

PHILEMON

The Gospel Breaks Down Social
Barriers

Introduction

- This letter was written during one of Paul's many imprisonments either in Rome (AD 60-62) or in Ephesus (AD 52-55)
- It is Paul's shortest letter—25 verses
- It is the most occasional of Paul's letters
- It was accepted into the NT canon for its unique contributions, particularly as a potent illustration of forgiveness and the breaking down of social and cultural barriers

The Backstory

- The backstory involves Philemon, who was a well-to-do Roman citizen and likely met Paul during his mission in Ephesus and became a believer
- Philemon helped start a church in Colossae together with Epaphras, a co-worker of Paul (vv. 1-2; cf. 1:7)
- Like many wealthy people at that time, Philemon owned a slave named Onesimus
- Somehow Onesimus wronged Paul in some way (theft?) and ran away
- Later, Onesimus came to Paul in prison and appealed to him for help
- In the process, he became a Christian and a beloved assistant to Paul

The Approach

- Paul tries to get Philemon to embrace Onesimus as a brother, no longer as a slave
- Verses 1-7 describe Paul's approach to the situation:
- ¹ Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker— ² also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home: ³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. ⁶ I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. ⁷ Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

The Approach

- Verses 4-5 represent Paul's prayer, where he thanks God for Philemon's love and faithfulness
- This sets up v. 6, where Paul writes: ⁶I pray that your **partnership** with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ.
- The term "partnership" translates the Greek word *koinonia*, which means sharing or mutual participation
- What Paul is saying is that faithfulness to Jesus means recognizing that all his followers are equal partners, who share together in the gift of God's love and grace

The Request

- ⁸Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— ¹⁰that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. ¹²I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. ¹³I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. ¹⁵Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever — ¹⁶no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord. ¹⁷So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. ²⁰I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.

The Request

- Paul identifies himself with Onesimus as his son in the faith (v. 10)
- Then comes Paul's bold request (vv. 15-16):
- ¹⁵ Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.
- Paul wants Philemon to receive Onesimus back, no longer as a slave, but as a beloved brother in the Lord
- Under Roman law, Philemon had every legal right to have Onesimus punished or put in prison
- Instead, Philemon should receive him back as a social equal, a family member

The Request

- Paul explains why should Philemon do as requested (vv. 17-19):
- ¹⁷ So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self.
- Paul wants Philemon to accept Onesimus back as a “partner” as if he were Paul himself
- Whatever Onesimus has done wrong, Philemon should charge Paul for Onesimus’ wrongdoing and Paul will repay it himself
- To facilitate reconciliation, Paul puts himself in the place of Jesus Christ
- As partners, they are all equal in Christ, not as slave and master

Final Closure

- The letter does not reveal Philemon's response
- Paul closes the letter by stating his confidence that Philemon will do what Paul requested (vv. 21-25):
- ²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask. ²² And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. ²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. ²⁴ And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers. ²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Conclusions

- This letter is unique in that Paul does not mention Jesus' death and resurrection
- This lacuna is intentional and significant
- Paul doesn't explain the cross with words because he is demonstrating the gospel with his actions
- Paul embodies the cross of Jesus by putting himself in the place through which Philemon and Onesimus are reconciled to God and to each other
- In Christ, people's values, social status, are not defined by race, gender, social or economic class

Discipleship Pointers

- The gospel prescribes forgiveness as more costly to the offended more than the offender
- Christ's death on the cross is the ultimate example of love and grace
- We must learn to forgive others, just as Christ forgave us of our sin