

# MORE THAN A SLAVE

## *A Study of Philemon*

### Study #4

#### More Than a Slave

#### *(Philemon 12-16)*

**12** ὃν ἀνέπεμμά σοι, αὐτόν, τοῦτ' ἔστιν τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα·

**13** ὃν ἐγὼ ἐβουλόμην πρὸς ἐμαυτὸν κατέχειν, ἵνα ὑπὲρ σοῦ μοι διακονῇ ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς τοῦ εὐαγγελίου,

**14** χωρὶς δὲ τῆς σῆς γνώμης οὐδὲν ἠθέλησα ποιῆσαι, ἵνα μὴ ὡς κατὰ ἀνάγκην τὸ ἀγαθὸν σου ἦ ἀλλὰ κατὰ ἐκούσιον.

**15** τάχα γὰρ διὰ τοῦτο ἐχωρίσθη πρὸς ὦραν, ἵνα αἰώνιον αὐτὸν ἀπέχης

**16** οὐκέτι ὡς δοῦλον ἀλλ' ὑπὲρ δοῦλον, ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν, μάλιστα ἐμοί, πόσω δὲ μᾶλλον σοὶ καὶ ἐν σαρκὶ καὶ ἐν κυρίῳ.

#### I. INTRODUCTION/REVIEW

- A. Paul has written this very short, very personal letter to his friend, Philemon, who is a member of the Colossian church, and in whose house that church meets (*verse 2*).
- B. Paul is writing to appeal for Philemon's run-away slave, Onesimus, who absconded after stealing from Philemon.
- C. After running away from Colossae, Onesimus ended up in Rome, almost 1,000 miles away, where Paul was under house arrest (*Acts 28:30-31*) on false charges (cf. *Acts 24:10-13, 25:7*).
- D. While in Rome, Onesimus came into contact with Paul, and was saved (*verse 10*).
- E. Now Paul is sending Onesimus to be reconciled and restored, as a believer, to his master, Philemon, and sends with him this brilliant and tender appeal.
- F. Paul has established that, although he has authority to command Philemon's obedience, he will instead appeal from love (*verses 8-9*).
- G. Paul describes a transformation in Onesimus's life, which resulted in a formerly useless slave now being useful, both to Paul and to Philemon; a reality on which Paul will now elaborate.

#### II. TEXT: PHILEMON 12-16

- A. *verse 12* = Paul describes the tenderness he feels toward Onesimus, and the consequent agony of sending him away.
  1. **"I have sent him back to you..."** = Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon in Colossae. He sent, with him, Tychicus (cf. *Colossians 4:7-9*), along with two letters: one primarily to the church, which would also have been read by Philemon (*Colossians*); and one primarily to Philemon, which would also have been read by the church (*Philemon*).
  2. **"...in person..."** = This may be the key phrase of the entire letter. It emphasizes that Paul was willing to risk Philemon's disobedience by delivering Onesimus physically into his hands—and it emphasizes, consequently, the reality of the decision that Philemon now has to make. There are at least three practical reasons for sending Onesimus back in person:
    - a. First, if Paul had sent only a letter asking Philemon to forgive Onesimus, but not sent Onesimus himself in person, Philemon's decision would be irrelevant. On the one hand, he could give verbal, surface forgiveness with no real depth or sincerity, because genuine restoration would be impossible with Onesimus 1,000 miles away; and consequently, his apparent "forgiveness" would be untried and unproved, remaining mere lip service. Or, on the other hand, he might refuse to forgive Onesimus, a decision which would have no real effect on Onesimus, who, being 1,000 miles away, would be out of Philemon's reach anyway. Philemon's decision, then, loses all impact unless Onesimus is returned to him in person. But, with Onesimus in his actual, physical

