

Bible Studies

Philemon



Read Philemon v1-25

How does Paul describe himself in this letter? v1 v13 v23, v9, v17

It is very likely that Paul wrote this personal letter during his first imprisonment at Rome.

At this time he was under house arrest and was free to entertain visitors. It was at this time Paul also wrote Colossians and probably Ephesians. (Paul mentions the same people, Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Archippus, Demas, Timothy & Luke Phil 1,10,22-24 Co 4:7-17.)

Who delivered the Colossian Epistle? Colossians 4v7-9

The Onesimus who accompanied Tychicus, is the same one who is the subject of Philemon.



Onesimus

What had he done?

Who was Onesimus?

v16

What happened to him in Rome?

Onesimus was Philemon's slave. It appears that he had run away and gone as far as Rome. Some people think that v18-19 means Onesimus had stolen from Philemon or had in some way caused him harm. In Rome, against all the odds Onesimus finds both Paul and Christ. He becomes a Christian.

How does Paul describe him? v10, v16b

Onesimus means 'useful', it is from this that the significance of v11 takes shape. Onesimus was the sort of name that would be given to a slave.

How good a slave had he been?



Philemon

Who was Philemon?

What kind of man was Philemon? v4-7

What was his relationship to Paul? v1b, v7 (&20,) v17, v19b.

If the Church met in Philemon's house, it is safe to say that if he wasn't in leadership, he was a significant figure within the Church. Paul calls him his fellow worker, brother, friend and partner. He was in all likelihood someone Paul had personally seen saved. This is probably what he means when he says Philemon owes him a very life. We have no record that Paul ever visited Colossae and no way of knowing where he met Philemon. Philemon must have been quite well off. He had at least one slave and a house big enough to function as a meeting house for the Church. Philemon was almost certainly part of the Church in Colossae, hence the greeting from Epaphras, who was part of the Colossian church. Col 4v12.

Because Paul wrote Philemon and Colossians at the same time and because he probably had this incident with Onesimus, in mind it is interesting to compare the two books. Colossians deals with slave master relationships and inter-Christian relationship. The teaching given in Colossians forms the bases on which Paul calls on Philemon to do what is right.

What was Paul's relationship with Onesimus? V12-13



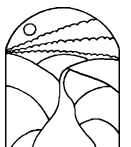
Slavery

The Roman world used slaves extensively. It has been estimated that a third of the population of Italy were slaves at this time. The treatment of slaves was diverse. Some were treated well and had a high degree of freedom. For most, slavery was cruel and oppressive in keeping with the way it has been practised in more recent times. This was especially true for agricultural slaves, working the huge plantations of Italy. The Romans lived in fear of slave revolts and treated run away slaves severely. In Roman law, a slave could appeal to someone, to interceded with their master. It is probably on this basis that Paul writes to Philemon.

What do you think the chances were of Onesimus ending up with Paul in Rome?

Do you think it strange that someone in the Church should have a slave?

Paul does not directly teach against slavery, although it is clear he is against it. Slavery was a fact of life at the time. He does call for slaves to be treated well. The Bible is against the abuses that became inseparable from slavery. The OT allows a kind of limited slavery, where the slave might even choose to become a bondsman rather than be set free. This parallels our current contractual work environment, better than it does our modern idea of slavery. It is wrong for one person to own another. But there is nothing wrong with one person benefiting from the labour of another, who has no choice but to give it. Our economy is based on this principle, very few people go to work because they want to, most do so because of economic necessity. It was no different for slaves in Paul's day. If we reject this idea, we would all need to become self employed and then working only for ourselves. It is when slavery is forced immorally then it becomes wrong. This is why Paul treats slave traders as evil. 1 Timothy 1v10



What is Paul's teaching to slave owners? Colossians 4v1, Ephesians 6v8-9
This was against the contemporary trend, where masters gave their slaves only enough to keep them alive. Christian slave owners must be fair and just. A slave is not an object, he is a person with rights. He must be treated accordingly. What Paul calls for is more like the situation we find in business today. This kind of slavery was practised at the top end of Roman slavery. Many of our modern professions today such as teachers and doctors were exclusively the domain of slaves in the Roman world.



Living up to your past

Do you think Onesimus ran away because he was badly treated?

It is unlikely considering Philemon character. It is as likely that he ran away because his master was a Christian and he thought he would get away with it.



How do you think Philemon felt towards his run away slave?

How do you think Onesimus felt about returning?

Why did Onesimus go back? What might happen when he returned?

What else could he have done? What might happen if he didn't return?

Did becoming a Christian mean Onesimus was no longer a slave or had to be set?

Does become a Christian absolve us of responsibilities for past crimes?

How often do we need to go back and deal with a situation from the past?

What happens if you don't? What should our attitude to our past be?

Our past has been forgiven - totally we do not need to feel guilty, or make atonement for it. We do need to do what is right now.

What is the Christian response to a past life as a thief? Ephesians 4v28

How does the New Testament tell slaves to behave?

Colossians 3v22-23, Ephesians 6v5-8, 1 Timothy 6v1, Titus 2v9, 1 Peter 2v18

How does this apply to us today? Are slaves inferior? Colossians 3v11



Read 1 Corinthians 7v21-23



New Relationships

What does it mean to be active in sharing your faith? v6

What did this mean for Philemon in his actions towards Onesimus?

How do you get a full understanding of the good things we have in Christ?

What implications does this have for us?

Sharing your faith means witnessing. Our faith is not an individual thing, it is a blessing to be shared. But this also means to live out our faith. Paul is saying that Philemon needs to act towards Onesimus out of his faith in Christ. This means forgiving, loving and being just. Our faith has to affect our relationships with other people. Faith in Christ has to change the way we do relationships. We live by new standards and new ways of behaviour. Christ changes everything.

The fullness of the Christian faith is found in doing it, not in understanding it. Jesus made this point in the parable of the wise and foolish builder, hearing Jesus words is no good unless you live by them.

How did being a Christian change Onesimus' position? How did it not change?

Should Philemon treat him better because he is a now Christian?

The interesting thing about this book is that it presents a test for Philemon and Onesimus.

On what points were they being tested?

There were several tests, but both of them were called to live up to their faith and prove it genuine.

What does Paul want Philemon to do? Failing this what should he do?

Paul wanted Onesimus back to him in Rome, failing that he be treated as a brother in Christ.

What was the worst Philemon could have done? What was the best?

what parallel is there between Paul and Christ, Onesimus and us? v18-19



Using Authority.

On what authority could Paul have to give Philemon orders?

Do you need an excuse to do what is right?

What does Paul do instead? What love?

The love Christ has for us, or the love between Paul and Philemon. It is very easy if you are in a position of authority to boss people around, but this is not the Bible's way. Mark 9v34-36.

Do you think Paul is overbearing or manipulative in this letter?

You could make this charge against Paul, he certainly makes it hard for Philemon to say no. In Paul's defence, he was writing to a close friend not a stranger. If you like, he is calling in a favour.



We do not know what happened to Onesimus. About 50 years later, Ignatius, referred to the bishop of the near by church at Ephesus, as one Onesimus maybe it was the same man.