

Chapter 1 – The Gospel of Grace in the Life of a Slave

Historians estimate that about one-third of those in the first century Roman Empire were slaves. Although forms of forced slavery based on ethnicity, nationality, or skin color (which are all forms of “manstealing” or “kidnapping,” cf. 1 Tim. 1:10, Exod. 21:16, Deut. 24:7) are explicitly denounced by Scripture, other forms of slavery such as crime-based, war-based, or debt-based slavery are not. The Bible certainly encourages freedom from any form of slavery (cf. 1 Cor. 7:21), but the function that slavery served in ancient societies was not such that it was *always* inherently sinful. Undoubtedly, manstealing was practiced in Roman society, but not all slavery came about because of that sin. For example, if a man fell into financial bankruptcy, voluntarily selling his only remaining asset—himself—would have been an attractive alternative to homelessness, starvation, and ultimately death, especially in a society that did not provide nationally funded financial safety nets for its citizens. In addition, many slaves were well-educated and well-trained, working as doctors or teachers, and enjoying a better quality of life than even many freemen. Thus, rather than indiscriminately opposing all forms of slavery, the New Testament addresses the hearts of people, recognizing that societal constructs improve based on biblical principles, not governmental policies.

Within such a context, and during his first imprisonment in Rome, the Apostle Paul wrote not only Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, but a very personal letter to Philemon about his slave named Onesimus who had run away (and perhaps stolen some of his belongings on the way out). Onesimus had apparently met Paul and been converted by his preaching, at which point Paul instructed Onesimus to return. In sending Onesimus back to Philemon with this letter of commendation, Paul expressed his *praise* of Philemon’s past faithfulness (cf. Phm. 1-7), a *plea* for present reconciliation (cf. Phm. 8-20), and a *plan* for future unity (cf. Phm. 21-25).

Praise of Past Faithfulness (Phm. 1-7)

Paul began his letter in the standard first-century, Greco-Roman format: sender, recipient, and greeting.

“Paul, a \_\_\_\_\_ of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother...”

The Sender (Phm. 1a)

Although he was put in prison by Roman authorities, Paul recognized that his present situation was by the will of Christ and for the sake of the Gospel. Thus, unlike other letters, such as 1 Corinthians, in which Paul refers to his apostolic authority, here Paul cites his position of humility and lowliness. In view of the purpose of this letter, why was it important for Paul to begin this way (cf. Phm. 8-9)?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Although Timothy was not necessarily an author of Philemon, name another New Testament letter in which Timothy is included in Paul’s introduction: \_\_\_\_\_

The Recipient (Phm. 1b)

“To \_\_\_\_\_ our beloved brother and fellow worker, and to \_\_\_\_\_ our sister, and to \_\_\_\_\_ our fellow soldier, and to the \_\_\_\_\_ in your house...”

What is implied by Paul’s use of the phrase “fellow soldier” (cf. 2 Tim. 2:3, Eph. 6:10-17)?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Chapter 1 – The Gospel of Grace in the Life of a Slave (cont’d)**

The Greeting (Phm. 2)

Standard Greco-Roman letters would end the introduction with a “health wish,” expressing the desire for the writer’s recipient to prosper. Rather than a generic health wish, however, the Apostle Paul often used his greeting to relate redemptive truths to his recipients.

To Philemon, he said, “\_\_\_\_\_ to you,” which refers to the *source* of a Christian’s salvation (cf. Eph. 2:8), and “\_\_\_\_\_ from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” which refers to the *result* of our salvation (cf. Rom. 5:1).

Four important aspects of prayer are *adoration, thanksgiving, confession, and supplication* (often summarized by the acronym *ACTS*). Three of these aspects were found in Paul’s prayers for Philemon. Put a check mark in three of the boxes below that describe Paul’s prayers, based on Philemon 4-6.

- |   |   |  |  |
|---|---|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> <b>A</b> doration:<br>glorifying God for His greatness and majesty, and declaring our allegiance to Him. | <input type="checkbox"/> <b>C</b> onfession:<br>admitting to God when we have sinned and agreeing with Him that we need forgiveness for it. | <input type="checkbox"/> <b>T</b> hanksgiving:<br>expressing appreciation to God based on what He has done in our lives and the lives of others. | <input type="checkbox"/> <b>S</b> upplication:<br>requesting God’s help in our lives and in the lives of others for both physical and spiritual needs. |
|---|---|--|--|

Philemon had already proven himself to be a genuine Christian not only in his professed love for Christ, but also in the love that he had shown fellow Christians (cf. Phm. 5). Yet, based on the purpose of the letter, Paul wanted Philemon’s “fellowship of faith” (the love, kindness, and hospitality between Christians brought about as a result of their common faith) to become “effective” (coming from the Greek adjective *energés* which means “energized” or “active”). In other words, Paul was hoping that Philemon’s care for fellow believers would increase even more than it already was (cf. Phm. 14). In particular, which fellow believer was going to need an exceeding amount of kindness shown from Philemon (cf. Phm. 10)? \_\_\_\_\_

What is one way that we can demonstrate love and kindness in an increasingly “effective” (active) way in the lives of fellow believers in our local church?

