

# Philemon

## WRITER

From a Roman prison, the apostle Paul wrote this personal letter to a longtime friend named Philemon (See "Writer" in the intro. to Rm). We are not told how long Paul knew Philemon, but the letter indicates that he had known him for a long time, possibly during the time of his ministry in western Asia from the city of Ephesus.

## DATE

This short letter, with the letters of Ephesians, Colossians and Philippians, was written by Paul during his first Roman imprisonment somewhere around A.D. 61 to 63 (Compare vss 1,9,23; Ep 3:1; Ph 1:13; Cl 4:18). Some believe that the letter could have been written during Paul's Caesarean imprisonment in A.D. 58-60 before he was taken as a prisoner to Rome. Others have affirmed that it may have been written during an imprisonment in Ephesus around A.D. 55,56 (See 1 Co 15:32; 2 Co 11:23). Because Paul mentions many of the same people to which he refers in the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, it is probable that this letter was written from Rome during his first Roman imprisonment.

Many of the same people who are mentioned in the Colossian letter are mentioned in this letter, indicating that Philemon was closely associated with the disciples in Colosse and those with whom Paul worked. Key individuals that are mentioned in both letters are Archippus (vs 2; Cl 4:17), Onesimus (vs 10; Cl 4:9), Epaphras ( vs 23; Cl 1:7; 4:12), Mark (vs 24; Cl 4:10), Aristarchus (vs 24; Cl 4:10), Demas (vs 24; Cl 4:14) and Luke (vs 24; Cl 4:14). This letter was probably delivered to Philemon by Tychicus and Onesimus who also delivered letters to the Ephesians and Colossians (See vss 10,12; Ep 6:21; Cl 4:3,7-9). Every indication from the content of the letter, therefore, suggests the date of writing to be in the early 60s during the first Roman imprisonment from which Paul was eventually released.

**PURPOSE**

Philemon worked among the Christians of Colosse and Laodicea (Cl 4:15). From what Paul states in verses 1 and 19, it appears that he was a longtime friend of Paul to whom he was indebted to help because of Paul's former work with him sometime in the past. Philemon was possibly converted by Paul. Several disciples met in the house of Philemon (vs 2). He was the master of Onesimus who was his slave. Onesimus had run away to Rome where he was converted by Paul.

Paul addressed this letter to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus who was instructed by Paul to return to Philemon. Paul thus wrote to encourage Philemon to receive Onesimus, not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ. It was Roman law that runaway slaves either be branded or beaten to death in the presence of other slaves. It is doubtful that Philemon would have inflicted either punishment upon Onesimus. However, in order to reassure Onesimus, and to instruct Philemon, Paul wanted to make sure that no punishment was inflicted on Onesimus when he returned. Paul also wanted Philemon to prepare a lodging for himself because he was confident that he was about to be released from prison.

When reading this letter, we must keep in mind that slavery was a part of the socioeconomic culture of the Roman Empire. Some students believe that as many as a third to a half of the population of the Empire was composed of slaves. In such a society, many slaves and masters were converted to Christianity. The Christian masters thus found themselves in a situation where they had Christian slaves but would not sell these brothers to unbelievers. Therefore, the Christian slaves remained in the care of their Christian masters. We do not know what type of social arrangement was made in such situations, though from this letter Paul did send Onesimus back to Philemon. He expected Philemon to deal with Onesimus after the principles of Christian conduct. In order to deal with the socioeconomic culture, inspired instructions were given to Christian masters and slaves that they maintain their relationships according to biblical principles until the abolition of slavery as a result

of these principles being incorporated into society as a whole (See comments Ep 6:5-9; Cl 3:22 - 4:1).

We would also assume that Christian slaves gained their freedom from their Christian masters since Christian slaves became more than slaves when they were converted. This seems to be indicated from what Paul says in verse 16. Paul possibly hoped that Philemon would free Onesimus and send him back to Rome to minister to him while he was in prison. Paul did not need a personal slave. He needed a fellow worker. He was in a situation where he needed a companion as he stood trial for his life before a Roman court. The sincerity and zeal of Onesimus would have brought him much comfort and assistance.

