



Tweets from Heaven

#1 Philemon: Introduction

I. Background

A. Occasion of the letter

It is the only private letter from Paul that we possess.

This is a prison epistle (see verses 1, 9, 13). Paul wrote it while in a Roman prison.

58 AD to 60 AD	Paul is a Roman prisoner in Caesarea
60 AD to 61 AD	Travels to Rome
61 AD to 63 AD	Lives under house arrest in Rome (released in Spring 63 AD)
63 AD to 67 AD	Continue to spread the gospel (perhaps with a trip to Spain)
67 AD to 68 AD	Back in a prison in Rome. Writes his last book of 2 Timothy
68 AD	Beheaded under Roman Emperor Nero

It was sent to the city of Colossae, along with the letters to the church at Ephesus, and to the Laodiceans (Col. 4:16).

Epaphras, the leader of the church in Colossae, came to Rome with doctrinal questions (Col. 1:8) for Paul. Paul answers them with these letters and sends Tychicus back to accompany the letters and the returning slave Onesimus.

Two possible "reconstructions" of what actually happened:

1. Onesimus is a runaway slave that somehow comes in to contact with Paul and becomes a Christian. Paul can't harbor a runaway slave so he sends Onesimus back to Philemon in Colosse.
2. Noticing the mention of Archippus in Col. 4:17, it's interesting that Laodiceae is mentioned repeatedly (Col. 4:13, 15, 16). Perhaps Archippus is a pastor in Laodiceae, not Colosse. If so, perhaps this is the lost letter of Col. 4:16. Maybe the decision to embrace a runaway slave is being proposed to the whole Christian community of Colosse and Laodiceae.

B. Date: likely between 58-60 AD

C. Interesting thought:

Ignatius – going for execution from Antioch to Rome, wrote many letters. Wrote one to church at Ephesus and has much to say about their wonderful bishop – Onesimus. And he makes exactly the same fun of his name as Paul did.

First collection of Paul's letters was done in Ephesus, at the end of the 1st century. And this letter was included in that collection.

D. Format of the book

It's a personal letter (not entirely unlike Pliny the Younger's letter to Sabinianus – somewhere between 62-113 AD).

E. The issue of slavery in the Bible (1 Cor. 7:21-24, Col. 3:22-23, Eph. 6:5-9)

At this point in history, slavery was an institution in the Roman Empire. As much as one third of the population in Rome and other large cities would be slaves. Legally, slaves were property not people. Owners had all the power.

Interesting to note that neither Paul nor any other New Testament writer ever called for abolition to slavery. Instead, they call for a higher standard of relating.

Gal. 3:28 "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

The motivation to consider Onesimus as a brother, rather than a slave is the gospel! Notice the two passages that deal with the duties of slaves and masters (Eph. 6:5-9, Col. 3:22 – 4:1)

Note: under Roman law stealing by a slave was considered punishable by death.

II. The main characters (vs. 1-10)

- A. Paul – an ex-Jewish rabbi to whom all Gentiles were untouchable.
- B. Philemon – wealthy Gentile patrician to whom a Jewish prisoner should have been an object of contempt.
- C. Apphia – wife of Philemon
- D. Archippus – probably their son who was the local pastor
- E. Onesimus
 - 1. Was a runaway slave of Philemon
 - 2. Seems he fled to Rome with some of his master's money (verse 18)
 - 3. Paul was able to win him to Christ and would have liked to keep him as a helper (see Col. 4:7-9).
 - 4. But, he felt it was his duty to return Onesimus...so that Onesimus could make everything right with Philemon.

III. Paul's co-worker (vs. 23)

- A. **EPAPHRAS** (his name means "lovely"). He is a prisoner in Rome with Paul. Mentioned in Col. 1:7 and again in 4:12 as a dear fellowservant, a faithful minister, one who labors fervently in prayer for others.

He is a fervent prayer partner

- B. **JOHN MARK** (John was his Jewish name, Mark was his Roman name). He first appears on the scene in Acts 12. He has a godly mother and is the nephew of Barnabas. When Barnabas and Saul (Paul) set out on the first missionary journey, they took John Mark with them (12:25). But somewhere in the middle of the trip, John Mark deserts the group and returns to Jerusalem (13:13). When it came time to head out on the second trip, Paul would not team up with John Mark again, choosing Silas instead. Barnabas took John Mark and they separated.

In the early years of his ministry, at least in Paul's estimation, John Mark proved to be unfruitful, somewhat unreliable, perhaps vacillating in his steadfast commitment to the work.

But take a look at the later stages of his ministry. When Paul is in the Roman prison the first time, look who is at his side: John Mark! See Col. 4:10 and Philemon 24.

At the very end of his life, during his second imprisonment, when Paul desperately needs encouragement, look whom he specifically asks for: John Mark! See 2 Tim. 4:11.

Even Peter recognized the great faithful spirit of this young minister. Look who is at his side in Rome at the end of his life too: John Mark! See 1 Peter 5:13.

He is a faithful servant

- C. **ARISTARCHUS** (his name means "the best ruler). A believer from Thessalonica, Aristarchus travels with Paul throughout the later chapters of the book of Acts. See Acts 19:29, 20:4 and 27:2. In Col. 4:10, we see him in prison with Paul.

He is a friendly companion

- D. **LUKE**, this is the physician who wrote the gospel and the book of Acts. According to 2 Tim. 4:11, he was the only disciple left with Paul at the end of his second imprisonment. Paul refers to him as the "beloved physician" in Col. 4:14.

He is a fastidious caretaker

- E. **DEMAS** (his name means "popular). A co-worker of Paul's mentioned in Philemon and in Col. 4:14. Remember, both these letters were written about 58-60 AD. 2 Timothy was written in approximately 67 AD. Notice what Paul has to say about his companion in 2 Tim. 4:10: "For Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world and is departed to Thessalonica...."

At the end, when Paul and his ministry needed him the most, Demas took off. He chose the "stuff" of this world over the ministry and his partnership with Paul.

He is a fly by night ("something of a dubiously transitory nature")

IV. **So what? What kind of "co-worker" are you? (And who are your co-workers? Do you treasure them?)**

Prayer partner: A watchful, persevering kind of care

Eph. 6:18 "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people."

Faithful servant: someone to help carry the load

Gal. 6:2, 10 "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ... Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."

Friendly companion: someone at your side...you do things "in common"

Phil. 1:5 "because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now,"

Fastidious caretaker:

Mark 10:43-44 "Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all."

Fly by night: implies "that the quality of work is done is shoddy enough that the person responsible must leave town under cover of darkness to evade any customers"

Ps. 142:4 "Look and see, there is no one at my right hand; no one is concerned for me. I have no refuge; no one cares for my life."

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think God included a personal letter in the New Testament? What insights into Paul do you glean in this epistle?
2. What is the value in understanding the setting (cultural, geographical, etc.) of a book of the Bible?
3. So what kind of a "co-worker" are you? Which aspect do you need to be working on?