

PHILEMON

FOR BEGINNERS

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Research Commentary:

The Interpretation of St. Paul's
Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon
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1. Slavery and the Early Church

Slavery in the first century was quite different than the slavery that existed in early American history. Slavery in New Testament times was not based on culture as it was here when innocent Africans were seized and sold into slavery by both African and European traders. In the first century a majority of slaves in the Roman Empire were the spoils of war and all kinds of people, conquered by the Roman military, became

slaves. In many cases individuals sold themselves into slavery because of debt - these were called "bond servants." Roman masters usually treated their slaves with a measure of respect and many of these had responsible positions in their owners' households. Slaves could marry, accumulate wealth, and purchase their own freedom. Under Roman law slaves were to be set free at the age of 30.

As many as two-thirds of the Empire at that time were slaves but this number decreased rapidly in the first century and continued falling as Christian ideals began to take hold in that pagan society. Of course, this brings us to consider the ownership of slaves by Christians in the first century. We know this is the case because Paul provides instructions for both slaves and masters in his letters:

⁵ Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; ⁶ not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. ⁷ With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men, ⁸ knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free.

⁹ And masters, do the same things to them, and give up threatening, knowing that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.

- Ephesians 6:5-9

Note the instructions that he gives to both masters and slaves:

1. Serve with sincere obedience.
2. Serve unto the Lord.
3. Serve with the hope of a blessing from God.
4. Masters should treat slaves with sincerity and not violence.
5. Remember that God will judge both slaves and masters.

²² Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. ²³ Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. ²⁵ For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality. ¹ Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.
- Colossians 3:22-4:1

We notice here that there was a certain consistency as far as the instructions to believing masters and slaves:

1. Serve with sincere obedience.
2. Serve unto the Lord.

3. Serve with the hope of a blessing from the Lord.
4. Realize that the Lord is serving with you.
5. God will punish slaves who do evil.
6. Masters should judge slaves as they themselves will be judged (justice/fairness).
7. Masters must remember that they too have a master in heaven.

In other passages (I Corinthians 7:17-24) Paul urges slaves to accept their present situation but if the opportunity to gain their freedom comes up, they should take their freedom. Paul's approach in dealing with this social evil was not to start a movement or use violence to attack the established order of things. He worked through the church in proclaiming God's word and will on this issue.

The early church recognized no difference in status between slave and master since everyone sat together in the assembly. Slaves in the early church were allowed to serve as elders and, unlike pagan gravestones that noted if the deceased was a slave, Christian graves did not make this distinction. According to Ignatius (second century Bishop) church funds were often used to buy the freedom of slaves. Some Christians even surrendered their own freedom in order to ransom and free others (1 Clement AD 55). Marriage among slaves was protected, and early Christians urged non-Christians to free their slaves or allow them to purchase their freedom.

Beginning with Paul's teaching on this issue and the equal status given to slaves in the church, the evil of mass slavery eventually died out in the Roman Empire. It is in this historical and social context that Paul wrote the brief epistle to Philemon, a Christian brother, urging him to free a runaway slave.

PHILEMON – BACKGROUND

This letter was written by Paul while in Roman prison awaiting his trial before Caesar sometime between 61 and 63 AD. While in prison Paul was allowed to receive visitors and exchange correspondence with various individuals and churches. The two main individuals mentioned in this letter were:

1. **Philemon** – A man of wealth and importance who was converted by Paul (verse 19) and probably came into contact with the Apostle while he was in Ephesus. Later on, Philemon moved or returned to Colossae and was a member of the church there.
2. **Onesimus** – He was a run away slave belonging to Philemon who had made his way to Rome. While there he came into contact with Paul and was converted. He then remained with Paul ministering to his needs.



During this period, Epaphroditus (one of Paul's co-workers who had planted the church at Colossae) arrived in Rome with a gift for Paul from the Philippian church. While there, Epaphroditus informed Paul of some trouble (in the form of false teaching) brewing in the church at Colossae. In Philemon verse 23 we learn that Epaphroditus was detained for a while with Paul but was later released and given a letter to take back to the Philippians thanking them for their gift. After Epaphroditus' departure Paul wrote several other letters:

- One to the Colossian church regarding the false teachers and the heresy that they were promoting.
- A personal letter to Philemon, who was a member of that Colossian church, regarding his runaway slave Onesimus.
- One to the church at Ephesus that was experiencing problems of unity and fellowship.

