

# *Our life together*



Philemon 1:1-25 | October 3, 2021



# *OUR LIFE TOGETHER*

PHILEMON 1:1-25

Over the past year and a half, we've all learned a lot about connecting remotely with people; checking in with each other, having conversations, coming together without actually, physically, coming together. We use the phone or a text message, an email or a video call, like Facetime or Skype or Zoom, and we've thought ourselves, I think, to be pretty innovative in being a church together without always being in the same building. But the apostle Paul was doing the exact same thing, centuries ago, without all our technology. Paul did it with letter-writing.

Paul pastored churches all around the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, in cities and towns and across the countryside. He travelled almost constantly, of course, but he connected remotely with his scattered churches from wherever he was via a steady stream of correspondence, back and forth between his many churches and himself. Even while being held under house arrest in distant Rome, a very real kind of lockdown, Paul was still writing, still pastoring, still very much a part of the Christian community in Colossae, which is where Philemon lived.

This letter is a brief but powerful glimpse into the kind of Christian community that Paul dreamed of for his churches. As Paul describes how he prays for Philemon, we see what type of person Philemon is: full of faith and love for both Jesus and the people around him, and a blessing for the believers who form this house church. Philemon was a fairly wealthy Roman citizen, living in the city of Colossae, which by that time was still a reasonably busy market city. Philemon was one of the leaders of the Christian community in the city at that time, hosting a house church in his home. Like most well-to-do Romans, Philemon owned a few slaves, who most likely worked as domestic labour in his household.

Slavery in the Roman empire was different than slavery in the Old Testament Israelite world and the more recent historical kinds of slavery with which we are most familiar. Old Testament slavery was a temporary arrangement, usually to pay off a debt or as a kind of social assistance for someone without resources to live independently, and all debts and bonds were cleared, every

seven years. Slaves in Rome, though, were rarely freed, and they were viewed as property by their owners. At its height, about 40% of the total population of the Roman Empire were slaves, and being anything other than Roman by birth made one enslave-able for work ranging from unskilled manual labour to domestic work to highly skilled professionals, like Greek doctors or accountants. The wealthy 1% of Roman society owned about half of the slaves; ordinary, middle-class men like Philemon would have had perhaps one or two slaves, working in their homes or businesses. It's not right, of course; it's just the way the Roman empire worked.

And Paul is not trying to change the world entire, the whole Roman empire, in this letter. What he is doing, though, is taking a small step in that direction by seeking to heal the rift and change the relationship between Philemon and his runaway slave, Onesimus. As we said, Paul starts off his letter by telling Philemon how Paul prays for him, and how Paul thanks God for Philemon and his faith. Paul goes on to remind Philemon about the things that they hold in common, this fellowship or joint partnership in the faith that exists between them because of Jesus. And on that basis, Paul makes his appeal to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus.

Lazy, useless, probably light-fingered Onesimus had run away from Philemon's household, from Colossae, and had made it all the way to Rome. But because God's great, saving plan includes everyone – even runaway slaves – somehow Onesimus ended up meeting Paul, and becoming a follower of Jesus.

Onesimus has been a great help to Paul during Paul's house arrest, and it's clear that Paul would like to keep Onesimus with him. But that would be illegal and unbrotherly toward Philemon. So Paul writes this letter for Onesimus to present to his master Philemon, and he sends Onesimus home. That reunion between Philemon and Onesimus would have been challenging enough, but Paul wants even more from Philemon than letting Onesimus resume his old work, and it is something unheard-of, breaking the rules of Roman society.

Philemon would have been well within his legal rights to have his runaway slave killed; Philemon is a good, Christ-following man, but our culture – the morality and laws of our society – does have a powerful effect on shaping who we are and how we think. And Roman culture said that that is what Philemon legally ought to do. It would be unfair to speculate about what Philemon might have done, had Onesimus simply been recaptured and returned to him in some

other way, but it says a lot that Paul doesn't even mention that Philemon might have been considering having Onesimus killed.

Knowing that little bit of history about the Roman empire helps us understand the implications of what Paul is asking Philemon to do. Paul wants more than forgiveness and letting Onesimus have his old position back without consequences. He asks Philemon to receive Onesimus back not as a slave but as a brother in Christ. Perhaps, Paul writes, the reason Onesimus was separated from Philemon for a time was so that Philemon might have him back forever as a dear brother, part of the Christian community of Colossae, vastly more to one another than master and slave. Onesimus is to be treated as a beloved brother in Christ before all other considerations, and Philemon likewise can be expected to receive the same treatment from Onesimus. What Paul is asking for is a transformation of their relationship from master and slave to the same kind of fellowship, the same kind of partnership in Christ, that exists between Paul and Philemon, for Onesimus to be made welcome in Philemon's house church as the apostle Paul himself would be made welcome, were he to visit.

One of the unusual features of this letter is what's missing; the things that Paul doesn't say. In all of Paul's other letters that we have in the Bible, he writes beautifully and powerfully about the Cross and Christ crucified, but not, it seems, in this letter to Philemon. At least, not directly.

As Christians together, we talk a lot about witnessing to our faith by the way we live our lives; we talk about learning from Jesus about how to think and act and speak in every-day situations and in times of crisis. If we are feeling perhaps a little poetic, we might say that we strive to be a Christ-like presence for others in difficult or challenging situations, bringing Jesus' love, his mercy and grace, his compassion and generosity into the lives of one another and our neighbours.

Paul is certainly being a Christ-like presence in this moment, but he's not bringing any of the lessons Jesus taught during his life into the situation. No, Paul is instead living the Cross and what Christ does for all of us through his death and resurrection.



