

What Was at Stake

A RUNAWAY. Onesimus had left his master, verses 15 to 16.
A DEBT. He may have owed Philemon money, verse 18.
THE LAW. Roman law gave a master full power over a slave who ran away.
A NEW BROTHER. Now master and slave were both believers. How should they treat each other?

The Idiot Proof Summary

Philemon is a one page letter about one man, but it shows the whole gospel in miniature. Paul stands between an angry master and a guilty runaway and says, if he owes you, put it on my account. That is exactly what Jesus does for us. Martin Luther said it best: we are all His Onesimus.

Philemon at a Glance

- CH 1 to 7

THANK YOU, PHILEMON
Your love refreshes the hearts of the saints.
- CH 8 to 16

A REQUEST OUT OF LOVE
Take back Onesimus, once useless, now useful, a brother.
- CH 17 to 25

CHARGE IT TO ME
I will repay. Get a room ready for me.

Where Jesus Shows Up

- PHILEMON 6

Every good thing that is ours in Christ.
- PHILEMON 16

In the Lord, a slave and a master become brothers. Galatians 3:28.
- PHILEMON 18 TO 19

Paul pays the debt of the guilty one, a picture of what Christ does for us. Colossians 2:14.

What to Watch for in Philemon

- ARCHAEOLOGY

1:10, 1:12, 1:19
- NOTABLE

1:7-9, 1:11, 1:15-18
- JESUS SPEAKING

Words in red are Jesus speaking, or God the Father speaking from heaven.

Cool Stuff Most People Miss

- A PUN IN THE BIBLE**

Onesimus means useful. Paul says he was useless, but now he is useful, verse 11.
- SIGNED BY HAND**

Paul signs it himself, like an IOU, verse 19.
- ONE OF THE OLDEST**

Papyrus 87, from the early 200s, is one of the oldest scraps of Paul's letters.
- LUTHER'S WORDS**

Martin Luther, 1522: we are all His Onesimus, if we believe.

What Happened Next?

We do not know Philemon's answer, but the letter was kept, which suggests he said yes. Colossians 4:9 calls Onesimus a faithful and beloved brother. About AD 110, Ignatius praised a bishop of Ephesus named Onesimus. It may be the same man.

ARCHAEOLOGY | NOTABLE

1

CHAPTER 1 IN 30 SECONDS

Paul writes from prison to his friend Philemon about a runaway slave named Onesimus. The runaway met Paul, met Jesus, and became a new man. Now Paul sends him home with a note: take him back, not as a slave but as a brother. If he owes you anything, put it on my tab. Oh, and get the guest room ready.

GREETINGS FROM PAUL AND TIMOTHY // PHILIPPIANS 1:1-2; COLOSSIANS 1:1-2

¹Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our beloved fellow worker, ² to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church that meets at your house:

³Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

PHILEMON'S FAITH AND LOVE

⁴I always thank my God, remembering you in my prayers, ⁵because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. ⁶I pray that your partnership in the faith may become effective as you fully acknowledge every good thing that is ours in Christ. ⁷I take great joy and encouragement in your love, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.

PAUL'S APPEAL FOR ONESIMUS

⁸So although in Christ I am bold enough to order you to do what is proper, ⁹I prefer to appeal on the basis of love. For I, Paul, am now aged, and a prisoner of Christ Jesus as well.

¹⁰I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whose father I became while I was in chains. ¹¹Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to

you and to me. ¹²I am sending back to you him who is my very heart.

¹³I would have liked to keep him with me, so that on your behalf he could minister to me in my chains for the gospel. ¹⁴But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that your goodness will not be out of compulsion, but by your own free will.

¹⁵For perhaps this is why he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for good— ¹⁶no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a beloved brother. He is especially beloved to me, but even more so to you, both in person and in the Lord.

¹⁷So if you consider me a partner, receive him as you would receive me. ¹⁸But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge it to my account. ¹⁹I, Paul, write this with my own hand. I will repay it—not to mention that you owe me your very self.

