

Can You See the Opportunity

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- Characters: Paul, Philemon, Onesimus
- Paul's personal letter to Philemon from a Rome prison.

- **Background:** Paul met Philemon at Ephesus
 - After Philemon got saved he served with Epaphras as house church leaders in Colossae.

- Onesimus was Philemon's slave.
- **Slavery in Rome:**
 - Spoils of war, so slaves were from every race and culture.
 - People also became slaves as a way to pay back a debt (bond-servants).
 - Slaves could purchase their own freedom (\$645 Denari about \$32,000).
 - Slaves acquired valuable employable skills & could have families.
 - Freed slaves often agreed to work voluntarily for their masters (now employers).
- Onesimus and Philemon had a falling out over something (not specifically told in scripture).
- Onesimus runs away. He would now be wanted by bounty hunters (slave catchers).
- Onesimus went to Rome and met up with Paul (by providence or possibly to get Paul's help).
- Paul led him to the Lord & Onesimus ended up greatly assisting Paul during his imprisonment.

Philemon (NIV) Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker— 2 also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home:

3 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

4 I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, 5 because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. 6 I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. 7 Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

Paul's Plea for Onesimus

8 Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, 9 yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— 10 that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. 11 Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

12 I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. 13 I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. 14 But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. 15 Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— 16 no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

17 So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 18 If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. 19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. 20 I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. 21 Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

22 And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.

23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. 24 And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.

25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

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- In the book of Philemon Paul doesn't tell about Jesus, instead he demonstrates Jesus with his own actions and appeal.
 - In the intro (vs 6) "I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ."
 - Paul highlights the word 'partnership' (Greek; koinonia for sharing, mutual participation).
 - Simply: all followers of Jesus share equally in his love and grace.
 - This is not just an idea but a reality that needs to be lived out. Paul presents Philemon the opportunity to live this out in the situation with Onesimus as he makes his requests in vs 17 & 18. "So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 18 If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. 19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back"
 - Paul's appeal to Philemon:
 - Receive Onesimus back
 - Forgive him of whatever wrong Onesimus may have done to him (Paul bearing the cost of whatever the grievance might have been)
 - Fully accept Onesimus no longer as a slave, but as a fellow brother in the Lord.

- Paul is demonstrating Christ to Philemon by being the reconciler between them.
- Paul's request would force Philemon to embrace Onesimus no longer as a slave but as a social equal and family member, breaking huge social & cultural norms of Roman society.
- This is an opportunity for Philemon to go beyond the rules and roles of culture and live out his faith by partnering with Onesimus in the oneness they have in Christ.
 - (A partnership of grace and love where they are co-equals in all things).
 - The reconciliation seemed to be a success as other historical documents indicate later that Onesimus was an active leader in the church in Ephesus.
- This story can be seen from a variety of perspectives. From the eyes of:
 - Philemon (the victim)
 - Onesimus (the perpetrator)
 - Paul (the reconciler)
- Each of these perspectives has an opportunity to do something of predestined purpose.
 - What side are you on today?
 - What struggle can you now see as an opportunity?
 - What relationship can you now embrace with equality instead of division?