

# ***Philemon***

## ***Asking and Receiving: Partnership in the Gospel***

*By Timothy Sparks*

*TimothySparks.com*

# ***Similarities Between Colossians and Philemon***

- Col. 4:7-9
- Both Colossians and Philemon appear to be:
  - Written at the same time and place
  - Sent to the same place
  - Carried by the same messenger or messengers
- Of the six who send greetings in Colossians, five send greetings to Philemon
  - Col. 4:10-14
  - Philem. 1:23-24

# ***Similarities Between Colossians and Philemon***

- Archippus is mentioned in both
  - Col. 4:17
  - Philem. 2
- Onesimus appears to reach his destination at the same time as both letters
  - Col. 4:8-9
  - Philem. 12

# ***Date and Location***

- Early 60s, perhaps AD 62
- The debate is whether Paul wrote from Ephesus or Rome (100 miles from Ephesus to Colossae versus 1,000 miles from Rome to Colossae)
- If Philemon is considered by itself, there are strong arguments for the writing of the letter at Ephesus
- If Philemon is considered along with Colossians, it appears Paul wrote from Rome

# *From Rome or Ephesus?*



# ***Purpose of Philemon***

- To thank, commend and encourage (vv. 4-7)
- To request with sincerity, gentility and love for Onesimus' continued assistance in the gospel
  - vv. 8-11, 20-21
- Paul takes the initiative, with gratitude for Philemon and his good qualities, asking Philemon as a partner in the gospel for Onesimus' continued help which would refresh both Paul and Onesimus
  - vv. 7, 12, 20

# *Paul and Onesimus*

- Paul was a prisoner (v. 1)
  - Perhaps still under house-arrest, maybe handcuffed to his military guard (Acts 28:30-31)
- How do we view Onesimus?
  - How we view Onesimus usually determines how we approach the letter to Philemon
- Two general views of Onesimus:
  - Runaway slave
  - Faithful slave: sent by Philemon to serve Paul

# *Runaway Slave View*

- Focuses on vv. 11, 15 and 18
  - It seems unlikely that Onesimus would run away from his master and while yet an unbeliever (v. 10) find and serve Paul (~1,000 miles away)
  - If Onesimus was a runaway slave, he is not pictured as remorseful or repentant and the “if” (v. 18) means he did not necessarily wrong Philemon or owe him anything
  - “It may even be outrunning the evidence to conclude that Onesimus was a runaway slave... It could be argued that his master had sent him to fulfill some commission . . .” (Bruce, 197)

# ***Faithful Slave View***

- Focuses on:
  - (1) Paul's situation
    - Being an old man (v. 9) and a prisoner (vv. 1, 9-10, 13, 23) he was dependent on support from outsiders (v. 13)
  - (2) Paul's relationship with Philemon:
    - co-worker (v. 1), brother (vv. 7, 20), partner (v. 17)
    - Paul returns a person who had assisted him, similar to Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25, 29)

# *Key Words & Phrases*

- **Heart (*splanchnon*)**—11 times in NT; 3 times in Philemon: vv. 7, 12, 20
  - inward parts of the body—intestines; emotion: heart, tenderness, affection, compassion; a cherished one, dear as one's self (v. 12)
- “I am sending him back . . . my own heart”
  - Part of himself; “receive him as you would me” (v. 17)
  - may imply Paul wants his heart back (but wants it to be Philemon's choice, vv. 9, 14, 21)
  - “Refresh my heart in Christ” (v. 20): both Paul and Onesimus → Paul's heart

# *Key Words & Phrases*

- **Christ** (v. 9), **Onesimus** (v. 10), **use(less/ful)** (v. 11)
  - **Christ** (*Christos*)
  - **Onesimus** (*Onēsimos*) = “useful”
  - ***achrēstos*** (“useless”) → *achristos* (“w/o Christ”)
- In Koine Greek *achrēstos* and *achristos* were homophones (words that are pronounced the same but differ in meaning and may differ in spelling: **rose** (*flower*) and **rose** (*past tense of "rise"*) or **to**, **two** and **too**)
  - ***euchrestos*** (now useful) → now in *Christos*

# *Key Words & Phrases*

- **Onesimus (*Onēsimos*) = “useful”** (v. 10) →  
**onaimēn = “benefit”** (v. 20)
  - “the **hearts** of the saints have been **refreshed** by you **brother**” (v. 7)
  - “**my own heart**” (v. 12)
  - “Yes, **brother**, let me **benefit** from you in the Lord; **refresh my heart** in Christ” (v. 20)

# ***Slavery in the First Century***

- Before and during the first century AD, among the Greeks and the Romans, a slave in law was not considered a person but a piece of property
  - Aristotle (384-322 BC) defined a slave as “a living tool, as a tool is an inanimate slave”
- But within the Lord's body slaves and free were brothers and sisters “for whom Christ died” (Rom. 14:15)
- Paul did something revolutionary when he sent Onesimus back to Philemon “no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a brother dearly loved” (v. 16)

# ***Slavery in the First Century***

- There was now a bond stronger than flesh or any other bond uniting them “in the Lord” (v. 16)
- Onesimus might still serve Philemon but now it would be service gladly rendered by one brother in Christ to another
  - The old relationship has passed away and has become new (2 Cor. 5:17)!
  - Responsibilities remain but the distinction of class (status) is destroyed, removing inequality
    - “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28)

# ***Slavery in the First Century***

- “Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all” (Col. 3:9-11)
  - Do not treat each other as ignorant, worldly people but as those who are a new creation being invigorated with true knowledge (the gospel) in conformity with the Creator's image

