

LETTER TO PHILEMON

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PHILEMON

- Very important book
- Only one chapter (25 verses)
- It doesn't really seem to contain any
 - epic doctrines or any confrontation of significant error.
 - record for us any elements of history that would be unforgettable and necessary for us to understand the flow of redemptive history.
- But the Lord has included it. It is an inspired book, inspired by the Holy Spirit for our edification.



PHILEMON

- Lets read...
- What did you get out of the letter?
- Some suggest the purpose is to **reveal the working of God in providence**; and **love is here**, and providence is here. Some suggest it's an example of **proper manners, Christian courtesy; no commands, nothing offensive, just the pleadings of love**; and certainly that's here. Some suggest it's to **help Christians maintain good relationships**; and that's here. Some suggest that it is to show the **effect of conversion on social structure**; and certainly that's here. And some suggest that this is the **first assault or attack on the institution of slavery**; **and that's not here.**



PHILEMON

- It must be noted that **no place** in Scripture, **no place is there any effort to abolish slavery**, no place in Scripture. There is, however, a **call to righteous love** on the part of God's people in every relationship, no matter what that relationship is; whether it's in a marriage, whether it's in a family, whether it's in a slave/master relationship.
- It's very likely that the Gentile church was made up predominantly of slaves; that is why Paul says in Galatians, "In Christ there's neither bond nor free."
- What does Paul say about slavery? **Ephesians 6:5** "Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ." That is a stunning statement.
- **Colossians 3** - Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. ¹⁹ Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. ²⁰ Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.
- ²² Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. ²³ Whatever you do, work heartily, **as for the Lord** and not for men, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.
- Others - 1 Peter 2:18, 1 Timothy 6



PHILEMON

- Really a stunning thing to say to slaves. You're literally serving the Lord when you serve your master.
- So how does the Bible deal with slavery?
 - Mind and heart transformation
 - ¹⁶ no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. **Philemon 1**
- Romans 12:2 ² **Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.**



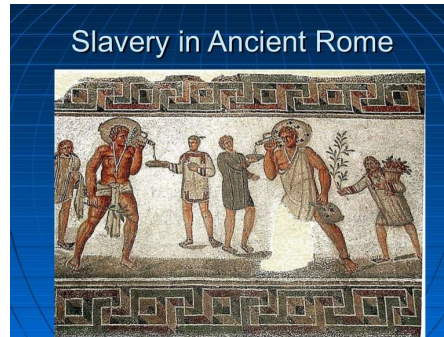
PHILEMON

- According to historians
- There were about 60 million slaves in the Roman world
- Slavery was an essential part of the ancient world.
- One study of the sacred treasury of the Romans for the years 81 to 49 B.C. included taxes for manumission – that's the freeing of slaves, five percent of the value of the slave to be freed. Using the value of a slave as 500 denarii, the conclusion was that about half a million slaves were freed during that thirty-year period. So Rome was not overly oppressive.
- The records of Augustus Caesar show that when masters died, slaves were freed in wholesale numbers. This became a problem. Because they didn't have anyone to care for them, the government eventually **limited the number of slaves that could be freed** when the master died, so they wouldn't have unemployed people on their hands.



PHILEMON

- Onesimus was Philemon's slave.
- Onesimus was a nonbelieving slave. He had run away, and he had **probably** stolen money, or something of value, from Philemon to fund his escape.
- Such an act was a grievous and serious offense, with severe punishment attached, even death. If slaves were found, they were branded with an "F" *fugitivas*, and they were **tortured**, and some were even **crucified**. Running away was not tolerated, because people had **valued investment in slaves**, and slaves had great responsibility.



PHILEMON

- We can say Philemon was a good master
- Still, there were slaves that ran, and they ran even from good masters, as **Onesimus** did
- He ran to Rome. By the will of God, **he ran into Paul**; and became a Christian.
- His life was transformed, and he became a very encouraging, helpful servant to Paul in his confinement.
- But he knew there was an unresolved issue between this runaway **slave** and his **master** Philemon.



