

"On the Way" 365 Bible Reading Plan

Philemon

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The Book of Philemon was written by the Apostle Paul while in prison in Rome. Therefore this short, personal letter was written about the same time as I Timothy, Titus, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. Indeed, this personal letter to Philemon was likely sent at the same time and by the same person who delivered the letter to the Colossians. Paul's letter to his friend that he led to faith in Christ Jesus, was not a letter to teach him doctrinal truth, but rather a personal letter, more like a plea on behalf of the newfound friend Onesimus, a runaway slave from Colossae that belonged to Philemon. Onesimus had not only run away but had stolen from Philemon as well. Paul had perhaps won Philemon to Jesus while at nearby Ephesus where he stayed for three years. Paul no doubt visited the churches that were in the vicinity. Most of those nearby churches are mentioned in the Book of Revelation in chapters two and three. Philemon would have been one who after conversion, his entire family became followers of the Lord Jesus. Philemon perhaps had been a benefactor as well, being a wealthy slave owner. It would not have been unusual for a very wealthy Roman citizen who had considerable land to have hundreds or thousands of slaves. Many who were slaves in the Roman Empire would

have in actuality had a better lot in life than those who were free, speaking from the standpoint of financial realities.

Paul gets right to the point of why his writing his longed for friend. Onesimus who had escaped his slavery and stolen from Philemon had met Paul in Rome by God's great providence. He had become a follower of Jesus and ministered to Paul who had become his father in the faith just like his owner Philemon. Paul knew that Onesimus must return so Paul sent this letter to implore his friend on behalf of one who was not just in a slave/master relationship, but much more, a true brother in Jesus. Paul asked Philemon to not only forgive him but to receive him as a brother. Onesimus could have been executed by Philemon because of what he had done, it was a criminal offense that could have brought the death penalty. Slaves, even though they had some rights within the Roman system were still considered property and less than others.

Paul so loved Onesimus that he asked Philemon to treat him as he would Paul himself, and even out of Paul's meager resources he offered to pay for any damages Philemon had suffered. However, Paul did remind Philemon that he owed Paul his very life and that without Christ he would have no hope.

Prayer and Action Steps

The Bible does not tell us the end of Onesimus and his relationship with Philemon, however, we do have one of the early church fathers, Ignatius, who said that one Onesimus became the pastor and leader of the church at Ephesus after the Apostle John was exiled to Patmos. Could God take a runaway rebellious slave and make him a trophy of His grace? I think you know the answer to that!
Thank you, dear Lord Jesus!