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The Letter of Paul to...

# Philemon

Slavery. Racism. Justice. and Jesus.

## Have we missed it?

Have you wondered why Christians have sometimes failed to speak up against slavery and racism? Does your family have a history of racism or un-forgiveness? Are you wondering if God is calling you to make a difference?

## Philemon: Slavery. Racism. Justice. and Jesus.

### Cultural Background

*Slavery in the First Century A.D.*

#### Geographical Context

Paul in Ephesus – Philemon in Colossae; distance: approximately 120 miles.<sup>1</sup> It is debated by scholars whether Paul was imprisoned in Rome or Ephesus. If Paul were located in Rome during the time this letter was written, the distance to reach Colossae would have been considerably greater.<sup>2</sup> Colossae was known to be a prosperous city where idol worship was prevalent.

#### Slavery

During the era of the first-century Church, slavery was thought of by the majority of society to be a completely acceptable way of life. In fact, some slaves had a somewhat better life than free peasants. Slaves were commonly allowed to work toward their eventual freedom and some even became quite wealthy.<sup>2</sup>

However, slaves could be also treated abusively and if caught while attempting to escape slavery, they could be punished severely or even killed. There was also a pervasive attitude among wealthier members of society that slaves explicitly from Phrygia tended to be slothful and ill mannered.<sup>2</sup> This mindset may have been used as justification for harsh treatment to be administered to one's slave.

Slave owners reserved the right to execute their slaves at will, and if the head of the family was murdered, all the slaves would commonly be executed.<sup>2</sup> Harboring someone else's escaped slave was also against Roman law and if reconciliation was not made, severe penalty would ensue. Furthermore, upon recapture, the slave owner had the undeniable right to punish or even kill the returned slave.

Scholar Lawrence Richards writes, "...the letter gives us insight into how early Christianity dealt with an evil institution.

Slavery then as at any time in history was repugnant—a denial of the dignity and worth of human beings. Yet Christians launched no crusade against slavery. Rather, as Paul shows us here, Christ introduced love into the heart of master and slave. As a slave Onesimus sought to be profitable to his master (v. 11); as master Philemon would learn to see Onesimus also "as a man and as a brother in the Lord" (v. 16). It is Christ's power to transform relationships that has, in history, motivated movements which have led to emancipation."<sup>3</sup>

Although Christianity did not immediately work toward abolishing slavery, it *did* however bring about a revolutionary concept of love towards all humanity regardless of ethnicity, race, etc. This love, which is found in the person and work of Jesus Christ, undoubtedly was instrumental in the later work of abolitionists and ultimately the freedom of many from the bondage of slavery. The work continues!

### Crazy Good News for Every Slave!

"For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus... there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise." (Galatians 3:26, 28-29)

**KEY:** Every person has equal value and significance through Jesus Christ.



## Historical Background

Questions about the author: Paul

### Paul's Family Heritage?

Paul was a Jew, born and raised in Tarsus of Cilicia (Acts 22:3). He was a Hebrew, an Israelite (Rom. 9:3-4), and a descendent of Abraham (2 Cor. 11:22). He was "circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, as to the law a Pharisee..." (Phil. 3:5-14). Paul was also a Roman citizen by birth (Acts. 22:28).

### Paul's Educational Background?

He was fluent in the Hebrew dialect (Acts 22:2) and educated under Gamaliel (the most prestigious teacher of his day), strictly according to the law and taught to be zealous for God (Acts 22:3). He was also part of the "Pharisees" (teachers and keepers of the law).

### Paul's Occupational Skills?

Paul was a teacher, debater, writer, religious leader, and a professional tent-maker (1 Cor. 2:13; 1 Cor. 4:17; Acts 18:1-4).

### Paul's Culture and Religion?

He was well versed in both the culture of the Jews, as well as the Romans/Gentiles, etc. (Gal. 2).

### Before receiving Christ...

Paul was raised a Jew, a strict Pharisee. He was extremely zealous for his ancestral traditions. He was advancing in Judaism beyond many of his contemporaries (Gal. 1:14). Before Paul's conversion he vehemently opposed Christianity by imprisoning and murdering Christ-followers (Acts 8:1-4; 1 Cor. 15:9).

### After receiving Christ...

Paul received the Gospel through a personal revelation of Jesus Christ (Acts 9:1-8; 26:9-17). Jesus appeared to Him on the road to Damascus and from that point on Paul (who was formerly known as Saul) was a completely transformed man (Gal. 1:11-16; 1 Tim. 1:13-17). The Lord commanded Paul by saying: "I have placed you as a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the end of the earth." (see Acts 13:46-48) He also experienced a vision or revelation where he was "caught up to the third heaven" (2 Cor. 12:2). The Lord also used a "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7) to teach Paul that through his weakness, Christ's strength is made perfect.



Photographer: Michael Breznau – Andhra Pradesh, India

## Why this Letter?

### The Purpose for Philemon

In God's sovereign plan, Paul reached out to a runaway slave named Onesimus with the Gospel. The only problem was that Onesimus had apparently robbed Paul's good friend and brother in Christ, Philemon, and had subsequently run away.<sup>4</sup> Out of respect for Philemon, Paul decided to send Onesimus back to his former owner (v.12).

**But here's the shocking piece:** Paul appealed to Philemon to treat Onesimus as a brother in Christ, even as if he were the apostle himself (v.17)! Paul desires to still have Onesimus by his side during his current imprisonment (vv. 8-14), but realizes the greater need for reconciliation and fellowship between the newly converted runaway slave and his owner Philemon (vv. 13-16). Paul, in essence, asked for Philemon to free Onesimus from the bonds of slavery and welcome him into the family of God.

### The Recipients of this Letter

The apostle Paul wrote this letter directly to Philemon, Apphia, Archippus and the church that was meeting in Philemon's home, located in the city of Colossae.<sup>1</sup> There were probably both Jews and Gentiles in this fellowship. Date: approx. 55-60 AD.

Colossae: A city in the central highlands of Asia Minor. Paul, however, was probably imprisoned in either Ephesus or Rome (1 Cor. 15:32; 2 Cor. 1:8-11).<sup>1</sup>

## Points for Action

**Q:** Can you think of some ways in which you *think* you are better than someone else because of your social standing?

**Q:** Have you ever ignored or rejected someone because they were different than you?

**Q:** Would you give love and forgiveness to someone who had stolen from you, broken a contract, run away, and is now returning with no ability to personally pay back what they owe you?

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### For the Book Geeks:

<sup>1</sup> David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 1440.

<sup>2</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 642-46.

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence O. Richards, *The Teacher's Commentary*, electronic ed. (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1987; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996), 983.

<sup>4</sup> John F. Woolvord, Roy B. Zuck, and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: an Exposition of the Scriptures. New Testament ed.* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 769.