

# “A Story of Forgiveness and Restoration”

## *Philemon 1-3*

**Theme:** The Gospel brings reconciliation and unity despite social and cultural barriers.

### I. The Offense to be Forgiven

#### A. The Offended Saints – *vv. 1-3*

1. The Apostle Paul writes to a dear brother who bears the book's name – *“Philemon.”*
2. Paul is imprisoned in Rome during his first imprisonment and references this in v. 1: *“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus ...”* – cp. [v. 9](#).
3. Paul mentions *“Timothy, our brother”* because it is likely that Timothy was with him when he wrote from Rome – and to promote Timothy's role as the one on whom the mantle of leadership would fall when Paul is gone.
4. Paul and Timothy had likely led Philemon to the Lord during his ministry in Ephesus,<sup>1</sup> but who now lives in Colossae and grew into a leader and host of the church that met at Colossae – *“... our brother and fellow worker.”* – [v. 19](#).
5. In addition to the principal recipient, several other people are mentioned:
  - a) *“... and to Apphia our sister”* – a probable reference to Philemon's wife, but certainly a godly woman whom Paul desires to honor.
  - b) *“... and to Archippus our fellow soldier”* – a possible reference to Philemon's son and pastor *“to the church in your house.”* – cp. [Colossians 4:17](#).
6. So, Paul's appeal to Philemon extended to the entire Christian community at Ephesus and serves as an example of the spirit of forgiveness that ought to result from the embrace of the Gospel.

#### B. The Offending Slave

1. Paul writes to address the problem caused by the other primary person mentioned in this epistle – *“Onesimus.”*

---

<sup>1</sup> This is the best hypothesis given that Paul had not yet been to Colossae, so Philemon must have encountered Paul where Paul had been – the likely location is Ephesus given its proximity to Colossae.

2. This man, “*Onesimus*,” had been a slave of Philemon's – cp. [vv. 15-16a](#).
3. However, “*Onesimus*” apparently ran away and took the money he needed to flee - cp. [v. 18](#).
  - a) *Onesimus was an unbeliever who was saved after he arrived in Rome.*
  - b) *He may have taken advantage of Philemon's faith and fled, thinking that Philemon's Christian faith would prevent him from pursuing.*
  - c) *He fled to Rome, thinking he would be lost in the multitude of people in that city.*
4. We don't exactly know what happened in Rome – but Onesimus, like the prodigal son, found himself destitute and needing help.

## II. The Occasion for Forgiveness

### A. The Reconciliation to the Master

1. It is possible that he recalled the message of the Gospel that he had heard from Philemon and Archippus and knew of the Apostle Paul from his ministry to Philemon back in Ephesus.
2. Perhaps he encountered one of the men tending to Paul while he was under house arrest – most likely Epaphras, who is said to be from Colossae – cp. [Colossians 4:12](#).
3. Having been brought to Paul, Paul had the joy of leading Onesimus to a saving knowledge of Christ – cp. [vv. 10, 13, 16](#), and [Colossians 4:8-9](#).
4. Thus, Onesimus went from being a rebellious, thieving, run-away slave to a follower of Jesus Christ who was an endeared companion to Paul – cp. [vv. 10-11](#).

### B. The Reconciliation to a Master

1. Now Paul desires Onesimus to be reconciled to his former master, Philemon.
2. He appeals to Philemon to receive him back without reprisal – cp. [vv. 8, 12, 16-18](#).
3. Many balk at the fact that Paul doesn't condemn slavery as an immoral institution but seems to defer to the status quo and the right of the owner to do with a slave whatever he thought best.

4. One of the difficulties we possess is the inability to separate slavery from the American slave trade, which was so heinously abusive and ungodly.
5. Interestingly, through the Gospel, there is a change in perspective whereby a slave ought to be treated as a brother in the Lord and not merely as property – cp. [v. 16](#).
6. Although there are legal obligations on the part of a slave to surrender any claim to independence or freedom to their owner, the essence of the arrangement is comparable to an employee who is not free to go to another employer because of a contract by which they are bound.
7. Christianity dramatically impacted the issue of slavery –
  - a) *A slave should not seek freedom because of Christianity – cp. [1 Corinthians 7:20-22](#).*
  - b) *Additionally, a slave is expected to obey their masters in everything – [Colossians 3:22](#).*
  - c) *Yet, a slave who is in Christ possesses a higher motivation than an obligation – [Colossians 3:23-24](#).*
  - d) *Both slaves and masters who are in Christ realize that in the eyes of the Lord, they are equal – cp. [Colossians 3:10-11](#).*
8. Even in the secular world, slaves were often adored by their masters and treated better than many freemen who were struggling to make ends meet.
9. Of course, there were horrible abuses as some owners considered slaves little more than non-human property, something Scripture warns against – cp. [Ephesians 6:9](#).
10. Using the institution of slavery as an illustration of the relationship between God and us demonstrates that it is not innately a wicked institution, merely fraught with great opportunity for iniquity and abuses.

### III. The Opportunity to Forgive

#### A. The Transformation of Relationship

1. Paul recognizes the transformation that has occurred in Onesimus' life and the respect he has for Onesimus as a servant of Christ.
2. He desires Philemon to view Onesimus and the power of the Gospel to transform a person from a wretch to a saint through faith.
3. Interestingly, "*Onesimus*" literally means "useful" – and he had

been useless – cp. [v. 11](#).

4. In essence, for Philemon to refuse to forgive Onesimus would be to deny the power of the Gospel and the work of Christ in his life.
5. As Paul opens this letter, he expresses his desire for the blessings of the Lord in Philemon's life – *“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”*
6. **The Resources for Transformation:**
  - a) *“Grace to you ...” [χάρις] – pointing to the desire of God to reconcile men to Himself through the work of Christ despite their unworthiness of such unmerited favor.*
    - (1) *“Grace”* is the basis for any person who would be saved – an unmerited favor bestowed by God.
    - (2) Being shown *“grace”* becomes the basis for the ability to show grace oneself.
  - b) *“... and peace ...” [εἰρήνη] – pointing to the reconciliation of sinners to a holy God bringing harmony, a much greater chasm than any offense a slave could perpetrate against a human master.*
7. **The Relationships of the Transformed:**
  - a) *One Father* – *“... from God our Father ...”* – Paul reminds Philemon that anyone born again is a child of God without distinction or station.
  - b) *One Lord* - *“... and the Lord Jesus Christ.”* – there is one Master and Lord of us all – cp. [Ephesians 4:1-6](#).

## B. The Transportation of Scripture

1. Paul realized he could not merely send Onesimus back to Philemon since he was a criminal who could be executed if caught.
2. There had to be some official capacity Onesimus would have to serve to benefit Philemon, and the delivery of this inspired letter by the Apostle was the occasion – cp. [vv. 12, 15, 17](#).
3. Additionally, he would return as a companion to Tychicus, who was charged with this duty - cp. [Colossians 4:7-9](#).

Conclusion:

- In these verses, we see some marvelous truths – first, anyone can be saved, regardless of how many sins they have committed.

- Salvation brings genuine transformation – whereas Onesimus had been useless to Philemon after he met Christ, he became most useful - people truly change through grace.
- Forgiveness of offenses becomes a means by which a person can reflect the character of our Heavenly Father, who delights in forgiving us.
- Regardless of how we have sinned against someone, God desires that we go back and make things right.
- When we see our own sin as the greatest, we are postured to forgive others the lesser sins they have committed against us.