PHILEMON

- A very personal letter
- Behind this letter is a story, a fascinating story, a compelling story along the lines of forgiveness.
- Shortest of Paul's letters.
- And Philemon is a very privileged man.
- Paul wrote thirteen inspired letters in the New Testament, many others beyond that; but as far as the New Testament is concerned, he wrote thirteen letters.
- Only three of them were sent to individuals: letters to **Timothy**, a letter to **Titus**, and a letter to **Philemon**.



PHILEMON

- Now Paul has in mind that **Philemon** should forgive **Onesimus**; that's really what's behind this letter. So it is a short story on forgiveness, a heartfelt, beautifully expressed call for Philemon to forgive Onesimus his slave who has wronged him.
- Forgiveness is a noble virtue to be attained, something to be honored, something to be valued. But more than that, we are commanded to forgive.



PHILEMON

- God is a forgiving God. And on the cross even, Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do,” to the very people who were crucifying Him, as recorded in Luke 23:34.
- Scripture says, “It is a man’s glory to overlook a transgression.”
Proverbs 19:11
- Scripture tells us that **if we do not forgive one another, God will not forgive us Matthew 6:15.**
- But now let’s see a story in which that forgiveness plays a very critical role.



PHILEMON

- The breakdown



PHILEMON

- “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and **Timothy our brother**, to **Philemon** our beloved brother and fellow worker, and to **Apphia** our sister, and to **Archippus** our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.



PHILEMON

- His name is only mentioned here, no where else in the Scripture. All we really know about him is what we can kind of see in this letter. He is the head of his household in Colossae, if you will, which was a small town, by the way, in Phrygia, which is in the Lycus valley.
- He also introduces him as *sunergos*, which is a **fellow worker**
- Philemon, obviously he was a part of Paul's life; and Paul had actually led him to the knowledge of Christ. No doubt their friendship had flourished.
- No record that Paul ever going to Colossae, there were other cities nearby, namely **Ephesus** an Laodicea was very close nearby. Somehow, while Paul was no doubt in Ephesus, he had come to know this man Philemon.
- No doubt, “**Apphia our sister**” refers to his wife, “**and to Archippus our fellow soldier**” likely refers to his son.
- Colossians 4:17, “Say to **Archippus**, “Take heed to the ministry which you’ve received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it.”
- But here was a man of means. Here was a man who had a **house large enough to be a meeting place for the church.**



PHILEMON

- Also, he writes, end of verse 2, “**to the church in your house,**”
- Most people don’t know this, but as far as we can tell historically, the oldest known church that was an actual church building was a modified house in eastern Syria that can be dated about 230 A.D. Up until that time, churches always met in a house.
- In the Romans 16:3 Paul writes, “Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles; also greet the **church that is in their house.**”
- 1 Corinthians 1, “For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;”
- And it is fair to assume that the church was made up mostly of very poor people; and, in fact, in many places in the Roman Empire, may have been made up mostly of converted slaves. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1, they were the nothings, the no names, and the nobodies; and that would certainly designate slaves.



PHILEMON

- Picture this...
- “Paul,” there must have been a stunning realization that he was receiving a letter from the great apostle himself.
- And when this letter was put in his hand by his **runaway slave Onesimus**, against whom he might have had some understandable hostility; and then he read that first word “Paul” in a letter handed to him by a returning slave; in ever sense, it must have gained his attention.



PHILEMON

- “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus.” And there is a reason I think that he says “**a prisoner of Christ Jesus**,” and that is to let people know, and let Philemon know, and the church to which he’ll read the letter, that while it might seem on the surface that he was a **prisoner of Rome**, that, in fact, was not the case. Rome had put him there, but they had put him there because it was the **will of Christ Jesus**.



