

GOD'S CARE FOR A RUNAWAY SLAVE

Philemon



We are going to spend our study time this morning looking at the book of [Philemon](#). Go to the book of Hebrews and make a left and you will find Philemon. The book of Philemon is a short intimate letter carefully crafted and sensitively worded. It demonstrates integrated Christian thinking and living and offers a blend of love, wisdom, humor, gentleness, tact, and above all, Christian maturity. Furthermore, it is a letter about Christian fellowship.

The book was written about A.D. 62 during Paul's first imprisonment in Rome and carried by [Onesimus](#) and [Tychicus](#) at the same time that they delivered the Colossian and Ephesian letters.

Philemon appears to have been a comparatively wealthy Colossian who owned slaves, as did most of the rich in his day. He evidently came to faith in Christ as a result of Paul's influence ([v. 19](#)), perhaps when Paul was residing at Ephesus. Onesimus was one of Philemon's slaves. He ran away from his master, and he eventually made his way to Rome where he could have lost himself in the crowd. There, as a result of divine providence, he came into contact with Paul and became a Christian ([v. 10](#)).



Paul and Onesimus both knew the danger the slave faced in returning, since slave owners had absolute authority over their slaves and often treated them as property rather than as people. The aim of this letter is quite simple: to return Onesimus to Philemon and to ask Philemon to forgive Onesimus' transgressions, all based on an appeal to Philemon's faith, love and grace in Christ.

The thing that I like about this letter is that it demonstrates to us God's care for the individual. Here we have in the [Canon](#) of Scripture a letter about a plea that a runaway slave be forgiven. God cares about us:

casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you. (1 Peter 5:7 NASB)

That is a very comforting thought, God cares for me. We see this care for people in the Lord Jesus Christ:

"I feel compassion for the multitude because they have remained with Me now three days, and have nothing to eat; ³ and if I send them away hungry to their home, they will faint on the way; and some of them have come from a distance." (Mark 8:2-3 NASB)

Jesus had preached to the multitude and had no doubt done many healings over the three days, and He knew that now their food supplies were gone. He knew that many had come long distances, and in His compassion, was afraid that if they returned home without food, they would not be able to make the journey. It is worth noting that this is the only time in the Gospel where Jesus identifies His own compassion for people. Oftentimes the Gospel writers will say, "Jesus had compassion..." But here Jesus says it Himself—about Himself—that He had this compassion.

The Greek word used here for "compassion" is [splanchnizomai](#). It is a very strong word. It means: *"to be so moved on the inside that it compelled Him to take action on the outside."* It is found only in the Gospels, and in every usage it is always related to need.

Sometimes we see situations, and we would say: "You know, I feel sorry for them." But that is not this word. This word goes well beyond that. It is to be so moved that we actually do something about it to help resolve the situation.

It is a picture of Jesus we need to remember—that Jesus cares about the everyday stuff of our lives.

In this text we see that our God is a compassionate God. What text do you think of when you think of God's compassion? When I think of God's compassion, I think of God's attitude toward the prodigal son. The son took his inheritance and went out to a far country, which could have been the Decapolis, and spent it all in sinful living. When he ends up broke and in the pig pen, he decides to go home and ask his father if he can just be a hired servant. Notice carefully the Father's response to this repentant sinner:

"And he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion [[splanchnizomai](#)] for him, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him.²¹ "And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'²² "But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet;²³ and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and be merry;²⁴ for this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' And they began to be merry. (Luke 15:20-24 NASB)

Our God is a compassionate God; it is a vital aspect of His divine nature. So when we look at Christ, we should not be surprised by the compassion that He demonstrated as the Messiah. The Lord Jesus Christ is a compassionate God.

It's important to understand that if we are truly going to be Christ followers, we need to, like Jesus, genuinely care about people. As Christians, as children of the heavenly Father, we have a duty to imitate Christ, who is compassionate:

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; (Ephesians 5:1 NASB)

As Christians, we are to be like Christ, we are to be compassionate. How do we get this heartfelt compassion? By spending time with God. In order to be like Christ, we have to know what He is like. The best way to learn about Christ is to read the Gospels. Every story, statement, and teaching unfolds some aspect of His divine and human natures, the beauty of His character, the faithfulness of His redemptive work, and His call to follow Him. We are to reflect Christ to all we come in contact with; this means that we are to be compassionate.

