

Chapter Summary: Philemons

The believers in the city of Colosse (in modern-day Turkey) first heard about Jesus from a man named Epaphras. Sometime during the years that Paul was based in Ephesus, he sent his associate Epaphras to Colosse, about a hundred miles east, to share the Good News there and in the nearby cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis. Many in Colosse became followers of Jesus. When they later learned that Paul was a prisoner (presumably in Rome), they sent Epaphras to help Paul on their behalf. He would make sure that Paul was being properly cared for in prison, bringing money and supplies from the church in Colosse.

During this time, Paul wrote the letters we know as Colossians and Ephesians. He sent Tychicus and Onesimus to deliver those letters to their recipients in the province of Asia. Paul gave them one more letter to deliver addressed to a man named Philemon—a leader among the believers in Colosse. Paul calls him his "brother" and "beloved co-worker," noting that the believers gather to worship in his home.

Philemon once had a slave who had betrayed his trust by running away, likely stealing money in the process. That slave was Onesimus, one of the men delivering Paul's letters. In this letter, Paul asks Philemon to forgive this slave, welcome him as a brother in Christ, and set him free. Onesimus is returning to Colosse as one of Paul's representatives. The runaway is about to see his owner again face to face.

In his letter to Philemon, Paul explains that he has become a "father in the faith" to Onesimus. Just as Epaphras was helping Paul on behalf of the Colossians, Paul wants to keep Onesimus with him on behalf of Philemon. But given their history, Paul knows that he can't presume anything. So, he sends Onesimus back to Colosse with Tychicus to seek reconciliation with Philemon.

Paul uses a variety of strategies to persuade Philemon: community encouragement (Paul addresses the letter to the whole church there), sympathy (he mentions five times that he's in prison), authority ("I could demand it"), personal debt ("you owe me your very soul"), and most significantly, the creation of one new unified family in the Messiah.

Even so, Paul is making a pretty audacious request. Philemon has the authority under Roman law to punish Onesimus severely. Runaway Search slaves were routinely killed by crucifixion. But Paul asks him to grant Onesimus freedom and to welcome him as a man and as a brother in the Lord – effectively as an equal.

Notice that Paul is mirroring what Christ has done for us. He is not merely encouraging reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus; he is embodying that reconciliation himself. By putting himself between them and volunteering to pay any debt that Onesimus owes, Paul is doing exactly what he asks of Philemon: "Put into action the generosity that comes from your faith."

The foundation for everything Paul writes in this short letter is the radical new unity made possible by Christ. The new world that has been born through the death and resurrection of the Messiah directly challenges the old way of life in the present evil age. In the Messiah's new family, love cuts across the old boundaries between people: Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. We all are now one in Christ.