

# INTRODUCTION TO 57<sup>TH</sup> BIBLEBOOK

## THE LETTER TO PHILEMON (ABOUT 61 A.D.)

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### **A. THE WRITER, DATE AND PLACE OF WRITING THE LETTER TO PHILEMON.**

Luke and Aristarchus went with Paul to Rome, where he was imprisoned<sup>1</sup>. Paul wrote the letters of Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians and Philippians while he was ‘a prisoner of Christ’, that is, *chained to a soldier who guarded him in a private house*<sup>2</sup>. This was during Paul’s first imprisonment in Rome, in A.D. 60-61. Epaphras was his fellow-prisoner (23), Timothy was with him (1) and other fellow-workers like Mark<sup>3</sup>, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke<sup>4</sup> sent greetings to Philemon (24).

The letters to the Colossians, Philemon and Ephesus were written first, in Rome between A.D. 60-61 and sent by Tychicus, accompanied by Onesimus, to these places in the province of Asia<sup>5</sup>. Philippians was written later, in Rome towards the end of A.D. 61, when Luke, Aristarchus and Onesimus were no longer with him<sup>6</sup>.

### **B. THE RECIPIENT AND PURPOSE OF WRITING THE LETTER TO PHILEMON.**

A slave named Onesimus had wronged his owner, Philemon, who was a Christian living in Colossae (1-2)<sup>7</sup>. We do not know how Onesimus offended his master, but it is possible that he had stolen something (18) or had been sent on a commission and had overstayed his leave.

In the Roman world of Paul’s day slaves sometimes ran away. They joined groups of robbers, attempted to disappear in the sub-culture of large cities, tried to flee abroad, be absorbed in the work-force, or sought refuge in a temple. Onesimus could have come into contact with Paul as a fellow-prisoner. Paul took an interest in him and led him to accept the Lord Jesus (10). Paul enjoyed his company and would have liked to keep him to serve with him in the proclamation of the Gospel (12). But keeping another person’s slave was illegal in Roman Law and would also have involved a breach of Christian fellowship with Philemon, his friend and fellow worker in Colossae. Paul respected the Roman law on this point at that time!

Paul sent Onesimus back to Colossae, carrying this letter to Philemon. He requested that Philemon receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul (17), that is, as a dear brother in Christ and no longer as a slave (16). Paul asked Philemon to charge whatever Onesimus owed him to his (Paul’s) account (18). He motivates Philemon with the fact that Philemon had also been led to the Lord Jesus by Paul (19). Paul refused to command or coerce Philemon in any way and desired that Philemon would respond spontaneously (14). Paul had confidence that Philemon would do even more than he asked and return Onesimus to Paul to service in the Gospel (21).

Apphia was probably the wife of Philemon and Archippus their son. Archippus was a fellow soldier of Paul and probably the leader of the house fellowship at their home (2). In his letter to the Colossians, Paul exhorts Archippus, “See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord.<sup>8</sup>”

### **C. THE THEME AND DIVISION OF THE LETTER TO PHILEMON.**

Theme. “An appeal to Philemon to receive his fugitive slave kindly and to release him for service to Paul.”

**Philemon 1-3.** Author, recipient and greeting.

**Philemon 4-7.** Thanksgiving and intercession.

**Philemon 8-20.** Plea for Onesimus.

**Philemon 21-25.** Final remarks and greetings.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 27:1-2; 28:16

<sup>2</sup> Acts 28:16; Colossians 4:3,7-9; Ephesians 6:20-22

<sup>3</sup> 1 Peter 5:13

<sup>4</sup> Colossians 4:14

<sup>5</sup> Colossians 4:7,9

<sup>6</sup> Philippians 2:19-30; Colossians 4:7,10,14

<sup>7</sup> Colossians 4:9,17

<sup>8</sup> Colossians 4:17

## D. THE MAIN MESSAGES OF THE LETTER TO PHILEMON.

### 1. The ministry of Jesus and his disciples is a ministry in houses.

It is not necessarily a ministry in special church buildings.

Mark 2:1-5. Jesus preached, taught and healed people in the ordinary houses of people<sup>9</sup>. The apostles went from house to house and never stopped teaching and preaching<sup>10</sup>. They preached the good news to their relatives and close friends in their own homes<sup>11</sup>.

Mark 2:15-16. Jesus had *fellowship* with ordinary people around meals in houses. Christians came together to break bread in a house<sup>12</sup>.

Acts 12:12. Christians prayed together in a house.

Acts 16:31-33. People were converted and baptised in houses<sup>13</sup>.

