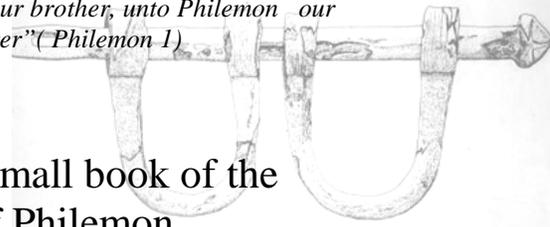




What is the message of Philemon?

“Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer” (Philemon 1)



Tonight we are going to focus merely upon one small book of the Bible. We are going to discover that the Book of Philemon masterfully illustrates the power of the Gospel in solving every conceivable social condition that we can imagine! This tiny book is only 25 verses long; nevertheless, it is majestic in its portrayal of the entire scope of the Gospel of Jesus Christ! Paul wrote Philemon from his prison cell in Rome around the same time that he wrote to the Colossian Church. The individual named Philemon was a wealthy citizen of Colossae, and obviously a prominent member of the church that met in his home. Philemon means affectionate.

We are going to learn that Philemon presents the entire Gospel message of Jesus Christ in a single book composed of only 25 verses. I venture to tell you that the Book of Philemon is probably the least referenced book in the Bible; it is certainly the least referenced book in the New Testament. Many do not know that during the 4th and 5th centuries there was a great controversy concerning this short letter and whether or not it should even be included in the pages of the Bible. This short letter was labeled as unworthy of the Apostle Paul's great mind and considered of no value for Christian edification. In time, wiser heads prevailed as Jerome led a successful defense of the Book of Philemon.

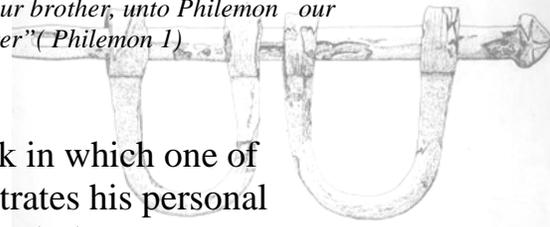
Like the small Book of Jude, Philemon is one of those books that is not composed of multiple chapters and verses; it is so small that it only has 25 verses. However, it is not as if God was looking for material to fill the pages of yet one more book for the Bible. Indeed, Philemon is an essential book of Scripture; it amazingly contains the entire powerful Gospel message. In a nutshell, the book is all about Paul interceding on behalf of a run-away slave named Onesimus which means “profitable.”

The reason that this book is so significant is that it provides an insight into Paul's character unlike any other book of the New Testament! Paul did not use the Book of Philemon to teach any of his marvelous doctrine in the same way that he taught grace in the Book of Romans. Nor does he use Philemon to teach us how to administer the church as he did all the way through the



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letters written to the Corinthians. Philemon is not a book in which one of Paul's great revelations are revealed! Instead, Paul illustrates his personal love for two individuals who were at odds. Paul loved both the run-away slave and his defrauded master. Paul felt compelled to bring these two estranged parties back together! Paul did not write this book from his powerful authoritative apostolic position. Indeed, we marvel at the very depths of that awesome apostolic authority especially when we consider the words spoken by the Apostle Peter, “And Ananias **hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost: and great fear came on all them that heard these things**” (Acts 5:5). Paul did not exercise his powerful God-given apostolic authority; instead, he made a concerted effort to reconcile these two conflicting individuals!

The New Testament frequently uses the English word “slave,” which usually comes from the Greek word “*doulos*,” which is also often translated into the word “servant.” When the Bible portrays an individual acting in the capacity of a “servant” the resulting English word is usually rendered as the word “minister.” However, we recognize that there is a difference between a “servant” and a “slave.” A “servant” is one who is usually privately employed to perform household services; this is an individual who serves another but often has his own home and life. This type of servant-hood usually does not include bonds. Indeed, those who were servants during the Roman empire often chose that lifestyle; and, in many cases they were actually proud of their lot in life!

