

Investigating the Word of God

Philemon



The Roman Theater at Colosse

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An Introduction to Philemon

Philemon. He was a resident of Colosse and the church seems to have assembled in his house (v. 1). He must have been converted by Paul at either Ephesus or elsewhere (v. 19). Evidently, he was a wealthy slave owner since Onesimus was his property (vv. 10-11, 16). His house was large enough to serve as a meeting place for the church (v. 2). His benevolence and generosity toward his fellow Christians is cited in verses five through seven. The apostle Paul requested of him a place to lodge (v. 22). “Probably Apphia was Philemon’s wife, and Archippus, their son.” (William S. Deal, *Baker’s Pictorial Introduction to the Bible*, p. 387)



Onesimus. He was a slave of Philemon who had run away. Verse 18 implies that he may have stolen money from his master to effect his get-away. He fled to Rome which would serve as a populous haven to conceal him. In Rome, he came under the influence of the apostle Paul. Two suggested possibilities as to how this came about. (1) Epaphras had come from Colossae at this time to visit Paul (Col. 1:7-8; 4:12-13). He may have seen and recognized Onesimus and brought him to Paul. (2) Onesimus may have exhausted his funds and stood in desperate need. He may have been familiar with the name of Paul and his situation and turned to him as a “last resort.” He endeared himself to Paul as another “son” in the faith (v. 10) so much so that Paul wanted to keep him in Rome (v. 13). Since Onesimus belonged to Philemon, Paul sent him back to him at Colossae with Tychicus who carried the Colossian epistle along with this letter to Philemon (Col. 4:7-9).

The Author of the Book

“From the most ancient times, the Pauline authorship of this letter has never been questioned.” (Deal, 387)

In the book, the author refers to himself three times as “Paul” (vv. 1, 9, 19). The book’s similarity to the book of Colossians (1, 2, 23-24; cf. Col. 4:1-17) suggests that the books were written at the same time, at the same place and by the same author.

The Date of the Book and Its Delivery to Philemon

“Philemon is one of the four ‘Prison Epistles’ (Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians were the others). It was written in A.D. 60 or 61 and dispatched at the same time as Colossians during Paul’s first Roman imprisonment.” (*Nelson’s Complete Book of Bible Maps & Charts*, p. 438)

That Paul was in prison is seen in that: (1) His listed associates were with him during his Roman confinement (vv. 1, 23-24); (2) He identified himself twice as “a prisoner of Jesus Christ” (vv. 1, 9) and as “the aged” (v. 9). Both of these distinctions would fit Paul’s first Roman confinement.

“It seems quite clear that this letter must have been written during Paul’s first Roman imprisonment, possibly about the time Colossians and Ephesians were written. Some think it was Paul’s first epistle while in prison....Evidently, Paul wrote this epistle just as he was arranging to send epistles to the Colossian and Ephesian churches. Tychicus apparently agreed to accompany Onesimus back to Colossae, taking the Colossian and Ephesian epistles. This was probably about A.D. 61.” (Deal)

Why This Book Was Written

“This very heart-warming letter was written by Paul for the purpose of interceding for the runaway slave who had become a faithful Christian, and not only pleading for mercy for him from his master, but also to remind his master of his duty as a fellow Christian toward this penitent slave.” (Roy Cogdill, *The New Testament Book-by-Book*, p. 117)

“In this intimate letter Paul thus wrote to commend Philemon for his Christian compassion toward the needs of fellow believers (1-7); to effect the forgiveness and restoration of Onesimus by Philemon (8-21); to announce plans of a future visit, based upon his hopes of an imminent release (22); and to send greetings from many of Paul’s associates who were probably known to Philemon (23-25).” (Robert G. Gromacki, *New Testament Survey*, p. 314)

The Themes of the Book

Brotherly love. “Paul’s epistle to Philemon is a testimony to the power of the grace of God in Christ Jesus and to the Christian love which unites believers. While he was formerly a thief and runaway slave, Philemon’s slave Onesimus had been transformed by God’s grace and was now a ‘beloved brother’ of Philemon (v. 16).” (*Nelson’s*, p. 440)

“Does Christianity *really* work? Is the principle of Christian love and forgiveness *really* applicable, practical and possible in difficult daily dealings?...Paul’s brief ‘post-card’ to Philemon reveals that he had no doubt. This is the Savior’s message put to application. This is Christian love put to the test. This is forgiveness exemplified.” (Wilson Adams, *Bible Survey* [an unpublished work], p. 304)

This book illustrates how brotherly love works. Love: is grateful for the best in others (v. 4); seeks the welfare of others (v. 10); deals honestly with others (v. 12); bears the burdens of others (v. 18); and believes the best of others (v. 21).

