

Episode: Paul's Letters Series No. 13

Narrator: Paul

Primary Scriptures: Philemon

Story Summary: Paul's letter to Philemon about returning his slave, Onesimus

Location: Roman Empire; Asia; Ephesus

Time: AD 30 Jesus crucified and resurrected; Pentecost; Holy Spirit arrives
 AD 48 Paul's "famine visit" to Jerusalem; First Missionary Journey starts
 AD 50 Council at Jerusalem; Start of Second Missionary Journey.
 AD 53 Start of Third Missionary Journey
 AD 61 Paul writes *Philemon* while imprisoned

Suggested Memory Scriptures: Philemon 1:6, 7, 15

This episode presumes Paul wrote *Ephesians*, *Colossians*, and *Philemon* at the same time, and sent them by Tychicus and Onesimus. Based on Colossians 4:2, Paul probably wrote and sent a letter to the church at Laodicea at the same time.

Paul lived in Ephesus for three years during the Third Missionary Journey, so he personally knew most people in the church of that large city. It is possible that the church at Colossae was started during that period by one of the people working with Paul. The Bible doesn't say whether Paul had been to Colossae or if he personally knew its leaders.

Based on Philemon 1:1-2, Philemon was a leader in the church at Colossae. Onesimus was a runaway slave owned by Philemon, and Paul was sending him back to Philemon. You can rightly guess Paul's instructions about slaves and masters in both *Ephesians* and *Colossians* were pointed straight at Philemon while also intended for all other Christians. For this reason, it is profitable to read those passages and *Philemon* at the same time to get better context.

Many modern people are displeased that neither Jesus nor Paul overtly condemned slavery, not content that the teachings of Jesus and Paul are certainly against slavery. It seems that both Jesus and Paul were much more concerned in their cultural moment with people being freed from the slavery of sin rather than the slavery of an earthly master. Perhaps they knew if all earthly masters became serious practicing Christians, then slavery would cease.

Philemon 1:11 says physical slaves are actually worthless, while Philemon 1:16 shows that having a brother or sister in Christ is invaluable. If all Christians lived by this value system, no one would desire to have slaves.

Your understanding of *Philemon* is possibly influenced by your thoughts on whether Paul and Philemon had a personal relationship. Philemon 1:22 might indicate they knew each other, but other verses could lead you to the opposite conclusion. It is interesting to read this very short letter two ways: read it first as if Paul does not personally know Philemon, then as if they are good friends.

Discussion Questions:

1. Describe slavery in the Roman Empire. How does that differ from slavery in the United States prior to 1865?
 2. Why didn't Jesus and Paul overtly condemn the practice of slavery in the Roman Empire? Does a verse like Galatians 3:28 undermine the existence of slavery?
 3. In what order did Paul want Philemon to hear his letters of *Ephesians*, *Colossians*, and *Philemon*?
 4. Onesimus went from being worthless to having great worth. What did he do to make that happen?
 5. Why did Paul ask Philemon to prepare a guest room for him?
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1. Up to one-third of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire were slaves. They were obtained as victims of war, purchased from slave-traders who may have kidnapped them or purchased them, people who went into too much debt, and children of slaves. Masters had the power of life-and-death over slaves. Slavery was seen as a result of misfortune. Slaves in the United States were primarily kidnapped from Africa or were children of slaves. Slavery in the United States was very much about racial inequality, with slaves seen as having less intrinsic "worth" than non-slaves. 4. Became a Christian. 5. Perhaps he really did expect to visit Philemon, but he might have used it as a pressure point.

Application questions:

1. Do you treat any types of people as having less "worth" than you by ignoring them, underpaying them, or saying mean things to them? How can you change these values?
2. The word "therefore" at the start of Verse 8 indicates that Paul was overtly setting up Philemon to feel obliged to do what Paul wanted. Do you find this to be a good strategy to get people to do what you want them to do?
3. Owners and slaves were obviously distinctly different in the early church, and it seems as if people treated them differently. Do you treat people in your church or at work differently based on their social or economic status?

Application Questions for Teens:

1. One of the most common practices of young people is to group themselves based on popularity, looks, interests, or athletic ability. What can cause this to be destructive behavior? How can you help people feel better about themselves?
2. Paul wanted Philemon to do something that would cost a lot. How do you encourage people to do things you want them to do? Do you tend to use persuasion, compliments, or threats?
3. Do you generally perceive that people have equal worth, or are you swayed by money, popularity, or intelligence? Are there types of people you are uncomfortable being around?