

The Greeting of the Letter Philemon 1:1-3

Background

Doctrinal Points

1. The hardships of believers are opportunities for Christian service.
2. The home of believers are opportunities for Christian service.

Practical Application

1. Are you a beloved brother/sister?
2. Don't forget, grace always comes before peace.

Questions

1. The book of Philemon is only one chapter. Name the two books that are shorter.
2. Philemon is one of Paul's "Prison Epistles." What does this mean?
3. Who was Philemon?
4. Who was Onesimus?
5. What was this letter about?

Answers

1. 1 John and 2 John are shorter than Philemon. (Philemon, however, is the Apostle Paul's shortest letter.)
2. In the early 60s A.D., Paul was confined to house arrest under the Roman authorities while he was awaiting his trial in Rome. See Acts 28:30-31. Paul wrote the epistle to Philemon, along with the other "Prison Epistles," Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians, during this first Roman imprisonment.
3. Philemon was a well-to-do Christian from Colosse. He and his wife hosted the whole Colossian church. Philemon may have been led to the Lord by Paul (see verse 19).
4. Onesimus was Philemon's slave.
5. Paul wrote on behalf of Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave. Apparently, Onesimus had stolen some of Philemon's property and then run away to Rome. There he came in contact with Paul, who led him to the Lord (see verse 10). Now Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon in order to straighten things out.

Discuss / Consider

1. Paul was confined under house arrest, with a Roman guard chained to him at all times. Yet Paul did not complain. Instead, he looked upon his hardship as an opportunity to share the gospel. Read Philippians 1:12-13. Paul saw the bigger picture—he was not a prisoner of Rome, or of Nero, but a prisoner of Jesus Christ, because he knew that his imprisonment was ordained by God. Do you see your hardships as an opportunity to further the gospel? Whatever your "confinement," look upon it as a special opportunity to serve Christ.

2. The home of Philemon and Apphia was open to the church. When homes are opened freely, furniture gets scratched, food and drinks are spilled, and things may get broken. They saw beyond the damage, using their home as a means for Christian service. How do you view your home? Do you open it freely and happily for the Lord Jesus?

Challenge

1. Philemon was not just a brother, but a beloved brother (verse 1). Are you not just a brother/sister, but a beloved brother/sister?

2. Paul always put grace before peace in his greetings. It's the same from God's perspective. There can be no human peace apart from God's grace, whether it be peace with God in reference to salvation; or the peace of God, in reference to rest for our soul. Are you aware of God's grace? Do you have both peace with God and the peace of God?

Faith and Love Among Believers
Philemon 4-7

Background

Doctrinal Points

1. Christians should thank the Lord for the love and faith of fellow believers.
2. Christians should pray to the Lord for the love and faith of fellow believers.

Practical Application

1. Do we love all the saints?
2. Are you a refresher or a refreshee?

Questions

1. How did a typical first century letter begin?
2. When was the church at Colosse started?
3. Why did Paul send Onesimus back to Philemon?
4. Was the Asia of the New Testament the same as the Asia of today?
5. What does it mean to show faith toward the saints?
6. What prompts love and faith for the saints?

Answers

1. After the salutation and greeting there would be a section of thanksgiving.
2. Probably during Paul's third missionary journey.
3. So Onesimus, now a Christian, would make things right after having robbed Philemon.
4. No. Asia was a province of the Roman Empire, where Turkey is located today.
5. Showing faith means to trust the saints and put confidence in them, even when they may not be trustworthy.
6. Love for the Lord Jesus

Discuss / Consider

1. Paul reminds Philemon that he is praying for him and that he is thankful for his faith and love. How do your prayers correspond to Paul's? Are you expressing thanks for the faith and love of fellow believers?

2. Paul prayed for growth of the saints, and for hearts to be refreshed. How do your prayers correspond to his? Is your faith and love growing?

Challenge

1. Paul commended Philemon's love for all the saints. Do you love all the saints? Even those who are hard to love?

2. Both Paul and Philemon encouraged fellow believers. Has someone refreshed your heart lately? Have you refreshed someone's heart recently?

Paul Makes His Appeal for Onesimus Philemon 8-17

Background

Doctrinal Points

- 1. Friendly persuasion can be biblical**

- 2. Biblical guidelines for using friendly persuasion are made on:**
 - a. The basis of Philemon's love.**

