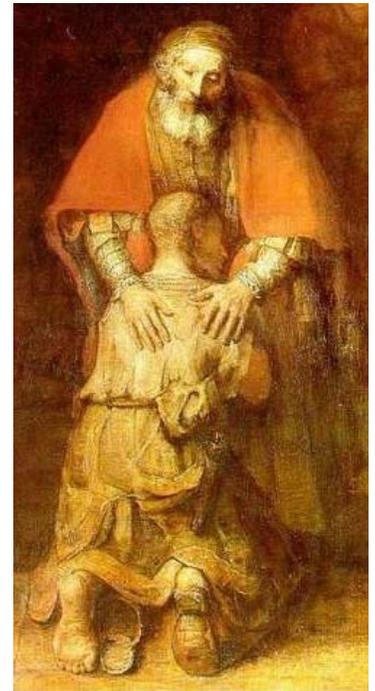


57 – Philemon: Forgiveness and Restoration

- Paul is a prisoner in Rome when he writes this letter (*his first imprisonment there, so dating is around 60-61 AD*). Through God’s divine intervention, **Paul converts the runaway slave** of his friend Philemon in Colosse. Paul now writes to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus.
- The **law at that time allowed a slave master to kill a disobedient slave**. But Philemon was a Christian believer. He had a difficult choice either way, with consequences. It was not unusual for others to intercede for these runaway slaves, and mediate for them.
- This little book contains an **excellent example of the “new creature in Christ”** that all of us become when we change over from faith in self and the world to faith in Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 5:17). Philemon was apparently a wealthy landowner who at one time heard Paul’s preaching and converted to Christianity. He had a slave named Onesimus who had possibly stolen from his master Philemon, then run away to Rome. At some point he also heard Paul’s preaching, and also became a Christian. For Onesimus, in Paul’s eyes, this was a complete transformation, as Onesimus, the former slave, showed evidence of becoming this “new creature” and was a great help to Paul. Now Paul challenged Philemon to do the right thing, to forgive Onesimus and take him back, not as a slave, but as a forgiven brother. Since Philemon was a believer, it is highly likely that he and his household had already been praying for Onesimus.
- In many ways this letter is a **testimony to what Jesus has done for us**. Martin Luther said that **“Onesimus is all of us.”** He is right. We were all sinners, who wronged our Master. We owe Him a great debt that we cannot pay. We could look at this book with the characters representing the spiritual situation we are all in. The master Philemon could be seen as Father God, Onesimus the disobedient slave is each one of us. Paul, the mediator, is our Mediator and High Priest, Jesus, the Messiah. Paul even offered to have the things owed by Onesimus “put on his account.” Just like Jesus put our sins on “his account.” Each day Jesus intercedes for each of us with the Father. Onesimus was condemned under the existing law, but saved by grace. Each of us was condemned to death under the Law of God, and instead have been saved by His grace. This letter is a beautiful example of Jesus’ work for us.
- There is an official doctrine of Christianity called the **doctrine of “imputation.”** This means to take something off one person and put it on someone else. Our sins are put on Jesus, and removed from us. He took them all to the cross. When Paul offers to pay for Onesimus’ possible debt, Paul is imputing that on himself.
- It is interesting to note the meanings of the names of these players. Philemon means “friendly” (from the Greek *phileo*, meaning to be friendly, have affection for). Onesimus means “profitable” or “useful.” Because of the intercession of Jesus, the Father is now friendly toward us sinners, who are washed clean by the blood of Jesus. We can become “useful” to Him in the work of His Kingdom. It is often helpful to find out what names in scripture mean. These can always provide an even richer understanding.
- Some early church historians (i.e., Ignatius) suggest that Onesimus became a servant of God and minister to the people, and **later a bishop at the church at Ephesus**. We do not know this for a fact, but if it is true, it is a good example of his changed life.



Highlights

V 1-7	Opening greetings, letter addressed to Philemon and a couple (Apphia and Archippus) in whose house the local church met, thankfulness for these good friends who comforted and cheered Paul and other saints
V 8-14	Appeal on behalf of Onesimus, Paul could have commanded, but chose to appeal in love instead, he has become a father to Onesimus who has converted to faith in Jesus; he is sending Onesimus back to Philemon, Paul wants this to be Philemon's choice, he would have liked to keep Onesimus with him since he was serving Paul well at the time
V 15-20	Paul wants Philemon to accept Onesimus back as a brother, not as a slave (though again the choice is up to Philemon); Paul suggest Philemon receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul, who is his partner; if Onesimus owes anything to Philemon, Paul says he will pay for it, to "put it on his account." Paul implies that Philemon "owes him" (even "his own self"); desires Philemon to benefit him (Paul) by refreshing his heart with this act Paul requests.
V 21-25	Paul is confident Philemon will do much more than Paul requests; Paul asks for a guest room to be prepared for him as he hopes to come for a visit; closing greetings from Paul and fellow workers.

- Slave holders were common in these days. This **letter served as a model to other masters and slaves**. It is interesting that Paul did not condemn slavery outright. But God's Word is generally directed at individuals, who then go on to change their culture, based on His Word. Paul urged Philemon to treat Onesimus as a brother. Perhaps this was his way of intimating that he should be given his freedom, but that choice was up to Philemon. Paul did not use his authority to command this.
- *"...who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me."* (v 11) This is a play on Onesimus' name, which means "profitable."
- Paul's request for Philemon to receive Onesimus back as a brother **did not cancel his legal position as a slave**. Paul wanted Philemon to make that choice for himself, and Paul took on Onesimus' debt. Onesimus had a new standing before God and God's people.
- Paul strongly encouraged Philemon to "do the right thing" here, because God wants His people to make the right choices without cajoling and commanding. We do these things out of love for God, and love for each other. Service and sacrifice must be voluntary, from a right heart before God.
- *"If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me."* (v 17). The Greek word for "partner" here is *koinonos*, which means "sharer, companion, partner." It also means "fellowship." This fellowship is what God has desired with us from the very beginning. Paul makes his request of Philemon, as one who has fellowship together. He brings Onesimus into that fellowship as well.
- *"Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord."* (v 20). Earlier in this letter Paul indicated that Philemon was a man who "refreshed the saints." Now, in another play on words, Paul wants Philemon to refresh him, by doing as he asks. Paul certainly knows how to convince someone!
- This book **serves many purposes and contains many lessons**, even if it is one short chapter, a personal letter to one man, not a church. It contains lessons about:
 - 1) The role of Jesus in our lives, as the one who took our sins on Himself, and mediates with the Father for us
 - 2) The necessity of Christians to forgive one another, and restore fellowship (forgiveness does not always mean repayment of debt, it is the erasing of debt)
 - 3) Forgiveness generally costs something (in our case, it was the precious blood of Jesus, a very high payment)
 - 3) The meaning of becoming a "new creature in Christ" that once forgiven, we are changed forever, the Holy Spirit works in us to change us