

## **Study: Philemon — Created Equal**

**Pray for your time together in God's Word.**

### **Introduction:**

Paul wrote this very short and personal letter to a man named Philemon, a beloved friend and fellow laborer. Philemon had become a believer through Paul, and may have helped plant the church in Colossae, since the church met in his house. Paul pleads with his friend over a runaway slave named Onesimus. Somehow Onesimus had run into Paul in Rome and had become a Christian. As a brother in Christ, Onesimus had made himself very useful to Paul in Rome, but because he still legally belongs to Philemon, Paul sends him back with a plea that Onesimus be forgiven and received as a brother in the Lord.

### **Scripture Reference**

#### **Philemon**

<sup>1</sup> Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker— <sup>2</sup> also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home: <sup>3</sup> Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>4</sup> I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, <sup>5</sup> because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup> I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. <sup>7</sup> Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

<sup>8</sup> Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, <sup>9</sup> yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— <sup>10</sup> that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. <sup>11</sup> Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

<sup>12</sup> I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. <sup>15</sup> Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— <sup>16</sup> 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 fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

<sup>17</sup> So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. <sup>18</sup> If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. <sup>19</sup> I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. <sup>20</sup> I do wish, brother, that I may have some

benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. <sup>21</sup> Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

<sup>22</sup> And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. <sup>23</sup> Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. <sup>24</sup> And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.

<sup>25</sup> The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

### Key Terms

Onesimus: Means useful or profitable

Philemon: Means one that is affectionate

Philemon family: Paul addresses this letter to a number of people. Apphia was probably Philemon's wife, and Archippus was probably his son. Philemon had a church that met in his home in Colosse. Apparently he was a wealthy man, because he had slaves. There were 60 million slaves in the world in those days.

### Questions for Discussion:

**Ask the Group:** Why do you think Paul calls himself "a prisoner of Jesus Christ," not a prisoner of Rome or of the emperor?

*Possible Answer: Because Paul sees his ultimate authority as Christ. He was imprisoned by the Romans for preaching about Christ, but he views his imprisonment as a sacrifice to Christ, not a submission to Rome. No matter where Paul was, he used his position to spread the word of God.*

**Ask the Group:** In the Roman world, Slaves didn't have any legal family; they were considered property of their master. And yet, Paul calls Onesimus his son (verse 10). How do you think this would have made Onesimus feel?

*Possible Answer: Good! Like he had status that he maybe didn't deserve. He may have seen it as Paul modeling Christ's love.*

**Read to the Group:** Paul took a risk in sending Onesimus back. According to Roman law, the usual penalty for an escaped slave was death or branding with a hot iron to mark him as a fugitive. Paul could have also been punished for harboring a slave.

**Ask the Group:** In spite of Roman law, why do you think Paul sent Onesimus back to his master?

*Possible Answer: Because he trusted the Lord to take care of Onesimus, and he wanted to give Philemon an opportunity to extend the same grace to Onesimus that he had received from Christ. Paul hoped that Philemon would also understand that even though he had the legal right to punish Onesimus, he should submit to Christ first and foremost -- and Christ would compel him to extend grace.*

- Where do you think Onesimus found the courage to go back?

*Possible answer: Consider referencing Romans 8:15-17 for further discussion. It probably took a lot of faith on his part, since he was facing the possibility of death by returning. However, he hoped that Philemon, who was himself a believer, would respond to God's authority and Paul's urging to treat him equally as a brother in Christ, rather than a slave. Ultimately, however, Christ had given Onesimus a new perspective on grace and forgiveness, which gave him the courage to live freely even as a slave.*

**Ask the Group:** As an apostle, Paul had some authority to command Philemon to release Onesimus. What does Paul do instead?

*Possible Answer: Paul appeals to Philemon on the basis of love and as a fellow believer in Christ.*

- What is striking to you about this approach?

*Possible Answer: Similarly, God has the authority to command us to behave, but gives us the freedom to act the way we want. Philemon was given the opportunity to respond out of love rather than obligation. Our voluntary actions indicate where our heart is pointed.*

**Ask the Group:** Just as Paul is asking for Onesimus' freedom, we were all set free from sin by Christ. Can you think of any bible verses that point to this freedom or our equality as believers?

*Possible Answer: Ephesians 2: 11-13, 1 Corinthians 7: 22-23, Galatians 3: 26-29. Danger zone! This question could lead to some really great discussion, but be mindful of your group's time.*

**General Application:**

**Ask the Group:** As Christians we try to treat everyone as equal, but sometimes our behavior fails to reflect our beliefs. Who do you struggle with treating as an equal?

**Ask the Group:** In light of our equality under Christ and the grace we all receive from God, what can we do to make sure our brothers and sisters feel equally valued as part of the body of Christ?

**Ask the Group:** What is our community application of this passage?

*Leader's Note: You may choose to create your own application question as a group based on your discussion, or highlight a question from this study.*