 - b. The basis of Onesimus' change.**

 - c. The basis of God's sovereignty.**

 - d. The basis of Paul's friendship.**

Practical Application

- 1. Remember, we don't always have to use authority to motivate people.**

Questions

1. Why isn't slavery denounced and condemned more in the New Testament?

2. How does the New Testament deal with the issue of slavery?

3. Why did so many slaves elect to stay with their masters after being granted their freedom?

4. In the case of Philemon, does Paul demand that he give Onesimus his freedom?

5. Name some kinds of friendly persuasion that are not biblical.

6. Name the four biblical guidelines for friendly persuasion Paul used in his appeal to Philemon.

7. What is the play on words with Onesimus' name?

Answers

1. Many first century Christians had slaves. Slavery was an essential part of the society in the Roman Empire. To advocate revolt on the part of slaves or demand their release could risk the breakdown of first century society and cause problems including joblessness and homelessness for the slaves.
2. It denounces the abuses of slavery and exhorts Christian masters to treat their slaves with kindness and fairness. It should be noted, however, that Christian principles worked out little by little in Roman society finally led to the abolition of slavery.
3. When Christian masters followed New Testament directives on how to treat their slaves, slaves were elevated to a status similar to employees in today's society. In fact, in some ways the situation was better than an employer-employee relationship.
4. No. Paul appeals to Philemon by friendly persuasion to receive back the runaway slave as a brother in Christ.
5. Blackmail, white lies, insincere flattery, and any other kind of arm twisting or manipulation.
6. The basis of Philemon's love (verse 9), the basis of Onesimus' change (verse 11), the basis of God's sovereignty (verse 15), and the basis of Paul's friendship (verse 17)
7. Onesimus' name means "profitable" (verse 11).

Discuss / Consider

1. Paul used friendly persuasion in his letter to Philemon. He could have used his authority, but he didn't. When in a position of leadership, do you use your authority to persuade someone to your way of thinking, or do you use friendly persuasion? Discuss when these two approaches would be appropriate.

2. Review the biblical guidelines of friendly persuasion that Paul used in his appeal to Philemon. When you write to someone, do you appeal along these guidelines?

Challenge

1. Recall examples when someone in authority has used his authority to "get things done his way." Recall examples when someone in authority has used friendly persuasion to motivate people. Parents, try this in your home this week.

Paul Makes a Pledge to Philemon
Philemon 18-21

Background

Doctrinal Points

1. **Believers should go to bat for one another in Christ.**

2. **Believers should refresh the hearts of one another in Christ.**

Practical Application

1. **You can serve the Lord even if you are a convicted thief.**

Questions

1. How was Paul planning to compensate Philemon for Onesimus' robbery?
2. Was it just coincidence that Onesimus and Paul met in Rome?
3. What was the penalty for runaway slaves in the Roman Empire?
4. What was the primary purpose of this personal letter?
5. What is the play on words in verse 20?
6. Define the word "imputation."
7. Was Paul covering up wrongdoing for Onesimus?

Answers

1. He wrote that if Onesimus owed Philemon anything, he should put it on Paul's account. In other words, Paul was ready to reimburse Philemon for Onesimus' wrongdoing.
2. No, it was God who arranged their meeting.
3. They could be put to death, especially if they had robbed someone.
4. To pave the way for Onesimus to be restored to Philemon.
5. "Benefit" and "Onesimus" come from the same root word meaning "useful or profitable." In other words, Paul was saying to Philemon, "Let me find in you a true Onesimus."
6. It is the act of God whereby our sins are put on (imputed to) Christ's account and His righteousness is put on our account.
7. Not at all. Onesimus was changed because he trusted Christ, and now both he and Paul want to set things straight.

Discuss / Consider

1. Paul went to bat on behalf of Onesimus. Has someone done this for you? Have you done this for someone?

2. "Let me have joy from you" Philemon 20. The heart is the seat of affections. If Philemon followed Paul's advice, his heart would be refreshed, even as Philemon had refreshed the hearts of others. Has your heart been refreshed lately? Have you refreshed someone's heart?

Challenge

1. Onesimus was a converted runaway thief. There is no one who hasn't done something wrong as an unbeliever, but when that person is saved, regardless of the extent of his sin, he can be useful to Christ. Have you put away the old things in your life that you might serve the Lord wholeheartedly?

Some Final Thoughts, and the Benediction
Philemon 22-25

Background

Doctrinal Points

- 1. God provides all kinds of fellow workers.**

- 2. Fellow workers each have a role to play in the ministry, providing a different lesson concerning service.**

Practical Application

- 1. Would you be happy to show hospitality to the Apostle Paul?**

Questions

1. When was this letter written?

2. Where is the city of Colosse located?

3. Why did Paul appeal to Caesar?

4. What did Paul accomplish during his imprisonment in Rome?

5. What indication is there that Paul expected to be released from his imprisonment?

6. What was Paul's reason for writing this epistle?

7. To whom was the closing benediction written?

Answers

1. In the early 60s A.D.
2. Colosse is located in modern-day Turkey.
3. Paul had been arrested in Jerusalem for disturbing the so-called peace of Judaism, and as a result was imprisoned for two years in Cesarea. He saw that the case was going nowhere, so he appealed to Caesar and was sent to Rome for trial.
4. He witnessed to the guards to whom he was chained, he ministered to and through fellow believers, and he wrote four books of the Bible.
5. See verse 22, *“Prepare a guest room for me.”*
6. To have Onesimus return to the scene of the crime to make things right.
7. To the church that met in Philemon’s house. “Your” in verse 22 is plural.

Discuss / Consider

1. God provides all kinds of fellow workers, each with a different role to play in the ministry. Consider some of your fellow workers, and the role they play in your common ministry.

2. Review the roles of each of Paul’s fellow workers: Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke. Can you identify these with some of your fellow workers? What kind of a worker are you?

Challenge

1. Philemon was to prepare a guest room for Paul. Would you be happy to show hospitality to a present-day Paul? What would you want to change in preparation for his visit?