Paul has come to know Onesimus, and Onesimus has become very dear to Paul. So Paul takes the consequences of Onesimus' wrong-doings upon himself: if he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, wrote Paul, charge it to my account. Welcome him as you would welcome me.

You see, Paul is working with a specific goal in mind: making things right between Philemon and Onesimus. Paul's goal is not to simply restore the old master-slave relationship between the two men; he wants to transform that relationship into what it ought to be: brothers in Christ. So by writing this letter, Paul is acting as a mediator, to reconcile Philemon and Onesimus to one another. And he does it, not by encouraging them to apologise to each other and forgive one another, not by laying out how they must make amends or compensate one another...he does it by building a bridge between them out of himself, rooted in the joint partnership in Christ between himself and Philemon, and by taking Onesimus' debt onto himself. This is also how we talk about what Christ did for us through his death and resurrection. Jesus built the bridge between us and God out of himself, reconciling us – making us right – with God.

Jesus creates a new relationship between us and God by freeing us from the otherwise permanent spiritual debt of our sin. And Jesus heals what was broken between us and God, making it whole and life-giving in a new way. Paul is embodying that same spirit of reconciliation by writing as he did to Philemon about Onesimus.

But what Jesus did on the Cross, and what Paul is aiming to do with this letter, goes even further than that. In another letter, Paul wrote: "We are no longer Jews or Greeks, or slaves or free men, or even men and women, but we are Christians, we are one in Christ Jesus." In this letter, Paul wrote about fellowship, being joint partners for the sake of, or in response to, Christ. Paul is talking about something that's called *koinonia*. That is an ancient Greek word, but it's one we've picked up on and use to describe the unique kind of community that Christians form.

*Koinonia* is fellowship, joint participation, and having shares in the same things. It's being partners with one another in our life together. Christian community is more than friendship or working together or talking to each other, and it's more than membership. It's unity among believers, among us,

and between us and God. It's spiritual oneness through the Holy Spirit, and it includes more tangible things, too, like the sharing of resources of food and money and goods. Koinonia is expressed in the communion of the Lord's Supper, which we'll be celebrating together today; it's the many becoming one, in Christ.

Koinonia is not without its challenges, though, and certainly Philemon and Onesimus both would have been challenged by what Paul was asking them to do. We never hear from Onesimus, but I bet he'd have just as soon stayed with Paul in Rome than face Philemon and all the people who had known him only as a not very useful and probably dishonest slave. But coming together as brothers in Christ, equals before God, meant crossing over the well-established boundaries that Roman society placed between them. And it meant leaving their comfort zones, doing something risky or embarrassing or humbling. Philemon and Onesimus would no longer interact with each other primarily as master and slave. They would have a new relationship, one that would grow from the basis of oneness in Christ, making their identity as Christians the most important way that they saw themselves and one another.

And that is one of the challenges of koinonia that we still grapple with today: being Christian before we are anything else, and seeing other Christians that way, too, as Christians first even before something as fundamental as our sex, our ethnicity, our social position or economic status. Those other parts of ourselves don't cease to be part of us, but if we are doing Christian community the right way, then we are one in Christ together, more than we are anything else apart.

Paul's letter to Philemon also highlights a second challenge of living together in Christian community. And that's what we might have to give up to love someone else.

Christianity does value the individual person – we are each of us made uniquely by God, known by God and loved by God, too. But from start to finish in Scripture, we are urged to put love of God first and other people second, and ourselves somewhere further down the list. Jesus' most important lesson, one that he said was the hook on which the gospel and the prophets all hung, was to love God and love others.



And that kind of active love doesn't rest on emotion or what we want for ourselves; it's about working for the best for the other person, wanting them to be one in Christ with us, love without condition or any motivation beyond the good of the other. Within a Christian community, that kind of love can require us to suspend our own rights and privileges for the good of another.

Philemon, remember, had every right to continue to keep Onesimus as a slave, to demand compensation, to punish Onesimus, even to have him killed. That was Philemon's right as a Roman citizen and as Onesimus' owner, as appalling and horrible as we find that today.

Paul asked him to set aside those rights on the basis of *koinonia*, to welcome Onesimus into the Christian community that Philemon led, for Onesimus' good and for the spiritual growth of the community. That setting aside of one's own privilege is a common theme in Paul's letters, mature Christians, well-established within the *koinonia*, taking the hit and sacrificing something, to welcome and help a new or struggling sister or brother in Christ.

There's a lot packed into this short letter. It's easy to close our hearts to what Paul's getting at because of the painful and sensitive topic of slavery. Many modern readers get frustrated with Paul for not condemning Philemon for having a slave or demanding that Onesimus be liberated from his enslavement. But what Paul was aiming for is reconciliation and oneness; a relationship of equality between the two men, equal standing before God in Christ and within the Christian community. And that was, in its way, more radical, more subversive, to Roman society than even granting Onesimus' freedom would have been.

No longer free man and slave, but brothers in Christ, a new relationship reconciled to one another, because of Christ and the Cross.

You might be wondering what happened, after Philemon finished reading Paul's letter. It's too long ago to know for sure what Philemon and Onesimus did. We do know that Onesimus, in the company of another one of Paul's people, really did go back to Colossae; it's mentioned in the letter to the Colossians. And we know that several years later, there was also a bishop in Ephesus, a neighbouring city, named Onesimus. According to church tradition, it's the same man.

Perhaps it's a coincidence? Maybe. But either way, this short letter is showing us the real and practical transforming effect that the many made one in Christ, that koinonia – a loving, faithful, nurturing Christian community – can really have on us. Thanks be to God! Amen.