Wednesday Morning Senior Adults Bible Study
Spring 2026

PHILEMON

April 29, 2026

THE BASICS

Author: Paul
Date: AD 61-63, during Paul's imprisonment in Rome (Acts 28)
Background Information: Paul was a prisoner in Rome (Philemon 1 & 9; Acts 28:16, 28:30-31). He wrote a letter to the church in Colossae (our book of Colossians), where to our knowledge he had never been but where his fellow minister Epaphras (now a prisoner with Paul; Philemon 23) had spread the gospel and likely started the church (Colossians 1:7). Along with that letter to the church Paul wrote a second letter specifically to one man in the church, Philemon. He wrote concerning Philemon's slave, Onesimus, who had apparently run away from his master (and perhaps had stolen from him), and who had since met Paul in Rome and had either become a Christian or had renewed his faith there. Now Paul sent him back to his master Philemon, but with an unusual request of Philemon as his unfaithful slave returned.

SETTING THE STAGE: IMPORTANT NOTES FROM COLOSSIANS

- Colossians and Philemon seem to have been written and sent at the same time.
- Both letters are from Paul and Timothy (Col. 1:1, Philem. 1).
- Both letters mention Paul's imprisonment (Col. 4:3, 4:18; Philem. 1, 9).
- Both letters mention certain people by name (some in the Colossae church, some with Paul): Epaphras (Col. 1:7, 4:12; Philem. 23), Onesimus (Col. 4:9, Philem. 10), Aristarchus (Col. 4:10, Philem. 24), Mark (Col. 4:10, Philem. 24), Luke (Col. 4:14, Philem. 24), Demas (Col. 4:14, Philem. 24), and Archippus (Col. 4:17, Philem. 2). These names tie the letters together and suggest that the church that met in Philemon's home (Philem. 2) was the Colossae church.
- What instructions does Paul give to slaves and masters in Colossians?
  - Col. 3:22-25, to slaves:

  - Col. 4:1, to masters:

- How does Paul describe Onesimus in Colossians 4:9? How does this description of Onesimus prepare the church and Philemon for Paul's request in his letter to Philemon?

THE LETTER TO PHILEMON

1-7 — What kind words does Paul have for Philemon as he opens this letter?
- 1, Philemon is his dear _____ and fellow _____.
- 5, Philemon's relationship with God's holy people:
- 5, Philemon's relationship with the Lord Jesus:
- 7, what Philemon has done for the Lord's people:
- 7, the effect Philemon's influence on the Lord's people has had on Paul:

8-11 — For whom does Paul appeal to Philemon? _____ *This name means "_____".*

- From verses 8-16, what problem seems to have arisen between this man and Philemon?

- Paul declines to order Philemon to do the right thing, though as an apostle he could. How does he appeal to Philemon instead?

11-16 — How does Paul describe his own relationship with Onesimus?

- 11:
- 12:
- 16:

• Notice how Paul works to help Philemon think of Onesimus less as a useless, runaway slave worthy of punishment and more as a useful, dearly loved brother in Christ:

- 11, Onesimus is no longer useless to either Paul or Philemon.
- 12-13, Onesimus is Paul's very _____. Paul would have liked to have kept Onesimus with him to assist him in his ministry.
- 15-16, Paul indicates that perhaps Onesimus and Philemon were separated for a time so that now Philemon could have him back no longer as a _____, but now as something better, a dear _____.
- 16, Paul says, "He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow _____ and as a _____ in the Lord."

17-21 — Paul makes two requests of Philemon here:

- 17, "_____ him as you would _____ me"
- 18, "If he has done you any _____ or owes you anything, _____ it to me."

• What does Philemon owe to Paul? Why does Paul mention that debt here?

21-22 — Paul puts tender but firm pressure on Philemon to do as Paul has asked—in two ways:

- How might Paul's words in verse 21 pressure Philemon to do the right thing?

- 22, How does Paul's suggestion that he might soon be Philemon's house guest pressure Philemon to do the right thing?

Paul and Mark — Another Example of Christian Reconciliation

24 — Philemon may not have known it, but Paul's mention of Mark here (Barnabas's cousin, as in Colossians 4:10) was itself an example of reconciliation such as Paul was asking Philemon to embrace with Onesimus. Mark had embarked on Paul and Barnabas's first missionary journey with them, but had quit and returned to Jerusalem early. When Paul and Barnabas were ready to begin a second journey together, they disagreed over whether to take Mark with them; Paul refused because of Mark's previous unreliability (Acts 12:25, 13:13, 15:36-40). By this time, however (some 10-15 years later), Paul and Mark had been reconciled, as Mark's presence with Paul in Rome indicates. A few years later still, Paul would write to Timothy that Mark "is helpful to me in my ministry" (1 Timothy 4:11).

FOOD FOR THOUGHT…

• How would Paul's request of Philemon, if Philemon carried it out, transform the relationship between Philemon as master and Onesimus as slave?

• Paul did not command Philemon to set all his slaves, or even Onesimus, free. In what ways, though, did his request of Philemon begin to undermine the institution of slavery in their time?

• Onesimus's crime against Philemon, under Roman law, could have been punished by death. What did Philemon (assuming he carried out Paul's request) and Onesimus get instead?

• Early church tradition says Onesimus later became a bishop (probably like a preaching elder) of the church in Ephesus (though we cannot be absolutely certain it was the same Onesimus).