

PHILEMON

Postcard on Forgiveness

Postcard on forgiveness is the best way to describe Philemon. It is the briefest of Paul's letters, contains only 334 words in the Greek text.

AUTHOR: This is the most personal of all letters Paul wrote (vv. 1, 9, 19). It is so short it is like a "postcard." It was hand carried to Philemon by Onesimus and Tychicus, who also delivered the letters we know as *Ephesians* and *Colossians* to their respective churches.

DATE AND PLACE: *Philemon* is one of the first prison epistles Paul wrote from Rome on his first imprisonment about A.D. 61 (vv. 1, 9, 10, 13, 23). These included *Ephesians*, *Philippians* and *Colossians*. Philemon 22 reflects Paul's hope to be released from captivity soon. *Philemon* is closely connected with other epistles, especially *Colossians*. Timothy is mentioned along with Paul in the opening of both epistles. Those who send greetings at the end of *Philemon* are said also to send greetings at the end of *Colossians* (cf. Archippus in Col. 4:17). *Philemon* was written to go with Onesimus on his return to his master. According to *Colossians* 4:7-9, Onesimus was to accompany Tychicus to Colossae (cf. Eph. 6:21-22).

PURPOSE: Onesimus, a slave of Philemon, prominent member of the church at Colossae, had stolen from his master and sought freedom by fleeing to Rome. Onesimus came in contact with Paul in Rome and was converted to Christ (v. 10). Paul wrote this letter to Philemon to tell him of the conversion, and to plead for the returning slave. R. B. Jones writes, "It is a private letter, but deals very definitely with the Christian teaching that would ultimately make human slavery impossible." "This letter is not an attack against slavery as such, but as suggestion as to how Christian masters and slaves could live their faith within that evil system. It is possible that Philemon did free Onesimus and send him back to Paul (v. 14)" (C. C. Ryrie). The primary goal of the letter is to seek Onesimus' reinstatement as a brother in the Lord, and in the household of Philemon from which he had fled.

THEME: One Christian brother makes his plea to another to forgive and restore another brother.

KEY VERSE: v. 18

STYLE: This postcard is a model of courtesy, discretion, tact and loving concern for a runaway slave to another brother in Christ who has legal authority to extract justice. It is a tactful, highly personal letter to a personal friend on a very delicate issue.

SLAVERY IN PAUL'S TIME: Slavery in the time of Paul was an evil thing. A slave has been compared to nothing more than a "living tool" who had no power or rights. He was at the disposal of his master who had absolute rights over him. He could even put him to death if he ran away or stole from his master. Pliny says, "He can brand someone with a hot iron for stealing a couple of towels."

What made it worse was the slaves were deliberately held down. There were in the Roman Empire sixty million of them and the danger of revolt was constantly to be guarded against. A rebellious slave was promptly eliminated. And, if a slave ran away, at best he would be branded with a red-hot iron on the forehead, with the letter F—standing for *fugitivus, runaway*—and at the worst he would be crucified to death.

This letter is filled with practical applications of Christian love. It brings out the best in others (v. 4). It seeks the welfare of others (v. 10), and deals honestly with them (v. 12). It bears the burdens of others (v. 18), and believes in the best of them (v. 21).

The Advocacy Law of Rome: The Roman law stated that a slave might flee to an influential friend of the master and implore his intercession. Paul probably uses this appeal in v. 15, and to the changed life of Onesimus (vv. 11-14). Please accept Onesimus as a brother (vv. 16-17). Accept him as you would accept me. Paul gives his own personal pledge, "I will repay." You can "charge it" to my account (vv. 18-19). "You owe me. . ." (v. 19).

How much we owe Jesus Christ! II Cor. 5:21 God imputed, charged to Christ our sin debt; credited to us His righteousness. God receives us in the merit of Christ. CHRIST SAID: "CHARGE IT TO MY ACCOUNT!"

We are all slaves to sin! Christ paid our sin debt. Col. 2:13-14

He has now adopted us as His sons (v. 16). Onesimus is "more than a slave. . . brother." Paul then makes his appeal, "Refresh my heart" (v. 20) - cause cheer, relieve

ONESIMUS THE BISHOP OF EPHEBUS?

Ignatius, one of the great Christian martyrs, wrote in a letter to the churches of Asia Minor, about 50 years later. Ignatius makes the same pun Paul does regarding the bishop of the church at Ephesus. It may well be that the Onesimus of Philemon, the unprofitable runaway

slave has become the great bishop of Ephesus.

SOME ABIDING PRINCIPLES:

1. Christ enables us to triumph over our circumstances through fellowship with Him. Paul was a prisoner, not of Rome, but of Jesus Christ! (v. 1, 9, 23). How many of us know what it is to experience limitations, persecutions, frustrations and to sit down and write of ourselves as the prisoners of Christ Jesus? It is the privilege of every believer, but possible only of those who are living in true fellowship with Jesus. Opposite of "poor me" syndrome.

2. Life in Christ changes every relationship.

Paul and Philemon: "Love seeketh not its own." cf. vv. 12-14, "I wanted to keep Onesimus."

Paul and Onesimus: "Love beareth all things." cf. vv. 18-19 "Charge it to me. I will take care of Onesimus debts."

Onesimus and Philemon: "Love suffereth long, and is kind." cf. vv. 15-17 You have been hurt, but it is time to forgive.

3. Our relationship with others test our relationship to Christ. The burden rests on Philemon to forgive Onesimus. Could Philemon angrily refuse to receive Onesimus? Could Onesimus refuse to return to Philemon? Could Paul keep that which was not his own? My relationships to other men test my relationship with Christ.

4. Social evils can be changed by transformed lives. The Colossian church was composed of rich and poor, master and slave. The church lives through the power of a common love. ILL: Quechuas: drunken weekends. Accept Christ - profitable, hard working contribution to society.

5. Christ radically changes our lives. Martin Luther said, "We are all the Lord s 'Onesimi, we are all the Lord s 'profitable servants. How have we been made profitable to the Lord? Where are we unprofitable? The unprofitable becomes profitable. It is the perpetual picture of Christ dealing with men. cf. Isa. 53:6. We were all runaway slaves to sin.

Example of changed lives: Philemon: faith and love toward Christ and the saints.

Onesimus: man changed from unprofitable to profitable

Paul: living above his circumstances. "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus."

Title: Introduction to Philemon

Series: A Look at the Book

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