

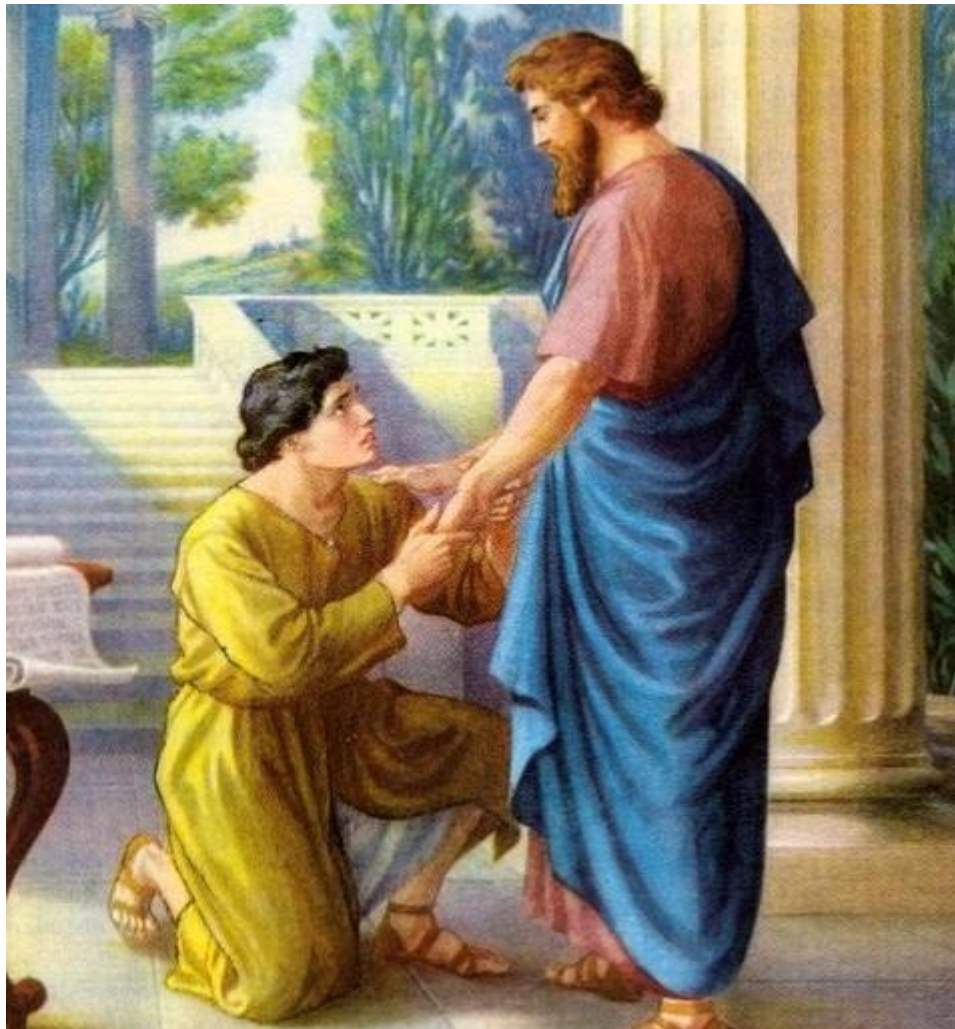
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THE HOLY BIBLE **NKJV** REFERENCE GUIDE

NEW TESTAMENT

BOOK 57

PHILEMON



PHILEMON AND ONESIMUS

SUMMARY

For more than two years during his third missionary journey, Paul ministered in Asia Minor among the people of Ephesus. This was a successful period for the apostle to the Gentiles, who saw many converts among both residents of Ephesus and visitors to the city.

One of the visitors converted under Paul's teaching was a man named Philemon, a slaveowner from the nearby city of Colossae. In the Bible book that bears Philemon's name, Paul addressed his beloved brother as a fellow worker, a title given to those who served for a time alongside Paul.

Gospel writers Mark and Luke also received this title later in the letter. Clearly, a kinship existed between Paul and Philemon, one that would serve a significant purpose in light of the circumstance that brought about the letter.

A slave named Onesimus had escaped from his owner, Philemon, and had run away from Colossae to Rome in the hope that he could disappear into that populous, urban environment.

Once in Rome, Onesimus, either by accident or by his own design, came in contact with Paul, who promptly led the runaway slave to faith in Jesus Christ. Paul had already been planning to send a letter to the Colossian church by the hand of Tychicus.

In AD 60 or 61 from a prison cell in Rome, Paul wrote a personal letter to Philemon and sent Onesimus the slave back to Colossae. The letter to Philemon reminds us that God's revelation to humanity is intensely personal.

In more formal biblical works such as the Gospels or the epistle to the Romans or even Paul's letters to churches at Philippi or Colossae, it might be easy to get the impression that God does not care or have time for the trials and tribulations in a single household.

Philemon stands as one piece of strong evidence to the contrary, revealing that lofty doctrines such as the love of God, forgiveness in Christ, or the inherent dignity of humanity have real and pertinent impact in everyday life.

The book of Philemon illustrates that principles like these can and should profoundly affect the lives of believers. Paul's message to Philemon was a simple one: based on the work of love and forgiveness that had been wrought in Philemon's heart by God, show the same to the escaped and now-believing slave Onesimus.

The apostle's message would have had extra force behind it because he knew Philemon personally. Paul had explained the gospel to Philemon and had witnessed the profound result: new life blossoming in a once-dead heart.

