

# THE GOSPEL ON DISPLAY

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*By the Book*™ A Chapter by Chapter Bible Study  
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## Let's Begin

*In another letter, Paul makes an incredible statement about the Christian. He writes, "Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men: Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God" (2 Cor. 3:2-3). The believer is a letter to be read by "all men." In other words, our lives are the embodiment of the Gospel, the message of Jesus Himself on full display.*

*No other book in the New Testament reveals the transforming power of the Gospel in real people's lives more powerfully than Philemon. Centered around three personalities—a saint, a slave, and a soul-winner—Philemon puts the Gospel on full display to be read by all men!*

*As we study this exclusive apostolic letter to a lay member of a local church, we will follow the outline below:*

- I. Philemon: A Refreshing Saint (vv. 1-7)**
- II. Onesimus: A Reclaimed Slave (vv. 8-16)**
- III. Paul: A Redemptive Soul-winner (vv. 17-25)**

## I. Philemon: A Refreshing Saint (vv. 1-7)

Philemon is a Gospel masterpiece. Being the most personal of all the letters in the New Testament, it is the only inspired letter either Paul or another Apostle wrote to a layperson.

Paul begins, "Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy *our* brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer, And to *our* beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house: Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (vv. 1-3). Immediately, Paul reveals his own situation: he is a "prisoner of Jesus Christ." By this, Paul indicates he is under lock and key at the Roman hands for his witness to Jesus Christ.

In addition, he mentions his protégé, Timothy, as ministering to him in his hour of need. Not only did Timothy

### Reflection Connection

*Think of people in your own congregation. Who would you think would embody the description "refreshing saint"?*

receive pastoral advice in the form of two letters from the Apostle, he also received personal, eye-to-eye instruction from Paul. While grace was undeserved by Philemon, as with others, so with him, Paul prayed for his life to be covered with abundant grace and anointing peace. The service to Christ and His kingdom Philemon provided by hosting a church in his personal home would not be overlooked in eternity. "Fellowlabourers" in the Lord they all were.

From Paul's standpoint, Philemon was a transformed man, a refreshing saint of the Lord Jesus Christ. Not only that, Paul was Philemon's father in the faith (v. 19). He won him to Christ. And, just what made Philemon so refreshing? Paul reveals his reasoning: "Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints" (v. 5). Both faith and love were branded deeply into the heart of Philemon. Indeed faith



and love should characterize all God's people. After all, faith and love go hand in hand. Elsewhere Paul says it like this, "faith which worketh by love" (Gal. 5:6). Faith and love represent Philemon's two-fold reach in life.

*First, faith is Philemon's Godward reach in life.* We might say it is Philemon reaching upward for meaning and purpose. It is the *vertical* dimension to one's life and is inherently spiritual. The God dimension to Philemon made his life both transparent and refreshing. It also made his life count. Paul says it like this, "That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus" (v. 6). The reason Philemon's life counted for eternity was because his life was "effectual." In other words, he shared his faith; he served Christ not in the power of his flesh but in the power of the Spirit!

*Second, love is Philemon's manward reach in life.* In addition to reaching upward to God, Philemon reached outward to others. It is the *horizontal* dimension to one's life and is expressed primarily in one's words and deeds. Simply put, Philemon loved other people. Love was the secret to the refreshing aura which surrounded his life. Even in the midst of suffering and trial, he remained loving toward others. Risking his personal freedom and status, he hosted a church in his home. Why? His faith guided him and strengthened him, while his love compelled him and completed him. Philemon was an amazing display of the transforming power of the Gospel.

## II. Onesimus: A Reclaimed Slave (vv. 8-16)

While Philemon was a *refreshing saint*, Paul wrote of Onesimus as a *reclaimed slave*. One of the interesting things about this little letter is, Paul is appealing to Philemon to reevaluate his view of Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave. He writes, "Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient, Yet for love's sake I rather beseech *thee*, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ. I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds: Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me" (vv. 8-11). While as an Apostle, Paul could have flexed his apostolic muscles and demanded Philemon do what he said. And, from what we know of Philemon, he would have obliged the Apostle's wishes.

However, Paul merely requested that Philemon consider what he had to say. Instead of law, Paul dealt with Philemon with love, the love that Philemon himself

exercised toward others as we saw above. Paul's gentle approach remains a stroke of genius: if Philemon's reach in life is manward and built on love to

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others, Paul's unspoken question would be, why does Onesimus not receive the same love others receive from Philemon?

In addition, Paul reveals to Philemon two significant factors concerning Onesimus Philemon has yet to learn. *First, Onesimus experiences a miserable condition* (v. 11). Undoubtedly, Onesimus ran away ideally thinking he was obtaining his freedom. Yet, instead of being free, Onesimus ended up in a cold dungeon as a criminal alongside the Apostle Paul. Some freedom!

In addition, Paul employs a play on words. He mentions that whereas before, Onesimus was "unprofitable" he now is "profitable." The Greek term translated "unprofitable" literally means "to be useless" or "profitless." On the other hand, Onesimus' name literally means "profitable" or "to be useful." And, when Onesimus "departed" he ran away as a slave, a useless sinner.

*Second, Onesimus experiences a marvelous conversion.* Until now—even including all his years as a slave under his master, Philemon—Onesimus never lived up to his name. However, Paul now speaks "for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds." Just as Paul was Philemon's father in the faith, seeing him converted to Christ under his care, now Paul is also Onesimus' father in the faith, seeing him converted to Christ under his care.