On the other hand, a “slave” is one who is bound in servitude to another person and serves as an implement for labor for his master. This type of “slave” is actually the property of his master. The Bible says, “Let as many servants as are **under the yoke** count their own masters worthy of all honour, that the name of God and his doctrine be not blasphemed. 2 And they that have believing masters, let them not despise them, because they are brethren; but rather do them service, because they are faithful and beloved, partakers of the benefit.



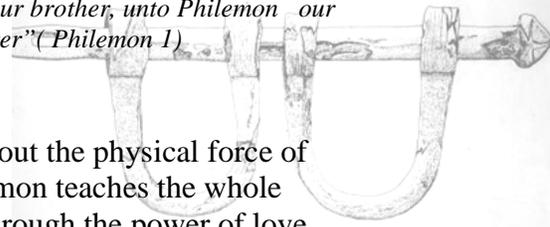
These things teach and exhort” (1 Tim 6:1-2). These instructions to servants “under the yoke” indicate a reference to slaves instead of a privately employed household servant as we have earlier observed. We should think of this type of a slave in much the same fashion that we might view an African slave of early American history.

The bloodiest war that the United States of America has ever known was fought because of



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slavery! Slavery in America could not have been eradicated without the physical force of civil war! We are going to learn that the tiny little Book of Philemon teaches the whole world that God reforms ailing social conditions such as slavery through the power of love instead of by physical force! Essentially, there is always a right way and a wrong way to handle poor social conditions. Philemon reinforces our awareness that God’s way of love is the most powerful force in the universe. We observe the Apostle Paul standing in for the lowly slave named Onesimus who could easily and legally have been killed and simply forgotten.

Despite what many may believe, slavery did not have its origins in the southern states of America! Slavery where the slave is merely considered as yet another possession of his master is an age-old long-standing condition! In fact, the Book of Genesis is the first place where we find the concept of Joseph having been sold into slavery! The key point for us to grasp during this study of the Book of Philemon is that the Bible has a simple and unique solution, which is designed to easily resolve every human condition of life!

We cannot allow ourselves to enter into contentious debate or to be confused concerning God’s will related to the whole issue of slavery. Scripture teaches that we are not to be caught up in, “doubtful disputations” (Rom 14:1). God gave humanity the ability to bring about such negative social conditions as human slavery by pronouncing, “let him (*humanity*) have dominion” over the things concerning the earth. Therefore, we cannot assume that God tacitly approves of slavery just because He has given man dominion over the earth!

Neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament condemns slavery, nor do either of those holy scripts call for the abolition of slavery. On the contrary, the New Testament actually instructs slaves to obey their masters. Notice Paul’s appeal to the slave owner Philemon; he suggests that it would be a better thing for Philemon to forgive Onesimus for his act of rebellion, “perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever; 16 ***Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved***, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?” (Philemon 15-16). Notice that from God’s perspective, His will is to release those living in any form of bondage, “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, ***to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound***” (Isa 61:1).

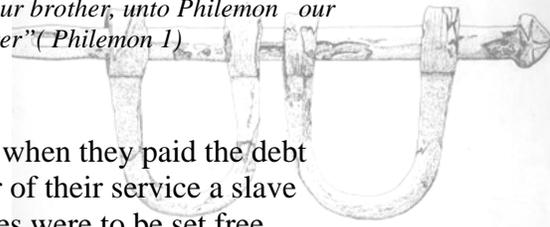


We observe in the Old Testament that no Hebrew could



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permanently become the slave of another. Slaves had to be freed when they paid the debt for which they were sold. It was also true that in the seventh year of their service a slave had to be released. And when the Year of Jubilee arrived, all slaves were to be set free.