²⁰Yes, brother, let me have some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

■ PHM 1:2 [NOTE] THE HOUSE CHURCH. There were no church buildings yet, so believers met in homes. Many think Apphia was Philemon's wife and Archippus their son. Paul tells Archippus to finish his work for the Lord, Colossians 4:17.

■ PHM 1:7 [NOTABLE] Philemon was known for one thing: people left his house encouraged. Paul asks him to do it one more time, verse 20.

■ PHM 1:8 [NOTABLE] Paul had the authority to give an order. He asked out of love instead. Real leaders win hearts, not just obedience.

■ PHM 1:10 [ARCHAEOLOGY] Marble plaque honoring Pliny the Younger, the Roman who wrote a famous letter asking mercy for a freedman → FIELD NOTES p.5

■ PHM 1:10 [NOTABLE] Onesimus means useful. The man who once lived up to his name the wrong way was changed by Jesus. No one is too useless for God.

■ PHM 1:11 [NOTE] USELESS TO USEFUL. Onesimus means useful. Paul plays on the name: once useless, now useful. Some hear a second pun, because the Greek word for useful sounded almost like Christ.

■ PHM 1:12 [ARCHAEOLOGY] A Roman iron slave collar with a bronze tag offering a gold coin for returning a runaway to his master Zoninus → FIELD NOTES p.6

■ PHM 1:12 [NOTE] SENT BACK. Most believe Onesimus was a runaway, as John Chrysostom said about AD 400. Some think he went to Paul on purpose to ask him to make peace with his master; others that Philemon sent him to help Paul; a few that he was Philemon's brother, not a slave. Deuteronomy 23:15 to 16 says not to hand back a runaway. Some answer that the law was for slaves fleeing to Israel from other nations; others that Paul would not act without Philemon's consent, verse 14, and sent him as a brother, not as property.

■ PHM 1:15 [NOTABLE] The gospel turned a runaway and his master into family. In Christ the walls between people come down, Galatians 3:28.

■ PHM 1:16 [NOTE] SLAVE AND BROTHER. See The Big Question pages, The Bible and Slavery, and the Titus 2:9 note, p.~.

■ PHM 1:17 [NOTABLE] Paul takes the slave's debt on himself. Martin Luther wrote in 1522 that Christ does the same for us before the Father: we are all His Onesimus.

■ PHM 1:19 [ARCHAEOLOGY] A loan contract on papyrus from the Jewish colony at Elephantine, Egypt, about 402 BC, with repayment terms, guarantors and witnesses → FIELD NOTES p.8

■ PHM 1:19 [NOTE] MY OWN HAND. Paul usually spoke his letters to a helper and signed the end himself, Galatians 6:11 and 2 Thessalonians 3:17. Here his signature works like an IOU.

²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

²² In the meantime, prepare a guest room for me, because I hope that through your prayers I will be restored to you.

ADDITIONAL GREETINGS

²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings, ²⁴ as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

FIELD NOTES · ARCHAEOLOGY · CONFIDENCE: HIGH

PLINY'S LETTER FOR A FREEDMAN

PHILEMON 8 TO 21



Part of the marble plaque honoring Pliny the Younger, early 100s AD, in the wall of the church of Sant'Amrogio, Milan. Photo Giovanni Dall'Orto, free with credit.

WHAT IT IS

Part of a marble plaque honoring Pliny the Younger, a rich Roman lawyer and governor. His name PLINIUS is on the top line. The same plaque appears in 1 Timothy, p. 7, because Pliny also wrote about Christians.

HOW OLD IT IS

It was carved in the early 100s AD, around the time of Pliny's death. Pliny was born about the time Paul wrote Philemon.

PLINY'S LETTER

About AD 107, Pliny wrote to his friend Sabinianus. A freedman, a former slave of Sabinianus, had made his master angry and ran to Pliny for help. He fell at Pliny's feet, cried and begged. Pliny wrote: he is sorry, forgive him, you can always be angry again if he deserves it. In a second letter Pliny thanks Sabinianus for taking him back.

SIDE BY SIDE

Both letters ask a master to take back a man who wronged him, and both use gentle pressure. But Pliny begs mercy for an inferior. Paul calls Onesimus my child, my very heart and a beloved brother, and offers to pay his debt himself.

