

## **Lesson 1-A Plea for Forgiveness**

**Focus:** Ch. 1 v.1-25

- 1. Introduction/Background:** Paul's letter to Philemon was penned from within the same walls of Roman imprisonment as was Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. These four letters make up what are known as Paul's four "prison epistles." Colossians and Philemon both seem to be sent at the same time. In fact, Philemon was a resident of Colosse. You can see a comparison between those being sent to Colosse in Colossians 4:7-9 and Philemon 1:12. The date of writing was A.D. 60 or 61. Onesimus, a runaway slave, now converted and having had given assistance to Paul, was being sent home to Colosse along with Paul's messenger Tychicus.

Onesimus had been owned as a slave of Philemon. He had run away and ended up in Rome. Somehow he met Paul there at the prison, or likely sought out Paul, since he would have heard of the apostle before from his master, Philemon. While in Rome, Onesimus had become a converted Christian and had given service to Paul. Both knew that it was time for Onesimus to return to his rightful master, Philemon, though. Philemon was also a convert of Paul's who had likely been converted to Jesus while living in Ephesus, where Paul had previously done a three year missionary stay on his third missionary journey. Philemon must have later moved on to Colosse, a much smaller city located about 100 miles [about 161 Km] east of Ephesus. Colosse was not a big or popular place and the church there was not known for much out of the ordinary other than this letter which we have. Paul had never visited Colosse previously, as can be known from the wording of his letter to them (Colossians 1:4-8; 2:1). The church there had been founded by Epaphras.

In this letter to Philemon, Paul appeals to the owner of Onesimus that he would receive him back with forgiveness and grace, not as a mere slave, but rather as a brother in Christ (for he surely now was). Paul appealed for Onesimus to be forgiven and accepted back as a token of Christian love and brotherhood, and also as a returned favor to Paul. The gospel and its spirit of love and forgiveness were to transcend even the often harsh boundaries of slaves and their masters.

- 2. Paul sends his warm greetings (v.1-3)** *This letter is addressed to several parties. Philemon was first on the list. Others were in need of hearing and witnessing this instruction too. Apphia, a woman in the Colossian church, Archippus, a fellow missionary (also mentioned in Colossians 4:17), and to the church that was meeting in the home of Philemon. God's grace and peace were wished to everyone.*
- 3. The Apostle expresses his thankfulness for the good faith he's heard of in Philemon (v.4-7)** *Jesus Christ was doing a great work in the life of Philemon (v.6) for which Paul was so thankful! Philemon had a record of great love and faith for the brethren and others. His example stirred the hearts and minds of fellow believers to become stronger in their faith (v.7).*
- 4. Paul begins to make his appeal for Onesimus (v.8-14, 15-16)** *The Apostle felt that he could speak very boldly and use force of words by his granted authority from God, however, he did not do such a thing.*

He rather went by love and tender appeal to Philemon (a worthy example for us to follow). Forcing things does not always bring the best things. Appealing tenderly for a willing change of heart is much better as it is possible to do so. Paul expressed how Onesimus had been converted to the faith under Paul's labors while imprisoned at Rome (v.10). Once he was just a runaway slave, but now the guy is a changed man! Paul even desired to keep him there in Rome, but of course sent Onesimus back to Philemon because it was the right thing to do, and he did not want to force anything onto the rightful owner of him. **Note on Slavery:** Slavery was a well established and accepted practice all throughout the Roman Empire at this time. Many people, believers and otherwise held slaves. Some master were more considerate and kind than others. A number were not. In Paul's efforts he did not make it a point to try to fully uproot or overturn this practice of slavery in any direct way. Such a task would have hindered the work of the gospel in that time, and would have been a huge social job or project of its own, ultimately being near a fruitless effort. The gospel was not to be hindered by dealing with that cultural side issue at the time. However, the principles set forth in the writings of Paul are such that if followed, would ultimately and eventually when practiced, on their own bring an end to the cruel practices of slavery. (v. 15,16)—Paul argues that **perhaps for this very reason**—the reason of conversion—the man Onesimus had run away. In other words, that while one had perhaps meant it for a wrong, yet God had meant to use this situation **for a good thing**. Now Onesimus was changed forever and he was saved—now a brother in Christ! He would be a Christian brother, not just some slave, from now on! And this would even make him a better helper! **The gospel transcends the barriers of even things such as slavery, and it brings us all onto an equal playing field—as brothers and sisters in Christ!**

5. **Paul appeals as an intercessory agent—offering to pay the debt himself (v.17-25)** Paul said to put Onesimus' wrongs upon his account...that is, to let the sins, debts or mistakes of this runaway slave fall upon him. Paul promised to repay (v.17-19). Then, however, he also reminded Philemon, that even Philemon's life was owed to Paul for Paul had introduced the gospel of Jesus Christ to him. (v.20-22) Paul trusted that Philemon would do even far better than Paul's appeal. Here Paul acted even as Christ, taking the guilt of a sinner to request that they themselves should be set free from their heavy debt of robbed service from their master. (vs.23-25) The other laborers in Christ who were near to Paul sent their greetings and acknowledgment as well.
6. **Summarizing thought:** In this letter we see the forgiving power and process of Jesus Christ's love at work. We see the picture of Christ and His work through an analogy in this story as well. Paul lays aside his rights (v.8) and becomes as a substitute for Onesimus, the slave (vs.18, 19). By the gracious act of Philemon, Onesimus will be restored and given a new relationship to him. The picture of this analogy relates to us in this way: We are like Onesimus. We are guilty, sinful, and deserving of death. We have run away from God. (Our bondage however is not from God, but is from sin). In our sin though, we felt that we could not be in God's presence, so we as human beings have tried to run away from God, thinking as if He were our burden or problem (though actually it was sin, not God). Onesimus should have rightly been condemned to death for running away from his master. However, Paul pleaded for Onesimus, and pleaded not on what Onesimus had done merely, but rather on what he himself, Paul, had done. Paul acted as a mediator for this now converted man (Onesimus had been converted after meeting Paul). This is the work of Jesus Christ, first He converts us, and then He becomes our mediator or advocate before God the Father. In such a way, the man found forgiveness from his master. Like Onesimus, we too were condemned by the law for our sins. However, by the grace and mercy of God we are saved.

### **Questions for the Heart:**

**As Jesus has given so much to pay the debt of our sin and to set us free, would you like to receive His forgiveness and to share the same with others as well? \_\_\_\_\_**