

# Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – September 8, 2019

## Philemon

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on biblegateway.com.)

### **Suggested Study / Prep**

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

### **Commentary on Philemon**

(From *Homiletics*; “How Do You Spell ‘Koinonia’”, September 8, 2019)

This short, personal letter of Paul to his friend and fellow believer Philemon has generated a surprisingly hefty amount of commentary. Textual scholars since the first centuries of the church’s history have enjoyed studying this epistle. Part of the attraction is that, while Philemon is quite brief, it is nevertheless the only piece of personal correspondence from Paul that has survived and found its place in the canon. Indeed, the particular and individual nature of Philemon caused some dissent among early church leaders, who wondered if it were not perhaps too personal to be of any great use to the church at large.

Not until Saint John Chrysostom suggested a new interpretation of Philemon in the fourth century were all its critics laid to rest. It was Chrysostom who proposed for the first time that Onesimus was a fugitive slave and that Paul was seeking to aid him in his reconciliation with his master Philemon. (See Allen Dwight Callahan, “Paul’s Epistle to Philemon: Toward an Alternative Argumentum,” *Harvard Theological Review* 86 [1993]: 357-76.) Chrysostom found in Philemon an excellent base upon which to set forth his own discussions about slavery and polemicize against those who were using their faith as an excuse to forcibly free Christian slaves from Christian masters. Chrysostom proposed Philemon as evidence that Paul himself sent the fugitive slave Onesimus back to his master, Philemon, despite the Christian faith now shared by them both.

Chrysostom’s rendition of this relationship between Philemon and Onesimus has become so entrenched in ecclesiastical tradition that we automatically assume its validity without even searching the text for other clues or possible interpretations. Indeed, acceptance of this version of Philemon has led many other scholars on a series of interesting, but unfounded, conjectures. John Knox suggested the intriguing hypothesis that Philemon returned the slave Onesimus to Paul to serve him in his gospel mission. Then, using linguistic similarities between Paul’s letter to Philemon and early church martyr Ignatius’ letter to the Ephesians, Knox postulated that Ignatius was revealing that the current bishop of Ephesus, whose name was also Onesimus, was the selfsame Onesimus Paul had sent back to Philemon. The wonderful symmetry and “happy ending” quality to Knox’s hypothesis found it favor in both scholarly and popular circles.

But when we force ourselves to examine just what we have before us in the text, a rather different view of this letter can come into focus. This letter is, it seems, a personal note between Paul and a beloved friend and colleague in

the faith, Philemon. The warm, personal greetings that open this letter appear to be to the entire household. It is most likely that Apphia, “our sister,” is Philemon’s own wife. Archippus, “our fellow soldier,” is also a full member of the household. Paul’s affection for Philemon is genuine and heartfelt. He remembers him in his prayers, thanks God for him and testifies to Philemon’s ongoing love and faith for “the saints” and the Lord Jesus.

Verse 6 is more than a bit difficult to decipher. Paul’s expression  $\text{ἰσχυροῦς ἑταίρου ἡμετέρου ἐν Χριστῷ}$  can be interpreted with several different variances. It may mean “sharing in” the Christian faith, or it may mean Christian “fellowship,” or even participating in the “act of sharing” — all as a means of Philemon’s experiencing ever deeper truths of Christian faith and enabling him to see the good that he might still do for Christ.

In verse 7, Paul concludes the first section of his letter by recalling all the “joy and encouragement” he has experienced as a recipient of Philemon’s love. Again, Paul stresses the familial ties between himself and this household of faith by calling Philemon “my brother.”

The second section of Philemon reveals Paul’s reason for writing at this time. The appeal he makes to his “brother” is not as a church leader but as an “old man” and as one who is beloved. At last, Paul mentions the name of Onesimus. The name itself translates from the Greek as “profitable” or “beneficial,” a definition Paul quickly employs in a pun — “he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful ( $\text{ἄχρηστος ἦν σοὶ ὄντως, ἀλλὰ νῦν ὡς ὄφελος}$ )” (v. 11).