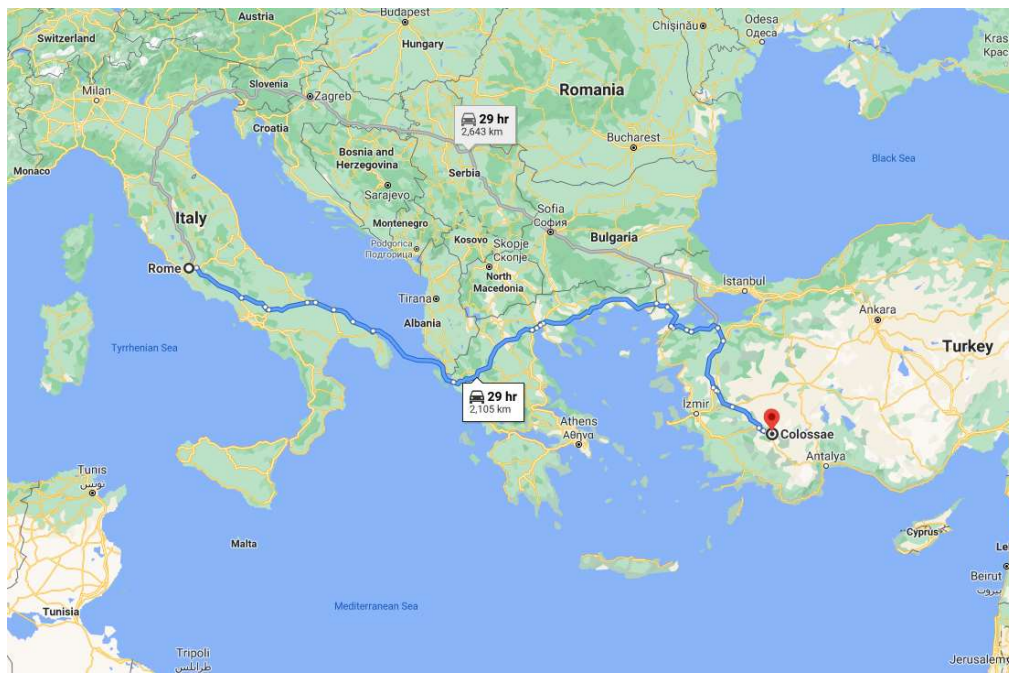
PHILEMON

- In the case of Timothy, wanted to do what he wanted to do in the other churches, and that is **establish his authority**, because Timothy needed instruction; he needed to conform his life to the will of God, which was not happening.
- And Paul was also very wise and tactful. He adds, “and Timothy our brother.” Timothy’s **not a co-author**, he is a companion, he is a brother in Christ. Paul is asking him to do something, and reminding him that he not only has accountability with Paul, but he has accountability with Timothy who knows about this.
- He had been with Paul on the third missionary trip, was acquainted with the believers in Philemon’s town. And Philemon was from **Colossae**; and that’s the third prison epistle that Paul wrote in addition to the letter to Philemon.
- Why does he single out Timothy in the beginning? Well, the answer simply is, because he is setting him up for future leadership. **1 Corinthians 4:17**



PHILEMON

- **Colossians 4:7.** “As to all my affairs, **Tychicus**, our beloved brother, a faithful servant, and fellow bond-servant in the Lord, will bring you **information**. For I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts; and with him **Onesimus**, our faithful and beloved brother, **who is one of your number**. They will inform you about the whole situation.”
- So Paul sends Tychicus; along with him is this runaway slave who has become so useful to Paul. And back they go with Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon.
- There’s some risk in this, because Onesimus was due punishment. But Paul decides to send Onesimus with a letter asking Philemon to forgive him, to forgive him. If the gospel embraced Philemon and Onesimus, that should bring them together.
- It wasn’t really the issue of accepting a slave anymore, it was the issue of **accepting a brother**, because in Christ there is neither bond nor free.

