

## **What's the Point...of Philemon?**

**Mark Garner**

*Paul's short epistle to Philemon is rather unusual amongst the books of the New Testament, in that it deals with matters of a purely private nature. Yet it serves an important purpose, in its insights about relationships in Jesus, and in its thoughts about spiritual rebirth. In it, Paul shows how Jesus can refresh and renew our hearts and our relationships.*

### ***Background - Paul, Philemon, & Onesimus***

While he was in prison, the apostle Paul wrote this letter to his friend Philemon, a believer who lived in Colossae (sometimes spelled Colosse). The epistle was likely written during Paul's house arrest described in Acts 28 (about AD 60-62). The letter concerns Onesimus, either a household slave\* or household servant, who has fled and apparently has also stolen from Philemon. He has likely gone to Rome counting on its size and distance to help him avoid capture.

\* Onesimus's background is not known with certainty, so if he was a slave, the reason is uncertain. In Roman territory, people could be enslaved for a variety of reasons. These included prisoners of war and unpayable debts, as well as several other reasons. Working conditions for both slaves and servants also varied widely.

With Onesimus now a devoted follower of Jesus, Paul urges him to return to Philemon, which would also give Philemon a chance to be renewed himself. Besides being personally close with Paul, Philemon also hosts a group of believers at his home, and he seems also to be supporting the church in other ways. So Onesimus has agreed to deliver the letter himself.

### ***Overview Of Philemon***

Before Paul discusses his main topic, he writes an extended greeting of thanksgiving and praise (1:1-7). In Paul's greeting, he refers to himself as "a prisoner of Christ Jesus", and the following thanksgiving (1:4-7) sets the tone for the rest of the epistle. He also encourages Philemon to put his faith into practice in newer ways, leading up to his request for forgiveness on behalf of Onesimus, while Paul also has Philemon's own spiritual well-being in mind.

Now Paul describes Onesimus's spiritual rebirth (1:8-16). While Onesimus has been away from Colossae, he has not only become a Christian, but has become very close to Paul. By returning, Onesimus is both taking responsibility and is also taking quite a risk, so he and Paul are appealing to Philemon's belief in Jesus, rather than his earthly status. Paul asks Philemon to act solely on the basis his appreciation for Paul and especially Philemon's love for God. Paul mentions how useful Onesimus\* has been to him, hoping that Philemon will now see him now as a fellow believer.

\* "Onesimus" means "useful", and Paul makes some puns in the epistle by using the words useful, useless, and the related word benefit.

Since Philemon is a reborn believer in Christ, Paul asks him to deal with the situation differently from what someone worldly would do (1:17-25). Paul asks his friend to welcome Onesimus just as he would welcome the apostle himself, and he gives a gentle though obvious hint that Philemon could set Onesimus free entirely. Paul also offers to repay any losses Onesimus has caused. This epistle, despite its short length, has some good thoughts on how our own spiritual rebirth can affect our personal lives and relationships.

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## **What's the Point...of Philemon?** **Caleb Dillinger**

Paul writes the letter of Philemon to a Christian named Philemon who had a slave/servant named Onesimus who had run away and spent time with Paul. While with Paul, Onesimus came to believe in Jesus, and now Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon and makes a case for Philemon to welcome him back. Philemon is only one chapter, truly a letter, and helps readers today understand Christian relationships, authority, rights, and grace.

The letter to Philemon reflects genuine relationship. There is blessing (vs 3), gratitude (vs 4), intentional prayer (vs 6), and expectation (vs 21). When we interact with Christians brothers and sisters, we can learn from Paul's interaction with Philemon about our behavior. There should be kindness and respect even in disagreement. Not all disagreements need to be labeled sin. Paul seems to advocate for Onesimus to be welcomed back due to advantage and spiritual possibilities, not necessarily sin/not sin. Whenever we disagree about Christian behavior, we should not to think anyone who disagrees with our practice is sinful in their disagreement.

When it comes to insights on Christian authority, Paul at one point claims he has authority to tell Philemon what to do (vs 8-9) but opts to appeal to Philemon through their relationship instead. This serves as a great example today for Christian leaders who wonder about their use of authority. Though Christian leaders have a right to use their authority, there is something to be said about appealing to relationship through Christ first. While Paul has a certain level of authority, Philemon has a certain level of rights. And yet the appeal is to give up the rights for someone who transgressed (Onesimus running away). This can teach us today to sacrifice our rights to help others draw closer to Jesus. If Philemon enslaved/punished Onesimus upon his return, who knows what would happen to his faith. But if Philemon could accept Onesimus and his new faith, then he gains a brother in the faith, not just a servant (vs. 15-16). He has the right to enslave, but Paul asks that right to be waived for the benefit of someone else – yet, logically, Paul points out this gaining of a Christian brother is of Philemon's spiritual advantage as well. Essentially, Paul asks Philemon to choose grace over rights but appeals through relationship rather than authority to make that point.

That's the point of Philemon today. Christians could learn much from Paul's wisdom of appealing to relationship rather than role/authority, and to prioritize grace toward others rather than prioritize rights of the self. It is challenging and humbling, but a needed message today.