THE OLDEST COPY

The title page shows Papyrus 87, a scrap of Philemon from the early 200s, now at the University of Cologne. Some scholars date it even earlier, in the 100s.

WHAT IT DOES NOT PROVE

Pliny never heard of Onesimus. The two letters show how such requests were made in the Roman world.

■ **PHM 1:22 [NOTE] A GUEST ROOM.** Paul expected to be set free, Philippians 1:25. Clement of Rome, about AD 96, says Paul reached the limit of the west, and many believe he was released and traveled again before his second arrest. See 2 Timothy, p. 7.

■ **PHM 1:24 [NOTE] THE SAME TEAM.** These are the same friends who send greetings in Colossians 4:10 to 14. Mark is the young man Paul once refused to take along, Acts 15:37 to 39. Luke is the doctor who wrote Luke and Acts. Demas later left Paul, 2 Timothy 4:10.

■ **PHM 1:25 [NOTE] WHAT HAPPENED TO ONESIMUS?** About AD 110, Ignatius praised a bishop of Ephesus named Onesimus. Some think it was the same man, and that he later helped gather Paul's letters, which would explain why this tiny note was saved. It is possible, but no one knows.

FIELD NOTES · ARCHAEOLOGY · CONFIDENCE: HIGH · LATER THAN PAUL

THE SLAVE COLLAR

PHILEMON 10 TO 16



Iron slave collar with bronze tag, Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome. Photo Mark Landon, CC BY 4.0.

WHAT IT IS

An iron collar that was locked around a slave's neck, with a bronze tag. The Latin says: I have run away. Hold me. When you bring me back to my master Zoninus, you will get a gold coin.

HOW OLD IT IS

From the 300s or 400s AD, at least 250 years after Paul. It has been known since 1749 and is in the National Museum of Rome.

A HARD TRUTH

The tag has a small palm branch, which may be a Christian sign, and other collars like it carry the Christian Chi Rho. Long after Paul, some Christians still owned slaves and collared them.

WHAT A RUNAWAY FACED

In Paul's day a caught runaway could be beaten, branded on the face, chained or sold far away. Professional slave catchers hunted them. Anyone who hid a runaway could owe the master for his lost work.

WHY PAUL WAS BOLD

Paul did not hide Onesimus. He sent him home with a letter asking his master to treat him as a brother, and he offered to pay whatever was owed, verses 16 to 19.

WHAT IT DOES NOT PROVE

This collar has nothing to do with Onesimus. It shows what running away could cost a slave.

DEBATED | THE BIG QUESTION

THE BIBLE AND SLAVERY

What Happened Then

PHILEMON 16 · GALATIANS 3:28 · EXODUS 21:2 TO 16 · LEVITICUS 25:44 TO 46

WHAT PAUL SAID

Take him back no longer as a slave, but as a beloved brother, verse 16. In Christ there is neither slave nor free, Galatians 3:28. If you can gain your freedom, take it, 1 Corinthians 7:21. Slave traders are listed with the lawless, 1 Timothy 1:10. But Paul also told slaves to obey their masters, Titus 2:9 and Ephesians 6:5, and he never told masters to free them.

SLAVERY IN ISRAEL

Hebrew servants were set free in the seventh year, Exodus 21:2 and Deuteronomy 15:12 to 15. Kidnapping a person was punished by death, Exodus

21:16. A runaway was not to be handed back, Deuteronomy 23:15 to 16. But foreigners could be held for life, Leviticus 25:44 to 46, and a master who beat a slave was not always punished, Exodus 21:20 to 21.

SLAVERY IN ROME

Millions were slaves: war captives, children of slaves, people sold for debt. It was not based on race. Many were freed in time, and some were doctors or teachers. But a slave had no rights, could be beaten or sold, and could not legally marry.

THE EARLY CHURCH

About AD 110, Ignatius told slaves not to expect the church to buy their freedom, which shows churches were doing it. About AD 379, Gregory of Nyssa preached that no human can own an-

other. In the 300s, Constantine let Christians free slaves in church. About AD 450, Patrick of Ireland wrote against a king whose men captured new believers as slaves.