- custody, his decision has real consequences; for himself, for Paul, for Onesimus, and even for the church that meets in Philemon's house.
- b. Second, without Onesimus himself in person, Philemon has to take Paul's word that he has been transformed. But in person, Onesimus's repentance is on full display and unable to be counterfeited, with four consequences: the church is encouraged; God is glorified by the display of transforming power; Philemon is under pressure to forgive and restore; and Onesimus is accountable to bear fruit in keeping with repentance (cf. *Matthew 3:8*).
  - c. Third, sending Onesimus back in person is an act of trust on Paul's part, in two individuals:
    - i. Paul trusts Onesimus = This slave has already run away from his master. If he hasn't really changed, if it was all an act, what's to prevent him from escaping again during the long journey back to Colossae? By sending him back in person, Paul is, in effect, declaring his confidence in the man's transformation.
    - ii. Paul trusts Philemon = Sending Onesimus back into a potentially fatal situation is an act of trust in Philemon, in whose commitment to do what is right Paul thus declares his confidence.
3. "...that is, sending my very heart..." = Onesimus was so precious to Paul that sending him away was tantamount to ripping his own heart out and sending it away! The word "heart" here is the Greek *splanchna*, from which we derive the English word spleen. This was (as the heart is now) a metaphor for the seat of our deepest emotions. This is no cold, detached appeal. Paul has come to have great and godly feelings for Onesimus, and his emotions are all wrapped up in this situation.
- B. *verse 13* = Paul expresses his desire to have kept Onesimus with him for service, elaborating on the idea of *verse 11* that the formerly useless Onesimus is now useful to Paul.
1. "...whom I wished to keep with me..." = In the previous verse, Paul said that sending Onesimus away was like sending his own heart. He now expresses the desire of his heart—he wanted to keep Onesimus with him in Rome. Why? Because Onesimus was useful for service to Paul.
  2. "...so that on your behalf he might minister to me..." = Paul assumes that Philemon would like to have been there with Paul in Rome personally, but obviously that was not possible. Paul indicates that Onesimus might have acted as a surrogate, ministering to Paul on Philemon's behalf. But as we will see in the coming verse, Paul did not wish to presume or impose; and to keep Onesimus with him in Rome without Philemon's consent would have done just that. So, Paul did what was proper and sent Onesimus back to Philemon in Colossae.
  3. "...in my imprisonment..." = Here is another subtle reminder of Paul's pitiable condition, which is intended to encourage obedience (see also *verses 1, 19*).
  4. "...for the gospel..." = Paul makes it clear that he is not in prison for any crime—he is there because of his testimony for Christ and for the gospel he boldly proclaims (cf. *Ephesians 6:20*).
- C. *verse 14* = Paul places the decision regarding Onesimus's future squarely on Philemon's shoulders.
1. "...but without your consent I did not want to do anything..." = Though Paul would have liked to have kept Onesimus with him for service, he recognized that to keep him without Philemon's permission and consent would be inappropriate. Paul's perspective is that a slave's submission to his master is right in the Lord, which is expressed in the other places as well (*Ephesians 6:5-8; Colossians 3:22-25*). Of course, Paul also teaches, in the same passages, the responsibility of masters to treat their slaves well (*Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 4:1*).
  2. "...so that your goodness..." = Paul subtly acknowledges, first, that allowing Onesimus to remain with him in Rome would have been good; and second, that Philemon possesses such goodness (*i.e., your goodness*), to such an extent that Paul can trust him to do good in this situation as well.
  3. "...would not be, in effect, by compulsion..." = Earlier, Paul expressed that Philemon's love for the brethren has been a refreshing thing to witness (*verse 7*); and his confidence in that love has prompted him to avoid exerting apostolic authority (*verse 8*). He maintains that stance here.
  4. "...but of your own free will." = (Greek *hekousious*; see also *Romans 8:20; 1 Corinthians 9:17; Hebrews 10:26; 1 Peter 5:2*) Paul did not want to presume. Philemon, as Onesimus's human master, had