The implications are staggering. Onesimus is now Paul's "son...begotten in bonds." In God's own providence, Onesimus met up with the Apostle Paul in a prison cell. Consequently, the slave who all his life had been "useless" was now a free man in Jesus Christ, useful and profitable for every good work just as his name implies.

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### Reflection Connection

*Many conversions to Christ come at evangelistic services or in people's homes. Do you know of a person who was converted to Christ in very unusual circumstances? Be prepared to share with the entire group.*

In addition, Paul counsels Philemon to not be quick to judge his wayward slave. In fact, God was working in the entire matter. He writes, "For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever" (v. 15). God had a reason for allowing him to depart. Indeed a much higher reason than Onesimus understood. While Onesimus craved *societal* freedom—freedom as a human being—God wanted to give him *spiritual* freedom—freedom from sin and death! Hence, Paul says, "perhaps he therefore departed for a season." Never condemning Philemon, the Apostle nevertheless prodded him toward accepting a slave as a man to be respected, not an asset to be returned.

Even more, Paul pushed the parameters of accepted Roman culture to breathtaking limits. Onesimus was more than a slave, he was a man made in God's image. Philemon accepted this fairly easily. However, would he accept what Paul would next outrageously suggest? The Apostle writes: "Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord? If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself" (vv. 16-17).



Paul's logic is impeccable. If Philemon has accommodated to Paul's requests thus far—and he has—the conclusion is inevitable. For just as Paul was Philemon's father in the faith, seeing him converted to Christ, he now is no less Onesimus' father in the faith, seeing him converted to Christ. But if Paul is spiritual father to both Philemon and Onesimus, what relationship between them necessarily follows? Brothers! Hence, Onesimus is more than a slave, he is a brother in the Lord to Philemon. Paul is so convinced of the transformation which took place in Onesimus' life, he tells Philemon to receive Onesimus just as he would receive him. From slave to prince, the fugitive returns to Philemon as a fellow follower of Jesus Christ. What a mighty God we serve!

### III. Paul: A Redemptive Soul-winner (vv. 17-25)

As Paul opens up his heart, we see the Lord Jesus on full display. He is so much like our Lord. The redemptive attitude he possesses toward slaves of sin remains a remarkable inspiration for all Christians today.

Notice Paul's words, "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth *thee* ought, put that on mine account; I Paul have written *it* with mine own hand, I will repay *it*: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides. Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord" (vv. 18-20). In this section, the greatest soul-winner in the Christian church reveals two fundamental doctrines which demonstrate how God deals with sin damaged goods in poor lost souls in slavery to sin.

*First, Paul explains reconciliation to God because of the distance sin has driven us from God.* Paul earlier mentioned the need for reconciliation between Philemon and his runaway slave, Onesimus, requesting Philemon to "receive him as myself"

(v. 17). In short, Paul asked Philemon to give him a guest room and no longer keep him locked up in the slave's quarters. Genuine salvation always brings one from sin's pigpen to heaven's penthouse. As sinners all of us stand before God, alienated from Him because of our sin. Yet, in Christ, we have acceptance with the Father. Paul elsewhere notes, "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love" (Eph. 1:4). John insists believers are "accepted in the Beloved" (1 John 4:17). Indeed, in Christ, we possess full accessibility to the Lord of Hosts (Rom. 5:2). Paul's focus on reconciliation with God, based exclusively upon God's grace, remains the cornerstone of Christian experience.

*Second, Paul explains substitution by God because of the debt of sin we cannot pay to God.* Not only does God take the initiative in reconciliation to sinful human

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#### Reflection Connection

*Would you be willing to stand in another's place and bear punishment for them? If so, what conditions would you judge necessary in order for you to make such a sacrifice? In other words, would you consider "substituting" yourself only if the other person was a relative or a close friend?*



beings, He lays everything on the line, making a full sacrifice for our sins. In other words, God substitutes the death of His only Son—His sinless Son—to procure the salvation of hopelessly sinful creatures. To Philemon, Paul requests if he suffered loss because of Onesimus, he was to “put that on my account” (v. 18). Paul was willing to bear the punishment and pay the debt himself for Onesimus. Paul’s example is an authentic picture of substitution, the very substitution Jesus gave when He bore our sin debt on Calvary’s cross.

In closing, Paul offers his profound confidence Philemon would be merciful to Onesimus (v. 21). He further is confident he will see Philemon face to face. Hence, he encourages him to save a guest room for him (v. 22). Other fellow workers in the Gospel have a rich reward awaiting them (v. 23), and the Apostle is convinced Jesus will continue to watch over souls until He comes for them (v. 25).

### Golden Greek Nugget

Paul described Philemon’s effectiveness upon those who knew him as “refreshing” (v. 7). The Greek term translated “refreshing” is *anapauo*, and literally signifies “to cause or permit one to cease from movement.” It chiefly concerns causing another to take rest (cp. Luke 12:19). Philemon’s presence had a certain peace it brought with it when he walked in a room or attended a meeting. What a way to serve the Lord Jesus, the Prince of Peace!

### Wrap Up

*In the study of this brief epistle, we discovered three lives which displayed the Gospel change a person undergoes when he or she comes to Christ. Philemon was an important citizen, fairly wealthy, and most of all, a refreshing saint. Christ gave him a heart of gold. Onesimus was a free spirit trapped in an institution which muzzled his need to be liberated and satisfied. Yet, he would find out the only liberty worth pursuing is the spiritual liberty from sin and death which he discovered, of all places, in a jailhouse! Paul displayed the transformation of the Gospel by never tiring of speaking the old story of a cross upon which Jesus died to offer free salvation to all who believe.*