

New Testament Survey—Philemon

Relationships. When you hear that word, what's the first thing that comes to your mind? Positive thoughts, such as the joy of meaningful relationships with family and friends? Perhaps negative and painful thoughts, due to strained relationships you're presently experiencing. The fact is, relationships can bring us great fulfillment and great frustration.

Thankfully, the Word has a lot to say to us about relationships (with God and with people), how to have them and how to have them in ways that please the Lord. There's also a lot of counsel in the Scriptures about how to experience reconciliation and restoration when relationships have been fractured.

That brings us to the letter Paul wrote to Philemon.

To do: Write down the names of the characters mentioned in the book, and as much information as you can remember about them.

To do: Count the number of times the word "I" appears in the book. Why is it so prevalent?

- **Who wrote the book?**

--Paul & Timothy (1)

Question: Who received the letter called Philemon?

--Philemon

--But also, Apphia, Archippus, and the church (2)

Note: Of Paul's four prison epistles, this is the only one written directly to an individual.

- **When was the book written?**

--A.D. 60

Paul wrote Philemon at the same time he wrote Colossians and sent it to Colossae by means of the messengers, Onesimus and Tychicus. Paul wrote both letters from prison (apparently from Rome).

See: Col. 4:7-9

- **"Why was the book written?"**

--The letter deals with a problem between two Christians, Philemon and Onesimus. It teaches us about forgiveness between brothers. It shows us how to honor God when we've been wronged by

someone.

### Key Figures Mentioned in Philemon:

Paul--apostle; church planter; mentor to Philemon

Timothy--Paul's associate in the ministry

Philemon--a believer in Colosse; a slave owner (Col. 4:1)

Apphia--probably Philemon's wife (2)

Archippus--Paul's fellow soldier (a leader in the Colossian church? Col. 4:17)

Onesimus--a slave who belonged to Philemon (10)

Epaphras--Paul's fellow prisoner (23); the person who evangelized Colosse? (Col. 1:7; 4:12)

Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, & Luke--Paul's fellow workers

Discuss: What's the story line that prompted this letter?

Onesimus was a slave who belonged to a Christian master living in Colosse, Philemon. Onesimus didn't like his status in life, apparently, because he stole some of his master's goods and fled to Rome (18-19). According to Roman law, his crime was punishable by death.

But in God's sovereign plan, while in Rome, Onesimus met Paul. And Paul led this runaway slave to a saving knowledge of the Master, Jesus Christ (10). After becoming a Christian, Onesimus stayed in Rome and ministered to Paul's material needs (perhaps as a house servant or chef; 11, 13; Gromacki, 314).

Though Paul appreciated his ministry, he knew the slave had to be returned to his legal master (13-14). Since Tychicus was leaving to deliver letters from Paul to the Ephesians and Colossians, Paul decided to send Onesimus back to Philemon with his letter messenger.

Discuss: How do think Onesimus must have felt at this time? Why did he go back? What does the action by Onesimus say to us?

Paul didn't send Onesimus back empty-handed. He wrote a very personal letter explaining the situation to Philemon, and instructed this Christian master how he should receive his runaway slave, now a Christian.

Note: Before reading the letter, it's interesting to note how Paul drafted his letter. As the *NIV Study Bible* observes (1854), "The appeal (vv. 4-21) is organized in a way prescribed by ancient Greek and Roman teachers: to build rapport (vv. 4-10), to persuade the mind (vv. 11-19), and to move the emotions (vv. 20-21). The name Onesimus is not mentioned until the rapport has been built (v. 10), and the appeal itself is stated only near the end of the section to persuade the mind (v. 17)."

READ the letter

- **What is the outline of the book?**

(from *NIV Study Bible*)

- I. Greetings (1-3)
- II. Thanksgiving and Prayer (4-7)
- III. Paul's Plea for Onesimus (8-21)
- IV. Final Request, Greetings and Benediction (22-25)

- **What is the message of the book in one sentence?**

--Philemon is a letter from Paul about how to treat a runaway slave.

- **What contribution does the book make to biblical theology (that is, how does this book relate to the rest of the Bible)?**

1. *Philemon teaches us about how to deal with the past.*

Discuss: What lessons do we learn?

- a. We must deal with the past, not run from it.
- b. As followers of Christ, we must do what pleases Christ (no matter how painful), not what seems to be expedient.
- c. Strained relationships can be restored when two people choose to treat each other the way they've been treated by God (see what Paul writes in verses (17-19).

Discuss: How has God treated us? Let's reflect on that thought together. How would our relationships be affected for good if we pondered this more often?

2. *Philemon teaches us about forgiveness.*

Discuss: What lessons do we learn?

- a. We need not forget in order to forgive.
- b. Forgiveness is choosing to let go of an offense (17-18).

Listen to Paul's words in verse 18, "If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me." That is what imputation is all about. As Gromacki observes, "This is the language of imputation (cf. II Cor. 5:19-21). The debt of the sinner (sin, guilt, and penalty) was paid by Christ's redemptive death. The person who paid the debt is also the one in whom the believer finds an acceptable standing."

Luther said, "Even as Christ did for us with God the Father, thus Paul also does for Onesimus with

Philemon."

Discuss: What are ways this truth applies to us?

3. *Philemon helps us to understand how early Christianity responded to slavery.*

a. The Bible does not directly attack the institution of slavery.

b. It does give principles for the humane treatment of slaves (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1; 1 Tim. 6:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:18-25).

c. On a social level, Christianity worked within the system of slavery. But on a personal level, Christianity taught equality of all persons.

e.g. Verse 21 "Confident...knowing you will do even more than I ask." (set Onesimus free?)  
) Again Gromacki's observation is helpful, "The principle is clear: If God our heavenly master freed us who were slaves to sin, should we not also release men from human slavery if it is within our power to do so?"

Discuss: What principles do we learn here about how Christians should respond to social injustice in the world?