

Philemon

Who, When, Where

Written by Paulus (Paul). Paulus was originally a fanatical Pharisee, persecuting, imprisoning, and even killing Christians for teaching what he thought was heresy, that Yeshua was the Anointed, (The Jewish Messiah). After meeting Yeshua in a miraculous way on the road to Damascus, Paulus became not just a Christian but one of Christianity's most fervent preachers and teachers. He spent most of his life as an itinerant missionary, with all the life threatening perils that that brought with it, to the towns and cities which lay along the route between Jerusalem and Rome. Paulus died in Rome somewhere in the 60's AD, and he wrote most of the letters which we have in the New Testament. Paulus wrote this letter while he was still in prison or house arrest. So probably during his house arrest in Rome, around 61-62 AD.

Summary

Philemon was a leader in the church at Colossae. Onesimus, (mentioned in the letter, and briefly in the letter to the Colossians), was a slave whom Paulus had met, and who had become a Christian through him, and somehow was no longer a slave. It seems that he was Philemon's physical brother, and it's possible that he had wronged him somehow, and possibly been sentenced to slavery for the crime. But either way, Paulus is asking Philemon to forgive him for any wrong he had done, and offering to repay any debt which Onesimus owed him. It's quite a challenge to forgive someone who has wronged us in a big way. But no more than Yeshua himself asks of all of us, "to be forgiven, because we have forgiven those who sinned against us".

Before You Read

Has anyone ever done anything so wrong against you that you really can't forgive them?

One small thing to note here. All the "you"s in this letter are singular. It's a personal letter. How would you feel if you received a letter like this, from a prominent Christian leader whom you deeply respected, about someone who had wronged you, and asking you to forgive them, and welcome them back into your life.

Do bad things happen to you much?
How do you feel when they do?
Do you ask God to make them stop?
Do you get angry with him for letting them happen?

Key Verses

Philemon 11

Onesimus, who used to be useless to you, but is now useful to both you and me

A nice little play on words. The name Onesimus means "useful"... But also a powerful example of how becoming a Christian can totally turn people's lives around. Someone who used to be useless, is now useful. And valued by those around him. And a lesson to not judge or reject Christians by who they used to be.

Philemon 15

perhaps he was separated from you for an hour because of this, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother...

This is such an important concept. We, (humans), tend to have a very short term view of life. We judge events as "good" or "bad" based on their short term impact on us. God has a long term view of life. His judgement is based on how things will finish. Something which is "bad" in the short term, could well be "good" in the end. Like useless Onesimus being sent away, but while there, became a Christian and now is coming back, useful. Like Joseph being treated horribly by his jealous brothers, and exiled as a slave to Egypt. Betrayed by his master's wife, when all he ever did was serve faithfully, and imprisoned. Being forgotten by the cupbearer and baker after they promised to mention him to Pharaoh. Sounds bad right. He had several years of being treated like that. You wouldn't blame him for wondering where God was, and why God was letting this happen. But he didn't. He always trusted Yahweh. And then he suddenly ends up as Pharaoh's right hand man, and eventually saving his entire family, and the future Jewish nation! Clearly from God's point of view, these bad things had to happen to Joseph to bring about a massive future blessing for him, his family, and his entire people. (And actually, for us too!) How about Yeshua? Lived a perfect life, but mercilessly and cruelly killed by the Romans as a political favour to the Jews. But bringing about the long term salvation of millions of people. How about you? Too focused on what's happening now? Or do you accept whatever comes your way because you trust Yahweh that he is using it to bring about blessing for the longer term.

Philemon 16

... no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, and how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the lord.

So, we know Onesimus is somehow no longer a slave. But also that he is both physically, and now also spiritually, the brother of Philemon.

Matthew 18:34-35

And his master was indignant, and handed him over to the tormentors until he'd repaid everything which was owed to him. In this way also, my heavenly father will do to you, unless each one of you pardons their brother, from your hearts, for their transgressions.

Yeshua said this to Jews, who had the Law. Our salvation comes from him, and is guaranteed. But what if it was dependent on you forgiving those who wrong you. Would **you** still be saved?

Matthew 6:12

And pardon us what we owe, since we also pardon our debtors.

That's part of what we usually call "The Lord's Prayer". Are you really willing to pray that? That you only be forgiven because you have forgiven those who have wronged you?

After You Read

What verses really stood out to you?

How would you summarize this book in a sentence or two? What is it about? What is God trying to say to us?

Is there anyone you haven't forgiven?
Perhaps they have done something as terrible as Onesimus - a crime which in those days carried the sentence of slavery. Perhaps they have done even worse. (Honestly if they have, my heart goes out to you. You should never have had to suffer that).

And how about your view of things which happen to you which you don't like?
Can you see Yahweh's long term view now?