If we will draw near to Jesus, we will find out His value is people. He just didn't risk His life; He *gave* His life for people. Why? Because Jesus cares about people. In the text in Mark, Jesus sees the need and has compassion and meets the need. Why? Jesus cares about people, and He wants us to do the same. And that is what we see in this letter to Philemon, God cares about the individual, He care about you!

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker, (Philemon 1:1 NASB)

Paul calls himself a "*prisoner of Christ Jesus*" - the word "prisoner" is the Greek word *desmios*, which means: "*a captive, in bonds.*" He repeats this fact three more times (verses [9](#), [13](#), [23](#)), which tells us it must have been important to Paul's purpose. He was in prison because he served Christ. As one's of the Lord's, he is pleading for another captive whose story is the burden of this letter.

It is significant that Paul did not write with apostolic authority as he did in many of his epistles; he writes to Philemon as a personal friend. Paul calls Philemon "*our beloved brother and fellow worker.*" Not only did Paul love Philemon, but he considered him as a co-laborer in the gospel ministry. "Fellow worker" in the Greek is *sunergos*, which means: "a co-laborer."

and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: (Philemon 1:2 NASB)

He addresses not only Philemon, but Apphia, who possibly could have been Philemon's wife. Paul may have

addressed her specifically, because normally the wife had day-to-day responsibility for the household slaves. [Archippus](#) may have been their son, or perhaps Philemon's biological brother, or his friend. He may very well have been the Pastor in the church that met in Philemon's house.

He also addresses the house-church which meets in Philemon's house because all were aware of Onesimus' departure from [Colossae](#). Christian congregations were dependent upon the hospitality of wealthy members who could furnish their own houses for this purpose. This note then contains an indication of the social status of Philemon. Before the third century there is no certain evidence of special church buildings for worship.

Onesimus was to be welcomed back by the entire household—Philemon, Apphia, Archippus and the house-church. Paul probably addressed the epistle to all of them to rally the support of other Christians to encourage Philemon in his Christian responsibility.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 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. (Philemon 1:3-6 NASB)

When Paul states he gave thanks “always,” he means that he did not forget Philemon in his regular prayers. We shouldn't regard this as a mere literary suck up. Paul must have had an extensive prayer list and presumably spent some time each day naming before God all his churches, colleagues, and supporters. Paul valued prayer.

Whenever Paul remembered Philemon in prayer, he gave thanks for him. Evidently his testimony had been consistently honoring to the Lord. The basis of this thanksgiving was Philemon's love and faith. Reports of these qualities had undoubtedly reached Paul through Epaphras ([Col. 1:7-8](#)), and probably others as well.

In verse 5, Paul acknowledges Philemon's spiritual maturity—“*I hear of your love, and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all the saints.*” In the succeeding verses we will see that Onesimus, too, is acknowledged by Paul as a spiritually mature believer. Thus, both Philemon and Onesimus are spiritually mature.

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. (Philemon 1:7 NASB)

Paul says that he has experienced much joy and comfort as he heard of Philemon's love. Please remember, Paul is in prison, he is chained, his physical movements are confined, his recreation is very limited, his pleasures are denied; in these circumstances, Paul makes the statement, “*I have come to have much joy.*” He is not just joyful, but he has “much” joy because of Philemon's love. It is not the things we have or the circumstances that we are in that bring us joy, it comes from our relationships.

Paul says, “*the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you*”—The word “refreshed” comes from the Greek [anapauo](#). It is a military metaphor signifying the rest that an army takes while on the march to regain strength for renewal of warfare. A form of this word is used in:

so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find refreshing [[sunanapauomai](#)] rest in your company. (Romans 15:32 NASB)

Paul here implies that true refreshment comes from one saint to another as they enjoy each other's company.

And I rejoice over the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus; because they have supplied what was lacking on your part. ¹⁸ For they have refreshed [[anapauo](#)] my spirit and yours. Therefore acknowledge such men. (1 Corinthians 16:17-18 NASB)

Paul cites by name three believers whose company recently “refreshed” his soul. And the ramification is that believers occasionally require “refreshment.” And that this refreshment comes from fellowship with other believers. Do you know this truth? Have you experienced it?