Let's realize that slavery in the Roman world did not usually entail severe treatment. Slaves often managed money, guarded children, cooked food, and sometimes were even family doctors. Our modern society generally associates the word “slave” with the ideas of forced servitude, which often includes harsh treatment. However, we should not think in those terms as accurate portrayals of slavery in the Roman Empire.

Slaves were often times accorded the same social status of their owners. Indeed, it was often difficult to distinguish a slave from a free person. A slave could be a custodian, a merchant, a salesman, a teacher, or a government official; further, it was not uncommon for slaves to be highly educated. There were a few slaves who were elders in the church, and thus exercised spiritual authority over the very masters that they served all week. Indeed, selling oneself as a slave in that period was commonly used as a means through which many individuals actually gained Roman citizenship.

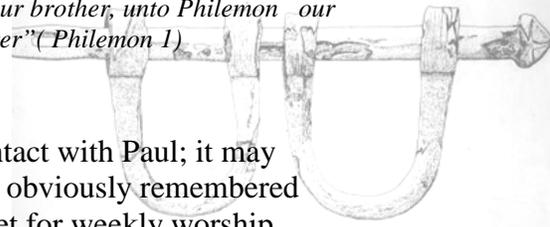
Roman slavery in the first century, especially for house servants, was far more humane and civilized than those horror stories associated with African-American slavery practiced in the United States prior to the civil war. Nevertheless, this does not suggest that ancient slavery was not a less-than-acceptable human condition. Slaves were still considered to be personal property and could be bought and sold and it was always the master's right to severely punish his own private property. It actually aids our Bible understanding if we correctly perceive the nature of slavery in the early New Testament period. That proper perception aids our understanding as to why the apostles did not simply condemn the whole condition of slavery.

Instead of condemning slavery, the Apostle Paul taught that believers who were slaves were to honor, respect, and obey their masters. He taught that Christians could actually defame the name of Christ if they acted contra wise. Paul realized that if the believer was the slave of a heathen master, he might be tempted to regard his master as somehow less than himself. Paul instructed all New Testament believers that any form of high-minded superiority certainly is misrepresentative of the mind of Christ. Further, Paul carefully considered the situation where the believer was the slave of a master who was also Christian. In these circumstances the slave might be tempted to use his Christian relationship as an excuse to act unfaithful. Therefore, the New Testament teaching is that any Christian who is a slave does not have the right to be disrespectful regardless of what kind of master he might have, “Let as many servants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honour, that the name of God and his doctrine be not blasphemed. 2 And they that have believing masters, let them not despise them, because they are brethren; **but rather do them service**, because they are faithful and beloved, partakers of the benefit” (1 Tim 6:1-2).



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Nobody knows the circumstances that brought Onesimus into contact with Paul; it may well have been pangs of conscience for running away. Onesimus obviously remembered his master's home in Colossae as the location where Christians met for weekly worship. He also obviously remembered how Philemon highly regarded Paul. When Onesimus arrived in Rome by some strange “coincidence” Paul too was in Rome. As a result of their meeting, Onesimus converted to Christ. Paul identified Onesimus as, “**my child, whom I have begotten in my bonds,**” (Philem 10). In keeping with his name, Onesimus’ service to Paul became “profitable.” Paul would have gladly kept Onesimus as his own aid; however, he could not do so without the knowledge and consent of Philemon. Therefore, he sent Onesimus back to Colossae, and to his master.



For now let’s forget about the whole controversial issue of slavery and focus instead upon what the Holy Spirit would like for us to learn from this special Book of Philemon – Let’s begin by reading this short 25-verses book:

“1 Paul, **a prisoner of Jesus**

Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer, 2 And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to **the church in thy house**:

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

4 I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers, 5 Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints; 6 That the communication of thy faith may become effectual **by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.** (Perhaps this portion of verse six is the most regularly quoted passage from this often-overlooked book.) 7 For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.

