



Bite Size Books of the NT: Philemon

Super Wednesday Bible Study: 11/7/18

1. Brain Starter: Images of Jesus

Jesus Wept by James Tissot

2. Reminder: The Basic Form of New Testament Letters

Opening Salutation: Authorship; Recipient; Greetings and Thanksgiving; Prayer

Body: Instruction in Doctrine and/or Practice; Correction/Call to Repentance; Travel

Conclusion: Paul often included a summary of the letter; Blessing; Further Greeting

3. Pauline Authorship

Undisputed: Romans, 1 Cor., 2 Cor., Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thess., Philemon

Disputed: Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thess., 1 Tim., 2 Tim., Titus

4. Pauline Process

Written to be heard; dictated to a scribe; written on papyrus; 3 columns w/16 characters per column, all in capitals with no spacing or punctuation; delivered by a speaker who would assume the role of Paul – almost like a theatrical performance.

5. The Basics of Philemon

Who: The apostle Paul, who was writing from prison. We do not know where Paul was imprisoned, but speculate it was relatively near the house church he is addressing. The recipient is Philemon, leader of a Christian house church. Again, experts are unsure of location, but a majority believe Philemon was living in Colossae (in southwest Turkey).

What: It is a letter of instruction to the leader of a local house church.

Where: Probably southwestern Turkey.

When: Mid 50's.

Why: Paul wrote the letter about the past actions and future status of Onesimus, a slave.

4. Philemon: Opening Salutation

- V. 1: Paul identifies himself and Timothy as the senders.
 - Note that Paul is identifying himself as a prisoner. Would that have been a prestigious way to be known in the early church? How about now? Paul might be a (metaphorical) prisoner of Christ, but more likely he is a literal prisoner of the state.
 - When it comes to the status of being a prisoner, Paul is flipping social reality with Gospel reality. What are other ways we do this as Christians?
 - What is the effect of having a co-sender?
 - How does Paul identify Philemon?
- V. 2: Experts believe Apphia and Archippus were likely Philemon's wife and son. "Fellow soldier" is metaphorical. They host a house church.
- V. 3: There is that "standard" greeting from Paul. Did it become liturgy or was it already liturgy? Why does Paul include greetings like this?

5. Philemon: Body - Introduction

- Vv. 4-5: Note the *consistent inclusivity* that Paul emphasizes in his expression of love, and the *consistent inclusivity* that has marked the house church at its best.
- Vv. 6-7: These verses are intended to energize Philemon and their partnership. Serving Jesus is not just the "right" thing to do but brings joy to the workers.
- V. 7
 - Paul receives παράκλησις from his ministry – "pastoral care and consolation." It is that feeling of *receiving* pastoral care when you *give*

- pastoral care. This is a word that Paul heavily uses in his correspondence.
- ο σπλάγγνον is “cleaned up” in the translation; it could read “the guts of the holy saints have been refreshed...” The passive points to God’s work.
- ο Philemon as brother: “Christian fictive kinship”
- *How would you sum up the tone and message of the first seven verses?*

6. Philemon: Body – Paul’s Plea for Onesimus

- Vv. 8-11: The backstory of relationships is that Paul converted Philemon, a high status person (hence Paul’s boldness in v. 8). Onesimus (also converted to Christianity by Paul) left Philemon and ran to Paul. Now Paul is sending Onesimus back with this letter.
- V. 10: Notice more “Christian fictive kinship” language.
- V. 11: The “useless/useful” wordplay stems from Onesimus’s name.
- Vv. 12-14: Paul is very diplomatic; he does not want to coerce here.
- V. 15: Passive language indicates that maybe God was behind the separation. More wordplay too – *temporary* separation vs *eternal* restoration.
- Vv. 16-19: Paul drops the hammer
 - ο Transferral and transformation of Christian fictive kinship involving Paul, Onesimus, and the house church. Slave→Brother; Partner Paul→Onesimus
 - ο And now since Philemon and Onesimus are both Paul’s “beloved brothers,” Philemon and Onesimus are now on the same level! To treat Onesimus otherwise would be to ascribe lower status to Paul.
 - ο Charge Onesimus’s debts to Paul (but note the debt owed to Paul in v. 19!)
- V. 20: Recap of v. 7, which promises refreshment to Philemon. More wordplay too: “benefit” is a pun (in Greek) on Onesimus’s name.
- V. 21: Paul uses a word (obedience) normally associated with a slave in order to address a master.
- V. 22: The *preparation* is singular (directed to Philemon) but the *prayers and restoration* are plural. Who do you think Paul really intends for the room?

7. Philemon: Conclusion

- ο Vv. 23-25: Greetings included; a closing formula ends the letter.

8. Philemon: Assessment of Importance

- Christianity brings about a new social order (horizontal, not vertical).
- Reconciliation is part of the plan.
- People can shift their place in the Christian social order more easily than in the secular social order.
- Brotherhood/Sisterhood in Christianity transcends blood.
- Christ unites everyone across family and status boundaries.
- What does this book teach us about Paul’s view of slavery?
- Luther: “This epistle gives us a masterful and tender illustration of Christian love.”
- “Worth pondering is the view that...Onesimus...later became the bishop of Ephesus known to Ignatius and praised by him in his letter to the Ephesians... One advantage of this thesis is that it helps account for the preservation and eventual canonization of an otherwise obscure personal note. However that may be, we are fortunate indeed to have this little giant of a book in the treasure house of our Scriptures.” John Koenig, *ACNT Philemon Commentary*, p. 189.

9. Next Week (11/14) Titus and Jude