1 Corinthians 16:19. Christian congregations gathered together in houses<sup>14</sup>.

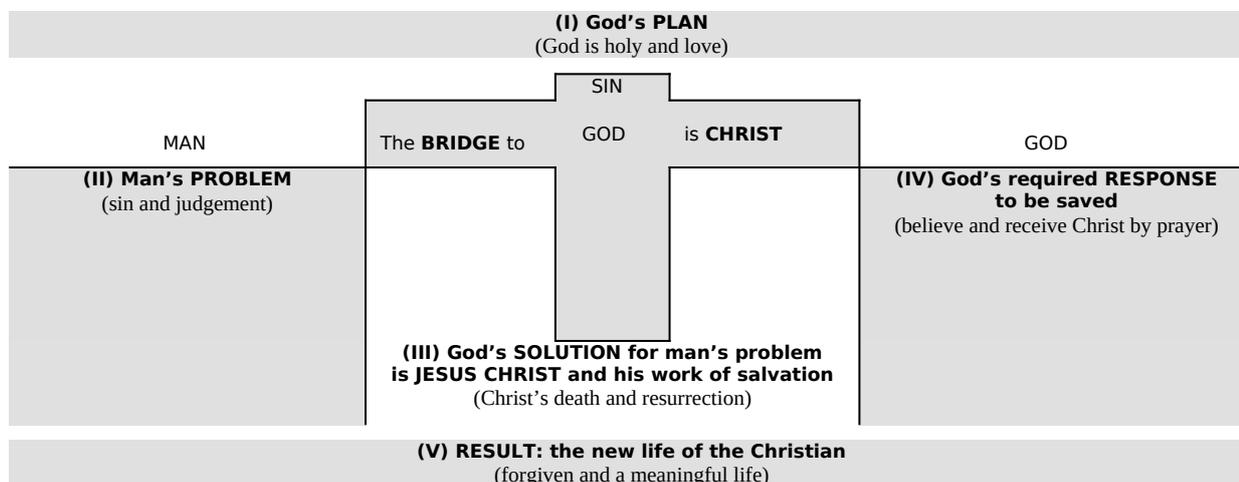
### 2. Share your faith actively<sup>15</sup>.

#### (1) The 'gospel' is the Good News

- about God's love, grace and kingship
- about Christ's death, resurrection and enthronement
- about forgiveness, salvation and victory for anyone who believes.

#### (2) Share the message of the gospel in five steps.

Whenever you preach, teach, share or explain the message of the gospel, you could use the following 5 steps:



#### (3) Help a person to discover these truths for himself.

Let the non-Christian read from the Bible the verses that explain the gospel.

Encourage him to discover for himself the truths from the Bible by asking questions like:

- "What does this Bible verse say about God?"
- "What are the consequences of sin?"
- "Why did Jesus Christ have to die?"
- "According to Jesus, what must you do to receive salvation?"
- "What are the responsibilities and privileges of a Christian?"

Draw 'the bridge of life illustration' as the discovery and discussion progresses<sup>16</sup>.

Write down the Bible references and key words as the illustration progresses.

At the end, give this illustration to him in order to remind him of the gospel.

#### (4) Invite the person to receive Christ.

After you have completed drawing the bridge of life illustration, invite the person to receive Jesus Christ as his Saviour or to submit his heart and life to Jesus Christ as King. If the person desires this, let him pray.

<sup>9</sup> Mark 3:20,32-35

<sup>10</sup> Acts 2:42; Acts 20:20-21

<sup>11</sup> Acts 10:24-27; 28:30-31

<sup>12</sup> Acts 2:42; 20:7-9

<sup>13</sup> Acts 9:17-18; 18:7-11; 22:16

<sup>14</sup> Romans 16:5; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 1:2

<sup>15</sup> [www.dota.net](http://www.dota.net) manual 2, lesson 13

<sup>16</sup> [www.dota.net](http://www.dota.net) manual 1, lesson 3 and manual 2, lesson 13

### **(5) Be sensitive to God's Spirit.**

Pray in your heart while you share the gospel. Remember that you are only God's servant. Only God can work a new life in his heart. Therefore, be sensitive to what God is doing in his heart and life.

### **3. Slavery in the New Testament.**

No writer in the New Testament comments on the origins of slavery. There is no theological support for slavery or justification for human beings to own other human beings. There is also no revolutionary programme to deal with the evils of slavery or its abolition. It is clear that there were slaves who had become Christians and also of owners of slaves that were Christians. *In the Bible, the focus is upon transformation of personal relationships within the system of slavery.*

In Ephesians 6:5-9 the apostle Paul teaches that Christian slaves (and employees) must obey and serve their earthly masters (and employers) with respect and sincerity of heart, just as they would obey and serve Jesus. Do this not just to win their favour, but to promote God's Kingdom. Christian masters (employers) must treat their slaves (employees) in the same way, with respect and sincerity of heart. Do this without threatening. In Colossians 4:1 the apostle Paul teaches that Christian masters (employers) must provide their slaves (employees) with what is right and fair, because Jesus is the Master of them both!

In 1 Corinthians 7:20-24 the apostle Paul teaches that a Christian, whether a slave or a freeman should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him! *A Christian slave is the Lord's freedman and a Christian slave owner is the Lord's slave.* Both are responsible to God! *The Kingdom (kingship) of God is extended within every kind of social system in the world!*<sup>17</sup> A Christian should not become a slave of men and their political and social systems. If he can gain his freedom from a particular human social system, let him do so. However, *to promote the Kingdom of God is more important than changing the social system.*

In Philemon 16 the apostle Paul motivates Philemon to treat his former slave Onesimus as 'a dear brother'. This does not mean that their former position as master and slave (employer and employee) had to change, but rather that their Christian relationship to one another had to change! They had become dear brothers to one another and they must love one another as Jesus Christ loves them<sup>18</sup>! The Letter to Philemon is moving in *the realm of personal relationships where the institution of slavery can only wilt and die.*

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<sup>17</sup> For example: communism, socialism, nationalism, imperialism, tribalism, etc.

<sup>18</sup> John 13:34-35