Paul claims he is sending Onesimus “back to you.” But he does not indicate here in any way that Onesimus is some kind of property — i.e., a slave of Philemon. Much has been made of Onesimus’ presence with Paul, who calls himself here a “prisoner.” But nearly all the scholarly conjecture has assumed Chrysostom’s suggestion that Onesimus is a runaway slave. Other than the fact that there is no clear literary evidence to prove Onesimus’ house-slave status, there would be almost insurmountable barriers that would separate a fugitive slave (either still on the run or newly captured by the authorities) from an imprisoned Roman citizen like Paul. Even if the two prisoners somehow had connected, how could Paul have guaranteed Onesimus’ safe-conduct back to his “master” Philemon?

What Paul actually says is that he is sending Onesimus back to Philemon, but reluctantly. In Onesimus, Paul has found a spirit and a heart that encourages him and loves him just as Philemon himself does. Onesimus is apparently much like Philemon. Paul confesses to Philemon that he wants to keep Onesimus with him so that Onesimus might “be of service to me in your place.” Both men are Paul’s “encouragers.”

The only mention of Onesimus as “a slave” comes in verse 16 where Paul suggests that by being parted from Onesimus for a while — that is, during the time he has spent with Paul — Philemon might now get him back “no longer as a slave” but now as a “beloved brother.” Onesimus has become a spiritual brother to Paul during this period of time as a new member of the household of faith. But Paul goes on to state that Onesimus’ new status is a cause for even greater joy for Philemon. Onesimus is now a brother to him, “both in the flesh and in the Lord.”

If we take this statement literally, we may rightfully conclude that Onesimus is no runaway slave whom Paul is returning to his master, but a wayward brother who now returns to his family’s household. Whatever status he had endured in his brother’s house previously — and as the younger, unlanded sibling, it may have been quite “slave-like” — is to be forgotten. He is now redeemed by Christ’s love back into full fraternity.

In verses 17-18, Paul makes further stipulations that will guarantee Onesimus complete acceptance into the household. Paul asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus now as Paul’s emissary — “welcome him as you would welcome me” (not unlike Paul’s directives to the Corinthians on Timothy’s behalf in 1 Corinthians 4:17). In addition, Paul dares to mention what may well have been the root of any animosity that had grown between Philemon and Onesimus — money. Paul pledges to repay any debts Onesimus had outstanding on Philemon’s books. Yet note: There is no evidence any theft has occurred.

In his role as reconciler between Philemon and Onesimus, Paul agrees to put his money where his mouth is. Once again, Paul stresses the unity of all in Christ when he directs his final words to Philemon, his “brother” (v. 20). Ultimately, what Paul desires of these two men, both of whom have shown the ability to uplift and encourage Paul in his ministry, is that they now join their gifts together, enabling Paul to “refresh my heart in Christ.”

## Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

## Reflection Questions on Philemon

1. As the only piece of existing personal correspondence from Paul, why do you think this letter was kept and eventually canonized as holy scripture? And what can we learn of Paul's personality and relationship with early Christians and their budding faith communities from this letter? Was the warmth and very personal nature of this letter genuine or strategic? How did Paul see himself – as a partner and coworker? A spiritual father? A mentor?
2. This letter has often been cited in the historical debates over the institution of slavery. If we assume Onesimus was a fugitive slave, whom Paul convinced to return to his master with a personal petition for clemency, how do we understand Paul's words and action? Was he complicit in injustice? Was he supremely confident that Philemon would be moved by the gospel that proclaimed in Christ there is "no slave or free?" Why did he not provide Onesimus with continued refuge? Why did he not overtly condemn the system of slavery within the Roman empire? Was Paul a pragmatist who was "choosing his battles?" Did he give priority to the obligations of his pre-existing relationship with Philemon over the duties of his newer relationship with Onesimus? Should we view this letter in the unique context of these particular relationships? Or in the larger context of the prevailing social and economic systems of Paul's time and, by extension, our own?
3. We don't know what kind of reception this letter received, or what actually came of Onesimus' return to Philemon. We tend to assume that the letter was favorably received, that reconciliation and brotherhood was established between Onesimus and Philemon, and maybe that Onesimus was freed from bondage, perhaps even returning to Paul and emerging as a leader in the early church. But the truth is we don't know. The question is...does it matter? What if Philemon rejected Paul's appeal, repossessed Onesimus as a slave rather than a brother, perhaps even had him punished? Would the message be any different? Would we judge Paul's words and actions any differently without the presumed "happy ending?"

## What questions do you have?

## What do you "wonder" about when reading these passages?