**Outline:** (1) Introduction (1-3), (2) Philemon's love and faith (4-7), (3) Plea for Onesimus (8-20), (4) Paul's release (21-25)

## INTRODUCTION

**1 Prisoner of Christ:** As in the other prison letters, Paul introduced himself to Philemon concerning that which Philemon already knew. Paul was in prison in Rome because he was preaching the gospel (vs 9; Ep 3:1; 4:1; 2 Tm 1:8). He was there because of the false accusations that had been laid against him in Judea. He had thus appealed to Caesar's court. At the time he wrote, he was about to stand before this court (At 23:11; 25:11; 26:32). When Paul addressed Philemon in this letter, he referred to himself as a prisoner. He did not refer to himself as an apostle because Philemon did not question his apostleship. He was simply Paul, a good friend of Philemon. **Timothy:** Timothy was known by the Christians in Asia Minor, and evidently well-known by Philemon. Timothy was with Paul during Paul's ministry in Phrygia. At the time of the writing of this letter, he was present with Paul. **Philemon:** The few things we know about this brother are that he was a disciple who lived in Colosse which was a city of Phrygia. He was a slave owner, and possibly a wealthy man. Paul probably converted Philemon (See vs 19), which conversion possibly took place in Ephesus (See At 19:19,20).

**2 Apphia:** This could possibly be the wife of Philemon. Archippus: This may have been the son of Philemon (Cl 4:17). He was a fellow evangelist with Paul. **Church [assembly] in your house:** The early disciples assembled in the homes of the members (See Rm 16:5; 1 Co 16:19). When the emphasis of the disciples is on relationships, where they meet is not important. The focus of the assemblies of the disciples must be on praising God and establishing relationships with fellow disciples. The location where these participatory meetings occur is not important. Meetings in large formal groups in public buildings should not exclude small informal and participatory groups in houses. Christians should seek to be with one another as much as possible in order to grow in love and unity (Hb 10:24,25). They must be in assemblies that encourage mutual participation and discussions (Compare comments At 20:7).

**3 Grace ... peace:** This is Paul's literary signature when introducing a letter. The one who had experienced so much grace in his life by being delivered from his past sin of persecuting the church, wants to remind every Christian the reason for his or her existence (1 Co 15:10). Without grace there would be no Christians because there would have been no event of the cross. Christians are who they are because of the cross. Without the cross, they would not exist (See Ep 1:2). The church is the result of people's response to the grace of God that was manifested on the cross (Ep 2:1-10; Ti 2:11).

### PHILEMON'S LOVE AND FAITH

**4,5 Making mention of you:** As with many others, Philemon found a special place in the personal prayers of the apostle who continually prayed for the saints (See Ep 1:16; 1 Th 1:2; 2 Th 1:3). **Hearing of your love and faith:** The reputation of brethren should be about their love for others (See comments Jn 13:34,35; 2 Jn 1-6; 3 Jn 6). Both Onesimus and Epaphras had reported to Paul that Philemon continued to be a faithful and loving person, both toward Jesus and toward his brethren (Ep 1:15; Cl 1:4; 4:12; 1 Th 3:6).

**6** Paul wrote to deal with the problem of Onesimus.

Therefore, he complemented Philemon concerning his reputation and the sharing of his faith. He reminded Philemon of his Christian behavior, knowing that he would continue such in reference to the delicate subject of Onesimus' flight to Rome. What Paul wanted Philemon to do was to see God's forgiveness in his life in order to show forgiveness to Onesimus (See Mt 6:12,13; 18:21-35; Cl 3:12,13; compare Js 2:13).

**7 *The saints have been refreshed by you:*** Philemon was not a nominal disciple. Paul's commendation of his Christian behavior reveals that this brother had a great impact on all those with whom he came into contact. He was a disciple who had impact on the lives of others outside his region.