Paul knew that conversion is nothing to trifle with, but that it should be honored and fostered. Paul made a request. He wanted Philemon to forgive Onesimus, to accept the slave as a brother in Christ, and to consider sending Onesimus back to Paul, as the apostle found him useful in God's service.

SUMMARY Continued

Paul did not minimize Onesimus's sin. This was not some kind of cheap grace that Paul asked Philemon to offer. No, there was sacrifice required in this request, and because of that, Paul approached the topic with gentleness and care.

His letter to Philemon presents in full color the beautiful and majestic transition from slavery to kinship that comes as a result of Christian love and forgiveness.

Live long enough, and you will understand the difficulty of offering forgiveness when you have been wronged. It does not come easy, yet as believers, we have to recognize that our ability and willingness to offer it are the result of Christ's saving work on the cross.

Because of that fact, forgiveness serves as a determining factor in who we say we are and how we hope to live our lives. When we do not forgive, bitterness takes root in our hearts and chokes the vitality out of us.

In what ways has forgiveness been a struggle for you since you accepted Christ's forgiveness? Allow Paul's letter to Philemon to encourage forgiveness in your own life, and trust God to foster renewed life in your heart and your relationships.

CHARACTER Definitions

PHILEMON - Philemon was a wealthy Christian, possibly a bishop of the house church that met in his home in Colosse. This letter is now generally regarded as one of the undisputed works of Paul. It is the shortest of Paul's extant letters, consisting of only 335 words in the Greek text.

The letter is addressed to Philemon, who is described as a fellow worker of Paul. It is generally assumed that Philemon lived in Colossae; in the letter to the Colossians, Onesimus (the slave who fled from Philemon) and Archippus (whom Paul greets in the letter to Philemon) are described as members of the church there.

Philemon may have converted to Christianity through Paul's ministry, possibly in Ephesus. The salutation mentions two other figures beyond Philemon. The first is Apphia, who is probably Philemon's wife.

Paul also mentions Archippus, a fellow soldier; some have speculated that he is the son of Philemon and Apphia.

As a background to his specific plea for Onesimus, Paul clarifies his intentions and circumstances. Although he has the boldness to command Philemon to do what would be right in the circumstances, he prefers to base his appeal on his knowledge of Philemon's love and generosity.

He also describes the affection he has for Onesimus and the transformation that has taken place with Onesimus's conversion to the Christian faith. Where Onesimus was useless, now he is useful – a wordplay, as Onesimus means useful.

CHARACTERS Continued

Paul indicates that he would have been glad to keep Onesimus with him but recognized that it was right to send him back.

Paul's specific request is for Philemon to welcome Onesimus as he would welcome Paul, namely as a Christian brother. He offers to pay for any debt created by Onesimus' departure and expresses his desire that Philemon might refresh his heart in Christ.

ONESIMUS - Onesimus' name is derived from a root that means beneficial, profitable, useful or helpful, but they all have the same idea but the question is this; were these statements about Philemon's slave and how he was beneficial or helpful to Paul or was it his actual name?

Could this have been this runaway slave's Christian name? Mysteries abound about this but we want to know more about who Onesimus was and not get preoccupied about his name.

The letter which Paul wrote to Philemon became canonized. Paul possibly never imagined that it would later become part of the New Testament but it was accepted as such quite early in the church's history and it was widely circulated among the churches.

Paul wrote I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me).

The fact that Paul calls Onesimus useful might be a clue to his name because Paul says Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.

Paul calls him my child perhaps revealing that Paul was his spiritual father, leading him to saving faith in Christ since he was no longer a bondservant but a brother in Christ. Whatever the case may be, Paul sent him back because it was the right thing to do as Paul didn't want to do anything without Philemon's consent.

Paul desired to keep Onesimus with him because he was serving him in prison but didn't want to keep him if Philemon didn't give his permission as he writes I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.

Upon Onesimus' return, Paul asked Philemon to receive him as you would receive me considering they were partners in Christ. If nothing else, Paul said he would repay him for Onesimus' service which could mean that Onesimus had apparently stolen some of his owners property so that he'd have the funds necessary to run away.

We are not sure how Onesimus came into contact with Paul. Was it because he had the customary hole in his ear that marked that of a slave and when the Roman authorities saw it, he was thrown into prison with Paul?

CHARACTERS Continued

This could have been the occasion for Paul telling him about Jesus Christ and how he came to be saved. Onesimus must have been freed at some point, or he would have never been useful to Paul.

Paul was fortunate to have someone on the outside since many times prisoners of Rome had to find their resources outside of the prison walls. There are historical accounts of Onesimus becoming very useful and not just to Paul and Philemon.

Onesimus later came to be known as Onesimus of Byzantium and The Holy Apostle Onesimus in some of the Eastern Orthodox churches and was also referred to as Ignatius of Antioch as Bishop in Ephesus. Onesimus is thought to have died in 68 A.D.

One of the shortest books in the Bible, the Book of Philemon, is one of the most precious books there are in Scripture. It reveals that God desires forgiveness and that He is in the business of restoring lives and proves that There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

God sees no difference between His children. God has placed the cross for all to come to for forgiveness and the cross is level ground where the rich and the poor, the free and the slave, and the male and the female are seen as equal before God.

BIBLE TIMELINE

62 AD

Paul Writes to Philemon

Philemon 1

MAP REFERENCES

