



Philemon: God of Forgiveness

Memory Verse: Philemon 1:4-5 "I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus."

Background

Philemon is the 57th book of the Bible and the 18th book in the New Testament. Paul's letter to Philemon was one of his "prison epistles" written around 60-61 AD, during his first imprisonment. Philemon, Paul's shortest letter in the New Testament, is one of four letters in which Paul addresses an individual rather than a congregation. Philemon was a convert of Paul's who had also become "a dear friend and fellow worker" and was known for his love and generosity (1:1, 5-7). Philemon lived in Colossae and was wealthy enough to be a slave owner and have a house large enough for the church to meet in (1:2). This letter is very personal in nature as Paul appeals to his dear friend to forgive Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave. Onesimus had run away from Philemon. It is possible that Onesimus had also stolen money from him in the process. Onesimus fled to the city of Rome where he came in contact with the apostle Paul. Paul led Onesimus to a saving faith in Jesus Christ. Paul then sends Onesimus, along with Tychicus, a fellow servant in the Lord, back to Colossae carrying the letters of Colossians, Ephesians, and this letter to Philemon (Ephesians 6:21; Colossians 4:7-9).

The Short Story

Paul appeals to Philemon to forgive and have mercy on his runaway slave who had converted to Christianity.

What's the Big Idea?

Paul's close friendship with Philemon is clearly seen in this letter as Paul commends and gives thanks to Philemon for his love for others and his faith in Jesus Christ. Paul writes of Philemon, "Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people." (1:7). Paul then intercedes for Onesimus, asking that Philemon forgive him and receive him back as a brother in the Lord. Paul could have used his authority over Philemon to demand that he take Onesimus back. Instead, he humbly appeals to Philemon "on the basis of love" (1:9). Paul knew firsthand that Philemon had experienced love and forgiveness in his heart by God when he accepted Christ (1:19). Paul requests that Philemon now show that same love and forgiveness to his runaway but now-believing slave Onesimus. Paul asks Philemon to "welcome him as you would welcome me" (1:17). Paul even offers to pay any debt that Onesimus might owe. "If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me...I will pay it back..." (1:18-19). Paul doesn't minimize Onesimus's sin. He understood that grace is not cheap and that there would be a sacrifice required in his request. Therefore, he gently, lovingly, and humbly makes his request of Philemon, confident in his obedience and knowing that Philemon would do even more than Paul had asked (1:21).

So What? Why is this book so important? What was God's purpose for the book?

Although short, the book of Philemon presents a beautiful illustration of the love of God, the forgiveness of Christ, and the change that these truths can bring to a person's life. Having been transformed by Christ, Onesimus returned to his owner seeking forgiveness and reconciliation. Furthermore, Paul was confident that Philemon, having experienced the grace of God himself, would forgive and accept Onesimus back, not just as a slave, but as something even better—a brother in Christ (1:16). Believers are called to forgive one another. "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." (Colossians 3:12-14). Our ability and willingness to offer forgiveness to others are only as a result of Christ's saving work on the cross. When we truly forgive others, we can trust God to bring new life into our hearts and our relationships, just as He did for Philemon and Onesimus.

**Material taken from various sources.*

Teaching Text— Philemon 1:12-16

"I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. 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. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— 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."

Sermon-Based Discussion Questions

- Philemon has three major themes, love, forgiveness and restoration. Which one stands out to you?
- Do you think Paul is being manipulative or is he reminding Philemon of his responsibility? Why?
- What is the Biblical view on slavery? How we view slavery today?
- What did Paul mean when he asked Philemon to make Onesimus a brother rather than a slave?
- According to 1st Corinthians 5:16-18 how are we to view people who are new Christians?

Practical Application

- Why is forgiveness such a hard thing to ask for, receive and give away?
- How do you view people who have personally hurt you or taken from you? How does that effect you?
- Where do you need to sense more forgiveness from the Lord in your life?
- Who do you need to give forgiveness to? What would help you make the decision?
- How would you like forgiveness to rewrite your history?

Hitting the Highpoints

- 1:3 "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."
- 1:4-7 "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 ..."
- 1:21 "confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask."
- 1:25 "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit."

Bonus Features— The Bible and Slavery

"The Bible does not specifically condemn the practice of slavery. It gives instructions on how slaves should be treated (Deuteronomy 15:12-15; Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 4:1), but does not outlaw slavery altogether. Many see this as the Bible condoning all forms of slavery. What many fail to understand is that slavery in biblical times was very different from the slavery that was practiced in the past few centuries in many parts of the world. The slavery in the Bible was not based exclusively on race. People were not enslaved because of their nationality or the color of their skin. In Bible times, slavery was more a matter of social status. People sold themselves as slaves when they could not pay their debts or provide for their families. In New Testament times, sometimes doctors, lawyers, and even politicians were slaves of someone else. Some people actually chose to be slaves so as to have all their needs provided for by their masters.....Another crucial point is that the purpose of the Bible is to point the way to salvation, not to reform society. The Bible often approaches issues from the inside out. If a person experiences the love, mercy, and grace of God by receiving His salvation, God will reform his soul, changing the way he thinks and acts. A person who has experienced God's gift of salvation and freedom from the slavery of sin, as God reforms his soul, will realize that enslaving another human being is wrong. A person who has truly experienced God's grace will in turn be gracious towards others. That would be the Bible's prescription for ending slavery." *Excerpted from gotquestions.org by Logo Bible Software*

Personal Takeaways and Notes