



ADVANCING  
THE  
GOSPEL

Philemon

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# Introduction

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- This short letter is a personal letter from the apostle Paul to Philemon asking him to forgive his runaway slave, Onesimus, and receive him back not as a slave, but as a beloved brother in Christ (verse 16).
- Philemon was written around A.D. 60–62, the same time as Philippians, Ephesians and Colossians.
- The letter to Philemon is the only personal letter we have in the New Testament. Even his letters to Timothy and Titus weren't meant for Timothy and Titus alone, but the whole churches at Ephesus and Crete.

# Philemon 1-7

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# Philemon's Love and Faith

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- Philemon lived in Colossae and was a leader in the church there.
- He had a group of believers meeting in his own home (verse 2).
- Paul sent this letter and Onesimus back to him with the letter to the Colossians.
- Paul called Philemon his “beloved fellow worker” (verse 2) and praised him for his faithfulness and love and impact on the people of the church there (verse 7).

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# Philemon's Love and Faith

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- Paul writes that Philemon owed Paul his “own self” (verse 19), implying that Paul led him to the Lord.
- Paul led Philemon to the Lord during his time in Ephesus (Acts 19:10). Paul and Philemon became devoted friends and coworkers in the advancement of the Gospel.
- Paul makes his request of Philemon not from his apostolic authority, but from their deep friendship, and by appealing to Philemon's faith in Jesus and love for the saints (verses 8-9).

Philemon 8-22

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# Paul's Plea for Onesimus

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- Onesimus had been a slave of Philemon in Colossae.
- But he fled Philemon's house, possibly robbing him in the process (verse 18), and escaped to Rome.
- Paul had met Onesimus in Rome and led him to the Lord there.
- Paul calls him "my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment" (verse 10).

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# Paul's Plea for Onesimus

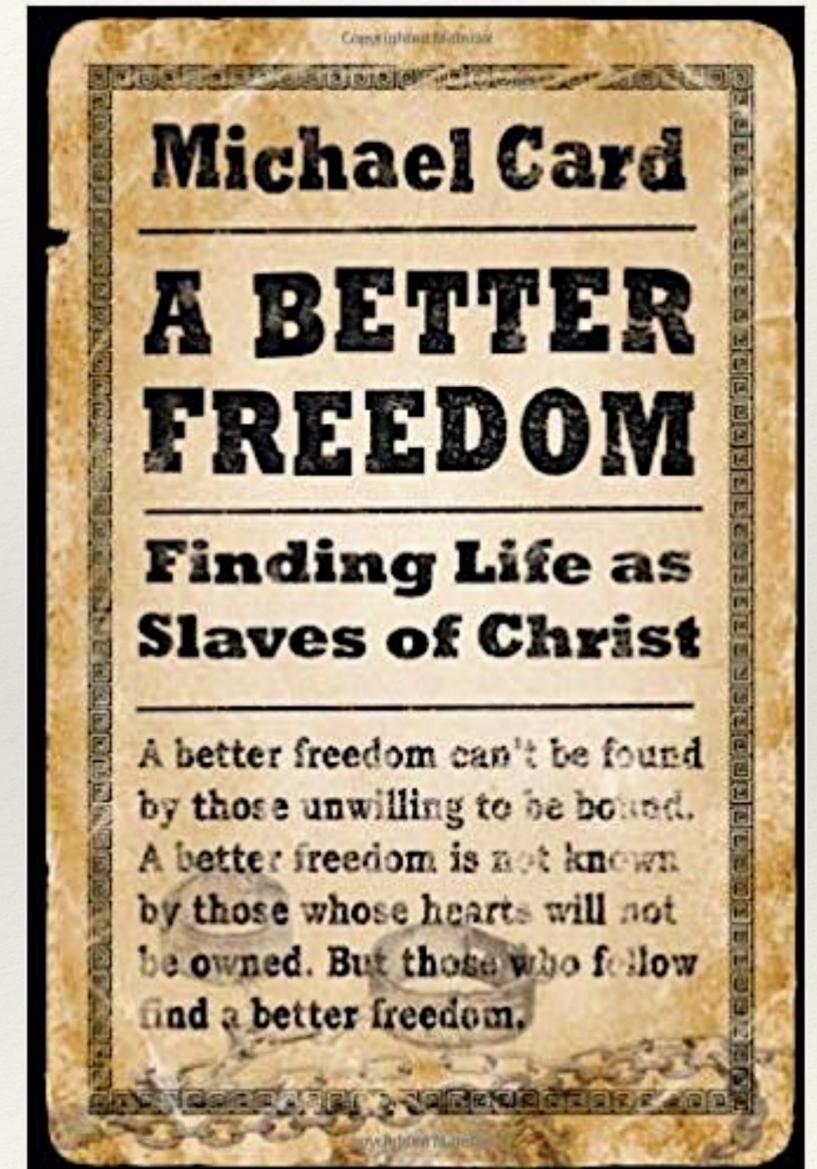
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- He had become a “faithful and beloved brother” to Paul (Colossians 4:9). He even calls him “my very heart” (verse 12).
- Paul wrote that he was “useful” to him and that he wished he could stay and serve him in his imprisonment, but he knew it was the right thing to do to send him back to Philemon (verses 11–13).
- Onesimus brought the letter to Philemon himself and, at the same time, accompanied Tychicus in bringing Paul's letter to the Colossians. The list of personal greetings in both letters is almost identical.

