

New Testament Survey

Class 24: Philemon

Authors: Paul and Timothy

Date: c. 60-62 AD, assuming that Paul’s imprisonment mentioned in vv.10, 13 is the same one recounted in Acts 28; presumably this letter was sent along with Ephesians and Colossians (cf. and the presence of Onesimus in Col 4:9)

Recipient: Philemon, a Christian and slave owner; secondarily, the whole Colossian church (Philemon 1:2, cf. Col 4:17).

Purpose of the letter: Paul wanted Philemon to receive Onesimus back “no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, as a beloved brother” in Christ (v.16).

Key themes:

- The gospel is powerful to transform Christians’ lives and personal relationships (e.g., owner/slave → brother/brother)
- Faith in Christ produces love between Christians
- The encouragement we receive from fellow Christians is meant to *refresh* us regularly (vv.7, 20)

3-Mar-24	Philemon
10-Mar-24	Introduction to the General Epistles
17-Mar-24	Hebrews
24-Mar-24	James
31-Mar-24	-----NO CLASS-----
7-Apr-24	1 Peter
14-Apr-24	2 Peter
21-Apr-24	Letters of John
28-Apr-24	Jude
5-May-24	The Old Testament in the New Testament
12-May-24	Revelation
19-May-24	Our Future Hope

A note on slavery:

“The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.”¹ It would be wrong to assume that slavery in ancient times was exactly like the modern institution. Ancient slavery had significant differences from American slavery.

Slavery in the Roman Empire:

- Was not based on race
- Was compatible with high ranking careers (e.g., imperial administrators)
- Was often entered into voluntarily as a path out of poverty and toward self-betterment and citizenship

Slavery in the Roman empire included the expectation of one person “owning” another person like a piece of property, and was inherently dehumanizing as such. Although in Roman practice enslaved people were often treated better than the least possible level allowed by law, much depended on the character of the master.

Slavery in the Bible:

- Was neither condoned nor explicitly condemned, but simply treated as an existing social convention
- Rules were given to regulate this *de facto* practice (e.g., Deut 15:12-18)
- The OT and NT explicitly teach that it is illegal and sinful to forcibly enslave a person. It was condemned as “man stealing” (Exodus 21:16; 1 Timothy 1:8-10).
- Jesus did not come to demolish the social order. So, although neither he nor his apostles “encourage widespread political revolution and the overthrow of the institution of slavery,

[Paul] did encourage slaves to gain their freedom if possible”² (e.g., 1 Corinthians 7:20-21, Philemon 8-17).

Outline of Philemon

Introduction (vv.1-3)

Thanksgiving for Philemon’s love and faith (vv.4-7)

Paul’s appeal: receive Onesimus as a brother, not as a slave (vv.8-21)

Note Paul’s appeal based on love rather than command based on boldness (vv.8-9)

What is Paul asking Philemon to do: send Onesimus back to Paul (vv.13-14) or manumit him (i.e., free him, see vv.15-16)?

Conclusion and plans to visit (vv.22-25)

¹ L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*, p.1.

² Kevin DeYoung, *Men and Women in the Church*, p.108.