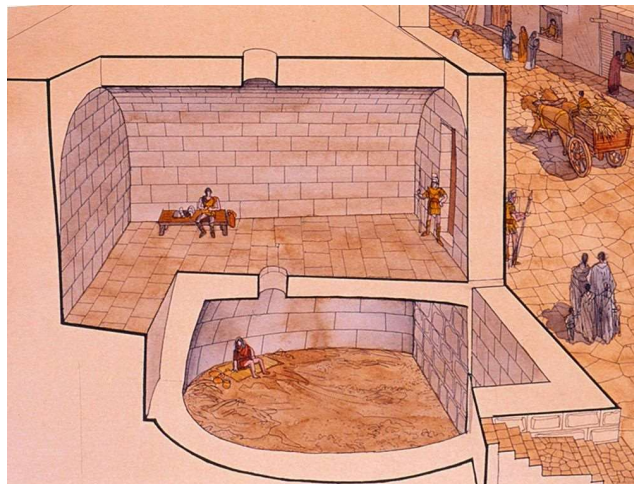


PHILEMON

- But here, this letter is very tender. It's very personal. It's very sensitive, full of compassion.
- Paul is deeply concerned about this man Philemon and his relationship to the runaway slave Onesimus; and **what Paul wants from Philemon is forgiveness.**
- **It is not an appeal from authority**, it is an appeal from the heart.
- There's no need to refer to himself as an apostle to wave his office around.
- In fact, go down to verses 8 and 9
- "Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to **command you** to do what is required,⁹ **yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you**—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus"



- Again, he may have been in a stinking dungeon; perhaps the **Mamertine Prison in Rome**, which is still available to be seen in its ruins in the center of the ancient ruins of Rome. Prisoners were thrown through a hole in the top. The city sewage system ran alongside that dungeon, and leaked into that dungeon, and made it a foul place beyond all comprehension.



PHILEMON

- While he was in prison he wrote four letters. They are called the “prison epistles.”
- In Ephesians, which is one of them, he says in chapter 3:1, “I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles.”
- In chapter 4 of Ephesians, “I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of your calling.”
- Again, toward the end of Ephesians chapter 6, verse 19, he says, “and pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.”
- Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon



PHILEMON

- ⁴I thank my God always **when I remember you in my prayers**, ⁵because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, ⁶and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. ⁷For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.
- Because - I hear. My own experience, **your reputation**. But I hear from Tychicus – or rather from Epaphras, I hear **from Onesimus**. I hear from all around me the kind of man you are.
- This is a man who cares about the saints.
- Galatians 6:10 - So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, **and especially to those who are of the household of faith.**



PHILEMON

- ⁶ and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become **effective** for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.
- – in other words – “that the fellowship that your faith has placed you into will flourish, *koinnia*.
- You are bound together in the body of Christ with other believers, and that fellowship is a rich part of your life. It’s an effective or powerful part of your life; and I want it to become powerful, particularly in this act of **forgiving Onesimus**.
- And, further, I want this act of forgiveness to bring about the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ Jesus’ sake. In other words, when you do this, this **is going to enhance your reputation in the knowledge of every good thing, which is in you.**



PHILEMON

- “Accordingly,” – based on who you are, based on the fact that you are a man of character, you are a **man of faith**, you’re a man of knowledge, you’re a **man who honors Christ**, you are a man who has brought much joy and comfort to the saints; their hearts have been refreshed.
- **You’re a man of love.** All of this, **because of who you are** – “Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ **to command you to do what is required**,⁹ yet **for love's sake** I prefer to **appeal to you**—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—”
- In other words - I could have commanded you. **I could have used my apostolic authority.** That would have been perfectly acceptable to order you to do what is proper. Yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you.”
- How do you use your **Authority**?
- Your **Authority** around those you love?



PHILEMON

- Now forgiveness is mandatory. It's demanded in the Scripture, it's commanded in the Scripture. Paul knew it; Philemon knew it; Onesimus knew it. He could have commanded; he had the authority, he had the right, it was proper. But Paul chooses the path of love.
- This is the distinction of Christianity: we speak the truth in love.
- ⁹ yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an **old man** and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—
- At the death of Stephen, back in Acts chapter 7, before Paul's conversion he was a young man. Now these many years later, a old man.
- He may not have been much older than Philemon. We don't know for sure. But Philemon was old enough to have a grown son who was in ministry.