# Slavery in the New Testament

# Slavery

- In his book, *A Better Freedom: Finding Life as Slaves of Christ*, Michael Card offers some summary statements about the nature of first-century slavery:
- Slaves were despised. To call someone a “slave” was a serious insult. Cato the Elder wrote, “He who has a slave has an enemy.”
- Slaves played a major role in the economic world. The Roman Empire was dependent on slavery.



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# Slavery

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- In general, slaves had no rights. In the earlier Republic, this was literally true. But in the time of the Empire, the New Testament era, some laws were written to give marginal protection, though they were often not enforced. Slaves could be killed or mutilated by their owners.
- Slaves left virtually no “voice” in the ancient records. We only have playwrights such as Plautus and Petronius who caricature and ridicule slaves.

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# Slavery

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- Slaves were often manumitted or could even purchase their own freedom from their own savings (peculium). Exceptions were agricultural and mining slaves, who represent the vast majority of slaves, who were never freed.
- Slavery could present a chance for upward mobility. But this opportunity was limited to an extremely small percentage. It was better to be the slave of an influential person than simply to be free and poor.
- Education enhanced the value of a slave and so was encouraged among house slaves.

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# Slavery

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- Paternity among slaves was virtually never recognized.
- Prices for slaves varied widely. A doctor was worth fifty times as much as a farm worker.
- Sexual abuse was common and taken for granted. Half of female slaves died before age 30.
- Slaves could own property, even other slaves. But their possessions were still under the control of their masters, even if they became freedmen.

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# Slavery

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- Provision for the average slave was meager. Cato speaks of a new cloak and shoes every two years. Archeologists have never verified sleeping quarters for slaves.
- Runaways were frequent, an obsession in the ancient records. Roman law forbade the sheltering of runaways. Professional “slave catchers” captured fugitives.
- Runaway slaves were branded, mutilated and fitted with iron collars that were sometimes inscribed with the words, “Capture me for I am fleeing.”

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# Slavery

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- There was never a movement to abolish slavery, though there were several slave revolts, such as the one led by Spartacus in 73–71 B.C.
- Roman slavery was not race-based. Slaves were virtually indistinguishable by dress or race.
- Exception: Some races were preferred for certain jobs, such as Gauls and Germanics for farming / mines and Greeks for more professional tasks.

# How Paul Worked to Overcome Slavery

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John Piper

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# Undermine Slavery

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- 1 - Paul draws attention to Philemon's love for all the saints. "I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints." This puts Philemon's relationship with Onesimus (now one of the saints) under the banner of love, not just commerce.
- 2 - Paul models for Philemon the superiority of appeals over commands when it comes to relationships governed by love. This points Philemon to the new dynamics that will hold sway between him and Onesimus. Acting out of freedom from a heart of love is the goal in the relationship.

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# Undermine Slavery

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- 3 - Paul heightens the sense of Onesimus being in the family of God by calling him his child. “I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.” Remember, Philemon, however you deal with him, you are dealing with my child.
- 4 - Paul raises the stakes again by saying that Onesimus has become entwined around his own deep affections. “I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.” This means, “I am deeply bound emotionally to this man.” Treat him that way.

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# Undermine Slavery

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- 5 - Paul again emphasizes that he wants to avoid force or coercion in his relationship with Philemon. “I would have been glad to keep him with me . . . but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.”
- 6 - Paul raises the intensity of the relationship again with the word *forever*. “For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever.” In other words, Onesimus is not coming back into any ordinary, secular relationship. It is forever.

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# Undermine Slavery

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- 7 - Paul says that Philemon's relationship can no longer be the usual master-slave relationship. Whether he lets Onesimus go back free to serve Paul, or keeps him in his service, things cannot remain as they were. "No longer as a slave" does not lose its force when Paul adds, "more than a slave."
- 8 - In that same verse, Paul refers to Onesimus as Philemon's beloved brother. This is the relationship that takes the place of slave. "No longer as a slave, but as a beloved brother." He gets the "holy kiss" (1 Thessalonians 5:26) from Philemon and eats at his side at the Lord's Table.

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# Undermine Slavery

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- 9 - Paul makes clear that Onesimus is with Philemon in the Lord. “[He is] a beloved brother...in the Lord” (1:16). Onesimus’s identity is now the same as Philemon’s. He is “in the Lord.”
- 10 - Paul tells Philemon to receive Onesimus the way he would receive Paul. “So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.” This is perhaps as strong as anything he has said: Philemon, how would you see me, treat me, relate to me, receive me? Treat your former slave and new brother that way.

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# Undermine Slavery

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- 11 - Paul says to Philemon that he will cover all Onesimus's debts. "If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account." Philemon would no doubt be shamed by this, if he had any thoughts of demanding repayment from his new brother, because Paul is in prison. He lives off the gifts of others. Philemon is the one who is to prepare a guest room for Paul.
- Conclusion: Without explicitly prohibiting slavery, Paul has pointed the church away from slavery because it is an institution which is incompatible with the way the gospel works in people's lives.

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# Early Church

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- Unfortunately, slavery continued throughout the Roman empire and continued for millennia. The Christian church preached a different message.
- The early church fathers encouraged kindness towards slaves.
- The Christian church recognized marriage among slaves.
- Christian leaders taught that freeing slaves was an act of charity.
- When slaves were buried in Christian cemeteries, the grave rarely had any indication that the person buried had been a slave.