

NEW TESTAMENT POSTCARDS

A POSTCARD TO PHILEMON

PHILEMON



The Heart of the Matter

The apostle Paul wrote thirteen letters which make up a large part of the New Testament. Paul wrote his letters during the course of approximately fifteen years, between AD 52 and AD 67. About six years before his execution in Rome, Paul sent a personal note to a man in Colossae named Philemon. This little letter—more like a postcard—is the shortest of all of Paul’s writings, but don’t let its size fool you. It contains a magnificent study in forgiveness. In brief, it is a warm appeal that Philemon, a slave owner, accept back into his household a runaway slave named Onesimus, who had become a Christ follower because of Paul’s preaching. Just as Jesus Christ acts as the advocate for Christians before God, Paul acted as Onesimus’s advocate before Philemon. Paul’s letter to Philemon has great practical value for us today. It teaches us about giving others second chances, the equality that believers have in Christ, and the power of the gospel to transcend cultural and socioeconomic boundaries. In short, Paul’s postcard to Philemon reminds us about grace.



Discovering the Way

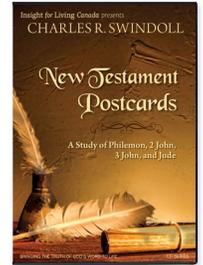
1. Historical Material of Slavery

In Paul’s day, about sixty million slaves lived in the Roman Empire. Slaves were considered property—like human tools in the hands of their owners. While some slave owners treated their slaves as valued parts of their families, others treated them like animals and abused them. Even some Christians owned slaves, but Paul instructed them in another letter to treat their slaves with respect and justice, unlike their pagan, slave-owning neighbors (Ephesians 6:9).

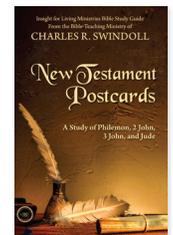
In his letter to Philemon, Paul addressed a serious conflict—Onesimus, Philemon’s former slave, had stolen from Philemon and run away to Rome. When slaves abandoned their masters, their crime was often punishable by death. While in Rome, Onesimus came to Christ through Paul’s preaching. So Paul encouraged Onesimus to go back to Philemon and make things right. Paul sent a compelling letter with Onesimus asking Philemon to receive Onesimus back, not just as a slave but as a brother in Christ.



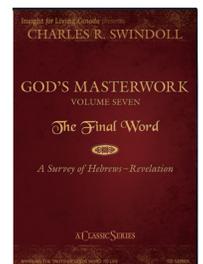
Tools for Digging Deeper



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New Testament Postcards:
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2. Expository Study of the Letter (Philemon 1–25)

Paul's letter to Philemon follows a simple outline but contains a significant request. First, Paul greeted Philemon and the members of his family and reminded them of the grace and peace they had received through Christ. Second, Paul commended Philemon for his love for other Christians and thanked God for the joy and comfort Paul had received because of Philemon. Then, in verses 9 and 10, Paul revealed the heart of his message—Paul appealed to Philemon for Onesimus, Paul's son in the faith. Paul, an apostle with authority, could have *demand*ed that Philemon receive Onesimus and show him forgiveness. But instead, Paul *asked* Philemon to make the right choice on his own. Finally, Paul promised to repay all of Onesimus's debts, shared his desire to visit Philemon, and closed his letter.



DOORWAY TO HISTORY

*The Benefits of Slavery*¹

The Bible doesn't always say what we want it to say. When we stumble upon passages like Ephesians 6:5 or Colossians 3:22, which instruct slaves to obey their masters, or when we read Paul's plea to Philemon to accept and reconcile with the runaway slave Onesimus, we wonder why the Bible doesn't come straight out and condemn slavery. Look high and low throughout Scripture; you won't find a clear-cut condemnation of it anywhere. Not even the dreary description of slavery in Exodus 1 hints at moral outrage—to say nothing of a direct condemnation of the practice.

The Bible often speaks of freedom. But its concern is spiritual emancipation more than physical emancipation. This is frustrating for many modern-day believers because we view slavery in moral terms—as degrading and dehumanizing. However, the picture of slavery in the first century and in the New Testament was often quite different.

Under Roman law, masters had complete control over the lives of their slaves. While many slave owners treated their slaves brutally, others were not cruel. Besides the fact that slaves were expensive to purchase and keep, they also possessed most of the legal rights of a free citizen. Slaves in the Roman Empire had access to money, could marry and rear a family, and were tried in court according to the same laws as free men.²

Roman law did make running away an offense sometimes punishable by death. In those cases the master could register the runaway's name and description with local officials who would place him or her on a wanted list. In most cases, captured runaways were returned to their owners, who might fit the slave with a bronze collar. If the slave persisted in running away, the master might resort to branding the slave with the letter *F*, representing the word *fugitive*.

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Many slaves, however, chose never to run away—not because of possible punishment, but because they often fared better than free men. While many free men slept in the streets of Roman cities or in cheap rooms with their families, slaves usually lived within the homes of their masters—often in a top-floor room of the master’s city house or country villa. Slaves were also provided food and clothing and in some cases as much as “five denarii a month as spending money.”³ (A denarii was the day wage of a free laborer [Matthew 20:2].) Their free counterparts who labored for a living had to live off what they earned without assistance.

For those slaves who wanted to gain their freedom and become Roman citizens, the empire during the first century freed slaves in great numbers. Some freed slaves, however, chose to remain in servitude to their masters. These were known as “bond slaves” and were identified by a ring or tag in a pierced ear (Exodus 21:6; Deuteronomy 15:17).



Starting Your Journey

So how does a first-century letter about a runaway slave relate to Christians today? Every Christian was once a fugitive who ran away from the One who bought us. Our guilt demanded a severe penalty. But God graciously provided an advocate and a substitute who paid our penalty and represents us—runaway slaves—before the Father. Because of Christ, God the Father not only accepts us, but has made us His sons and daughters.

Are you still a runaway slave or have you been set free by Christ? Are you withholding forgiveness from anyone who has wronged you?

ENDNOTES

1. Adapted from Insight for Living, “Philemon,” in *Insight’s Handbook of New Testament Backgrounds: Key Customs from Each Book* (Plano, Tex.: IFL Publishing House, 2012), 92–93.
2. Arthur A. Rupprecht, “Slave, Slavery,” *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 5, Q–Z, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Regency, 1976), 459.
3. Rupprecht, “Slave, Slavery,” *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 5, Q–Z, 460.