PHILEMON

- Now he adds this for a little more **sympathy**, end of verse 9, “and now also a **prisoner** of Christ Jesus. **I'm captive for Christ.**”
- How can Philemon possibly ignore a request like this after Paul said everything he said about him, in verses 4 to 7, extoling him to the skies?
- What is he asking Philemon to do?
- What is he appealing for?
- In a word: he's appealing for him to forgive Onesimus.
- Now the culture wouldn't have forgiven him. There would have been just punishment for his crime. It was a **crime to be a runaway slave**, because slaves had value. It was like stealing.
- Paul wants Philemon to forgive this slave, and he sends the slave back to Philemon with this letter, and also Tychicus with the letter to the church at Colossae, so that the book of Colossians as well as the letter to Philemon were to be read in the church.



PHILEMON

- ¹⁰ **I appeal to** you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. ¹¹ (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) ¹² I am sending him back to you, sending **my very heart**. ¹³ **I would have been glad to keep him with me**, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, ¹⁴ but **I preferred to do nothing without your consent** in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.
- When the offending person seeks to be forgiven, the first thing you do in the **act of forgiveness is to receive that person**, personal reception: a willingness to close the gap, a willingness to cross the chasm, a willingness to heal the wound, to bring the person back into relationship. **Onesimus qualifies for that**.
- Do you have someone in your life that qualifies?
- Paul is asking **in the letter**, but **Onesimus is asking for forgiveness in person**. Paul softens the blow of that confrontation by prefacing the name of Onesimus, verse 10, with the words “my child whom I have begotten in my imprisonment.” Like Timothy, like Titus, and like Philemon, this fugitive slave is Paul’s spiritual son.



PHILEMON

- So repentant Onesimus is standing there. He’s humble. He’s in the dangerous position of having stepped right back into the consequences of his crime. He is looking into the eyes of the one against whom he committed that crime, and he comes as a forgiven sinner. He left as merely a slave; he comes back now as a brother in Christ. He has been transformed.
- Verse 11 tells us about that transformation, “who formerly was **useless** to you.” This is a play on words. **Onesimus means “useful.”**
- Onesimus is a very common slave name, so it may have become nickname. Maybe good slaves were just called **useful**
- Onesimus, meaning “useful” indicates, perhaps, something of the fact that he was a useful slave, but he became useless, and “now is useful both to you and to me.”
- Onesimus was coming back as a runaway slave and needed to be received, in a sense, restoring – listen – the **master/slave relationship**.
- Buy Paul was look out for him
 - Do you have relationship/fellowship with people like Paul?



PHILEMON

- Paul takes the high ground and says, “I know your goodness.” He rehearsed it in verses 4, 5, 6, and 7.
- I didn’t want to presume on your goodness. I didn’t want your goodness to be taken for granted. I didn’t want your goodness to be the only option by compulsion.
- Are we taking others goodness for granted?
- I’m sending him back, because I truly believe in the **nobility of your spiritual life**. I believe you are a man whom God has made righteous, and so I wouldn’t presume **to keep him here without your consent**, as it were, by compulsion. But I want you to have the choice of your own free will.
- Philemon needs to be the one who rises above the offense and shows that he also has been transformed as Onesimus has.
- The opportunity to demonstrate goodness, an opportunity to make a sacrifice



PHILEMON

- ¹⁵ For this **perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while**, that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶ **no longer as a bondservant** but more than a bondservant, **as a beloved brother**—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.
- “**perhaps**” because no one can look behind the curtain and see the secret movement of God. - God’s will
- You meant it for evil, Onesimus; God meant it for good,”
 - As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that **many people should be kept alive, as they are today. Genesis 50:20.**
- This is **not** a call for emancipation. This is **not** a call to Philemon to set him free, not at all, because in Colossians 3 - “Slaves, obey your masters.”
- 1 Corinthians 7:22 “For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ.”
- **as a beloved brother** – Paul looking out for Onesimus



