



# CAPITOL COMMISSION™

## *Philemon: The Little Letter with a Big Message*

TIM PAULEY

INTRODUCTION TO PHILEMON

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**The capitol can certainly be a contentious place. The two-party system is adversarial from the start. Spirited campaigns and heated debates often cause strained relationships and hurt feelings between those involved. The pursuit of positions of leadership and influence can cause difficulties between individuals even from the same party. More than likely everyone involved in politics has at some time said or done something that hurt someone else or been on the receiving end of the same. As a result, it is important for the follower of Christ to carefully consider and deal with the issue of forgiveness and reconciliation when words have been spoken or things have been done that cause hurt and division. This is vital because the Bible makes it clear that an attitude of forgiveness is one of the key characteristics of one who is truly seeking to follow Jesus.**

One of the smallest books of the Bible, Paul's letter to Philemon, deals with this big issue of forgiveness. It is a vivid, practical illustration of how faith in the gospel of Christ will lead us to make things right with those we have harmed or to forgive those who have done us wrong. Even though this letter is brief (only one chapter with 25 verses), we will take each of our studies during the 2013 regular session to consider this little letter and the big issues it raises.

### **INTRODUCTION: THE LITTLE LETTER WITH A BIG MESSAGE**

(I encourage you to take the time to read Paul's letter to Philemon in its entirety at this point. It is only 25 verses long and will only take you a few minutes.)

This letter to Philemon, along with Ephesians and Colossians are what are known as Paul's "Prison Letters" due to the fact that he wrote them while he was in prison in Rome. Paul started the church in Ephesus (Acts 19), and it is likely that folks who were saved through the ministry there then began the church in Colossae, about 120 miles away. Philemon is closely tied to the letters of Ephesians and Colossians as we see they were written at the same time and sent via the same person, Tychicus (Ephesians 6:21-22; Colossians 4:7-9). Paul continued to faithfully preach the gospel of salvation through faith in Christ which caused him

problems with pagan idol worshippers and religious leaders alike. Ultimately, he found himself on trial before the Roman government, and as he appealed his case, he ended up in prison in Rome. (Acts 24-28).

Philemon was saved under Paul's ministry, probably in Ephesus. He was likely a wealthy individual since the church met in his home and he owned slaves. The letter was addressed to him, Apphia (probably his wife), Archippus (probably his son), and to the church that met in his home.

Onesimus was a slave serving in Philemon's home who evidently stole from his master and ran away. These were offenses which were usually dealt with quite severely. The system of slavery in Rome was undergoing positive changes at this time, but even so Onesimus could have been severely punished, if not killed upon capture. Onesimus somehow ended up meeting Paul in Rome. Paul shared the gospel with him and he repented and put his faith in Christ. At Paul's urging, Onesimus realized he must make things right with his master. Consequently, Paul sent him back to Philemon along with this letter to be read before the church urging him to forgive Onesimus and receive him as a brother.

### **WHY STUDY THE LETTER OF PHILEMON**

I would like for us to consider some of the reasons why we will be studying this little letter and why you might want to consider taking part in our meetings throughout the regular session.

***The importance of the issue of forgiveness.*** We talked in the introduction of how difficult it can be to maintain positive relationships in the midst of the challenging environment of politics. Add to that the emphasis the Bible puts on the subject of forgiveness and we find a great reason to study this letter which has such practical application to life in the statehouse. Here, as well as elsewhere in the Bible, we see that our forgiving others is based upon the fact of how much God has forgiven us. Each of us has sinned greatly against Him in so many of our thoughts, attitudes, and actions. Yet God, through the sacrifice of His Son on our behalf, has made forgiveness available to each of us if we will but repent and put our trust in Him. If then God has forgiven us so much, how can we not forgive others?

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### **BIBLE STUDIES**

**LOBBYIST / STAFF STUDY: TUESDAYS, 12:00 NOON, TREASURER'S CONFERENCE ROOM (EB 54)**

**LEGISLATOR / ELECTED OFFICIAL STUDIES: THURSDAYS 8:00 A.M. & NOON TREASURER'S CONFERENCE ROOM (EB 54)**

# West Virginia

## Philemon: The Little Letter with a Big Message

**It is a part of scripture little known or studied.** Paul tells us that ***“All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness...”*** (2 Timothy 3:16) If indeed we have not spent much time studying this little letter tucked away between Titus and Hebrews, then it will be good for us to spend some time getting to know the big message it contains.

**Philemon clearly demonstrates how the gospel drastically changes lives.** We see Paul who went from being one who hated Christians and sought to imprison and kill them to one who boldly proclaimed the gospel of Christ and was himself imprisoned for doing so. We see Onesimus who went from being a thief and runaway slave to being one who was willing to return to his master to make things right, possibly at great personal cost. We see Philemon who had every (legal) right to severely punish this runaway slave which would have been accepted, if not expected, by the culture of the day. While we do not know for certain the outcome, we cannot help but believe that Philemon heeded Paul’s plea, forgave Onesimus, and accepted him as a brother rather than a slave.

**This letter gives us a great example of how to apply the truth of scripture to a practical area of our lives.** In the Bible we have clearly expressed principles and teaching regarding forgiving others who have wronged us (Matthew 6:14-15; Matthew 18:21-35; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13). Here we have a powerful real-life illustration of how that principle of forgiveness is applied in a difficult, real-life situation.

**Paul’s letter to Philemon shows us how the gospel is the only thing that can truly change a huge moral issue.** Some critics of Christianity will point to the Old Testament’s teaching on slavery and the New Testament’s silence or seeming approval of slavery (particularly Paul’s writings) as one reason to reject it as a whole. We will consider this in a later study but let us say now that there were some major differences between the system of slavery in the Roman Empire and that shameful system in our own nation’s history. Eventually, Christianity did have an impact on the issue of slavery, but it was not ultimately through legislation or revolution. It was through believers like Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon living out the implications of the gospel as they faithfully proclaimed the good news of salvation through

faith in Christ to those around them. Only this, the bold proclamation of the gospel and believers faithfully living out the Christian life, is what will change the tremendous social and moral problems we face in our state and in our nation.

**Studying this small letter will help us see how we should approach all of scripture.** We can quickly read through this whole letter every time we sit down with our Bible. We can easily determine who wrote it, to whom it was written, and the reason for which it is written. This is really how we should approach every passage of scripture. Every book or letter was written by a particular person, to a particular individual or group, for a particular reason. Properly approaching the Bible requires studying to determine what those particulars are. Instead, we often seek out an encouraging verse here or an inspiring verse there. Or we may choose a statement or verse out of context to prove some point we want to make. I hope our study of Philemon will demonstrate for us how to properly study to understand God’s Word.

**Paul’s letter to Philemon, as well as the rest of his writings, shows us the importance and impact of the local church on our lives.** All of Paul’s letters were written to churches, the leaders of churches, or, as in the case of Philemon, individuals who were deeply involved in their church. Their involvement in their church had a great impact upon their lives. This should remind us that the primary means of grace that God uses to help us grow in our faith and become more like Christ is our local church. This is why it is important for you to find a good church, not just to attend but to get involved in seeking to encourage others and allow them to encourage you.

### APPLYING THE MESSAGE OF PHILEMON

- **HAVE YOU FOUND FORGIVENESS FOR YOUR SIN THROUGH FAITH IN WHAT CHRIST HAS DONE FOR YOU?**
- **HAVE YOU WRONGED OTHERS TO WHOM YOU NEED TO GO AND MAKE THINGS RIGHT?**
- **HAVE OTHERS WRONGED YOU AND YOU NEED TO FORGIVE THEM?**