

PHILEMON: A LETTER BORN IN CONFLICT

WEEK 1: OVERVIEW OF PHILEMON

– PATRICK WALTON

Philemon 1-25

| **Colossians 4:7-9**

INTRODUCTION—*You think I'm being a jerk?*

OVERVIEW OF PHILEMON

Philemon (*Phi-la-mon*), a Pauline letter was most likely written around 60-61 A.D while Paul was on house arrest in Rome—It's the only personal correspondence from Paul that we have—Paul's Epistles (letters) are arranged much like the Old Testament prophets, with the largest first and the smallest second

Paul's letters are broken up into two categories—the first category are letters written to Churches followed by letters written to people—and those are arranged as well from largest to smallest—Philemon is the shortest of all Pauline letters, with only 335 words in the original Greek (*25 verses*)

The three-main people in this letter are; Paul (*author*), Philemon (*overseer of the Church in Colossae*) and Onesimus (*Philemon's runaway slave*)—Other people include Timothy (Paul's ministry partner), Apphia (Philemon's wife) and Archippus (Philemon's son) (**Acts 19:21-41**)

This letter has no mention of congregational structure, Old Testament quotes, the gifts of the Spirit and it doesn't refute any heretical doctrines happening in their region—It's also Paul's only letter that has no mention of the Cross or the resurrection and that's intentional—Paul isn't talking about theology, he's demonstrating it

Philemon was said to be a wealthy Greek citizen from Colossae who most likely met Paul and was born again in Ephesus through Paul's ministry—Colossae is a Phrygian city located about 10 miles Southeast of Laodicea—the city was known for wool that was died jet black, precious and expensive—After Philemon was born again, under Paul's leadership he planted a congregation in Colossae (*Colossians and Philemon are companion books*)

This letter is written because Philemon's slave Onesimus has run away looking for freedom, in Rome—But while there in Rome, Onesimus meets Paul and is born again—Paul, growing his affection for Onesimus, realizes that he has to send him back to Philemon to mend this fractured relationship between Philemon and Onesimus

Paul's appeal is that Philemon would welcome Onesimus back into his family, no longer as just a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother in Christ

STRUCTURE OF THE LETTER

1. Paul's introductory greeting (v. 1-3)
2. Thanksgiving and prayer for Philemon (v. 4-7)
3. The body of the letter (v. 8-22)
4. A short list of greetings (v. 23-24)
5. The benediction and conclusion (v. 25)

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SLAVERY, PAUL AND THE SCRIPTURES

As a white male, living within the dominate culture I don't feel qualified to speak to the issue of slavery, but I'm going to do my best

The Roman world lived with slavery—From the earliest times the Roman government accepted it, practiced it, and promoted it—Slaves were used for the advancement of war, with thousands being sold for the increase of the private citizens investments—During the Roman Empire's heyday, it was said that 1/3 of its population were slaves, with numbers higher than 400,000

During this time slave owners were able to do whatever they wished to a slave—But during the 1st and 2nd century there was a significant uprising that was led by philosophers which brought about a more human treatment, with legal protection following

Many have asked why Paul wasn't more outspoken regarding the issue of slavery—Paul's approach was primarily theological and not social—He was committed to sowing seeds into the culture, by way of changed lives through the Gospel which would bring forth more systemic change that would outlast an empire, culture, or a cause

In Philemon Paul was building a case on the relationships that emerge in Christ—while others argued for the "brotherhood of man" Paul was arguing for the "in Christ" of God's Gospel—Paul's theology told him that all who were in Christ, were joined together in participating in a common task—Which means he wasn't primarily concerned with sympathy, kindness, or charity, but that Philemon would voluntarily respond to God's word in obedience and receive Onesimus, as a brother

This is how an institution like slavery wilts in the power of the Gospel—it's called IN-CHRIST—Equal footing, level playing field, or one new man—Paul wasn't using activism or coercion; he was preaching an IN-CHRIST Gospel

Colossians 3:9-11 *"Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all."*

Galatians 3:26-28 *"For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."*

Sarah Ruden, Harvard graduate and author of *Paul Among the People* says this about Paul's letter to Philemon, "The letter to Philemon may be the most explicit demonstration of how, more than anyone else, Paul created the Western individual human being, unconditionally precious to God and therefore entitled to the consideration of other human beings."

CONCLUSION

Maybe your like Philemon; in need of forgiving someone who has wronged you, and receiving them back—Or maybe your like Onesimus; in need of forgiveness for a wrong you've committed
