

Overview Book Of Philemon

AT THE foreman's signal, the giant ball is released, and with dynamite force and a reverberating crash, it meets the wall, snapping bricks like twigs and scattering pieces of mortar. Repeatedly, the powerful pendulum works, and soon the barrier has been reduced to rubble. Then it is carted away so that construction can begin.

Life has many walls and fences that divide, separate, and compartmentalize. Not made of wood or stone, they are personal obstructions, blocking people from each other and from God. But Christ came as the great wall remover, tearing down the sin partition that separates us from God and blasting the barriers that keep us from each other. His death and resurrection opened the way to eternal life to bring all who believe into the family of God (see Ephesians 2:14-18).

Roman, Greek, and Jewish cultures were littered with barriers, as society assigned people to classes and expected them to stay in their place—men and women, slave and free, rich and poor, Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and barbarians, pious and pagan. But with the message of Christ, the walls came down, and Paul could declare, "Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all" (Colossians 3:11).

This life-changing truth forms the backdrop for the letter to Philemon. One of three personal letters in the Bible, the letter to Philemon is Paul's personal plea for a slave. Onesimus "belonged" to Philemon, a member of the Colossian church and Paul's friend. But Onesimus, the slave, had stolen from his master and had run away. He had run to Rome, where he had met Paul, and there he had responded to the Good News and had come to faith in Christ (1:10). So Paul wrote to Philemon and reintroduced Onesimus to him, explaining that he was sending him back, not just as a slave but as a brother (1:11-12, 16). Tactfully he asked Philemon to accept and forgive his brother (1:10, 14-15, 20). The barriers of the past and the new ones erected by Onesimus's desertion and theft should divide them no longer—they are one in Christ.

This small book is a masterpiece of grace and tact and a profound demonstration of the power of Christ and of true Christian fellowship in action. What barriers stand in your home, neighborhood, and church? What separates you from fellow believers? Race? Status? Wealth? Education? Personality? As with Philemon, God calls you to seek unity, breaking down those walls and embracing your brothers and sisters in Christ.

VITAL STATISTICS

PURPOSE: To convince Philemon to forgive his runaway slave, Onesimus, and to accept him as a brother in the faith.

AUTHOR: Paul

ORIGINAL AUDIENCE: Philemon, who was probably a wealthy member of the Colossian church

DATE WRITTEN: Approximately A.D. 60, during Paul's first imprisonment in Rome, at about the same time Ephesians and Colossians were written

SETTING: Slavery was very common in the Roman Empire, and evidently some Christians had slaves. Paul does not condemn the institution of slavery in his writings, but he makes a radical statement by calling this slave Philemon's brother in Christ.

KEY VERSES: "Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord" (1:15-16).

KEY PEOPLE: Paul, Philemon, Onesimus

KEY PLACES: Colossae, Rome

SPECIAL FEATURES: This is a private, personal letter to a friend.

THE BLUEPRINT

1. Paul's appreciation of Philemon (1:1–7)

2. Paul's appeal for Onesimus (1:8–25) Paul pleads on behalf of Onesimus, a runaway slave. Paul's intercession for him illustrates what Christ has done for us. As Paul interceded for a slave, so Christ intercedes for us, slaves to sin. As Onesimus was reconciled to Philemon, so we are reconciled to God through Christ. As Paul offered to pay the debts of a slave, so Christ paid our debt of sin. Like Onesimus, we must return to God our Master and serve him.

MEGATHEMES

Forgiveness

EXPLANATION: Philemon was Paul's friend and the legal owner of the slave Onesimus. Paul asked Philemon not to punish Onesimus but to forgive and restore him as a new Christian brother.

IMPORTANCE: Christian relationships must be full of forgiveness and acceptance. Can you forgive those who have wronged you?

Barriers

EXPLANATION: Slavery was widespread in the Roman Empire, but no one is lost to God or beyond his love. Slavery was a barrier between people, but Christian love and fellowship are to overcome such barriers.

IMPORTANCE: In Christ we are one family. No walls of racial, economic, or political differences should separate us. Let Christ work through you to remove barriers between Christian brothers and sisters.

Respect

EXPLANATION: Paul was a friend of both Philemon and Onesimus. He had the authority as an apostle to tell Philemon what to do. Yet Paul chose to appeal to his friend in Christian love rather than to order him what to do.

IMPORTANCE: Tactful persuasion accomplishes a great deal more than commands when dealing with people. Remember to exhibit courtesy and respect in your relationships.