### PLEA FOR ONESIMUS

**8-12** As a Christ-sent apostle, it is interesting to note that Paul made no apostolic command that Philemon receive Onesimus. The apostles did not authoritatively function in this matter with the church (See comments At 6:1-6). They revealed the truth, but left obedience to the truth to the free-will response of those who heard. Paul here knows the character of Philemon, and thus, he is confident that Philemon will do what is right. **For love's sake:** By appealing to Philemon's love, Paul is assured that love will prevail (1 Jn 4:11). Therefore, based on Philemon's love, Paul is urging him to take the right actions concerning the situation of Onesimus. **Paul the aged:** What Paul says here is for the purpose of moving Philemon to accept his wishes because he was an "old man in prison." Knowing the great friendship between Paul and Philemon, we could possibly assume that Paul had a smile on his face as he wrote these words to his longtime friend whom he had shared many experiences. Paul was probably in his late sixties when he wrote this letter. **My son Onesimus:** Paul had converted Onesimus. For this reason, he refers to him as his son (See 1 Pt 1:22,23). The Greek name Onesimus means "profitable." Onesimus was a slave of Philemon (vs 16), and now, he was profitable to Philemon for the work of the ministry. Onesimus had evidently met Paul when Paul had

formerly stayed with Philemon. For this reason, when Onesimus ran away, he went to Rome to find Paul. He was converted by Paul, and then, instructed by Paul to return to Philemon. **Formerly ... unprofitable:** This could refer to Onesimus' being unprofitable to Philemon as a runaway slave. It could also refer to Onesimus' being unprofitable to Philemon in reference to spiritual matters. Whatever the case, Onesimus was now profitable to Philemon in spiritual matters. He was not only profitable to Philemon, but also to Paul for ministry. **Sending him back:** Paul could have kept Onesimus with him. But he respected civil law in sending him back to Philemon. What was right according to law was that he return to Philemon. In fear of being captured and falling under Roman law that would demand punishment, it is assumed that Paul sent Onesimus back in the company of Tychicus who bore also the letter to the Colossians (See Cl 4:7-9).

**13-16** Paul desired that Onesimus remain with him in order that he be Philemon's minister to him while in prison. However, he freely returned Onesimus to Philemon in order that Philemon have the right to exercise his choice in this matter. Thus Paul's action honored both Roman law and the right of Philemon to make his decision concerning what must be done. **Not ... by compulsion:** If Philemon's actions in this matter would have been by obedience to a command of Paul, then it would not have been a choice on his part to make a decision to do good to Paul. Good leaders give the people options by which they can use their choice to act. Dictators steal away the freedom of people to work out of love. **For perhaps:** Paul could not say that it was in the providence of God that Onesimus ran away to him in Rome (See Gn 45:5-8). What did happen was a wrong choice on the part of Onesimus that turned into good by his obedience to the gospel. God can use our wrong choices to bring about good, but He does not move us to make wrong choices. **In the flesh and in the Lord:** Onesimus' conversion did not free him from his civil duties as a slave. He possibly remained a slave to Philemon. However, now that he had obeyed the gospel, he was also a brother in Christ. On-

esimus was now more than a physical slave to Philemon. Philemon should now consider him above a mere slave. In these words, Paul was giving his indirect teaching that slavery would eventually be abolished from the Christian community as Christian masters considered their Christian slaves to be more than slaves.

**17-20** Paul indirectly obligated Philemon to receive Onesimus. Paul and Philemon had previously labored together in evangelism (vs 1). Paul was now asking Philemon to accept Onesimus as a fellow laborer as Paul had accepted him. In order to emphasize his request to Philemon, Paul stated that he would stand surety for any financial loss that Philemon may have incurred as a result of Onesimus' departure. **You owe me:** This was Paul's subtle reminder that Philemon was indebted to him for his possible conversion of Philemon. Paul had made great sacrifices in order to preach the gospel free of charge to those as Philemon who obeyed the gospel in order to receive the free gift of God's grace. Paul played on the conscience of Philemon in order that he deal justly with Onesimus according to all that Paul had done to him. If Philemon did according to what Paul requested, then Paul would be spiritually refreshed. He would be reassured that his labors on behalf of Philemon would have produced gospel behavior. For this reason Paul requested that others follow his example (1 Co 11:1).