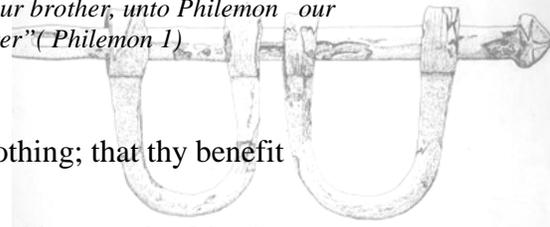
8 Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient, 9 Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ. 10 **I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:** 11 Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:

12 **Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him,** that is, mine own bowels: 13 Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me



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in the bonds of the gospel: 14 But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.

15 For perhaps *he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever*; 16 Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?

17 If thou count me therefore a partner, *receive him as myself*. 18 *If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account*; 19 I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides. 20 Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord.

21 Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say. 22 But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you.

23 There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus; 24 Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers.

25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.”

That’s it! That’s all there is to this short letter. Why? Why has the Holy Spirit even decided to include this short letter within the pages of the Bible? Our answer comes into focus when we make a simple outline of the events that took place in the story of Onesimus. Doubtless, he had heard the gospel message while he was a member of Philemon’s household, before he ran away and ended up in Rome. Nevertheless, he was not converted by Paul’s teaching in Philemon’s home at Colossae. During Paul’s third missionary trip, he visited Colossae, “after he had spent some time there, he departed, and went over *all the country of Galatia and Phrygia* in order, strengthening all the disciples” (Acts 18:23). Some time after that visit, Onesimus became unprofitable to his master because he fled. However, as a result of his conversion after he ran into Paul, he actually became the very thing that his name implies, “profitable,” especially in Paul’s eyes.

Onesimus obviously defrauded his master when he ran away from his service. For this reason, Paul offered to repay Philemon from his own personal money. For whatever value it may be, the historical church documents known as the Apostolic Canons (73) identify that later Philemon actually set Onesimus free. Another historical record, the Apostolic Constitutions (7:46), teaches that Onesimus was later set apart by Paul to become the bishop of Berea; it also notes that Onesimus was later martyred in Rome.

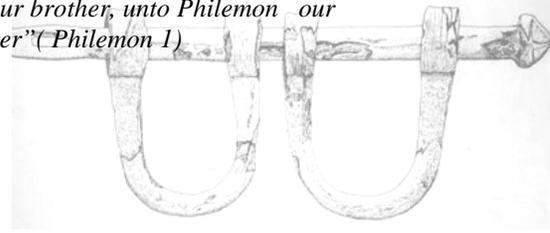
But, what are we really supposed to learn from this book? What can we learn from a run-away slave? We are going to observe (*below*) how an outline of the book is helpful in releasing a concealed message. Essentially, our outline should certainly include the major events referred to in the Book of Philemon as follows:

- A. Onesimus forsakes his master;**
- B. Paul finds Onesimus;**



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- C. Paul identifies with Onesimus;
- D. Paul interceded for Onesimus;
- E. Paul offered to pay the debt incurred by Onesimus;
- F. Philemon receives Onesimus on Paul's account; the slave was restored back into his master's favor.

Think about it; doesn't that outline remind you of something more profound that is recorded throughout the pages of the Bible? Absolutely! This story of Onesimus and Philemon is the exact identical story of the Gospel and the redemption that Jesus Christ paid in order to restore the Father's children back to Him!

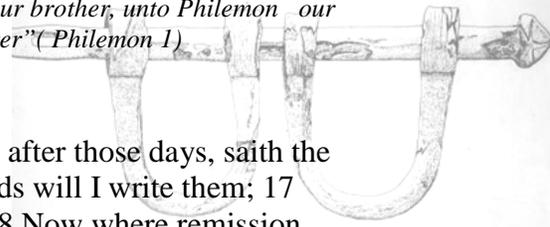
Let's fill in some of the Gospel details of our outline based upon this new perspective:

