



Forward thinking from Philemon ...

Grace, Peace, Love, and Faith

Paul's epistle to his disciple and friend in Christ, Philemon, is short but contains the Holy Spirit's revolutionary teaching on one of the most important issues in Christianity for all time — slavery! The central individual in this short book included in the writings of the New Testament is one Onesimus, a slave run away from his Christian master, a leader in the church at Colossae. Sometimes commentators think that the apostle Paul had never been to Colossae, basing their conclusion on Paul's statement in that epistle that the Colossian brethren had heard the gospel from Epaphras, and that

Paul had heard of their faith rather than personally witnessing it. The fact that the initial work was done by Epaphras does not exclude Paul from having been there, and his hearing of their faith would come from his continued monitoring of their progress through his information network. In fact, the internal things in the book of Philemon clearly indicate that Paul had been to Colossae; Philemon owed Paul his soul, Paul knew Philemon's family, and Onesimus, when he ran away, ran to Paul in prison in Rome. What follows is interesting and of signal importance for the churches for all time!

▼ **Opening greetings** — The apostle has a fairly standard but important greeting in his letters, whether the letter is to a congregation or to an individual. "Paul," says he, "a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker, and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philemon 1:1-3). This letter is one of the "prison epistles," written by Paul in prison in Rome, and carried by Tychicus and Onesimus. As is Paul's custom, he includes greetings from one of the men who were working with him at the time, this time Timothy. Apphia seems to be Philemon's beloved wife, and Archippus their son, who apparently was a teacher, preacher, and fellow worker in the Lord. Philemon, as a slave holder, had a large household, consisting of his family, servants, and slaves; this could constitute "the church in your house." As usual, the apostle prays that God's abundant grace might continue with those he specifically mentioned, as well as praying that they might have the true peace that can only come from God.

▼ **Paul's prayers** — Paul was concerned about all the churches, as he had clearly stated in his first recorded epistle to the Corinthians, and also deeply cared for each individual. "I thank my God always," he asserts, "making mention of you in my prayers, because I hear of your love, and the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all the saints" (Philemon 1:4,5). The apostle brings forth his gratitude for such a man as Philemon, noting that his love for Jesus and for the saints is well known. Paul also mentions that this man's faith as he looked to Jesus was recognized by many, and that his belief in the potential of his fellow saints was also spoken of. This is a good man, possibly an elder, and the apostle recognizes these qualities in the sight of God. The apostle further prays, "that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake" (Philemon 1:7). Paul earnestly desires that this man be able to share his faith with others in a very effective way. Philemon was knowledgeable of the excellencies which come from participating in Christ, and petitioned that such knowledge be distributed around for the ultimate benefit of Christ and His kingdom.

Paul rightly praises the man to whom this letter is addressed. But there are no idle words emanating from the apostle. After listing these fine qualities, the apostle is going to appeal to Philemon for Onesimus, making his entreaty based on his assurance that Philemon will continue to exhibit those qualities as he makes his decision concerning the run away slave.

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JAY WILSON