

# God's Amazing Book

Journey Through the New Testament

## WHEN YOU NEED A FRESH START<sup>1</sup>

A Quick Look at the Epistle of Philemon about Onesimus

### Fast Facts on Philemon

**Written by?** Apostle Paul

**Written to whom?** Philemon

**Written when?** c. A.D. 60-63

**Written where?** Rome  
(Paul's first Roman imprisonment)

**Written why?** Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon with a letter which asks the master to forgive his former slave who is now his brother in Christ.

Focus	Prayer of Thanksgiving	Petition for Onesimus	Promise to Philemon
<b>Divisions</b>	Commendation of Philemon's Love	Intercession for Onesimus	Confidence in Philemon's Obedience
<b>Topics</b>	Character of Philemon	Conversion of Onesimus	Confidence of Paul
<b>Key Phrase</b>	"You . . . have refreshed the hearts of the saints"	"Refresh my heart in Christ"	
	"I hear about your faith . . . and love"	"I appeal to you on the basis of love"	"Charge it to me"
<b>Place</b>	ROME (prison)		
<b>Time</b>	A.D. 60-63		

### FASCINATING FACTS:

- 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the Roman empire were made up of slaves [possibly 6 million]. This was not racially specific. A slave could be put to death by his master, especially if the slave had wronged his master.
- Philemon is one of the five one-chapter books of the Bible, the other four being Obadiah, 2 and 3 John, and Jude.
- There are a total of 11 names that appear in this short letter. This shows that Paul wanted Philemon to know that all of these people are aware of the situation, and are watching as to what he will do with his slave, as a brother in the Lord.
- Philemon is one of Paul's most tactful and discreet pieces of writing in the midst of a very controversial subject (slavery).
- Philemon is one of the most masterful examples of how to spiritually arm-twist others in a godly way.
- The slave's name, Onesimus, means "useful." Paul acknowledges that Onesimus caused trouble for Philemon, the slave owner. But Paul argues that things are different now: "He was useless to you, but now he is useful both to you and to me" (11).

***It is a masterpiece, and a model of graceful, tactful, and delicate pleading. – Robert Lee***

<sup>1</sup> The chart is from Danny Akin, "Philemon", www.danielakin.com.

### **A masterpiece of tactful persuasion<sup>2</sup>**

Paul doesn't come right out and ask Philemon to free Onesimus. But Philemon would likely have realized that this is what Paul wanted. The pressure Paul applies, though subtle, is certainly not gentle. It's powerful and compelling. Consider these seven pressure points:

1. Paul compliments Philemon on his growing faith in Jesus and his "love for all of God's people" (5)—slaves included.
2. "I would like to keep him [Onesimus] here with me, where he could take your place in helping me," Paul writes. "But I won't do anything unless you agree to it first. I want your act of kindness to come from your heart, and not be something you feel forced to do" (13–14). The implication is that Paul, as an apostle, has the authority to order Philemon, a church leader, to free Onesimus and return him to Paul's side.
3. "Onesimus is much more than a slave. To me he is a dear friend," Paul adds. "Welcome Onesimus as you would welcome me" (16–17). Certainly, Philemon would not punish a visiting Paul as he would a runaway slave.
4. Paul says he will pay back anything Onesimus may have taken to finance his escape. "Charge it to my account," Paul says, adding, "But don't forget that you owe me your life" (18–19). Paul apparently converted Philemon. The implication is that Philemon owes Paul, and in gratitude should write off any debt.
5. This is not a private letter. It's to Philemon and "the church that meets in your home" (2). Others will read it and realize what Paul is asking Philemon to do—peer pressure at its finest.
6. When Paul gets out of jail, he plans to visit Philemon (22). This will be one awkward meeting if Onesimus is not free by then.
7. Paul is not alone in asking for kindness on behalf of the slave. Paul sends greetings from four associates, including Mark and Luke, implying that they support his request.

### **EXTRA: PHILEMON 16 – Doesn't Paul approve of the institution of slavery?<sup>3</sup>**

Slavery is unethical and unbiblical and neither Paul's actions nor his writings approve of this debasing form of treatment. In fact, it was the application of biblical principles that ultimately led to the overthrow of slavery. Note the following:

- 1) God declares that all people are made in the image of God (See Gen. 1:27, Acts 17:26, 29).
- 2) Though semitic cultures tolerated slavery, God's law demanded that slaves eventually be set free (Ex. 21:2; Lev. 25:40). Likewise, servants had to be treated with respect (Ex. 21:20, 26).
- 3) Israel, itself in slavery in Egypt, was constantly reminded by God of this (Deut. 5:15), and their emancipation became the model for the liberation of all slaves (cf. Lev. 25:40).
- 4) In Christ, all people are equal before God. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).
- 5) The Slave trade is so repugnant to God that He pronounces His final judgment on the evil system that perpetrated it (Rev. 17-18). The NT condemns trading the "bodies and souls of men" (Rev. 18:13).
- 6) Paul is alluding to the situation of the day when he writes, "Servants, be obedient to those who are your masters" (Eph. 6:5; cf. Col. 3:22). He is not commending the slavery that exists.
- 7) Paul undermined slavery by urging Philemon to treat Onesimus as "a beloved brother" (v. 16). So, by emphasizing the inherent equality of all human beings, both by creation and redemption, the Bible laid down the very moral principles that were used to overthrow slavery and help restore the dignity and freedom of all persons of whatever color or ethnic group.

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Miller, *How to Get into the Bible*, "Philemon".

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Norman Geisler, "When Critics Ask", "Philemon".