- **Humanity (Onesimus) forsakes his master:** Think about how humanity in the person of Adam forsook his original master in the Garden of Eden, “Wherefore, *as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men*, for that all have sinned” (Rom 5:12). Since mankind was subject to sin and death, humanity was essentially stolen away from God or kidnapped from fellowship with Him, “that they may recover themselves out of the snare (*entrapment or captivity*) of the devil, *who are taken captive by him at his will*” (2 Tim 2:26).
- **Jesus (Paul) finds humanity (Onesimus):** God did not leave humanity in a lost state; instead, He sent Jesus Christ to the earth to find his lost sons, “For this my son was dead . . . he was lost, and is found” (Luke 15:24). Whether Paul found Onesimus or Onesimus found Paul, the ultimate result was the same, “despise thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?” (Rom 2:4)
- **Jesus (Paul) identified with humanity (Onesimus):** “17 If thou count me therefore a partner, *receive him as myself.*” Jesus identified with our earthly circumstances. He gave up his godhead and came to earth as the son of man, “we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but *was in all points tempted like as we are*, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15). Jesus took upon himself flesh and blood; further, He was tempted in all points.
- **Jesus (Paul) interceded for humanity (Onesimus):** Paul said, “10 *I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:* 11 Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me.” Paul was essentially interceding for Onesimus. In like fashion, Jesus “ever liveth to make intercession for us!” We are acceptable to God because of Jesus' righteousness, “he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor 5:21).
- **Jesus (Paul) offered to pay humanity's (Onesimus') debt; “18 If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account; 19 I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it.”** Likewise, Jesus died on the Cross for us in order to remove our sins and establish a New Covenant between humanity



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and God, “This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them; 17 And **their sins and iniquities will I remember no more**. 18 Now where remission of these is, there is no more offering for sin” (Heb 10:16-18).

- The father (*Philemon*) receives humanity (*Onesimus*) on Jesus’ (*Paul’s*) account; essentially, the slave is restored back into his master’s favor: We who were servants of sin are now received back into the favor of God our father, “God be thanked, that *ye were the servants of sin*, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. 18 Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness” (Rom 6:17-18). Because Jesus became sin for us, the Father does not hold our sins against us!

What is the purpose for the book of Philemon? Essentially, this short little Book of Philemon encompasses the whole story of the Gospel in only 25 short verses! Just like the Biblical “Onesimus” each individual Christian who receives the redemptive work of Jesus Christ will become profitable to the Father as they assume their positions in the family as sons of God! In the past, each of us were prisoners of sin and death; but, we are now alive in Christ Jesus!

So, we have discovered that the short letter written by Paul to Philemon is actually an amazing depiction of the entire Gospel message to humanity. We can now better understand the passage that says, “Then said I, Lo, I come (***in the volume of the book it is written of me,***) to do thy will, O God” (Heb 10:7). We should be able to find the message of Jesus and the Gospel on literally every page of the Bible!

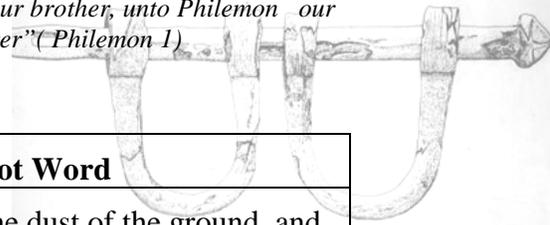
Notice the following example of this very idea: The Genesis chapter five account is kind of dry; it only lists the generations of Noah. What most people do not realize is that the Gospel message is preached in this particular passage about generations. Notice the passage as follows: “This is the book of the generations of Adam. In the day that God created man . . . And Adam lived an hundred and thirty years, and begat a son in his own likeness, after his image; and called his name Seth . . . 6 And Seth lived an hundred and five years, and begat Enos . . . 9 And Enos lived ninety years, and begat Cainan . . . 12 And Cainan lived seventy years, and begat Mahalaleel . . . 15 And Mahalaleel lived sixty and five years, and begat Jared . . . 18 And Jared lived an hundred sixty and two years, and he begat Enoch . . . 21 And Enoch lived sixty and five years, and begat Methuselah . . . 25 And Methuselah lived an hundred eighty and seven years, and begat Lamech . . . 28 And Lamech lived an hundred eighty and two years, and begat a son: 29 And he called his name Noah, saying, This same shall comfort us” (Gen 5:1-29). Now, how could this passage possibly teach the Gospel message?