THE GREAT DEBATE

In 1688 Quakers in Germantown, Pennsylvania, protested slavery. John Newton, a former slave trader, wrote *Amazing Grace* and fought the trade. William Wilberforce led Britain to end the slave trade in 1807 and slavery in 1833. In America both sides quoted the Bible. A Slave Bible printed in 1807 for slaves in the British West Indies cut out the Exodus story. Frederick Douglass wrote in 1845 that the Christianity of this land was not the Christianity of Christ. Methodists split over slavery in 1844 and Baptists in 1845. In 1995 the Southern Baptist Convention apologized for its role.

book shows how early Christians lived with slavery. Best case: it is honest about the texts. Believers who hold it say God's word came in real history and pointed forward.

THE PROSLAVERY READING

In the 1800s many preachers in the American South said slavery was God's plan, using the curse on Canaan in Genesis 9:25 and verses telling slaves to obey. Almost every church today rejects this reading. The curse fell on Canaan, not on Africans, and the Bible condemns kidnapping people to sell, 1 Timothy 1:10.

WHAT WE ALL AGREE ON

Kidnapping and selling people is sin. In Christ a slave and a master stand equal before God. And slavery is not gone: a 2022 estimate counted about 50 million people in forced labor or forced marriage today, and many Christians work to set them free.

The Case Each Side Makes

PHILEMON 16 · GENESIS 1:27 · 1 TIMOTHY 1:10 · EPHESIANS 6:5 TO 9

THE SEEDS VIEW

The Bible planted seeds that would destroy slavery: every person is made in God's image, Genesis 1:27, master and slave are brothers, verse 16, and both answer to the same Master, Ephesians 6:9. Paul worked inside a system he could not change overnight. Best case: the abolitionist movement grew from exactly these verses. Many evangelicals hold this, and William Webb's 2001 book calls it a redemptive movement.

IT WAS DIFFERENT

Bible slavery was mostly debt service for a set time, not the race based slavery of the Americas, and man stealing was a crime, Exodus 21:16. Best case: the Old Testament laws were kinder than the nations around Israel. Critics answer with Leviticus 25:44 to 46 and Exodus 21:20 to 21, and note Roman slavery in Paul's day was often lifelong.

THE BIBLE ACCEPTED IT

Many scholars say the Bible writers simply accepted slavery as part of their world, and Christians were right to move beyond it later. Jennifer Glancy's 2002

FIELD NOTES • ARCHAEOLOGY • CONFIDENCE: HIGH • FAR OLDER THAN PAUL

CHARGE IT TO MY ACCOUNT

PHILEMON 17 TO 19 • COLOSSIANS 2:14



Loan contract on papyrus, Elephantine, Egypt, about 402 BC. Brooklyn Museum, no known restrictions.

WHAT IT IS

A loan contract written on papyrus in Aramaic. Anani son of Haggai, a Jewish soldier at Elephantine, an island in the Nile in Egypt, borrowed grain from a man named Pahnum and promised to pay it back.

HOW OLD IT IS

About 402 BC, more than 450 years before Paul. It belongs to the Elephantine papyri, records of a Jewish community in Egypt, and is in the Brooklyn Museum.

WHAT IT SAYS

Anani would repay out of his ration from the king. If he was late, he owed a fine in silver. If he died, his children or his guarantors had to pay. Until then the lender could take his house, a servant or his bronze pots. A scribe wrote it and four witnesses signed.

THE LANGUAGE OF DEBT

Paul writes like a businessman. Charge it to my account is a bookkeeping word. I, Paul, write this with my own hand. I will repay. That was the standard promise in a written IOU, and the signer wrote it himself.

A GUARANTOR

Paul steps in as Onesimus' guarantor and takes the debt on himself. Colossians 2:14 uses a word for a handwritten record of debt and says God nailed ours to the cross. Martin Luther wrote: we are all His Onesimus.

WHAT IT DOES NOT PROVE

This contract has nothing to do with Paul. It shows how debts and promises to repay were written down.