

Philemon Bible Study

Lesson 1 - Historical Backgrounds of Philemon

Information useful to understand before a study of the letter's contents

Slavery in the Greco-Roman World

One of the most important things to understand about Philemon is the background of slavery in the ancient world. Once we have an informed understanding of slavery in the ancient world we will be able to make better sense out of what Paul is writing to Philemon regarding his slave and Christian brother Onesimus.

What do you typically think of slavery being like?

One of the first things we have to overcome is to understand the differences between slavery in America and slavery in the ancient world. The two are quite different. Here is how Scott Bartchy explains it,

“knowledge of slavery as practiced in the New World in the 17th-19th centuries has hindered more than helped achieving an appropriate, historical understanding of social-economic life in the Mediterranean world of the 1st century, knowledge of which is absolutely essential for a sound [interpretation]of those NT texts dealing with slaves and their owners.”¹

In the ancient world slaves were viewed as property. People could actually sell themselves into slavery. That doesn't make sense from a 19th century American slavery point of view. But their system was different. You could sell yourself into slavery to advance your family through the eventual gaining of Roman citizenship which had some great benefits in the long run. This is because slaves in the ancient world could buy their way back out of slavery with a new status. They would even purchase slaves for themselves while slaves themselves and earn wages. Slaves could come from any conceivable background. Some slaves were doctors, philosophers, and government officials. For some, slave life was voluntary. If a person wanted Roman citizenship, they could become a slave to a Roman and when they purchased their way out or were released from their obligation (called manumission) gain Roman citizenship. Slavery was not a racial matter. It was a means to get manual labor done.²

Are any of these aspects of ancient slavery surprising to you? Which ones?

That sheds a lot of light on the letter to Philemon. Once we get out of our minds the 19th century stereotypes of American slavery and get a proper understanding of slavery in their world things begin to make more sense. It answers questions like, “Why wouldn't Paul tell them to free all their slaves?” Because it wasn't typically a cruel and abusive system, instead it was often used to advance the status of the slaves who were able to purchase themselves out of slavery and even then gain status as Roman citizens. It also casts Philemon in a better light. He was not some cruel slave master, rather, he was a loving brother in Christ who undoubtedly treated his slaves with care and compassion.

¹ S. Scott Bartchy, Anchor Bible Dictionary, vol. 6, “Slavery (Greco-Roman)”, ed. David Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 67.

² Joseph A. Fitzmyer, The Letter to Philemon, The Anchor Bible, vol. 34C (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2000), 25-28.

How does the view of slavery above help put to rest how contradictory it seems for Paul to not command Philemon to release his slaves as the Christian thing to do?

- Although Paul may be hinting to Philemon that he ought to release him in vs. 15-17

2 – The Reason Paul and Onesimus Connect

Philemon is one of Paul's prison letters. What is the chance that a slave of one of Paul's friends would end up with him in prison from such a great distance? It had to be intentional. Onesimus is not a prisoner. He is presumably a slave on the run. But notice that Paul assumes he can go back to Philemon. In the Roman world a runaway slave had to be reported if they were found. But it was customary that slave could run away if they had gotten in trouble and went to seek a friend of their master to make intercession for them to reconcile the situation. So chances are Onesimus set out to find Paul and Paul writes the customary letter back to Philemon asking them to be reconciled and to set things right. That is the letter we have in front of us when we read Philemon. So Onesimus is not running to free himself from slavery but seeking out Paul to bring reconciliation with Philemon so he can return in peace.

Last, people have assumed Onesimus had stolen money or possessions from Philemon because Paul promises to pay back any damages (Phil 1:18-19). It is entirely possible that Paul is offering to pay work not completed in Onesimus' absence.

Have you ever had to appeal to a mutual friend in order to bring about reconciliation in a difficult manner? What was the result?

Ancient Letters:

Philemon is a perfect example of what ancient letters were typically like in the Greco-Roman world. Gordon Fee in his book [How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth](#) lays out the form of ancient letters as follows with examples from Philemon added:

Activity – Read the parts of the letter and let them identify it in the letter

1. Name of the writers
 1. **"Paul**, a prisoner of Jesus Christ and **Timothy** our brother" (1:1)
2. Name of the recipient
 1. **"To Philemon** our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home:" (1:1)
3. Greeting
 1. **"Grace and peace to you** from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:2)
4. Prayer wish or thanksgiving
 1. ⁴"I always **thank** my God as I remember you in my **prayers**, ⁵because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. ⁶**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. ⁷Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints." – (1:4-7)
5. Body of the letter
 1. Philemon 1:8-22
6. Final greeting and farewell

1. ²³“Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you **greetings**. ²⁴And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers. ²⁵The **grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit**.”

To see how similar this is to many other ancient letters here is an example from an ancient letter contemporary with Paul to show you just how closely Paul follows the form of ancient letter writing. Notice the parts from the above list are numbered.

“Isias [1] to her brother **Hephaestion** [2] **greeting** [3]. If you are well and other things are going right, it would accord with the **prayer** [4] which I make continually to the gods. [here you find the body of the letter [5] that is the length of Philemon]...You will do me a favor by taking care of your bodily health. Goodbye [6].”³

Philemon is actually the average length of ancient letters. The letters Paul writes like Romans and Corinthians are extremely long for ancient letters.

Hopefully with these three things being understood from the beginning we will be able to understand Philemon in a way corresponding to Paul’s intended purpose.

