

# About a Slave - Paul's Letter to Philemon

## Study 3 - A Life changing Appeal

### Introduction

Authority and obligation are important concepts, particularly in our own day when all forms of authority are being challenged and when very few feel any sense of obligation at all to a higher authority. Self-determination, liberty and independence are the buzz words of our age while words like duty, self-denial and service are seen not only to be out of date, but destructive to our new found freedom.

What is particularly striking about Philemon 8-16 is that although Paul is quite willing to affirm both his own authority and Philemon's obligation 'in the Lord' to obey Paul's wishes, Paul chooses rather to appeal to Philemon on the basis of love (vs9). In doing so he teaches a vital lesson about the importance of motive and choice in the Christian life. There is no doubt that Paul knows what the right thing is for Philemon to do. And there is no doubt that he wants Philemon to do it. But principally he wants Philemon's mind to be convinced and his heart to be changed with respect to Onesimus. Then and only then will Paul be satisfied that Philemon will in fact do what is right.

As we shall see, Paul's approach to Philemon is nothing short of masterful. It is in no way manipulative but forthright and clear. It is full of respect for Philemon and deeply aware of the difficulty he faces with respect to Onesimus. Paul will not act unilaterally nor will he do anything to diminish Philemon's own authority or freedom to decide. He reasons with Philemon as a brother, albeit an older brother who has himself willingly sacrificed many things in the service of the Lord, not least his own freedom. He wants Philemon to feel that the choice is in his own hands (as indeed it is), but he also wants Philemon to understand that those who have authority also in fact face the obligation to do what is right and to use their authority for good. (Note that the NIV's *favour* in verse 14 is better translated as *the good*). Nor will Paul himself compromise what is right just for his own personal benefit. Thus although he would have benefitted by keeping Onesimus in Rome he sends him back to Philemon, trusting that Philemon will in fact see Onesimus in the light of the gospel, both as a man and as a brother, and give to him both his own freedom and the opportunity to serve willingly rather than under compulsion.

**Read Philemon 8-16**

 **Investigate and Think** 

1. What authority did Paul have?
2. What could Paul have done in order to get Philemon to do what he wanted?
3. What approach did Paul in fact use? What word underlines this approach?
4. What primary motivation does Paul want Philemon to be governed by?
5. Why do you think Paul mentions his age and imprisonment?

6. What characterised Paul's own view of Onesimus?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. Although Onesimus has fled from Philemon's service, how had he in fact continued to serve Philemon?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. What words does Paul use to underline the change that has taken place as a result of Onesimus' conversion?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
9. In what way does Paul show his respect for Philemon's own authority and right to decide?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
10. What does this passage teach us about Paul's view of God's sovereign providence?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
11. What new attitude does Paul want Philemon to adopt toward Onesimus?



## **Apply**

1. What has this passage taught you about authority and obligation?
2. What does this passage teach about the motivation that should govern our choices as Christians?
3. In your opinion, how did this passage lay the foundation for a change with respect to the way that slaves were viewed and treated by Christians?
4. In what way would this have been a challenge to others?