Exactly how can the Gospel message be embedded in the genealogy passage listed in Genesis Chapter five?” The answer lies in the fact that the names of each individual has a meaning as noted in the following table. When those meanings are combined they reveal a hidden message that lies well below the text:



What is the message of Philemon?

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| Genesis Name | Meaning | Scripture or Root Word |
|--------------|-----------------------|---|
| Adam | Man | “the LORD God formed <i>man</i> of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Gen 2:7) |
| Seth | Appointed | “she bare a son, and called his name Seth: For God, said she, hath <i>appointed</i> me another seed instead of Abel” (Gen 4:25) |
| Enosh | Mortal, | Comes from the Hebrew root <i>Anash</i> “to be incurable” often used of a wound, grief, or sickness that leads to death |
| Kenan | sorrow | Comes from the Hebrew root word meaning “sorrow” |
| Mahalalel | the blessed God | Comes from the Hebrew roots which when combined mean “the Blessed God” |
| Jared | shall come down | Comes from the Hebrew root <i>yaradh</i> meaning “shall come down” |
| Enoch | teaching | Comes from the Hebrew root word for “teaching” |
| Methuselah | his death shall bring | Comes from the Hebrew root <i>muth</i> meaning “to die;” and from the Hebrew root <i>shalak</i> meaning “to send forth.” The year that Methuselah died the flood came upon the earth. |
| Lamech | the despairing | Seems to come from the same origin as the English word “lamentation” which means to despair. |
| Noah | Comfort | “And he called his name Noah, saying, This same shall <i>comfort</i> us” (Gen 5:29) |

Now put all of those meanings in to a simple sentence and notice that these names reveal the Gospel through the hidden message: “Man (*is*) appointed mortal sorrow; (*but*) the Blessed God shall come down teaching (*that*) His death shall bring the despairing comfort.”

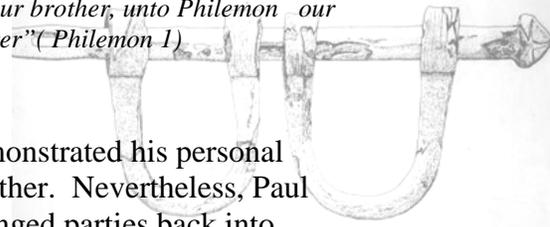
This sentence that arises out of a combination of the names of the patriarchs up through Noah pretty much sums up what Paul wrote concerning the Gospel, “God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him” (Rom 5:8-9).

The message of Jesus Christ should be detectable on literally every page of the Bible!



What is the message of Philemon?

“Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer” (Philemon 1)



We have observed in the Book of Philemon how Paul openly demonstrated his personal love for two opposing individuals who were at odds with one another. Nevertheless, Paul loved both! Therefore, he felt compelled to bring these two estranged parties back into fellowship! All of these same things are true of our Lord and Master Jesus Christ! The Book of Philemon is the short story of how Jesus Christ took upon Himself the sins of humanity in order that they might be reunited with the Father!

Think about it; this short story of Philemon shows us a deeper more profound concept. Essentially, we learn that the Gospel message all by it self has the power to solve **every** conceivable social condition that we can imagine!

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is literally the answer to every single problem that humanity faces! For further study we recommend the *Rivkah Ministries* Bible Studies entitled, “The Blood of the Lamb.” <http://www.rivkah.org/PDFs/030227.pdf> You can obtain this Bible Study from the Internet at: <http://www.Rivkah.org>