Activity - Read all 25 verses of Philemon out loud as a group. Note the times Paul refers to the following:

Love

- Vs 5, 7, 9

How we view and value others

- Paul’s view of Philemon
 - Thankful – 4
 - Partnership in the faith – 6, 17
 - A brother – 7, 20
 - Respectful of his wishes - 14
- Paul’s view of Onesimus
 - A son – 10
 - Useful to both Paul and Philemon - 11
 - A brother – 16
 - Dear to Paul and Philemon - 16

God’s plan and timing

- Vs 15 – the reason he was gone might be for a greater purpose
- That purpose will change the roles Philemon and Onesimus see in each other

How does the letter of Philemon challenge you to see all people as important regardless of status?

Is there anyone you need to be reconciled to? How will you go about it?

³ C.K. Barrett, The New Testament Background, 28.

Lesson 2 - Philemon 1:1-7

First we notice that Paul is in prison. Philemon is one of four letters Paul wrote from prison. The other three are Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. Colossians has some interesting overlap with Philemon. Both are introduced as coming from both Paul and Timothy. Both introduce Paul as a prisoner (Philemon 1:1, Col 4:3). Both mention Onesimus and Archipus (Philemon 1:1:2, Col 4:9, 17). In the final greetings section of both letters, 5 out of 6 of the people mentioned are in both Philemon and Colossians. So we would probably be correct to assume that Philemon lives in Colossae.

In 1:2 we notice that Philemon is probably the head of a house church. The early church didn't meet in large auditoriums. They met in homes and were probably congregations of 50 or less scattered throughout the city.

In 1:3 Paul writes, "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." *When you read through Philemon were there any things Paul wrote that could bring you grace and peace just as he intended Philemon to experience it?*

Next we find the thanksgiving and prayer section. It sounds like Paul prays specifically for Philemon, by name, and on regular occasions. *Who do you find yourself praying for on a regular basis and what makes those people different from others you might pray for regularly?*

In verse 6 he prays that Philemon would basically be more evangelistic. We typically think we evangelize to bring a benefit to someone else. But notice Paul flips it here. *What benefit does he pray for Philemon to experience in verse 6 as the result of sharing his faith with others?*

How do you think you might be benefited in the same way when you share your faith with those around you?

It makes sense that the more we share or tell something to others, the better, richer and deeper understanding we will personally have regarding what we share. *You might have thought Paul would have told him to "share the Gospel" but instead what does he tell him to share? What is the difference/is there a difference?*

What does Paul say Philemon has done that has given him great joy?

How might you go about "refreshing the hearts of the saints" today?

Lesson 3 - Philemon 1:8-16

Paul starts off with a pretty strong appeal. *Who is Paul appealing for and why?*

Why do you think Paul wants this to be Onesimus' own decision and not something done because Paul is twisting his arm?

Paul wants Onesimus to do this out of love and not out of obligation...and yet Paul is certainly doing some arm twisting in this letter! Paul is making a big appeal here. Something like... "I am old...you wouldn't want to spite an old man would you? Onesimus is like a son to me...surely you would take back someone I consider a son. I have the right to order you but I wouldn't do that! No...instead do it because you are supposed to love others." Paul is really putting the pressure on Philemon to do the right thing.

Your Bible probably has a footnote by Onesimus' name...*What does it say his name means in Greek?* Notice the play on words Paul uses with that in verse 11.

What arm twisting does Paul do in verses 12-16?

In verse 16 Paul brings it all into perspective. While Onesimus is a slave the reality is something much bigger and more important than that...*What does Paul mention about Onesimus in verse 16 that will basically force Philemon to do the right thing?*

The take home point in these verses for us is about reconciliation toward those who have done us wrong. *Are there people in your life whom you have never forgiven or "taken back"? If so, why? How do Paul's words in this letter remind you just how important it is to not hold things against people?*

How can we, like Paul, still see people who have messed up as "dear to us" again?

Lesson 4 - Philemon 1:17-25

1:17 – In other words, if you don't take him back...don't consider me a partner any more? Wow Paul...that is some strong language. It shows you just how strongly Paul feels about Philemon making the right decision on this matter.

Have you ever stood up for someone or stepped into a situation to try to make things right? What happened and what did you learn from it?

What potential barrier or roadblock does Paul attempt to alleviate in the reconciliation of Philemon and Onesimus?

It sounds like Paul converted both Philemon (1:19) and Onesimus (1:10). That gives Paul a very special relationship with both of them and makes him the perfect person to help make this situation right again. *Do you think you have played a pivotal role in certain relationships in your life? How can God use you to bring a godly influence on the people and relationships around you?*

If all that wasn't enough Paul concludes with more words about what Philemon ought to do and his confidence Philemon will do the right thing. It sounds like Paul really knows Philemon. He knows him well enough to know just how far to push the envelope with him to make things right. What is interesting is usually we think of the person who messes up as the one who needs to make it right. But here Paul is stressing the one who has been wronged, Philemon, as the one who needs to take steps to make this right. This is probably because of Philemon's superior social status to Onesimus and that it would make more sense for the superior to bear with those under them than for the slave to initiate reconciliation with his master. However, Paul reminds them both that they are brothers in the matter...far more than master and slave.

It is important for us all to remember that while by earthly standards people in certain positions are treated in certain ways that is not true in Christ. We treat everyone the same and don't elevate some and devalue others. All are equal valuable in Christ's eyes and so they are to us as well.

1:22 - One last little shot by Paul...oh yeah, I intend to visit you soon too. In other words, if you don't work this out I will know about it when I get there!

1:23 – *Why does grace play a key role in all that is going on in this book? How do you need to have more grace for those around you?*

What are the biggest roadblocks in your life to making things right with others?

Activity – Prayer time

Conclude in prayer for reconciliations of our relationships in Christ and for those outside the church as well. Pray that God would use us as agents to mend broken relationships and patch up disunity in the body of Christ.