

Philemon

As with the other prison epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians), Philemon was written by Paul during his first confinement in Rome. That Paul is the author is supported by both the external and internal evidence. First, “among the church fathers, Ignatius, Tertullian, Origen, and Eusebius give evidence of the canonicity of this brief book. It was also included in the canon of Marcion and in the Muratorian fragment.”⁷⁰ As to the internal evidence, Paul refers to himself as the author in verses 1, 9, and 19.

The letter is written to Philemon, the owner of Onesimus, one of the millions of slaves in the Roman Empire, who had stolen from his master and run away. Onesimus had made his way to Rome, where, in the providence of God, he came in contact with the apostle Paul, who led him to trust in Christ (v. 10). So now both Onesimus and Philemon were faced with doing their Christian duty toward one another. Onesimus was to return to his master and Philemon was to receive him with forgiveness as a Christian brother. Death was the normal punishment for a runaway slave, but Paul intercedes on behalf of Onesimus.

Date: A.D. 61

Since it was written during Paul’s first imprisonment in Rome, it was written around A.D. 61.

Theme and Purpose:

[Forgiveness](#) is a key theme. Just as God forgives us, he expects us to forgive others, as we find in the [Lord's Prayer](#). Paul even offered to pay Philemon for anything Onesimus had stolen. Equality exists among believers. Although Onesimus was a slave, Paul asked Philemon to consider him the same as him, a brother in Christ. Paul was an [apostle](#), an exalted position, but he appealed to Philemon as a fellow Christian instead of a church authority figure. [Grace](#) is a gift from God, and out of gratitude, we can show grace to others. Jesus constantly commanded his disciples to love one another, and that the difference between them and pagans would be how they showed love. Paul requested that same kind of love from Philemon, which runs contrary to our human instinct.

The primary purpose of this letter, the most personal of all Paul’s letters, was to ask Philemon to forgive Onesimus and accept him back as a beloved brother and fellow servant in the gospel (see vv. 10-17). In the process of this, Paul asks Philemon to charge this to his own account. As such, this epistle is a fitting illustration of Christ who took our place as our substitute (see v. 18). A secondary purpose is to teach the practicality of Christian love as we seek to express the life-changing effects of Christ’s life in ours as it transforms our relationships with others whether in the home or in the master/slave or employer/employee relationships. In the other prison epistles, Paul spoke of this new relationship (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22; 4:1). In this letter we have a

wonderful example. A final purpose was to express Paul's thanksgiving for Philemon and to request preparation for lodging for him when he was released from prison (vv. 4-7 and 22).

Philemon was not the only slave holder in the Colossian church (see Col. 4:1), so this letter gave guidelines for other Christian masters in their relationships to their slave-brothers. Paul did not deny the rights of Philemon over his slave, but he asked Philemon to relate the principle of Christian brotherhood to the situation with Onesimus (v. 16). At the same time, Paul offered to pay personally whatever Onesimus owed. This letter is not an attack against slavery as such, but a suggestion as to how Christian masters and slaves could live their faith within that evil system. It is possible that Philemon did free Onesimus and send him back to Paul (v. 14). It has also been suggested that Onesimus became a minister and later bishop of the church at Ephesus. *Ephesians*, 1).

Summary

The book of Philemon consists of only one chapter.

In verses 1-7, Paul gives his greetings to Philemon and presents his appreciation and gratitude for Him as a brother and worker in Jesus Christ. Philemon was most likely a wealthy member of the church in Colosse. It seems Paul begins by softening up Philemon, as to prepare him initially, before mentioning Onesimus his runaway slave. Philemon was apparently angry with his absent slave. *"I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake"* (vs. 6).

Verses 8-25, consist of Paul's appeal for Onesimus, *"I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me"* (vs. 10). Onesimus had run away and traveled to Rome where he met Paul. While there, Onesimus surrendered his life to Christ. Philemon, under Roman law, could execute his slave for fleeing however, Paul pleads with Philemon to accept his servant. Paul goes one-step further and asks Philemon not only to accept his slave, but also to accept him as a brother in Christ and to overlook his faults and errors. *"For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord"* (15-16). Onesimus would carry this letter back and give it to Philemon. Onesimus is later mentioned at the end of the book of Colossians as a faithful and beloved brother.

Key Words

Key words or concepts are, "Oneness," and "forgiveness in Christ."

Key Verse

15-18. For perhaps it was for this reason that he was separated from you for a little while, so that you would have him back eternally, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, as a dear brother. He is especially so to me, and even more so to you now, both humanly speaking and in the Lord. Now if he has defrauded you of anything or owes you anything, charge what he owes to me.

Commentary

This, the fourth of the personal letters of Paul, differs from the other three, as well as from all other epistles of Paul, in that it is neither doctrinal, nor intended for general church instruction. It has its interest in that it shows by a particular example the application of the great principles of Christian brotherhood to social life. It is written to Philemon, an active Christian of Colosse, a convert of Paul, in behalf of Onesimus, a runaway slave of Philemon, who had found refuge in Rome, had in some way been brought under Paul's instruction during his first Roman imprisonment, and had been brought to Christ. In [Col 4:9](#) he is mentioned as belonging to Colosse, commended as a faithful and beloved brother who had been of great service, and it is there stated that he would return from Rome to his old home along with Tychicus, while this epistle explains the occasion of his return, and throws a practical light on the new relations of master and slave, which could not be done by precept alone.

A few words concerning ancient slavery will assist in an understanding of the lesson of the epistle. Slavery was universal. Aristotle, one of the most enlightened of the Greeks, held that the Creator had made the majority of the human race for slavery. Even the Mosaic law permitted the relation, but mitigated the condition of the slave by protective regulations which made Jewish slavery far the mildest in the world. Under the Roman law the slave was not considered a man, but a chattel without any civil rights whatever, completely at the mercy of his master. The master could sell him, give him away, torture him, crucify him, put him to death, even feed him to the fishes, and there was no law to interfere in his behalf. But when Christ came he introduced new relations between man and man. All in the church were a brotherhood. In Christ Jesus there was neither bond nor free, male nor female. All stood on a footing of equality before the Lord; all were brethren; all God's children, and to be bound to each other by the ties of brotherly love.

Such revolutionary ideas were sure in the course of time to destroy the condition of slavery, but in the meanwhile, Christianity sought to prepare men for the revolution before it was declared, and hence the relation was continued under new regulations. The servant was to continue to render faithful service to a master who was a brother beloved, and the master was to love and trust his servant as a brother, and to do unto him as he would be done by in such a relation. Hence in the early church thousands of masters and slaves met on an equal footing and often the slaves were the bishops who ruled the church and watched over the spiritual welfare of their masters.

Onesimus, an unconverted slave of Philemon, had fled, whether after or before his master's conversion, is unknown. When he was converted the principles of Christian teaching would require him to return, but the conditions of his return are explained in the

affectionate letter which he carries back to Philemon. He returns a servant, but as a more than servant, "a brother beloved, both in the flesh, and in the Lord," and Philemon is desired to so receive him in a tender appeal to his consciousness of how much he owes to him who asks. He is reminded that Onesimus is Paul's own son in the Gospel, as well as himself. A sense of the fault is exhibited, and forgiveness for the offender is required, not by the authority of apostolic power, but of love.

This epistle must have been written about the same time as that to the Colossians, and was carried by the same messengers