---



---



---



---

Rather than simply desiring Philemon to show exceeding kindness, and leaving it at that, Paul explained how Philemon would be motivated and encouraged to do so: by contemplating “every good thing” that God had given him through Christ (cf. Phm. 6). When believers recognize the exceeding kindness that God has shown them, it compels them to show exceeding kindness to others.

In other words, as 1 John 4:11 says, “Beloved, if God so \_\_\_\_\_ us, we also ought to love \_\_\_\_\_.”

**Chapter 1 – The Gospel of Grace in the Life of a Slave (cont’d)**

In each of the following passages, explain how God’s love for us motivates our love for others:

Colossians 3:13

---

---

---

---

Philippians 2:3-8

---

---

---

---

Ephesians 5:25-30

---

---

---

---

Paul ends his praise of Philemon’s past faithfulness by stating that he has come to have much \_\_\_\_\_ and comfort in Philemon’s love, because the hearts (from the Greek word *splanchna*, which literally means “bowels,” referring to the place of emotion) of the \_\_\_\_\_ had been refreshed (Phm. 7).

The Greek word for “refreshed” comes from a military term referring to an army resting from their march. Based on that understanding, what is one way in which Philemon might have “refreshed” his fellow Christians?

---

---

Plea for Present Reconciliation (Phm. 8-20)

Paul then turns to the purpose of his letter: asking Philemon to forgive and reconcile with the runaway slave Onesimus. Paul’s plea to Philemon consists of several requests. Match the descriptions of each request with the passage below that it represents:

*Phm. 8-10    Phm. 11-13    Phm. 14    Phm. 15-16    Phm. 17    Phm. 18-19    Phm. 20*

<u>Description</u>	<u>Passage</u>
<i>Recognize</i> the usefulness of Onesimus.	<i>Philemon</i> _____
<i>Regard</i> Onesimus as a brother.	<i>Philemon</i> _____
<i>Refresh</i> Paul’s heart.	<i>Philemon</i> _____
<i>Restore</i> Onesimus in love.	<i>Philemon</i> _____
<i>Rejoice</i> in forgiving Onesimus.	<i>Philemon</i> _____
<i>Reconcile</i> with Onesimus.	<i>Philemon</i> _____
<i>Receive</i> compensation as necessary.	<i>Philemon</i> _____

**Chapter 1 – The Gospel of Grace in the Life of a Slave (cont’d)**

This letter to Philemon is likely one of the least-read of the New Testament for the simple fact that, on the surface, it appears that it contains little theological depth. And while it’s true that it does not contain an *explanation* of doctrine, the reality is that this letter is immensely doctrinal in its *example*. By seeking a restored relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, the plea of the Apostle Paul reflects the atoning work of Christ, who provided a restored relationship between God and sinful men. In other words, having recognized what Christ did for him, the Apostle Paul was more than eager to act similarly for others. Thus, while this letter is certainly historical fact (not allegory or fable), the implications of this letter extend well beyond the first-century setting by representing timeless, theological themes.

Below are several doctrinal categories of Christ’s saving work that are reflected by the Apostle Paul in the book of Philemon. In the blanks that follow, fill in the name of the doctrinal category next to the verse that it best reflects.

Substitution: Jesus was forsaken and punished as if He had lived our sinful life so that we can be welcomed and accepted as if we had lived His righteous life (cf. 1 Pet. 3:18, Matt. 27:46, Isa. 53:5).

Imputation: Jesus was indebted with sins that He did not commit, and believers are credited with His righteousness that they did not earn (cf. 1 Pet. 2:24, 2 Cor. 5:21, Isa. 53:6, Rom. 4:3-5).

Propitiation: Jesus’ death on the cross completely satisfied the wrath and justice of God on behalf of the elect, paying their debt in full (cf. Col. 2:14, Heb. 2:17, John 19:28-30).

Adoption: Through Jesus, believers are welcomed into the family of God as His beloved children (cf. Eph. 1:5, John 1:12).

