

# Philemon

## One Page Letters—part 1

August 8, 2020

### The book of Philemon: “Clean-up on aisle 12”

Paul writes a “one page letter” to his brother in the Lord Philemon, in the hopes of cleaning up a very tangled mess with a former indentured servant to Philemon. It is a masterpiece in dealing with “clean ups on aisle 12.”

#### **DAY 1: Setting: the characters and situation**

1. There are three characters in this letter.

a. Paul is the great apostle Paul. He is writing this letter to Philemon from a Roman prison.

b. Philemon became a Christian under Paul’s ministry. He is leading a small church that meets at his house. He has become like a son to Paul.

c. Onesimus

- Became an indentured servant in order to pay off his debt. (Instead of debtor's prison).
- Owed a large debt to Philemon he could not pay or was unwilling to pay off thru service
- Stole from Philemon; (took advantage of Philemon's gracious offer).
- Ran away (unpaid obligations). Made it to Rome, to ostensibly get lost in the big city.
- Became a Christian under Paul's ministry while in the big city of Rome!
- As a new Christian has become a tremendous help to Paul and Paul’s ministry!

2. Paul leads Onesimus to Christ. Now what is to be made of the colossal mess Onesimus has made financially, legally, personally, and relationally?

3. If you were Paul, how would you counsel Onesimus on each item below?

a. **Financial obligations** to Philemon: (1) Paying back his indentured service loan in finances or service time? (2) The theft of property or money?

b. **Legal obligations**: Onesimus owes a debt to Philemon. How should Philemon approach this legal question? Should he get the government to prosecute Onesimus?

c. **Relational mess**: Not only did Onesimus “skip out” on the indentured service part of his contract, but his theft created a gigantic personal hurt to Philemon. He was taken advantage, twice!

d. **Moral obligations**: What are the right things for Onesimus to do in light of the profound and complex train wreck he has caused?

4. What strikes you from the setting of this story? Is there something here to which you relate?

## DAY 2: The astounding appeal and the godliness of trust!

*Philemon 1:1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, <sup>2</sup> to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home: <sup>3</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup> I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, <sup>5</sup> because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. <sup>6</sup> I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. <sup>7</sup> Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.*

1. What strikes you from Paul's opening comments to Philemon?

2. After having reestablished the tight bond Paul and Philemon built, Paul now makes an appeal.

*Philemon 1:8 Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, <sup>9</sup> yet **I appeal to you** on the basis of love. I then, as Paul--an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ -- <sup>10</sup> **I appeal to you** for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. <sup>11</sup> Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.*

3. The back story of this appeal is stunning! Paul is the “veteran” Christian, Philemon is a leader in his church, and Onesimus is a brand new Christian. As we look at the following facts and contingencies, ask yourself again if Christ can make a difference in our lives!

a. Onesimus was a runaway slave (or indentured servant). Legally, he owed Philemon the balance of time on his contract. Additionally, he had also stolen from Philemon. In the Roman Empire, just being a runaway slave carried with it a death sentence.

→So, why wouldn't Onesimus just run away again and hide? Why would he put himself in legal and personal jeopardy? Instead, he is entrusting himself to God, Paul and Philemon! Would you?

b. Philemon has been taken advantage of in a big way by Onesimus running out on his servant contract. Additionally, Onesimus stole from him. Philemon could have lowered the legal boom and financial boom on Onesimus.

→So, why wouldn't Philemon tell Paul to take a hike and demand Onesimus be turned over to the authorities and returned to pay his debts? What would motivate Philemon to not do that?

c. Paul has no legal or financial authority over Philemon. He is not just making a personal appeal, but, as we'll see later in this story, Paul is willing to pay off Onesimus' servant debt and what Onesimus stole!!

→So, why wouldn't Paul just send Onesimus back? If Paul paid the debt, what would keep Onesimus from running out again? What would you do?

4. All three men are challenged to **trust God** with this situation in all its complexities, and **trust one another**. It is a stunning! Each man is called to rise about what sinful would *normally* do.

## DAY 3: Godly appeals, godly motivation

### Godly appeals:

*Philemon 1:12 I am sending him--who is my very heart--back to you. <sup>13</sup> I 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. <sup>14</sup> But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced.*

1. Paul's huge appeal "down the line" of authority is a spectacular example of how to make any appeal: "up the ladder" of authority, to a peer, a spouse, or a friend.

a. Paul is not "pulling rank" (v. 13)

b. Paul is not demanding an outcome he likes. (v. 13)

c. He's not presumptuous. He doesn't assume he knows what Philemon would like him to do. (v. 13)

d. He directly says that Philemon's consent is important. (v. 14)

e. He wants Philemon's decision to be free of pressure from Paul (v. 14)

f. He does not want a "forced" decision. (v. 14)

2. What strikes you from this list? Is there something you'd like to add when you need to appeal to someone at work or at home?

