

## Philemon“ Paul the reconciler at his best

**Written:** approximately 60 to 61 AD, from jail in Rome, 1<sup>st</sup> imprisonment.

**Theme:** reconciliation of brothers

**Occasion:** Paul seeks the restoration of a slave and master, now brothers in Christ.

**Historical context:** Roman culture had brought many detestable things, including slaves and masters. One such master was Philemon, a well-to-do master who had an encounter with Christ through Paul. He lived in Colosse, where the planting of the church (remember Colossians?) resulted in church being held in Philemon’s house. One of his slaves, Onesimus, had escaped his ‘owner’, Philemon, and was on the loose. Though in jail, more like house-arrest, Paul had contact with Onesimus and won him to Christ.

*What about slavery in the New Testament?* The early, persecuted church had no platform from which to attack the institution of slavery, but as the Kingdom advanced one person at a time, hearts were changed and the practice eventually fell apart with the empire. Paul’s approach is in no way a stamp of approval.

**The situation is this:** A Christian slave owner has a runaway (newly) Christian slave. Paul is the obvious common link, and has to decide how to attack the problem. When/how can it be fixed?

**Options:** Paul can convince Philemon to forgive Onesimus, let him go legally and go on with his life, especially since *slavery is wrong*. Or, Paul can convince Onesimus the fugitive to go back and beg for Philemon’s forgiveness, and at least have a roof over his head again.

*Paul has the choice to either command or appeal.....vs 8-11*  
Instead, Paul sees it as an opportunity to see Philemon and Onesimus embrace each other as brothers in Christ, which was not the case before.

### **Paul knew 2 things:**

- 1) **Philemon**, as a more mature believer, needs to exercise both grace and mercy in forgiving Onesimus and receiving him back without punitive measures.
- 2) **Onesimus**, on the other hand, is a new believer caught up in a Roman system of injustice, but needs to learn that believers are

required to ‘make things right’, and also, to forgive. Making things right for him meant to go back ‘home’ and realize that life as a fugitive for a believer will never provide him with the peace that God has intended for him to walk in.

Paul even offers to repay (vs 19) any costs incurred to Philemon on Onesimus’ behalf in order to make it workable for them both.

This is Paul, ‘the aged’ (see vs 9) who had learned that blown-up relationships render us useless in the Kingdom of God. (See Paul and Mark—2 Tim 4:11 “for he is *useful* to me...”)

**The kicker ‘God thing’** in this is—the name ‘**Onesimus**’ meant ‘*useful*’ or ‘*profitable*’. He is now, through sanctification, useful after being a liability and embarrassment.

**Vs 20: “Yes, brother”** (Philemon), Paul says, “***let me have joy/profit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.***” The ‘joy/profit’ word in the Greek is the same root word for ‘Onesimus’ (useful), and Paul was using a play on words with Philemon to get him to see the work God had done in Onesimus.

Some relationships are severed to protect the Body and unity; not all of them are salvageable. Others are severed through human effort and need to be restored, in wisdom, by those with maturity.

- 1)** *When have you run ahead and tried to ‘fix’ a relationship in your own understanding (flesh)? What was the result?*
- 2)** *What’s the value in waiting on God to see how the best can be brought out in all involved so there is reconciliation?*
- 3)** *Who is qualified to ‘broker’ a deal between those in conflict? (hint: see Galatians 6:1)*
- 4)** *What do you think eventually happened between these 2 men?*

**Favorite vs: 6-- Want your faith to be shared effectively-how? ‘by acknowledging of every good thing in you by Christ’**  
**Again, the way you think and what you acknowledge determines your success.**