Our Lord used this word in:

"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest [[anapauo](#)]. (Matthew 11:28 NASB)

The connotation here is to give rest from effort. Paul will again use the term in Philemon 20, which says, ***"Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ."*** And the inference here is that Philemon's attitude, faith in God, and love are all images and expressions of love for Christ, and the character of Christ being expressed in Philemon, so that by associating with Philemon, Paul experiences the same refreshment that he would have found with Christ Himself. This is a spiritually mature man.

Philemon's spiritual maturity is about to receive a test. Will the spiritual maturity of Philemon be able to endure the natural influences of sin? Is Philemon's love stronger than his sense of justice toward Onesimus?

Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do that which 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-- (Philemon 1:8-9 NASB)

Paul's “confidence,” which comes from the Greek word [parrhesia](#) [par-rhay-see'-ah], meaning: *“all outspokenness, i.e. frankness, bluntness”* was his assurance that if he commanded Philemon, he would do as he requested, because Paul was an Apostle. Paul, because of the Apostleship that he received from Christ, could order Philemon to do what is right, namely, accept Onesimus back without retaliation or hatred. But Paul sets aside his spiritual authority. Rather, he appealed on the basis of love, the love of Christ that bound all the parties involved in this situation together.

At this time Paul would have been about 55 years old, which in his day was older than it is in ours because life expectancies were shorter then. He appealed as a father for his son in the faith. His reference to his present imprisonment also would have encouraged Philemon to accede to his appeal.

Paul says that he is ***“a prisoner of Christ Jesus.”*** Paul here registers his perspective on his personal life and his incarceration in Rome; he is the prisoner, not of Nero or of Rome, but of Christ. And here is the principle that Paul believes, knows, and understands: Jesus Christ controls history; that Paul's incarceration was for a purpose, which included the evangelizing of Onesimus and writing the pastoral letter of Philemon as a part of the canon of Scripture.

I appeal to you for my child, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, Onesimus, (Philemon 1:10 NASB)

Paul now, for the first time, uses the name of Onesimus, the runaway slave who was probably guilty of theft, which was a common sin of slaves. Onesimus is furthermore referred to as Paul's begotten son, won to the Lord while Paul was in bonds.

The name “Onesimus” only occurs twice in the New Testament here and in:

and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of your number. They will inform you about the whole situation here. (Colossians 4:9 NASB)

In the Colossian text we learn that Onesimus was a ***“faithful and beloved brother”***. And that he was originally from Colossae—***“who is one of your number.”***

I appeal to you for my child, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, Onesimus, (Philemon 1:10 NASB)

Notice what Paul says here, ***“whom I have begotten in my imprisonment”***. The Revised Standard Version translates this phrase: ***“whose father I have become in my imprisonment.”*** Yeager translates the phrase: ***“to whom I have given spiritual birth while chained here.”*** Doesn't that sound a little Armenian? Is Paul saving people? No, this is Paul looking at Onesimus' salvation from the human perspective. He led him to Christ.

Apparently Onesimus fled the home of Philemon in Colossae and came to Rome. Here's Onesimus, fleeing to Rome to try to melt into the masses, but no one hides from God. Isn't this great? Remember your own life. There you were, minding your own business, going your own way; either ignoring or trying to run from God, but suddenly you find yourself sitting down and in your right mind at Jesus' feet, converted by divine grace through the gospel.

How did Onesimus meet Paul? We only know that he met Paul in Rome, and that Paul led him to Christ during the time that the Apostle was in prison. We also know now that Onesimus was saved, he wanted to return to Philemon and make whatever restitution he was able.

who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me. (Philemon 1:11 NASB)

There is a play on words here—Onesimus comes from the word *onesis*, meaning: **“profitable”** or **“helpful,”** but he became *unprofitable*, because of his sin of running away from his master and probably for stealing enough money to permit his escape to Rome. "Useful" had been "useless" to Philemon, but now he was living up to his name. He had proved useful to Paul, and he could be useful to Philemon. The name *Philemon* means: “affectionate” or “one who is kind.” If the slave was expected to live up to his name, then what about the master?

