

**The topic of slavery:** According to the latest Global Estimates of Modern Slavery (2022) from Walk Free, the International Labour Organization and the International Organization for Migration: 49.6 million people live in modern slavery – in forced labour and forced marriage. Roughly a quarter of all victims of modern slavery are children. The latest Global Slavery Index, produced by human rights group Walk Free, reveals the 10 countries with the highest prevalence of modern slavery are North Korea, Eritrea, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Tajikistan, United Arab Emirates, Russia, Afghanistan, and Kuwait. Human Trafficking is the recruitment, transfer, transportation, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit. Men, women and children of all ages and from all backgrounds can become victims of this crime, which occurs in every region of the world. The traffickers often use violence or fraudulent employment agencies and fake promises of education and job opportunities to trick and coerce their victims.

## **The Book of Philemon**

Due to the similarities with the names mentioned in Colossians 4:7-14, and Philemon 1:23-25, these two books are considered to have been written at the same time. It is generally accepted that Paul wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians at the same time as well, because of the similarities in their themes. So these four books were most likely at about the same time and from the same place.

**Where:** Paul most likely wrote these four books from Rome while he was under house arrest.

**When:** This would then mean he wrote Philemon sometime between 58 and 60 AD.

**Recipients:** Philemon appears to be written to the Laodicean church, but it may or may not be the letter to the Laodicean church that Paul tells the Colossians to read in 4:16. If it isn't there is a lost letter from Paul to the Laodicean church that the Holy Spirit never meant to be a part of the true Bible. Please note that there are probably other letters of Paul which are not a part of the Bible as well, such as to the Corinthian church (**1 Corinthians 5:9** I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people, appears to point to a lost letter from Paul written before 1 Corinthians).

**Purpose:** Paul wants Philemon to forgive Onesimus, the runaway slave, and accept him as a brother in Christ and not enslave him again. Neither Paul nor Jesus Christ ever say stop slavery right now, but Paul tries to indicate the better way is to be free, so your life can be wholly devoted to God. God desires the powerful message of love from the gospel to impact people so deeply that over time people realize the practice of slavery should stop. We are now citizens of heaven, and slavery will not be practiced in heaven.

### **Commentary on the three main characters in Philemon:**

Onesimus was a slave, who fled from his master, Philemon, and somehow met Paul during his Roman imprisonment. It is even possible from verse Philemon 1:18, that as he illegally fled from his master, Philemon, he stole from him to be able to survive. After coming to Rome, whether he became a prisoner himself is hard to discern, but we do know he met Paul, who was under house arrest, and came to Christ through Paul, thus becoming his spiritual son. He is now going back in person to Philemon with this letter from Paul, because as a believer he needs to right the wrongs he did to others, even from his past, as much as he possibly can. He will have to humbly ask for forgiveness and accept whatever consequences occur.

Philemon, the slave master, was most likely the host of the house church at Laodicea, thus holding a place of respect at the church as a servant leader (similar to the role of a deacon or possibly even an elder if he taught or led the church). The way he handles this situation with Onesimus will have ramifications for the church, and the whole community. It is also very plausible on one of Paul's journeys, he met Philemon and led him to Jesus Christ. Philemon obviously loved people and people loved him, and he faithfully served with a kind heart as Paul states in the above verses.

Paul was an apostle, and an overseer to the members of the Laodicean Church. In the letter Paul wrote that he did not want Philemon to do this out of compulsion, but then Paul leaves Philemon very little choice in the matter. According to Paul there is one proper way to proceed to accept Onesimus as a brother not a slave. Paul will incur the debt of whatever wrongs Onesimus did, and Philemon needs to remember that he owes Paul his very life. Paul knows Philemon will be obedient and even do more than what Paul writes. So now what choice does Philemon really have? Paul is making it almost impossible for Philemon to make Onesimus a slave again. This way the other slave owners in the church will blame Paul for Philemon's actions. Paul will become the scapegoat, and Philemon will not have to deal with as much peer pressure, because they read the letter as well and realize Philemon would have to go completely against the apostle Paul. Jesus Christ did that on the cross for us when he took the blame and the wrath from His Father for our sins. This is the idea of a scapegoat.

#### Observations:

Relationship between Paul and Onesimus: Spiritual father to spiritual son - Paul mentors Onesimus in the faith to live for God's glory (Phil 1:10). Onesimus hopes to return to Paul's side to serve Paul and spread the gospel (Phil 1:13).

Relationship between Onesimus and Philemon: Spiritual brother to spiritual brother - Onesimus personally seeks forgiveness from Philemon and is willing to accept whatever consequences occur (Phil 1:12). Philemon should forgive Onesimus and accept him as a brother & partner in Christ (Phil 1:7).

Relationship between Paul and Philemon: Spiritual elder to church member - Paul pushes Philemon to do what is proper, but Paul is willing to take all the heat (Phil 1:8, 18). Philemon should understand the truth of the gospel and submit to what Paul wrote (Phil 1:9-11).

#### Principles and Applications:

We are all one and equal because we are in Jesus Christ-

**Galatians 3:28-29** <sup>28</sup> There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup> And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise.

Mentor others & share the truth of the Word with them -

**2 Timothy 2:2** <sup>2</sup> The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

Role of Pastor towards his flock -

**John 10:11** <sup>11</sup> "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.

Role of church member is submission to the elders and humility towards each other -

**1 Peter 5:5** You younger men, likewise, be subject to *your* elders; & all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

We all need to actively seek forgiveness with those we offended even from our past, if it is at all possible, and to do what we can to better the situation -

**Matthew 5:23-24** <sup>23</sup> "Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, <sup>24</sup> leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.

We all need to forgive those who offended us, and try to bring about full reconciliation -

**Matthew 18:21-22** <sup>21</sup> Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.