

## PHILEMON

This is not a doctrinal letter but rather a personal letter. It was written around 63 AD and is one of the “prison” epistles. Though the letter is not doctrinal we do get some excellent instruction on how to treat others. See how Paul handles the delicate matter of a runaway slave. This might also be a good place to mention that slavery is not condemned anywhere in the Bible. There are clear instructions on how slaves are to be treated and even instruction on when they are to be given their freedom but no passage condemns the practice. The following applies to the Jews only and not to other nations. Slaves served for six years and in the seventh year they were given the choice of freedom or continuing with the master as a slave. De 15:17 **Then thou shalt take an aul, and thrust [it] through his ear unto the door, and he shall be thy servant for ever. And also unto thy maidservant thou shalt do likewise. {15:18} It shall not seem hard unto thee, when thou sendest him away free from thee; for he hath been worth a double hired servant [to thee,] in serving thee six years: and the LORD thy God shall bless thee in all that thou doest.**

They only get the choice one time. We might wonder why anyone would want to remain a slave but ,depending on the master ,or mistress,it could be a good life with no worries. For some,that might be preferable to going out on ones own and starting with nothing. Think about another slave,Hagar. She ran away from Sarai and God himself told her to go back and remain a slave to her harsh mistress.

OK,now to the letter.

**1 Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer,**

The first thing we notice is that Paul refers to himself as a prisoner of Jesus Christ and not a prisoner of Rome where he was actually in prison. Paul greets Philemon in a friendly way. Paul loves Philemon and he respects Philemon. Paul calls him a fellow worker. This means that Philemon, Paul and Timothy do the same sort of work. He calls Archippus also our fellow soldier. Paul calls Timothy a ‘brother’. Christians still call other Christians brother and sister.

**2 And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house:**

There were no church buildings for the early church. They met in peoples

houses and in some cases along the rivers or other places outside. We can still do that today if it is necessary. A lot of good churches have started in someones house or garage.

**3 Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

God made us and he loves us. In that way, he is our Father. Here again you have the blessing grace and peace with grace always being first.

**4 I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers,**

**5 Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints;**

Philemon has a good testimony that is apparently known all the way to Rome. Paul does know him personally but this seems to refer to Philemon's testimony being known by many others as well.

**6 That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.**

In the Bible communicating has more than one meaning. It may mean talking one on one, or communicating by letter as Paul was doing here. In addition it can also mean meeting the needs of someone physically as in feeding the hungry or providing temporary housing to a missionary or any other such help. The last part of the verse,acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus, can mean exactly what we mean when we say “tell others what Jesus has done for you”.

**7 For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.**

As we have said before,bowels,in the scripture,means everything inside you. Paul is telling Philemon that now Onesimus is a blessing to all who know him. He refreshes them by his very presence.

**8 Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient,**

Now Paul starts to “lay it on him”. In effect he is telling Philemon that he has the spiritual authority to order him to release Onesimus to him(Paul) but will not order but rather will ask him for Onesimus.

**9 Yet for love’s sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.**

This verse tells us several things. One,it gives us the fact that Paul is now an old man. He was probably in his seventies or eighties when he wrote this

letter. He speaks, in the next verse, about being in bonds or a prisoner. We know that in Acts Paul ignored the Holy Spirit five times when he told him not to go up to Jerusalem. He disobeyed and went anyway so now he is a prisoner. It encourages me to know that Paul wasn't perfect either. Also, if Paul did not get away with disobedience, neither will we. Paul was in prison due to his own stubbornness but was still in the permissive will of God. In other words, God got him to Rome anyway.

**10 I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:**

Onesimus is Paul's spiritual son. In other words, Paul is the one who led him to the Lord. I suppose that when Onesimus ran away he somehow made his way to Rome and there encountered Paul. Nothing happens to a Christian by accident or luck. This meeting was set up by God so that Paul could write this letter and we could read it 2000 years later.

**11 Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:**

Onesimus was a useless human being but now he is worth something to both of us and Paul wants to keep him as a helper.

**12 Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:**

**13 Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel:**

Paul wanted to keep Onesimus with him but he has sent him back to his owner. That was the proper thing to do and anything less would have been theft. That said, I do believe that Philemon sent him back to Paul because a person named Onesimus turned up later as a bishop of the church at Ephesus. That last isn't from the Bible but from an early church leader called Ignatius. In a letter, he refers to someone called Onesimus. He describes this Onesimus as the Bishop of Ephesus. Ignatius's letter is not in the New Testament. But many scholars believe that this Onesimus and the Onesimus in Paul's letter are the same person. If this is true, then Onesimus's life changed completely because of Paul's letter.

**14 But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.**

Paul writes, I do not want to do anything unless you permit it. Then you will

be kind because you want to be kind. I will not force you.

**15 For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever;**

**16 Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?**

Onesimus is still a slave but is now to be treated as you would any other Christian brother. 1 Tim 6:2 **And they that have believing masters, let them not despise [them,] because they are brethren; but rather do [them] service, because they are faithful and beloved, partakers of the benefit. These things teach and exhort.**

**17 If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.**

**18 If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account;**

I know a Christian who once tried to use this verse to justify owing money. He said “see Paul had an account with Philemon”. That is not what this is talking about. Paul never owed Philemon anything. What Paul is saying here is that if Onesimus stole money, or anything else, when he ran away then I will pay it as soon as I see you. Now, I don't think Paul expected to be charged for anything, he was just making the offer.

**19 I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.**

This is sort of a way of saying, “you can charge me if you want to but you had better not.

**20 Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord.**

**21 Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.**

In other words, “send that slave back to me and do not charge me for anything”. That is what Paul expected him to do. It may also be that Paul intended that Onesimus be freed but that is never said.

**22 But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you.**

**23 There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus;**

**24 Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers.**

We recognize these names from other places in Paul's writing. Epaphras is

apparently in prison with Paul. Mark and Luke are the Mark and Luke from the gospels. Remember too that Mark had left Paul at one point but now Paul has accepted him back as a part of his ministry. Then there is Demas from 2Tim 4:9 **Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me: For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica;**

And then Paul's usual final blessing.

**25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen**