

NT Reading Plan 2020

Living Hope Fellowship
Philemon

Philemon is the 13th and last letter of Paul's in the NT, not the last to be written (that was 2 Timothy), but last in order. It's also his shortest. If you've read this far, you've read all of Paul's writings! Paul sent this letter plus Colossians, and Ephesians by the hand of Onesimus and Tychicus. Can you imagine what it would have been like for Onesimus to carry the freshly penned word of God back to Philemon's house church in Colossae and come face to face with his master? Both of them would have heard the letter to the Colossians for the first time as it was read in church. There was also another envelope singled out for Philemon. He didn't know Onesimus got saved. What was he supposed to do with that? Would the church be witness to a redemption story right there in front of them? Paul was praying for just that.

Useful

Paul does a word play using Onesimus's name which means "useful" (v. 11). Since he had gone AWOL, Onesimus was no longer useful to Philemon but ironically had become very useful in serving Paul while he was in prison.

1. What change has now made Onesimus useful to Philemon?

Church Family

The church at Colossae very well may have met in Philemon's house. Paul's greeting shows a close personal connection with Philemon and his family (the likely interpretation of Apphia and Archippus is that they are Philemon's wife and son). There is a lot of relational glue with these church members which allows Paul to speak directly and with great love to Philemon. Look at these tender words of familial relationship between church members: "our beloved fellow worker" (1:1), "Apphia our sister" (1:2), "Archippus our fellow soldier" (1:2), "the church in your house" (1:2), "the saints" (1:5, 7), "my brother" (1:7), "my child" (1:10), "[his] father" (1:10), "my very heart" (1:12), "a beloved brother" (1:16), "brother" (1:20), "my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus" (1:23), "my fellow workers" (1:24).

2. Look at what these people share: Love (1:5, 7), joy and comfort (1:7), faith & evangelism (1:6), a guest room (1:22), refreshment, prayers (1:22), helpfulness & value (1:11).

Slavery

Onesimus was Philemon's slave who had run away to Rome (or perhaps never came back from an errand). While in Rome, he came under the preaching of Paul, heard the gospel, and was converted to Christianity. Therefore, Paul can say that he became Onesimus's "father" in the faith. Paul's main concern for Onesimus was for his relationship with Philemon to be restored, not that it would just go back to normal, but that Philemon would now accept him "no longer as a bondservant, but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother" (v. 16).

It is noteworthy that Paul doesn't turn his attention to the abolition of a social institution. Often this is leveled as a severe criticism of Christianity. To be silent is to be complicit, right? But Paul isn't silent. His attention is not focused on overturning an institution but seeing the gospel transform individuals and seeing these gospel transformed lives apply biblical truth in their respective situations. If Philemon and Onesimus are brothers in Christ, living according to the

gospel, loving in keeping with the gospel, their social status will not matter. However, if slavery is abolished yet these two men remain unreconciled, their change of social circumstances hasn't resulted in their changed hearts' the gospel hasn't been applied. The gospel upends the abuses of slavery starting with the heart of individuals and trickles out to society. This is what we saw occur with the advance of Christianity in the Roman empire.

Slavery is a very loaded term; it rightly comes with a lot of negative baggage. You must know that both testaments, decried in the strongest possible way, what we think of when we hear of slavery (Exodus 21:16; 1 Timothy 1:10). The Old Testament had many laws regarding slavery (Ex 21; Deut 15) and the New Testament has much to say about master-slave relations as well (Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-4:1. Onesimus is carrying both of these letters in his satchel!). While it's beyond the scope of these notes, it's always helpful to keep the character of God in mind when we approach the Bible's discussions of slavery. Those under the Old Covenant were literal slaves whom God freed from Egypt. His laws were reminders to them that they know oppression first hand as well as God who is the most benevolent master. Far from sanctioning kidnapping, violence, and oppression, God advocated for the care of every human in a way which reflected God's relationship with Israel. New Covenant people know what it's like to be slaves of sin when God freed us from bondage. The way we are to treat all men is to reflect God's incomparable love and compassion which he demonstrated to us when he rescued us from our sin, from hell.

3. What was the penalty for enslaving people in the Old Covenant (Ex 21:16)?

4. What is enslaving people contrary to in the New Covenant (1 Tim 1:10)?

Prison

Philemon rounds out the so-called Prison Epistles along with Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. (To add some confusion, Paul writes 2 Timothy during a *different* imprisonment.) In such a short book, Paul mentions his circumstances 5 times (1:1, 8, 10, 13, 23), more than in any of the other prison epistles. In one chapter, Paul mentions his prisoner status more than in Ephesians (6 chapters), Philippians (4 chapters), or Colossians (4 chapters). I get the feeling that Paul is implying his own current "slavery" status hasn't gotten his focus off of the transforming power of the gospel. Paul's greatest concern isn't for the social injustices of his situation to be resolved, it's that the gospel resolve the tensions between two brothers. In any of our discussions on the injustices of slavery (and there are many!), we need to marvel at how the NT continues to laud the virtues of the gospel as the antidote to all evil. When the heart has been changed and salvation from the slavery of sin granted, everything else will fall into place as Christ consummates his kingdom.

5. How is it that Paul can remain so positive in light of the injustice of his situation? Was Paul ever the instigator of injustice himself (think outside of Philemon)?

Christ

Jesus comes up in nearly half of the verses in this short letter. He is the constant focus of biblical revelation because, when we look at him, we see everything we need for life and godliness. If Christ isn't our only hope, we're not saved. If Christ isn't our motivation, we won't be sanctified. If Christ isn't our focus, we'll constantly miss the point.

6. Why was Paul imprisoned (1:1, 9)? What good did Christ bring from Paul's suffering?