- prerogative to do as he wished with his slave—but had Paul kept Onesimus without Philemon’s approval, he would have taken that prerogative on himself, taking it away from Philemon and effectively forcing his hand, giving him no choice in the matter but to accept Paul’s unilateral decision.
- a. **IMPORTANT:** Forgiveness and restoration are *not* optional. That is not what this verse is teaching. Philemon *must* forgive; that is the *only* right and proper response. Allowing Onesimus to remain with Paul, however, was *not* an obligation. That is the point of this verse.
    - i. *Matthew 6:12, 14-15* = Forgiveness is *required* (cf. *Mark 11:25-26*).
    - ii. *2 Corinthians 2:5-11* = Slightly different context, but same point and principle: forgiveness and restoration are *not* optional (*Matthew 18:12-35*). But:
    - iii. *Colossians 3:22* = Masters *do* have the authority to decide how and where their slaves will serve. That is the issue of this verse.
- D. *verse 15* = Paul suggests that the sovereignty of God was at work even in the sin of Onesimus, such that His perfect will was accomplished.
1. “**For perhaps...**” = Paul does not state this as a dogmatic assertion. But knowing of the sovereignty of God, what follows is a sound, reasonable conclusion, and he therefore submits it for Philemon’s consideration.
  2. “**...he was for this reason...**” = God allows what He allows for a reason! The sovereignty of God is always at work, and pervades every event both miniscule and massive that transpires in human history. It is true broadly of all of humanity...and it is true of our individual lives, experiences and existence.
    - a. *Genesis 45:4-9* = In the events of Joseph’s life: God sent, God sent, God sent...
    - b. *Genesis 50:15-21* = An example of forgiveness and restoration in light of God’s sovereignty (cf. *Romans 8:28*).
    - c. *Daniel 4:35* = God’s will cannot be thwarted (*Job 42:2*).
  3. “**...separated from you for a while...**” = Onesimus’s escape was, as it turned out, temporary.
  4. “**...that you would have him back forever...**” = But his return to Philemon was, because of Christ, permanent, lasting and eternal.
  5. “**...a while...forever...**” = The contrast is glorious! A temporary separation results in an eternal bond of fellowship. God’s sovereignty took a temporary separation caused by sin, and turned it into an eternal restoration and reconciliation effected by grace!
  6. “**...forever...**” = Nearly two-thousand years later, Philemon and Onesimus are still enjoying fellowship with one another in the presence of God, and they will, still, in a million years, and on into eternity. Our fellowship as members of God’s family is eternal!
- E. *verse 16* = Because of God’s grace, the dynamic of the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, slave and master, is irrevocably altered. The slave/master relationship has metamorphosed into something deeper and more binding.
1. “**...no longer as a slave...**” = This does not mean that Onesimus is no longer a slave (cf. *1 Corinthians 7:21-24*). What it *does* mean is that the slave/master relationship is no longer the fundamental, primary way for these men to relate to one another (see *1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:26-29; Colossians 3:9-11*).
    - a. **A NOTE ON SLAVERY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT** = Nowhere does the New Testament explicitly condemn slavery. It is simply addressed as it exists, the accepted social system in place in that day. This does not necessarily imply an acceptance or condoning of slavery. But Christ’s, and by extension Christianity’s, primary purpose is to save souls in whatever social system they are found. It is *not* to overthrow imperfect, corrupt or even evil systems (cf. *1 Peter 2:13* and following).
  2. “**...but more than a slave...**” = (cf. *2 Corinthians 5:17*) Onesimus is not just a slave. There is more to him than his human, temporal, physical identity...and as one who has experienced that same broadening of identity, Philemon can no longer interact with Onesimus on only that fleshly level.

3. “...**a beloved brother...**” = Onesimus is now Philemon’s beloved brother, and this means he is doubly useful, even as a slave (see *1 Timothy 6:1-2*)!
4. “...**especially to me...**” = Paul has a special love and affection for Onesimus, his spiritual son (*verse 10*).
5. “...**but how much more to you...**” = But Philemon’s relationship with Onesimus ought to be even more precious and intimate than Paul’s!
6. “...**both in the flesh and in the Lord.**” = Both as a slave of Philemon, *and* as fellow-slaves of the Lord Jesus Christ, whom they are both now serving.

### III. CONCLUSION

- A. Are you impassionate in your heart toward other believers, or do you feel a pang of sadness when separation or distance becomes necessary?
- B. If you have offended against someone, are you willing to approach them, and interact with them *in person* as part of the repentance and restoration process?
- C. If someone has offended against you, are you willing to take a risk by allowing them back into your life *in person* so that their repentance can be seen as genuine, and your forgiveness can result in equally genuine restoration? What about in the church setting? If someone has transgressed in or against the church, are you willing to allow them back, willing to restore them as Christ desires?
- D. If you *are* willing to restore, do you feel it is a burden, only tolerable because it is mandated? Or does it bring you joy to restore? Put another way, is your goodness by compulsion, or of your own free will?
- E. Do you recognize God’s sovereignty in all things big and small? In the world? In your life? What does that sovereignty look like in your life? What does it mean for you? Give yourself some specific examples?
- F. Do you understand that although God does not cause people to sin, He always accomplishes His purposes even through that sin?
- G. Have you reflected lately on the eternal aspect of your relationship with other believers?
- H. When you look at other believers, do you see only what they are as creatures of flesh and bone, identifying them only by their station in life, their job, their level of education, their criminal history? Or can you see past those things to the spiritual reality and identity at work in them through Christ?
- I. Do you understand that your role and responsibility as a believer in Christ is not to change the world’s system, but rather to save men and women out of it by clear and consistent proclamation of God’s gospel?

### IV. PRAYER