

Assignment 6.1

Philemon

Paul writes Philemon while he is in prison, in Rome. Philemon is named one of the prison letters because he is said to have written it while in a Roman prison. Philemon has a house church in Colossae, which lay in the valley of the Lycus River, in a mountainous district about 100 miles east of Ephesus.

Philemon is probably written in AD 61, roughly the same time that Colossians was. Philemon is Paul's beloved friend and fellow labourer. (v. 1)

In Paul's letter to Philemon, Paul asks him to treat kindly Onesimus, his recently converted runaway slave. Before Onesimus was converted he was Philemon's slave and stole some money from him. Onesimus escapes and flees to Rome to seek Paul's help. While in Rome Onesimus becomes converted to Christianity through Paul.

Paul is writing to Philemon to urge him to forgive Onesimus for stealing from him. He tells Philemon that now Onesimus, who was once unprofitable to him, will now be profitable to him (v.11)

We know this is true because in Paul's letter to the Colossians in 4:9, he mentions how Onesimus, who is one of them now (the Colossians Church) is a faithful and beloved brother.

We can assume then, that when Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon in Colossae, Philemon forgave him. Paul asked Philemon to receive him as he would Paul (v.17) and put the money Onesimus owes Philemon on Paul's account.

Paul has confidence that Philemon will do as he suggests, telling Philemon how obedient he has been to him. (v.21). However, we can also assume that Philemon cancelled Onesimus' debt to him, as well as, didn't give the debt to Paul because Paul knows that Philemon will do even more than he says (v.21). It may be in the beginning that Paul was the one who converted Philemon to Christianity as well(v.19).

This letter is a great example of forgiveness. Theft is something, like many sins, is really hard to forgive, because one has to be able to trust

that person again. But Onesimus proved to Paul and Philemon that he was repentant and became a faithful and beloved brother of Christ.

Jesus knows the hearts of men. That's why He told the story in Luke 7:41-47 about the creditors who owed their master money. The one that owed his master more than the other, was forgiven more, and it turned out that he loved his master more. Jesus goes on to say "To whom little is forgiven, the same love little, the one much is forgiven, he loves much."

Onesimus here, can be likened to this parable because he was forgiven much. He proved that he was worth forgiving because he went on to becoming a slave of Christ that was faithful.

We are writing about slavery in the Greco-Roman period in Philemon's day. Slaves weren't treated very well in those days. Slavery played a significant role in this society. Slaves were in the city, the countryside, households and businesses and ownership of them wasn't limited to those who were well off.

Philemon's day was the first century Roman Empire. Slavery was a deeply rooted social and legal institution in the Ancient Roman World. Philemon seemed to be well off and had many slaves.

Classes were sharply divided in pagan societies. Aristocratic landowners, politicians, government contractors and others lived in luxury. A strong middle class did not exist because slaves did most of the work. Now dependent on government support, the more or less middle classes of previous times had become, homeless and foodless mobs in the cities often were worse off than slaves who at least had job security.

Because Onesimus ran away from Philemon because he stole from him the Apostle Pauls urges him to take him back (v.12).

Slavery in Ancient Rome played an important role in the economy. Unskilled or low skilled workers laboured in the fields, mines, and mills with few opportunities for advancement and little chance of freedom.

Skilled and educated slaves, including Artisans Chefs, domestic staff and personal attendants, entertainers, business managers, accountants and the like, occupied a more privileged tier of servitude and would hope to attain freedom through one of several well-defined paths with protection under the law. One of the means was manumission, the act of

freeing slaves by their owners. Subsequent citizenship was also a distinguishing feature of Rome's system of slavery, resulting in a significant and influential number of freed persons in Roman society.

At all levels of employment, free working people, former slaves and the enslaved, mostly did the same kind of jobs. Elite Romans whose wealth came from property ownership, saw little difference between slavery and a dependent earning wages from labour.

Slaves were themselves considered property under Roman law and had no rights of legal personhood. Unlike Roman citizens, by law they could be subject to corporal punishment, sexual exploitation, torture and summary execution, an act of putting someone to death, without a fair and proper trial.

No wonder the Apostle Paul sought to help Onesimus with his life and fought for him to be given another chance with Philemon (v.12)

Philemon, being a Christian, may not have thought this way. But Onesimus, in the beginning (v.11) may have felt that Philemon had every right to put him to death, that's why he run away (v.12 & 18)

But like Jesus, the Apostle Paul has a lot to say about slavery. Even though at first glance, it does seem that both condone it, e.g. Paul telling Titus in Titus 2:3 to exhort bond servants to be obedient to their masters and Jesus says in Luke 12:43 "Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives." It also says in Ex 21:16 whoever steals a man and sells him and if anyone found in possession of him shall be put to death. So these two seemingly condoning slavery, DO NOT.

Paul says in Galatians 5:1 "for freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery"

Also Jesus says in John 8:36 "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" and Luke 4:18 "the Spirit of the Lord is upon Me because He had anointed Me to preach the Gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed".

We can see from these Scriptures, although slavery existed, one was to treat their slave equal to themselves!

The Scripture quotations are from New King James and New International Versions and information I have collected about slavery is from A Survey of The New Testament by Robert H Gundry.