

## Philemon Study Guide

### Historical Background:

#### **1 – 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.

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

Slaves were viewed as property. They were able to sell themselves into slavery, purchase slaves for themselves, earn wages, and buy their way out of slavery. 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 manumitted gain Roman citizenship. Slavery was not a racial matter, rather it was a means to get manual labor done.<sup>2</sup>

That sheds a lot of light on the letter to Philemon. Once we get out of our minds the 19<sup>th</sup> 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.

#### **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. 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 a 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.

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

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

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. Having settled all of that, let's have a look at Philemon.

### **Ancient Letters:**

Paul starts the letter with the customary introduction that is frequently seen in Greco-Roman letters. Gordon Fee in his book How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth lays out the form of ancient letters as follows:

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. "<sup>4</sup>I always **thank** my God as I remember you in my **prayers**, <sup>5</sup>because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. <sup>6</sup>**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. <sup>7</sup>Your 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. "<sup>23</sup>Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you **greetings**. <sup>24</sup>And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers. <sup>25</sup>The **grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit**.

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]."<sup>3</sup>

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

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<sup>3</sup> C.K. Barrett, The New Testament Background, 28.