Slavery. “This letter gives us a clear picture of social and domestic life in New Testament times. Slavery was one of the common practices of the ancient world. People then saw no more wrong in having slaves than in having domestic servants. Some authorities think that within the Roman Empire there were perhaps 60 million of these slaves. This grievous condition was so common it

could not be uprooted immediately, so Christianity regulated it with such principles as to make righteous conduct toward it possible, while at the same time, making it very difficult to continue its inequities and be what Christians ought to be....The letter suggests that social and inequitable evils in this world are not to be solved by revolution or violence but by Christian influence and teaching.” (Cogdill, 118)

“Although the Bible nowhere attacks directly the institution of human slavery, principles for the humane treatment of slaves are found everywhere (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22 - 4:1; I Tim. 6:1-2; I Peter 2:18-25). They were to be treated as people, not property. In this personal letter, however, there is a hint of a principle which if properly applied would lead a Christian master to release his slaves, especially those who were Christian. Paul wanted Philemon to receive Onesimus ‘not now as a servant [slave], but above a servant, a brother beloved’ (16). He later added: ‘Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say’ (21). The words *more than I say* provide the clue. Do they not contain Paul’s hope and prayer that Philemon would not only forgive Onesimus, but that he would also release him from the yoke of human bondage? The principle is clear: If God our heavenly master freed us who were slaves to sin, should we not also release men from human slavery if it is within our power to do so? (Gromacki, 315-316)

Philemon

Keys to This Book

Key Passage: Verse 21

“Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.”

Key People

Paul

Timothy

Philemon

Apphia

Archippus

Onesimus

Epaphras

Mark

Aristarchus

Demas

Luke

Key Words

Effective

Acknowledgment

Consolation

Appeal

Consent

Voluntary

Confidence

Obedience

Key Lesson

Questions on the Text

1. Who wrote this book?
2. To whom is the book addressed?
3. In what did Paul always mention Philemon?
4. What had Paul heard in relation to Philemon?
5. What gave Paul great joy and consolation?
6. How did Paul refer to himself in verse nine?
7. Who was Paul sending back to Philemon? Why was he sending him back?
8. How did Paul want Philemon to receive the one he was sending back to him?
9. According to verse 18, what was Paul willing to pay?
10. What did Paul want Philemon to prepare for him?

Matching

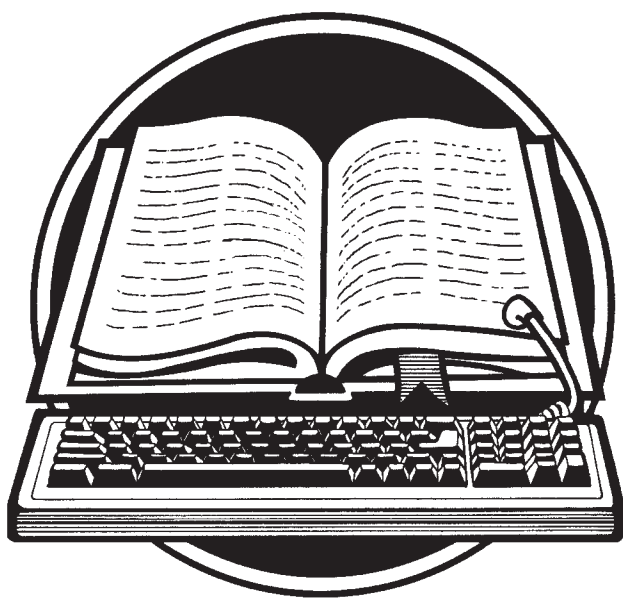
- | | |
|----------------------|--|
| _____ 1. Philemon | A. Now is profitable to you and to me. |
| _____ 2. Archippus | B. My fellow laborer |
| _____ 3. Onesimus | C. Beloved friend and fellow laborer. |
| _____ 4. Epaphras | D. Our fellow soldier. |
| _____ 5. Aristarchus | E. My fellow prisoner. |

True - False

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| T | F | 1. The church of which Philemon was a member met in his house. |
| T | F | 2. Philemon had refreshed the hearts of the saints. |
| T | F | 3. Paul did not want to keep Onesimus with him. |
| T | F | 4. Paul did not want to do anything in regards to Onesimus without Philemon's consent. |
| T | F | 5. Paul wanted Philemon to treat Onesimus as one would treat a runaway slave. |

Discussion Question

How do you think Philemon treated Onesimus when he returned to him?
Why do you think that?



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