

Walking Out the Word:
The Epistle to Philemon

Important Background to Philemon:

- This is a personal letter to Philemon, who was an important leader of Christians who met regularly in his home in Colossae. His slave Onesimus had run away. Roman slaves during this time were considered property by their owners and could be branded, beaten or even killed. Onesimus' return to his master was filled with risk, except for the fact that he had received Christ under Paul's leadership and was now a brother in Christ to Philemon. Underlying Paul's warm greeting is his apostolic authority to influence Philemon's response. Paul loved this young man and used his moral authority in Philemon's life to convince him to do the right thing. Paul does not overtly challenge the social condition of slavery which had 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire. However, he appeals to the ethic commands of the Christian life to recognize Onesimus' new position as a brother.
- The letter does not reveal the outcome of Paul's appeal. However, there is historical evidence from a letter written 50 years after this epistle by Ignatius, bishop of Antioch who was being taken to Rome to be executed. Ignatius wrote a letter to the Bishop of Ephesus whose name just happened to be Onesimus. In his letter he uses the same word play for Onesimus' name that Paul does in verse 11. Onesimus' name means "useful" or "profitable". Paul and Ignatius both make a pun on this name. Some scholars suggest that this is the same Onesimus, formerly a slave, and now a bishop. That would also explain how this small personal letter was included in the canon of Scripture.
- The Letter to Philemon imparts the power of Jesus Christ to bring healing and restoration to broken lives.

Things to talk about in Walking Out the Word:

- *Discussion in Philemon:* How does this letter reveal Paul's approach to Christian ethics? Why does Paul consider Onesimus' conversion to be a reason for reconciliation with Philemon? Discuss how Paul points to God's deeper providence in verse 15? Talk about how you have personally experienced God's providence in situations in your life that took place before your salvation.