

## **Sermon: A Reason For Everything**

**Text: Philemon vv. 1-16**

### **Introduction:**

The Book of Philemon is an overlooked and basically unknown little one-chapter book tucked at the very end of Paul's Epistles. It's like a one-stop-sign, one-gas-station little town in a rural area—you blink and you miss it. Unlike most of the rest of Paul's letters (with the exception of Titus & Timothy), it is addressed to one person. Given its brevity (25 verses) and the fact that it's more personal in nature, most of us tend to skip right over Philemon on our way to Hebrews

Which is a shame—because there is a lot going on in this short little letter. My hope is that in these next couple of weeks before we head into Advent season, we will gain a much better understanding and appreciation for Philemon. It speaks powerfully to our lives today.

We've just spent a few months studying the Book of Colossians. Paul wrote Colossians (along with Ephesians and Philippians and Philemon), while shackled in chains in a prison cell in Rome in the year 61AD. We learned that the church in Colossae was started by a pastor named Epaphras in the year 55AD (Epaphras was also now in Rome, chained as a prisoner right beside Paul). In the year 61AD, churches didn't gather in what we now call "church buildings," they gathered in homes. The church in Colossae gathered in the home of Philemon, Apphia, and their son Archippus.

Sadly, the Roman culture allowed for the horrific practice of household servants—or slaves. Philemon and Apphia "owned" a slave by the name of Onesimus. At some point, Onesimus had enough of this, and ran away—apparently stealing some money as he went. He put 1,000 miles between himself and Colossae, looking to "get lost" in the big city of Rome. But he was far from lost in the eyes of God (a bit reminiscent of the book of Jonah). In ways that we're not aware (perhaps because of Epaphras?), God led Onesimus to the Apostle Paul in prison—and Paul led Onesimus to Christ. The transformation was dramatic. The bond between Paul and Onesimus was strong. So strong, in fact, that Paul refers to Onesimus as "my son," and "my very heart."

Paul is now writing several letters. One letter is to the church in Ephesus. Another letter is to the church in Colossae. A third letter is to Philemon—the host of the Colossian house-church. The deliverer of this letter is none other than Onesimus (along with Tychicus). It's hard to understate how delicate this situation was. As absolutely wrong as slavery was—Philemon could have easily viewed himself as the one "wronged." Onesimus had ran away, and stolen some money as he went. Viewed from a Lower Story perspective, Philemon might have thought he had every reason to be angry.

It is against this very dramatic back-story that Onesimus shows up at Philemon's doorstep, looking to be welcomed back into the house not as a slave—but as a brother in Christ. And he has in his hands what is probably the most sensitive, artful, and subtly direct letter that Paul wrote. He is calling Philemon to see the Upper Story—and to understand that in Christ, we are ALL brothers and sisters who have been set free and redeemed by the blood of Jesus.

### **Examination:**

- Read **Philemon vv. 1-16**

- You would think that Paul would refer to himself as a prisoner of Rome in verse 1—but he doesn't. He calls himself "a prisoner of Christ Jesus." Why do you think he refers to himself in this way?
- Paul isn't the only one writing this letter. There is a co-author. Who is it, and what term is used to describe him? Why this term?
- The first addressee in the letter is Philemon. What two terms does Paul use to describe him? Why do you think he used these terms?
- Paul is also addressing the letter to Apphia (most certainly Philemon's wife) and Archippus (very likely Philemon's son). What about the way Paul words this greeting leads us to believe that these three are part of the same family?
- Who else does Paul want to read the letter? Why do you think Paul would want this letter read to this group of people?
- What do verses 4-7 show about Paul's attitude toward Philemon?
- What can we gather from verses 4-7 about the kind of man that Philemon was?
- How did Philemon give Paul joy?
- What was the content of Paul's prayers for Philemon?
- What do you think is Paul's purpose in sharing these high words of praise with Philemon?
- Does your testimony shine brightly like Philemon's? What might someone say about you?
- Why could Paul give orders to Philemon (v. 8)?
- What did Paul decide to do instead of ordering Philemon?
- What does this teach us about using authority (having authority doesn't mean you always have to use it)?
- Who is Onesimus? What is his relationship to Philemon? What is his relationship to Paul? What do you think it means that "he became my son while I was in chains"?
- Why was Onesimus now so much more useful than before? (v. 11)
- Why did Paul "send him back" (Onesimus had broken the law by running away and stealing. These issues had to be resolved)?
- If you could summarize Paul's request into one word, what is he asking Philemon to do?
- Did Philemon deserve forgiveness? Did Onesimus deserve forgiveness? What does this tell us about the nature of forgiveness?
- What would an unbelieving master do to Onesimus?
- Paul makes a very important comment in verse 15 about "the reason he was separated from you for a while." Reason is defined as: A cause, explanation, or justification for an action or event. Do you think that Paul is wanting Philemon to look at this entire chain of events as having been orchestrated by God? What might that reason be?

### **Application:**

I have never seen as much division and finger-pointing as I see right now in our world. Everyone sees their point of view as right. How can we apply this passage to our lives?