

Key Verse

“I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.” (Philemon 1:10-11)

Key Truth

Belonging to God’s family means committing to forgiveness, reconciliation, and mutual respect. Together, we are called to welcome, honor, and encourage our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Background

Paul was a prisoner in Rome, his friend Philemon was in Colossae, and the human link between them was a runaway slave named Onesimus. The details are not clear, but it appears that Onesimus robbed his master and then fled to Rome, hoping to be swallowed up in the crowded metropolis. But, in the providence of God, he met Paul and was converted!

Now what? Perhaps Onesimus should remain with Paul, who needed all the assistance he could get. But what about the slave’s responsibilities to his master back in Colossae? The law permitted a master to execute a rebellious slave, but Philemon was a Christian. If he forgave Onesimus, what would the other masters (and slaves) think? If he punished him, how would it affect his testimony? What a dilemma!

Along with the Epistle to the Colossians, this letter probably was carried to Colossae by Tychicus and Onesimus (Colossians 4:7-9). In it, we see Paul in three important roles (Beloved Friend, Intercessor, and Partner) as he tried to help Philemon solve his problems. At the same time, we see a beautiful picture of what the Father has done for us in Jesus Christ. Martin Luther said, “All of us are Onesimuses!” and he was right.

Overview:

The Book of Philemon is a deeply personal letter from the Apostle Paul to a wealthy believer in Colossae. In it, Paul pleads for mercy on behalf of Onesimus, a runaway slave who had recently crossed paths with Paul and converted to Christianity. Rather than seeking punishment, Paul urges Philemon to welcome Onesimus back—not just with leniency, but as a beloved brother in Christ.

Demonstrating true leadership, Paul offers to personally repay any debts Onesimus might owe, while subtly encouraging Philemon to grant him his freedom. Ultimately, this brief letter serves as a profound example of Christian love, forgiveness, and reconciliation, reminding us that the Gospel fundamentally transforms our relationships and levels the ground at the foot of the cross.