These three letters were delivered by Tichicus, another one of Paul's co-workers.

Onesimus was placed in the care of Tichicus (to protect him from arrest by slave catchers) who would return him to Philemon along with Paul's letter.

PHILEMON – OUTLINE

1. Paul's greeting to Philemon – vs. 1-3
2. Paul's prayer concerning Philemon – vs. 4-7
3. Paul's appeal to Philemon – vs. 8-20
4. Paul's requests and blessing of Philemon – vs. 21-25

PHILEMON – TEXT

1. Greeting

¹ Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker, ² and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul summarizes his personal situation by referring to himself as a prisoner of Christ, meaning that his imprisonment is for the cause of Christ, and Timothy is with him caring for his needs. Philemon is the recipient of the letter, Apphia is his wife and Archippus is probably their son. The church met in their home which was located in the city of Colossae. Paul not only offers a precious blessing (grace and peace) on Philemon and his family but also comments on his value in Christ as a beloved brother and co-worker with Paul. This would be high praise from an inspired Apostle for any Christian to receive.

2. Paul's Prayer

⁴ I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints; ⁶ and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake. ⁷ For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.

Paul's prayer of thanksgiving is motivated by what he knows about Philemon:

- His love of God and those who belong to God.
- His faithfulness to God and the saints (both slave and free).
- Philemon's love and faith have been a blessing to all.

What Paul has not mentioned yet is that he will base his requests of Philemon on the knowledge of these qualities – faith expressed in love.

3. Paul's Appeal – vs.8-21

⁸ Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper, ⁹ yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you— since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus —

At first glance it would seem that Paul is pulling rank (ie. as an Apostle I could order you to do as I command). The "confidence" in Christ he speaks of is not, "I'm sure Jesus will back me up in this." He is telling Philemon that in the situation that he will be talking about (the return of the slave Onesimus) Paul is so confident in the will of Christ and Philemon's Christian maturity (faith and love) that he could simply tell him what to do and he is assured that Philemon would do it.

However, because of Paul's love and his knowledge of Philemon's love he will not frame his request in this way but put the entire matter on a higher plane, not simply doing the right thing but doing the loving thing. His references to his own age (about 60 years old ¹) and imprisonment are a reminder to Philemon of Paul's long service and suffering when considering what will be asked of him in the next passage. This would include the loss of service and financial value of a slave by granting him freedom without cost. In 79 AD a slave in the Roman Empire sold for approximately 625 denarii, the equivalence of \$32,000 in today's society.

In verses 10-16 Paul makes a specific appeal:

¹⁰ I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, ¹¹ who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me.

¹ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, p. 961 Augsburg Fortress Publishers (September 15, 2008)

He names the runaway slave, Onesimus (the name means "useful") and Paul's connection to him – he converted him while in prison. Paul makes an interesting play on words using Onesimus' name. At first, he says that Onesimus was "useless" to Philemon both spiritually (a pagan) and financially (he had run away). Now he was "useful" spiritually (he had become a believer and now shared their faith), and useful physically because he was returning to Philemon's household (freed slaves often worked for their former masters and were paid a regular salary).

¹² I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, ¹³ whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel;

Paul offers Philemon a spiritual way of seeing things through the eyes of faith where events and people act according to God's will and purpose:

- He was not simply a runaway slave found by Paul. Through the eyes of faith...
- Onesimus was a slave sent by Philemon to care for Paul in prison and in doing so found salvation there.

¹⁴ but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will. ¹⁵ For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

Of course, doing the right thing required something of Paul as well as Philemon. According to Roman law, Onesimus belonged to Philemon and only he could legally free him. Paul wanted Philemon to do this without having it imposed on him by Paul's status as an Apostle, or as a favor because of his age or suffering in prison. Again, Paul asks Philemon to view this situation through the eyes of faith: not simply a runaway slave returned to his owner, but God working to convert a pagan slave into a believing servant ministering to Paul in prison, and now a brother in Christ to his former master, something that would be a spiritual challenge for Philemon.

¹⁷ If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me. ¹⁸ But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account; ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well). ²⁰ Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.

Paul addresses the cost of what he is asking Philemon:

- The actual value of Onesimus as a slave.
- The cost of replacing him and his service.
- Other damages or lost items connected to his running away.
- The social challenge of accepting back a former slave as an equal brother in Christ.