And I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, (Philemon 1:12 NASB)

Onesimus had so endeared himself to Paul that his departure was an extremely painful prospect for the apostle. Paul, who was big-hearted, sees that instead of forcing the slave to beg for mercy all by himself, he returns supported by Tychicus and the letter from Paul addressed to the entire congregation of Colossae. In this letter his love and the spirit of forgiveness is emphasized.

whom I wished to keep with me, that in your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; ¹⁴ but without your consent I did not want to do anything, that your goodness should not be as it were by compulsion, but of your own free will. (Philemon 1:13-14 NASB)

Paul had a desire to keep Onesimus with him as his “minister” rather than a “slave,” but he would not do so without Philemon's permission. He implies that he wanted to borrow Onesimus to do for him what Philemon would have personally done now that he was in prison suffering persecution for the sake of the gospel. Without Philemon's permission, however, Paul would not retain Onesimus in Rome.

For perhaps he was for this reason parted from you for a while, that you should 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. (Philemon 1:15-16 NASB)

Paul's "perhaps" here or “peradventure,” as it is translated in [Romans 5:7](#), might rightly be called God's providence. God providentially rules even over human sin. A case in point is found in [Genesis 45:4-8](#) and [50:15-21](#) in which God overruled the sin of Joseph's brothers when they sold him into slavery. In spite of their sin, God intervened and worked it out for the good of all the sons of Jacob. Joseph said:

“And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this

present result, to preserve many people alive. (Genesis 50:20 NASB)

Onesimus departed "for a season," that (Philemon) could receive him forever. In the flesh Philemon has a brother for a slave; in the Lord he has a slave for a brother. Paul does not declare the slave emancipated and free now, but he implores Philemon not to look upon Onesimus merely as a possession, an instrument or a tool, as slaves were then regarded. He is to be treated as a beloved brother:

If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me. (Philemon 1:17 NASB)

Paul's term "partner" [[koinonos](#)] must not be weakened to mean merely an intimate friend or companion. It suggests the fellowship or partnership of those who have common interests, common feelings, and common work. Paul is saying: If you consider me to be a fellow-participant in the saving work of the blood of Christ (and he is, is the statement of the conditional clause), then welcome Onesimus, who also resides under the blood of Christ, as you would welcome me. Philemon's refusal of Paul's request would be inconsistent with his acknowledgment of this partnership.

Paul was putting Philemon in a precarious position by pleading for forgiveness and restitution for Onesimus without a punishment that was obvious to all. How would the other slaves respond to this? Would they all want to "get saved" so they would have better treatment?

Onesimus would probably have been returning in fear and trepidation, because he was taking quite some risk—though a necessary one at that—in coming to his city where there was some unresolved business that needed doing with his master.

But if he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account; (Philemon 1:18 NASB)

First, Paul admits by his use of the first class conditional clauses, that Onesimus has wronged Philemon and could never pay back the large sum of money he stole.

"Charge that to my account" means the same as ***"impute it to me."*** It is a commercial term of substitution. Paul used the same word in [Romans 5:13](#), and it is translated "imputed" or "counted," where he says, "Sin is not **imputed** (charged) when there is no law." Paul's offer is a beautiful illustration of biblical forgiveness based on imputation ([2 Cor. 5:21](#)).

I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (lest I should mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well). (Philemon 1:19 NASB)

This letter and pledge of the Apostle Paul to Philemon is his "[promissory note](#)"— a legal document, evidence in a civil suit in which Philemon could sue Paul for the amount, if he were still living, or sue his estate if Paul were dead.

Apparently Philemon had become a Christian through Paul's ministry either directly or indirectly. Paul here uses apophysis or insinuation, which is when professing not to mention certain matters, the speaker then proceeds to do so.

In other words, Paul says, ***"I won't even mention the fact that you owe me your own salvation and present happiness,"*** but in not mentioning it, he has mentioned it. But note that Paul does not press it any further. The mere hint should be more than enough for a man of Philemon's character. And also note that Paul will personally repay the stolen monies rather than crudely remind Philemon of what he has just delicately insinuated. Philemon owed Paul a debt that he could never repay. He had been forgiven by the Lord, thanks to the gospel message he had heard from the lips of the Apostle Paul. The entire basis for forgiveness is the fact that we have also been forgiven:

"Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you

entreated me. 33 'Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?' (Matthew 18:32-33 NASB)

Paul put it this way:

And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. (Ephesians 4:32 NASB)

This is practical Christianity 101, we are to be forgiving.

Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. (Philemon 1:20 NASB)

By receiving and forgiving Onesimus, Philemon would be repaying Paul and encouraging him. Another play on words occurs in that the Greek word translated "benefit" is the root of the one translated "Onesimus." One writer rendered this clause, "*Let me get help as well as you get Helpful.*" As Philemon had refreshed the hearts of the saints (v. 7), so Paul asked him to refresh his (Paul's) heart by forgiving and accepting Onesimus.

Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say. (Philemon 1:21 NASB)

Paul was sure Philemon would go the **second mile**; he would do more or better than Paul asked of him. Not only will Philemon receive Onesimus back, but Paul hints that he might even see fit to send Onesimus back to him. As we read between the lines, we could interpret the "more" as a desire of the apostle for Onesimus to be returned to him for the service of the gospel.

And at the same time also prepare me a lodging; for I hope that through your prayers I shall be given to you. (Philemon 1:22 NASB)

Paul was rather expecting that he would be released and is already asking that at Colossae lodging be prepared for him. Paul's hopes seem to have been fulfilled, for after his first Roman imprisonment, he was released and supposedly made a trip to Spain. We have no record that Paul did or did not fulfill his desire to visit Philemon. The prospect of this visit would have motivated Philemon further to accept Onesimus.

And at the same time also prepare me a lodging; for I hope that through your prayers I shall be given to you.
(Philemon 1:22 NASB)

The doctrine of God's sovereignty didn't hurt Paul's prayer life. He believed in prayer as a mighty working force in the spiritual universe.

Notice what Paul says here: "*I hope that through your prayers I shall be given to you.*" Paul doesn't say, "*I hope through the sovereignty of God I shall be give to you.*" Paul taught very strongly on the sovereignty of God. But he believed the prayers of the Christians in Philemon's church could result in his being released. The doctrine of God's sovereignty didn't hurt Paul's prayer life. He believed in prayer as a mighty working force in the spiritual universe. As such he sought and valued the prayers of others on his behalf, and he himself faithfully exercised such intercession for the saints.

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. (Philemon 1:23-25 NASB)

The "your" is plural in the Greek text and refers to the whole church in Philemon's house.

There is no evidence as to how Philemon and his wife, Apphia, and Archippus responded to Paul's letter. Did Philemon forgive Onesimus? We have no direct record of his response to this letter. However, the fact that Philemon preserved this epistle and allowed it to circulate among the churches strongly suggests that he did behave as Paul had requested.

So the drama is shared by three characters. Here is an ex-Jewish rabbi, to whom all Gentiles were once untouchables; a wealthy Gentile, to whom an itinerate Jewish preacher in a Roman prison would normally be an object of contempt; and a runaway slave, a thieving, ungrateful one without hope of human sympathy or even human justice. All three are caught up through their common allegiance to Christ into an entirely new relationship where each acknowledges the other as one of God's adopted sons and a brother for whom Christ died.

Onesimus was a testimony to the power of God to transform a life. Paul tells the Colossians that the man who left Colossae as a runaway slave now returns as one of your number. He was to be treated as a member of the church, because in Christ there was neither slave nor freeman ([Gal. 3:28](#)).

Does verse 19 imply that we owe a debt to the person responsible for leading us to Christ? *“Lest I should mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well.”* If so, how do we repay that debt? Through Prayer? Do you pray for the person who led you to Christ? Thankfulness? I encourage you to reflect this week on your salvation and the person that shared the gospel with you. Maybe you could write them a letter or give them a call to let them know how much you appreciate their faithfulness in sharing the gospel with you. Maybe in doing so you will be an encouragement and a refreshment to their soul.

Also I hope this little letter will encourage you to be faithful in sharing the gospel with others whom God places in your path. If they are going to be saved we must share:

How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? (Romans 10:14 NASB)

Let's be that “preacher” that carries the good news to a lost and dying world.

This message was preached by [David B. Curtis](#) on June 1, 2008. Media #417.



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