### PAUL'S IMPENDING RELEASE

**21,22** **You will do even more:** It is possible that Paul was confident that not only would Philemon set Onesimus free, but that Philemon would also send Onesimus to minister to him in prison (vss 13,14). Whatever happened, Paul was sure that Philemon would follow his conscience in this matter. **Prepare ... a guest room:** All those who had heard of Paul's imprisonment were praying for him. He trusted that these prayers were about to be answered in his release (Ph 1:25; 2:24). The pronouns "you" and "your" are plural in the text, and thus, Paul was requesting that all the disciples in the area where Philemon lived should pray for his release. Paul does not explain how God would answer these prayers. He simply

had confidence that God can work in a way that would bring about his release. If this letter were written during Paul's first Roman imprisonment of A.D. 61-63, then it is possible that after his release he revisited the area of Asia Minor (See comments At 28:31). Paul here shows great confidence that God will answer the prayers of the saints, and thus, he requests that Philemon prepare a place for him to stay.

**23,24** Epaphras was possibly an evangelist who worked in the area of Colosse and had journeyed to Rome on behalf of the church (Cl 1:7; 4:10-13). Paul refers to him as a fellow prisoner. Reference could possibly be in the spiritual sense that he was a prisoner in the service of the Lord (See Cl 4:10). However, it was not uncommon for evangelists in those times, and especially in the latter part of the 1st century and into the 2nd century, to be imprisoned for their preaching of the gospel. Paul also mentions the other fellow evangelists who were with him. **Mark:** (At 12:12,25; 15:27-39; Cl 4:10; see "Writer" in the intro. to At). **Aristarchus:** (At 19:29; 27:2; Cl 4:10). **Demas:** (Cl 4:14; 2 Tm 4:10). **Luke:** This was the beloved physician (2 Tm 4:11; see "Writer" in intro. to Lk).

**25 Grace:** See Gl 6:18; Ph 4:23; 2 Tm 4:22. In closing, Paul calls on the favor of Jesus for the entire welfare of Philemon. It is Paul's prayer that Jesus show special favor to this godly man in whom much trust placed to carry on with the preaching of the gospel (See comments 3 Jn 2).

Commentary by Roger E. Dickson

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## ABBREVIATIONS

### OLD TESTAMENT

Genesis - **Gn**, Exodus - **Ex**, Leviticus - **Lv**, Numbers - **Nm**, Deuteronomy - **Dt**, Joshua - **Ja**, Judges - **Jg**, Ruth - **Rt**, 1 Samuel - **1 Sm**, 2 Samuel - **2 Sm**, 1 Kings - **1 Kg**, 2 Kings - **2 Kg**, 1 Chronicles - **1 Ch**, 2 Chronicles - **2 Ch**, Ezra - **Er**, Nehemiah - **Ne**, Esther - **Et**, Job - **Jb**, Psalms - **Ps**, Proverbs - **Pv**, Ecclesiastes - **Ec**, Song of Solomon - **Ss**, Isaiah - **Is**, Jeremiah - **Jr**, Lamentations - **Lm**, Ezekiel - **Ez**, Daniel - **Dn**, Hosea - **Hs**, Joel - **Jl**, Amos - **Am**, Obadiah - **Ob**, Jonah - **Jh**, Micah - **Mc**, Nahum - **Nh**, Habakkuk - **Hk**, Zephaniah - **Zp**, Haggai - **Hg**, Zechariah - **Zc**, Malachi - **Ml**

### NEW TESTAMENT

Matthew - **Mt**, Mark - **Mk**, Luke - **Lk**, John - **Jn**, Acts - **At**, Romans - **Rm**, 1 Corinthians - **1 Co**, 2 Corinthians - **2 Co**, Galatians - **Gl**, Ephesians - **Ep**, Philippians - **Ph**, Colossians - **Cl**, 1 Thessalonians - **1 Th**, 2 Thessalonians - **2 Th**, 1 Timothy - **1 Tm**, 2 Timothy - **2 Tm**, Titus - **Ti**, Philemon - **Pl**, Hebrews - **Hb**, James - **Js**, 1 Peter - **1 Pt**, 2 Peter - **2 Pt**, 1 John - **1 Jn**, 2 John - **2 Jn**, 3 John - **3 Jn**, Jude - **Jd**, Revelation - **Rv**