Whatever Onesimus owes, Paul says to transfer that debt to Paul (in the same way that we transfer our debt for sin to Jesus on the cross). What is unsaid here is, "If Paul owed Philemon

this debt, would Philemon press to collect it?" Paul reminds Philemon of his own personal debt for the salvation of his soul since Paul converted him. In fact, both he and Onesimus owe Paul a greater debt than Onesimus owes to Philemon.

Onesimus was useful in Christian service by ministering to Paul in prison, now Philemon can be useful to Paul by receiving back Onesimus as a free and equal brother in Christ. This will refresh and encourage Paul as he suffers for the gospel in prison, the same gospel that saved the souls of both Philemon and Onesimus, and put each of these men into Paul's debt.

4. Paul's Request and Blessing – vs. 21-25

²¹ Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say.

Paul doesn't summarize the appeal and details of the letter but addresses his feelings and attitude concerning Philemon. He is confident, knowing Philemon to be a man of faith and genuine love, that his response will not be anger, offense, resentful obedience or some form of passive-aggressive hypocrisy. He knows that Philemon will go the second mile in his response to Paul's appeal. He is a man of faith and love, and he will respond accordingly.

We get a hint of his positive response when reading Paul's letter to the Colossians where the Apostle refers to Onesimus and calls him a "faithful and beloved brother" (Colossians 4:9). Also, Ignatius (35 AD-108 AD) an early church writer and elder at Antioch, mentions that Onesimus eventually served as an elder in the church at Ephesus.

²² At the same time also prepare me a lodging, for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you.
²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, ²⁴ as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers. ²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

We know that Paul won his freedom from Roman prison and spent the next two years revisiting various congregations he had established on his previous missionary journeys. This request for lodging suggests that he was confident in his eventual release. Not all who are named are in prison with him but were individuals who visited and worked with Paul and were also known by Philemon and thus were mentioned. Paul closes with another blessing similar to the one in the opening verse but this time offered only to Philemon himself.

In 66 AD, in prison for a second time during the persecution of Christians under Nero, Paul wrote his final epistle (II Timothy) and was executed by beheading the following year in 67 AD.

SUMMARY / LESSON

Through God's providence a runaway slave is converted by an Apostle in a Roman jail who not only knows the slave's owner but has also been responsible for his conversion as well. This slave is then returned with a letter asking the slave owner to receive him back as a free and equal brother in Christ. As far as we know Onesimus was freed, accepted as a brother in the Lord and served as a leader in the church at Ephesus, the same congregation where the Apostle John served.

Here's the one lesson I'd like to highlight here:

Christians should see life through the eyes of faith.

Paul presented Onesimus' story and Philemon's response through the eyes of faith in order to make sense of it. It was God's Providence that sent Onesimus to him in prison and then back to Philemon for restoration as a free and equal brother in Christ. This wasn't about the cost of a runaway slave, it was a seed planted by God in the early church surrounded by a pagan empire where slavery was common. It was a teachable moment recorded in a personal letter to one man, and subsequently has been read by millions of people throughout history. The letter encapsulates the spirit and wisdom of God about the evil of slavery which was eventually discontinued and condemned as Christianity spread throughout the Empire and the world.

God continues to work to this day in big ways with nations and kings as well as intimate ways in our lives. These things are not hidden but can only be seen with the eyes of faith. Our task is to ask God to open our eyes of faith so that we can clearly see what He is doing in our own lives as well as His influence in the world around us.

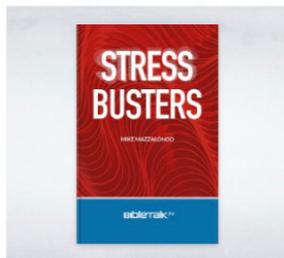
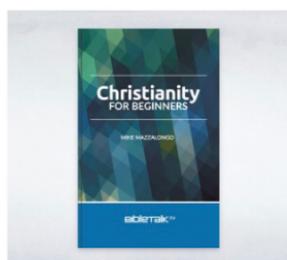


Mike Mazzalongo began his preaching and teaching ministry in Montreal, Quebec, in 1979. He was educated at Oklahoma Christian University in the United States and served as Dean of Students for that institution from 1991 to 1993. Brother Mazzalongo has preached for several congregations in Canada and the United States.

Mike's first book was published by College Press in 1995. Since then he has written over forty books, several of which have been translated into French and Russian for use in the mission field. Mike is married to Lise and together they have four children and twelve grandchildren.

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