

Philemon

Original Historical Setting

Author: Paul

Written: ~60-62 A.D.

Audience: Philemon, Paul's friend in Colosse

Occasion: During the time of Paul's ministry in Ephesus, Philemon had likely journeyed to the city, heard Paul's preaching and became a Christian. The slave Onesimus robbed his master, Philemon, and ran away, making his way to Rome and to Paul. Onesimus was still the property of Philemon, and Paul wrote to smooth the way for his return to his master. Through Paul's witnessing to him, Onesimus had become a Christian and Paul wanted Philemon to accept Onesimus as a brother in Christ and not merely as a slave.

Timeline:

- ~35 AD – Paul's conversion
- ~50-53 AD – Paul second missionary journey
- ~60-62 AD – Paul imprisoned in Rome
- ~62-66 AD – Paul released and writes Titus
- ~67-68 AD – Paul arrested

World Events that occur simultaneously

- ~58 AD – Buddhism of India is introduced to China
- ~64 AD – Rome burns; Nero blames Christians
- ~67 AD – 6,000 captured Jewish rebels become Nero's slave labor force
- ~68 AD – Nero commits suicide

Key text(s)

- 6** – I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith
- 16** – No longer as a slave—a beloved brother
- 18** – If he has done you wrong or owes you, I will repay

Memory Verse: Philemon 6

Genre/Literary style

A brief epistle (letter) written in (Koine) Greek

Features and Structure:

This is the shortest of all of Paul's letters by far, at only 25 verses. It is a classic example of personal communication of the time.

The body of the letter has two main sections:

- I. Paul's request for Onesimus (**1-21**)
- II. Paul's request for hospitality when he visits (**22-25**)

What to look for

- Notice Paul's power of persuasion as he writes to convince Philemon to do the right thing.
 - a. This is not a private letter in that it was written to Philemon and his house church, providing some positive peer pressure for him to what is right. (**2**)
 - b. Paul commends Philemon's love for "all saints" which would include slaves. (**5**)
 - c. Paul seems to indicate that he might be able to force Philemon to do the right thing as an Apostle, but instead wanted it to come from his heart. (**13-14**)
 - d. Paul asked Philemon to accept Onesimus as he would himself, knowing Philemon would treat him well. (**16-17**)
 - e. Paul apparently led Philemon to the Lord and thus "owes him his life." Paul reminded him of this when Philemon considered the debt owed him by Onesimus. (**18-19**)
 - f. When Paul gets out of jail he plans on visiting Philemon which would cause some awkward moments depending on Philemon's action. (**22**)
 - g. Paul implies that those with him agree to his requests by listing greetings from four of his associates. (**23-24**)

Interesting facts

- It is true that Paul did not actively campaign against slavery. However, he clearly declared the equality of both slave and free in Christ. Instead of changing the system that would influence people, Paul changed people who would influence the system.