

## ***Advancing the Gospel***

### ***Introduction to Philemon***

This short letter is a personal letter from the apostle Paul to Philemon asking him to forgive his runaway slave, Onesimus, and receive him back not as a slave, but as a beloved brother in Christ (v. 16).

### ***Date of the Letter***

Philemon was written around A.D. 60–62, the same time as Philippians, Ephesians and Colossians. These four letters are called the Prison Epistles because they were written during Paul’s first imprisonment in Rome. The letter to Philemon is the only personal letter we have in the New Testament—from Paul to one person. Even his letters to Timothy and Titus weren’t meant for Timothy and Titus alone, but the whole churches at Ephesus and Crete.

### ***Onesimus***

Onesimus had been a slave of Philemon in Colossae. But he fled Philemon’s house, possibly robbing him in the process (v. 18), and escaped to Rome. Paul had met Onesimus in Rome and led him to the Lord there. Paul calls him “my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment” (v. 10). He had become a “faithful and beloved brother” to Paul (Colossians 4:9). He even calls him “my very heart” (v. 12). Paul wrote that he was “useful” to him and that he wished he could stay and serve him in his imprisonment, but he knew it was the right thing to do to send him back to Philemon (v. 11–13). Onesimus brought the letter to Philemon himself and, at the same time, accompanied Tychicus in bringing Paul’s letter to the Colossians. The list of personal greetings in both letters is almost identical.

### ***Philemon***

Philemon lived in Colossae and was a leader in the church there. He had a group of believers meeting in his own home (v. 2). So, Paul sent this letter and Onesimus back to him with the letter to the Colossians. Paul called Philemon his “beloved fellow worker” (v. 2) and praised him for his faithfulness and love and impact on the people of the church there (v. 7). Paul writes that Philemon owed Paul his “own self” (v. 19), implying that Paul led him to the Lord. *Holman Bible Dictionary* says that even though Paul never actually went to Colossae, he led Philemon to the Lord during his time in Ephesus (Acts 19:10). Paul and Philemon became devoted friends and coworkers in the advancement of the Gospel.<sup>1</sup> Paul makes his request of Philemon not from his apostolic authority (though he could have), but from their deep friendship, and by appealing to Philemon’s faith in Jesus and love for the saints (v. 8-9).

### ***Colossae***

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<sup>1</sup> Trent C. Butler, ed. “Philemon,” *Holman Bible Dictionary* (Broadman & Holman, 1991).

Colossae was the least significant of three towns noted for their medicinal spas, including Hierapolis and Laodicea. Colossae was the town that had cold, pure waters, mentioned in Revelation 3:14–22, when Laodicea was criticized for being lukewarm. It was situated at a crucial crossroads in the Lycus River Valley, about 120 miles southwest of Ephesus. Paul had never personally been to Colossae, but he still considered it one of his churches through his coworker Epaphras, who brought the Gospel to them, along with Laodicea and Hierapolis, during Paul’s third missionary journey, when he spent two years in Ephesus.<sup>2</sup> We can tell in reading both Colossians and Philemon that Paul knew and loved the people there and felt responsible for them as a spiritual father, even though he did not establish their church himself.

### ***Slavery in The New Testament***

In *A Better Freedom: Finding Life as Slaves of Christ*, Michael Card offers some summary statements about the nature of first-century slavery:

- Slaves were despised. To call someone a “slave” was a serious insult. Cato the Elder wrote, “He who has a slave has an enemy.”
- Slaves played a major role in the economic world. The Roman Empire was dependent on slavery.
- In general, slaves had no rights. In the earlier Republic, this was literally true. But in the time of the Empire, the New Testament era, some laws were written to give marginal protection, though they were often not enforced. Slaves could be killed or mutilated by their owners.
- Slaves left virtually no “voice” in the ancient records. We only have playwrights such as Plautus and Petronius who caricature and ridicule slaves.
- Slaves were often manumitted or could even purchase their own freedom from their own savings (*peculium*). Exceptions were agricultural and mining slaves, who represent the vast majority of slaves, who were never freed.
- Slavery could present a chance for upward mobility. But this opportunity was limited to an extremely small percentage. It was better to be the slave of an influential person than simply to be free and poor.
- Education enhanced the value of a slave and so was encouraged among house slaves.
- Paternity among slaves was virtually never recognized.
- Prices for slaves varied widely. A doctor was worth fifty times as much as a farm worker.
- Sexual abuse was common and taken for granted. Half of female slaves died before age 30.
- Slaves could own property, even other slaves. But their possessions were still under the control of their masters, even if they became freedmen.
- Provision for the average slave was meager. Cato speaks of a new cloak and shoes every two years. Archeologists have never verified sleeping quarters for slaves.

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<sup>2</sup> Trent C. Butler, ed. “Philemon,” *Holman Bible Dictionary* (Broadman & Holman, 1991).

- Runaways were frequent, an obsession in the ancient records. Roman law forbade the sheltering of runaways. Professional “slave catchers” captured fugitives. Runaway slaves were branded, mutilated and fitted with iron collars that were sometimes inscribed with the words, “Capture me for I am fleeing.”
- There was never a movement to abolish slavery, though there were several slave revolts, such as the one led by Spartacus in 73–71 B.C.
- Roman slavery was not race-based. Slaves were virtually indistinguishable by dress or race. (Exception: Some races were preferred for certain jobs, such as Gauls and Germanics for farming/mines and Greeks for more professional tasks.”<sup>3</sup>)

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Card, *A Better Freedom*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 145-147.