

Philemon

Love, Humility, Courage & Faith

Warmup



Have you ever played the role of an advocate? What did you do? Did you write a letter on behalf of a person in need? Did you stand firmly with a placard to defend a cause? Did you pray earnestly on your knees for someone caught in a difficult situation?

What was the outcome?

Introduction

This well-written letter from Paul the Apostle to Philemon the Colossian is full of courtesy, grace, courage, faith and duty.

A slave has run away from his master. Perhaps to us in the twenty-first century, that doesn't seem momentous. But this is first-century Rome, and runaway slaves who were caught were either returned to their masters to be severely punished, or imprisoned and put to death.

Onesimus is the slave who has done such a dangerous thing. But in the providence of God, he has run straight into the arms of grace and has been converted to Christ. Now as a Christian, he knows he must return to his master.

Paul kindly writes a letter to the servant's master, Philemon, with the appeal that Onesimus be readmitted to the family circle, and even welcomed as a brother.

Read Philemon 1-25

¹ Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, ² 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: ³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. ⁶ 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. ⁷ Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.

⁸ Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹ yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul - an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—¹⁰ I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son

while I was in chains. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

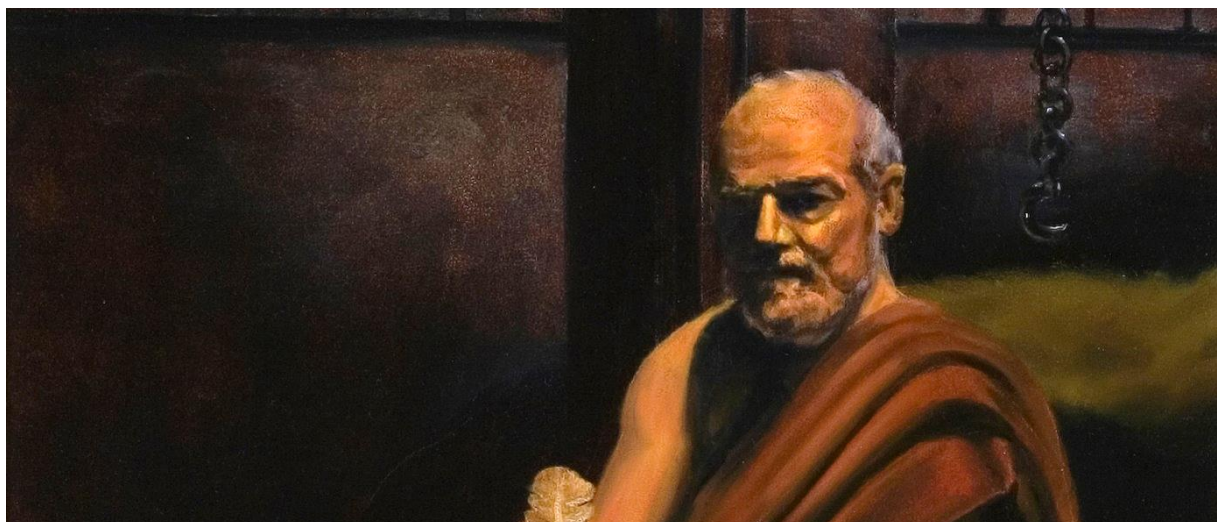
¹² I am sending him - who is my very heart - back to you. ¹³ I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴ But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favour you do will be spontaneous and not forced. ¹⁵ Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

¹⁷ So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back - not to mention that you owe me your very self. ²⁰ I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

²² And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. ²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. ²⁴ And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers. ²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Question 1

(i) List some things that you find impressive in the way that Paul handles this delicate situation.



(ii) There are four characters in the *Parable of the Good Samaritan* (Luke 10) – the priest, the Levite, the Samaritan, and of course the man who had been robbed and left for dead. Can you recall how each person acted toward the man who was hurt?

Given that Paul is a Jewish teacher, and that Onesimus is a Gentile in need, in what way is the real-life story described in our letter a wonderful twist on the parable mentioned above?

With reference to Philemon 1:18, distinguish between the actions of grace and mercy.

Question 2

(i) List some things that you find challenging about what Onesimus has to do, together with some things that should give him hope.



(ii) There are three characters in the *Parable of the Prodigal Son* (Luke 15) – the Father, the younger son, and the older son. Both sons, the prodigal and his older brother, had duties – one to say sorry and the other to forgive.

Of these two duties, which do you think is the harder? And why?

If the older brother, instead of the father, had run out to meet his younger sibling, how do you suppose the conversation might have gone? What do you think might have been the outcome?

Question 3

(i) List some things that you find challenging about what Philemon is asked to do.



(ii) There are three characters in the *Parable of the Unmerciful Servant* (Matthew 18) – the King, the servant who owed the King a ‘million dollars’, and the servant who owed a few dollars to the servant who owed much. Can you recall what happened in the story? Does the story have a happy ending? What might this suggest about what often happens in real life?

What would be tragic if Philemon made the decision to turn Onesimus away? What do you think he will do? Is there power in this Christian Faith to forgive others?

Conclusion

Reflecting on the actions and duties of the three prominent characters of this letter - Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon - consider the following questions:

1. Is there something more you could do to advocate for someone that you know is in need? What would that look like? And what would be the first step of this second mile?
2. Is there someone to whom you still owe an apology? (That is, not just someone to whom you’ve made your apology in your mind, but someone who has yet to hear it from your lips?)
3. Is there someone who has tried hard to say sorry to you, whom you are still needing to forgive?