# ***Slavery in the First Century***

- “where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all” (Col. 3:11)
  - It is not only the old sinful attitudes and habits that are done away with in this new creation
  - The barriers that divided human beings from one another are done away with also
    - Racial and religious barriers (Gentiles vs Jews; circumcision vs uncircumcision)
    - Cultural barriers (Greeks vs barbarians; Graeco-Roman civilization vs Scythians)
    - Social barriers (slaves vs free)

# ***Slavery in the First Century***

- Within the community of the new creation (“in Christ”) these barriers do not exist
  - For a member of Christ's body to pretend as though these barriers exist is to be hypocritical (see Gal. 2:11-14)
  - Believing masters and slaves are brothers (1 Tim. 6:2)
    - The slave/master (like employee/employer) relationship might continue in the home and business life (Col. 3:22-24)—but nonexistent in Christ (Col. 3:11)

# ***Slavery in the First Century***

- “Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use it. For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord’s freedman. Likewise he who is called while free is Christ’s slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. Brothers, let each one remain with God in that state in which he was called” (1 Cor. 7:21-24)
  - Advantages of gaining freedom to use it to glorify God, but if not, serve God as being free in Christ

# ***Slavery in the First Century***

- If a believing slave had an unbelieving master, he was to serve him more faithfully now because the reputation of Christ and being a Christian was knit together with the quality of his work
  - 1 Tim. 6:1 (unbelieving master)
  - 1 Tim. 6:2 (believing master)
  - 1 Pet. 2:18-25 (believing/unbelieving master)

# ***Serving Christ Now***

- Christians have the highest of all motives to be faithful employees—conscientious, dependable and diligent—
  - We serve the Lord Christ (Col. 3:23-24)
    - This encourages us to do our very best though we may work for difficult, perhaps harsh and ungrateful employers, knowing we will receive our reward from Christ
  - We seek to please Christ, not people (Gal. 1:10)
  - We can “adorn” the teaching of God our Savior
    - to make beautiful, decorate, dress (Tit. 2:9-10)

# ***The Spirituality of Slaves***

- A slave might be a leader in a congregation due to his spiritual ability and freeborn members of the congregation would gratefully and humbly accept his spiritual direction
  - There is evidence that Roman leaders such as Pius (AD 150) Callistus (AD 200s) were of servile origin
- Slaves showed they could suffer for their faith as courageously as freeborn Romans
  - The slave girl Blandina and her female master suffered in the persecution against Christians in Lyon, Gaul (modern France) in AD 177

# ***The Spirituality of Slaves***

- Though Blandina was frail, the general caused her to be tortured in a horrible manner, so that even the executioners became exhausted "as they did not know what more they could do to her"
- She repeated to every question, "I am a Christian and we commit no wrongdoing"
- Blandina was taken to the amphitheater, suspended on a stake and wild animals were released as "entertainment" for the crowd
- Because she appeared to be hanging on a cross and because of her intense prayers, she inspired the other Christians

# ***Amphitheater in Lyon, France***



# ***The Spirituality of Slaves***

- Enduring this for a number of days and none of the beasts attacking Blandina, she was taken down from the stake—the Christians believed God had preserved her for other contests so her victory over the evil spiritual forces might be the greater
- On the last day of the contests in the amphitheater, Blandina was again brought in with Ponticus—both of them were about 15 years old
- Every day they had been brought to witness the sufferings of others and pressed to deny their faith and swear by idols
- Ponticus died first and Blandina remained the last

# ***The Spirituality of Slaves***

- She had encouraged many others and saw them tortured to death
- Now Blandina was ready to hasten after them
  - Such an understanding of persecution might help us reflect more spiritually (e.g. songs we sing)

“I am resolved to follow the Savior, faithful and true each day;  
Heed what He sayeth, do what He willeth, He is the living Way.  
I am resolved to enter the kingdom leaving the paths of sin;  
Friends may oppose me, foes may beset me, still will I enter in  
I will hasten to Him, hasten so glad and free;  
Jesus, greatest, highest, I will come to Thee”

# ***The Spirituality of Slaves***

- As the last of the martyrs, she was scourged, placed on a red-hot grate (a “roasting seat”), enclosed in a net and thrown before a wild steer that tossed her into the air with its horns
- Blandina faced her death rejoicing—as if being called to a marriage feast rather than to a torturous death
- Still not dead, she was sacrificed (apparently to some pagan god) with a dagger
- Eusebius says Blandina impressed friend and foe alike as a “noble athlete” in the contest of martyrdom

# ***The Spirituality of Slaves***

- In the arena of Carthage (AD 202) the Roman matron Perpetua (about 22 years old and mother of an infant she was nursing) stood hand-in-hand with her slave Felicitas (or Felicity, who was pregnant at the time)
  - Both women faced a common death for a common faith

# ***Breaking the Barriers***

- For the Christian what real difference could there be between slave and free?
- Our world has many barriers of one kind or another: iron curtains, color bars, class (status) distinctions, national and cultural divisions, political partisanship
- But in Christ these barriers must come down
- “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free” (1 Cor. 12:13)

# ***Memory Verse Review (1 Thessalonians—Titus)***

- 1 Thess. 1:8—“For from you...”
- 2 Thess. 3:1—“Finally, brothers...”
- 1 Tim. 3:14-15—“These things...”
- 2 Tim. 2:15—“Do your best...”
- Titus 2:11-12—“For the grace...”

# ***Memory Verse for Philemon***

v. 20

“Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in  
the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord”  
(NKJV)

“Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in  
the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ”  
(NASB)