### Godly motivation:

*Philemon 1:15 Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good-- <sup>16</sup> 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 man and as a brother in the Lord.*

3. Paul begins a section to lift Philemon's perspective above the *normal*. What might God be up to in this situation? Is there anything else higher than Onesimus getting the hammer of justice???

a. Perhaps there is more to the story than Onesimus running away, and leaving Philemon in a financial bind.

b. What if this was the tradeoff: Let Onesimus go in the short run, but have him in the long run? (v. 15)

c. What if the status of the relationship changed from master-slave to dear brother to dear brother? (v. 16)

d. Does the fact that Onesimus and Philemon are now brothers in Christ change the equation? How? (v. 16)

e. The nature of the relationship changed, from a legal one to a deeply personal one! (v. 16)

4. Which of these motivation/perspective items would have appealed to you?

## DAY 4: Sacrificing for the kingdom of God--GLADLY

1. You may be impressed with how they are determined to not only trust God with this thorny situation but incredibly trust one another! But you may be wondering about Onesimus' legal and financial obligations. It's impossible for Onesimus to pay back his double debt—the indentured servant debt and the payback from theft.

2. Are we just letting Onesimus off “Scott-free?” Are we *rewarding* crime and theft? Well, buckle up your seat belts for what you're about to read!!

*Philemon 1:17 So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. <sup>18</sup> If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, **charge it to me.** <sup>19</sup> I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. **I will pay it back**--not to mention that you owe me your very self. <sup>20</sup> I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.*

<sup>21</sup> *Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.*

3. Paul volunteers to pay Onesimus' entire debt!!! (Yes, you read that correctly).

4. Although Paul is certainly *willing* to pay the debt, he *hopes* he won't have to.

5. Paul reminds Philemon of several other **motivational factors** to consider.

a. He reminds Philemon of their **partnership** in the gospel (v. 17)

b. Paul reminds him that Onesimus, Paul and Philemon are **equals** at the foot of the cross (v. 17)

c. He reminds Philemon that Paul **paid a significant price** for Philemon's salvation and life. It is a debt that can never be fully repaid. That “price” was most likely time, energy, work, investing in the building of Christ in his life (v. 19)

d. He does lay out **his desire** (not demand) to benefit from Philemon “in the Lord.” He likely means that Onesimus now has great value in the kingdom of God. (v. 20)

e. What Paul is asking for in his appeal would not just be a favor, or a nice thing to do. It would “**refresh my heart in Christ.**” Paul means that there is nothing more special to Paul's redeemed heart than to have Onesimus now serving the Lord! (v. 20)

f. Paul is “confident in your obedience.” Paul knows this is a big “ask,” but that Philemon's big heart is up to the big ask! It is a tremendous compliment to Philemon (v. 21).

g. Paul lifts the eyes above even the “big ask.” He is saying something like this: “I know I'm making a big ask. I'm confident you are up for the big ask. But don't limit yourself to the big ask. This is the time to make an even greater investment in the kingdom of God. Think big!”

6. What strikes you from:

a. Paul's willingness to pay the entire debt of Onesimus?

b. Paul's seven “motivational factors” outlined, above?

## **DAY 5: Four final thoughts...**

*Philemon 1:22 And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. <sup>23</sup> Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. <sup>24</sup> And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.*

*<sup>25</sup> The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.*

1. Four final thoughts strike me from this letter.

### **Thought #1:**

Paul and Philemon, along with the other brothers and sisters mentioned at the beginning and end of this letter are playing “for the big fish.” They work as a team, whether together in the same geographical city or not. Paul has referred to them as “fellow prisoners” and “fellow workers”. At the beginning of the letter he referred to them as “dear friend,” “fellow worker,” and “fellow soldier”.

### **Thought #2:**

Paul and Philemon are living for something far greater than what the material world can give us. Can you imagine any three people, including yourself who would craft a plan like this one????

### **Thought #3:**

The unique “opportunity” of (1) a runaway slave who was also a thief, (2) a man who was badly taken advantage of, financially, legally, and personally, and (3) a Christian leader who is in prison. Somehow, someway God brought them together without the use of GPS or social media!

This unique “opportunity” is a way for gospel power to shine in the lives, purposes, and values of these three men! And shine it does!

### **Thought #4:**

Paul’s willingness to take on the debt of a former scoundrel, thief, and cheat reminds me of what Jesus Christ did for us.

*2 Corinthians 8:9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*

2. Which of the “four thoughts” strikes you most? Why?

3. What is one thing you may never forget from this one-page letter to Philemon?