Reconciliation: Through the blood of Christ, there is peace rather than hostility between God and believers (cf. Eph. 2:16-19, 2 Cor. 5:18, Rom. 5:1).

Forgiveness: Because Christ satisfied God’s justice for His people, God can legally pardon them from having violating His Law (cf. Col. 1:14, Eph. 1:7, Isa. 55:7).

Intercession: Jesus speaks to the Father on our behalf, defending us from the accusations of Satan and asking that His elect people would be reconciled (cf. John 17:1-26, Rom. 8:34, Heb. 7:25, Isa. 53:12).

<u>Passage</u>	<u>Doctrinal Category</u>
Philemon 10-11 reflects the doctrine of	_____
Philemon 12-14 reflects the doctrine of	_____
Philemon 15 reflects the doctrine of	_____
Philemon 16 reflects the doctrine of	_____
Philemon 17 reflects the doctrine of	_____
Philemon 18 reflects the doctrine of	_____
Philemon 19 reflects the doctrine of	_____

## Chapter 1 – The Gospel of Grace in the Life of a Slave (cont'd)

Although believers must always be *willing* to forgive those who hurt them, the reality is that forgiveness cannot actually be *granted* until the offending party requests it. This is also true when it comes to the Gospel itself: God does not grant forgiveness to sinners until they actually confess their sins and ask for it on the basis of Christ's atoning work (cf. Prov. 28:13, Psa. 32:5, 1 John 1:9). Thus, when Paul asked Philemon to forgive Onesimus, the underlying assumption is that Onesimus was already sorry for his actions. What is the proof that Onesimus repented (cf. Phm. 12, Col. 4:9)?

*Restitution* is the act of an individual restoring something to its rightful owner (cf. Phm. 18-19, Luke 19:8), whereas *reparations* is an act in which the descendants of one group of people are required to give compensation to the descendants of another group on behalf of perceived injustice to their ancestors. Explain why the Bible supports the concept of *restitution*, but not *reparations*.

### Plan for Future Unity (Phm. 21-25)

Paul ends the letter by being confident that Philemon will do as he has been instructed (cf. Phm. 21). Paul goes on to explain not only that he plans to visit, but that five other saints also express their greetings (cf. Phm. 23-24). How would this information have motivated Philemon to comply with Paul's request to forgive Onesimus?

Choose one of the five other men mentioned by Paul in Philemon 23-24, and explain who he was (see Col. 1:7, 4:10-12, Acts 13:13, 15:36-39, 1 Pet. 5:13, 2 Tim. 4:11, Acts 20:4, 27:2).

This letter represents a grand example of the Gospel, by uniting three men of totally different backgrounds: Paul (a trained Jew), Philemon (a wealthy Gentile), and Onesimus (a lowly runaway slave). Although the New Testament doesn't record how this situation turned out, the fact that this letter to Philemon was divinely inspired as part of Scripture would indicate a good outcome. Furthermore, church history reveals that a man named Ignatius of Smyra wrote a letter to the Ephesian church and mentioned a pastor by the name of "Onesimus," who very well could have been this man who was once a slave of Philemon. Regardless, how is it that the Gospel can unite people of such varying backgrounds (cf. Gal. 3:28, Eph. 2:11-22, Rom. 15:7-13)?

**Chapter 1 – The Gospel of Grace in the Life of a Slave (cont’d)**

On the other hand, the world seeks unity in a number of wrong ways. What is one way in which the world tries to cultivate unity?

---

---

If Paul had not written this letter to Philemon, but instead allowed Onesimus to remain with him, how might that have undermined his Gospel ministry?

---

---

---

Historically, not only has the book of Philemon been misused to justify the evil practice of the transatlantic slave trade (spanning primarily from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries), but Old Testament slavery laws have been misused as well. Upon examination, however, there is a vast difference between slavery as found in the transatlantic slave trade (which Scripture unequivocally condemns) and slavery practiced under Mosaic Law. Fill in the blanks below, based on passages from Mosaic Law, to illustrate the differences:

Transatlantic Slave Trade

Mosaic Law Slavery

*People were kidnapped and sold into slavery.*

vs. *According to Exodus 21:16a...*

---

---

---

---

*Female slaves were often abused physically and sexually.*

vs. *According to Deuteronomy 21:10-14...*

---

---

---

---

*Slaves were often mistreated or beaten, to the point of severe injury or death.*

vs. *According to Exodus 21:26-27...*

---

---

---

---

*Runaway slaves were caught and returned to their masters.*

vs. *According to Deuteronomy 23:15-16...*

---

---

---

---