PHILEMON

- ¹⁷ **So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.** ¹⁸ If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.
- **There needed to be restitution.** Whatever Philemon had lost, whatever he had to spend to replenish whatever he had stolen, Paul says, If I'm a fellow sharer with you, if we're in spiritual fellowship together, **accept him as you would me.** Treat him as if it were me. **Welcome him. Forgive him as if you were forgiving me.**
- Just as Paul did for Onesimus, are making the path easy for our fellow believers?
- Restitution is always the final component of forgiveness. Onesimus must show his genuineness by being willing to repay, willing to restore. But Onesimus doesn't have anything with which to do that.
- Colossians 3:25 ²⁵ For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. (Sevenfold restoration (**Proverbs 6:30-31**))
- This is a Christlike act, on the part of Paul. Christ paid the debt for us; Paul pays the debt for Onesimus. – **“charge that to my account.”**



PHILEMON

- The motives for forgiveness
- ¹⁹ I, Paul, write this **with my own hand: I will repay it**—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. ²⁰ Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.
- I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it - it's a way of signing a blank check for Philemon, and he can fill it in. Whatever Onesimus owes, Paul will pay.
- He's signing to make restitution for Onesimus. Onesimus is a runaway slave. He has no money.
- Whatever Onesimus owed him was far less than what he owed Paul – right? – because Paul was the one who led him to the knowledge of Christ.
- The recognition that I owe someone a debt I cannot pay.
- Can I not allow gladly some material debts to go unpaid, and with a full heart forgive that person?
- **“I want some benefit from you in the Lord”** - if you will forgive this man you'll bless me.
- – it says in verse 7 – now refresh me.



PHILEMON

- ²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.
- Philemon is told to do what's right because of how it will **benefit and encourage** and bring **joy** to the heart of another believer who seeks the Lord's honor. When you forgive someone, all the **believers around you are blessed**. All those who seek the honor of the Lord, and know the virtue of forgiveness, and know that God has commanded forgiveness, and is honored when you forgive are therefore blessed.
- Two good motives then to forgive.
 - One, "You owe more than you can pay. You have a debt you will never ever be able to pay.
 - You owe far more to people than anybody could ever owe to you."
 - You can bless the saints and refresh their hearts, because they long for your fellowship in godly virtue."
- **Confident of your obedience** - Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, (Philippians 2:12)



PHILEMON

- ²² At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.
- Here's the motive - Get a room ready, I'm coming, and you're not going to be able to hide whatever you did.
- "**graciously given to you**" - This is not a threat, but a promise. Paul is still a prisoner, so it's an optimistic promise.
- "**through your**" - Don't just expect me; **pray me out of this prison**. Pray me to your house.
 - ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. **The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. James 5:16**
- All the evidence says that Paul was released from prison, and he made more missionary trips. This was **not his final imprisonment**; that came later, where he lost his head in Rome. There was the answer to this prayer, perhaps, certainly, he showed up at the home of Philemon.



PHILEMON

- ²³ **Epaphras**, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, ²⁴ and so do **Mark, Aristarchus, Demas,** and **Luke**, my fellow workers. ²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.
- They are five men mentioned **Colossians 4:10-14**
- Five men, they all knew Philemon, they all knew the church at Colossae, and Paul is giving all these names to him to say, **All your friends are watching.**



PHILEMON — FORGIVENESS

- The realization that I am in debt to so many people at such a vastly higher level. I certainly, I certainly can tolerate someone who owes me far less
- If I forgive, I'll refresh the brothers.
- If I forgive, I am being obedient to the Lord who called me, and I'm honoring Him.
- When I forgive, I am demonstrating a sense of accountability to my spiritual caretakers.
- I'm not alone, but I'm setting an example.
- I must be empowered by the grace of God



PHILEMON

- Onesimus needed forgiveness. He couldn't have had a more noble man to grant it to him.
- Lord, make us like Philemon, eager to forgive all those who seek our forgiveness for the sake of the fellowship, the church, and most importantly, for the sake of Christ and His glory; and we ask these things in His name. Amen.

