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## Philemon

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# Philemon

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## A. Overview and Summary.

1. The book is named after the recipient of the letter, Philemon. He was a prominent member of the church at Colosse, which met in his house (2). It is one of the Apostle Paul's prison letters written during his imprisonment in Rome along with Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. This would place the date of its writing 60 to 62 AD. Philemon was saved through the preaching of Paul, probably at Ephesus, and is reminded by Paul of that indebtedness (19).
2. Paul's purpose in writing is to ask Philemon to forgive Philemon's slave Onesimus, who had run away, and to welcome him back into service, not as just a slave but now a brother in Christ (15-17). Onesimus had run away from Philemon and gone to Rome, where he apparently hoped to lose himself in the large population of slaves. He met Paul somehow in prison, and Paul led him to Christ. He ministered to Paul there (11-13), and Paul became caring towards him and desired to keep him there with him. However, Paul recognizes that this would be unjust and proposes to send him back with Tychicus, a trusted coworker who is also mentioned in this epistle, as well as the epistle to the Colossians (Colossians 4:7-9). Onesimus needed an escort due to people who acted as slave catchers. The book contains just 25 verses and contains no doctrinal matters as it is a personal letter from Paul to his friend.
3. The letter shows insight into first-century slavery. Slavery was widespread in the Roman Empire, and according to some estimates, constituted over one-third of the population. Slaves were not considered persons, but property and tools of their masters. They could be bought, sold, inherited, and could be punished severely for even minor infractions. But the climate was changing as masters realized that contented slaves were more productive. In 20 AD, the Roman Senate granted slaves accused of a crime the right to a trial. The New Testament does not attack the institution of slavery. If it had, the gospel might have been hopelessly confused with social reform. Instead, the gospel changes the hearts of slaves and masters. Unfortunately, the Bible was used to justify slavery in many nations and civilizations, as it did not directly attack the institution of slavery.

## B. The text of the epistle.

1. Paul opens by mentioning Timothy, who was there with him. He greets Philemon and says: "I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, hearing of your love, and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all the saints; that the fellowship of your faith may become effectual, in the knowledge of every good thing which is in you, unto Christ. For I had much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother (4-7).
2. He gets to the heart of his letter to Philemon: " I beseech you for my child, whom I have begotten in my bonds, Onesimus, who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me: whom I have sent back to you in his own person, that is, my very heart: whom I would have kept with me, that in your behalf he might minister to me in the bonds of the gospel: but without your mind I would do nothing; that your goodness should not be as of necessity, but of free will. For perhaps he was separated from you for a season, that you should have him forever; no longer as a servant, but more than a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much rather to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord" (10-16).
3. He asks that Philemon receive Onesimus as he would Paul himself. He offers to pay Philemon for any debts that Onesimus incurred (17-18). He closes with "Having confidence in thine obedience, I write unto thee, knowing that you will do even beyond what I say. But prepare me also a lodging: for I hope that through your prayers I shall be reunited with you" (21-22).

#### C. Discussion Questions, Application and Passing it On.

1. Paul's mention of having any debts owed by Onesimus charged to his account is similar to the Good Samaritan and his instructions to the innkeeper about the injured man. Do you have such a caring heart for someone less privileged than you?
2. Slavery is still a very prevalent social disease today, involving sex trafficking, forced labor, or indebtedness. As Christians who were once enslaved by sin, we should be on the forefront of organizations that work to end such practices. Research what organizations are involved with ending such practices and if possible, support them as a volunteer or with financial contributions.

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*This New Testament survey was provided by Joshua Nations ([JoshuaNations.org](http://JoshuaNations.org))*