

Worship Material
The cost of following Jesus
Material from Roots Bible Study
Sunday 7th September

Begin with an opening prayer

Dear Lord, we come to you from busy lives,
with our burdens and concerns;
help us to place these worries in your care.
May we centre our hearts and minds on you,
so we can worship you as you deserve.
Amen.

Read Philemon 1-21

Bible notes

Philemon is Paul's shortest, most personal letter. It is addressed to Philemon, a slave-owning Christian whose slave Onesimus ran away, possibly as a result of some offence, and has found his way to Paul, who is in prison. Onesimus has also now become a Christian, and is close to Paul who describes him as 'my child' (v.10). Paul would like to continue their companionship, but has decided to send him back to his owner for his agreement.

The puzzle surrounds what Paul is asking Philemon to do. Paul's style is diplomatic – Martin Luther described it as 'holy flattery'. Onesimus was not of great use previously (v.11), but his conversion has changed everything. Paul would like to have Onesimus back by his side. This depends on whether Philemon is willing to accept Paul's offer to recompense him for any offence from Onesimus (v.16) – Paul exerts pressure by highlighting that Philemon is in debt to him even for his life (v.19), as the one who brought him to Christ. But Paul also invites Philemon to recognise Onesimus as a 'brother' in the Lord. Some scholars see a hint here that Philemon should set Onesimus free, now that they are both Christians, for how can a Christian who says 'Jesus is Lord' also say to a human master 'You are my lord'? If Paul implies this (cf 1 Corinthians 7:21-24), then there are challenging implications for Philemon – if he owns other slaves who may be, or become, Christians – and for other slave-owning Christians.

The letter depends on an understanding of humanity renewed in Christ, so that secondary characteristics such as slavery are washed away in baptism and we become one in Christ (Galatians 3:28). The bonds of the new family lead to obligations to care for each other and offer each other hospitality, in a new community that is markedly different from a society divided between slave and free. Both slave and owner need to navigate new relationships, respecting each other as siblings in Christ.

We do not know how this story ended, but perhaps the survival of the letter suggests that Philemon understood and accepted Paul's request and could be proud of their ongoing relationship.

Prayer

Lord, help us to act with love and kindness to everyone.
Give us strength to be bold to stand up for others.
Shine your light through our lives, especially when
we need to act differently to the people around us.
Help us to encourage one another to live out our faith each day.

Amen.

A prayer to conclude

Heavenly Father,
we thank you for this gathering of hearts and minds.
As we depart from this space,
help us to carry your love in our hearts
and to speak kindness into all situations.
In your loving name, we pray.

Amen.