

1 Philemon – Who, What, Why, When?

- ◆ **Written by whom?**
 - Paul, the apostle. Almost every commentary agrees.
- ◆ **Written when and where?**
 - Possibly as early as AD 58, or as late as AD 60. Paul was probably in prison in Rome when he wrote the letter. It was most likely written before the letter to Colossae.
- ◆ **Written to whom?**
 - Written to Philemon, a wealthy Gentile Christian slave owner. He lived in the Lycus Valley in Asia Minor. The house church met in his home. Archippus is also listed as a recipient of the letter, and may have been Philemon's son and the local pastor. Apphia is also named, but her relationship to Philemon is unknown, though she was possibly his wife.
- ◆ **What form?**
 - A personal letter of commendation, recommendation and request.
- ◆ **What's it about?**
 - Onesimus was a runaway slave. Paul, who came to know him and his character, is urging Philemon to take Onesimus back into his household. From what Paul says, Onesimus became a Christian through Paul.
- ◆ **Written for what purpose?**
 - Paul, Philemon and Onesimus were from three different worlds, united in Christ. The ethical demands of Christianity are motivated by the love of Christ, not obligation.

2 Philemon – Chapter 1– Scripture Questions

1. How does Paul describe himself? (vs. 1)
2. Why does Paul, in his prayers, thank God for Philemon? (vs. 5)
3. What has Philemon done to give Paul great joy and encouragement? (vs. 7)
4. On what basis is Paul appealing to Philemon? (vs. 9)
5. For whom is Paul appealing? (vs. 10)
6. What is Paul doing with Onesimus? (vs. 12)
7. Why did Paul want to keep Onesimus with him? (vs. 13)
8. Paul said that he wanted any favors done to be _____, not forced. (vs. 14)
9. How does Paul hope that Onesimus' status will change with Philemon? (vs. 15, 16)
10. What is Paul willing to do to make things right between Onesimus and Philemon? (vs. 17-19)
11. Of what was Paul confident? (vs. 21)
12. What was the 'one thing more' that Paul asked of Philemon? (vs. 22)

3 Philemon – Chapter 1- What did it mean to them?

From prison, Paul writes on behalf of himself and Timothy to Philemon, a slave-owner in Colossae who has a house church meeting in his home. Paul speaks well and warmly of Philemon. Then Paul appeals to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus, a runaway slave who has become not only a Christian but a person very dear to Paul. Paul asks Philemon to accept Onesimus back as a brother in the Lord, as a special favor to Paul. He also asks that Philemon save a guest room for him, as Paul hopes to come and visit.

From Paul's other writings, we know that his over-riding concern was that the Gospel be preached. Everything else, while not unimportant, was secondary to that drive. To that end, he wanted the believers to live exemplary lives. As much as possible, they were to live up to the best of their communities. Within the church itself, relationships were to be as Christ-like as possible, submitting to one another, living in peace, encouraging one another and holding one another accountable. When Paul begs Philemon to take Onesimus back, all of his priorities are covered. A slave returns, calming societal concerns; the house church is reminded of equality between members; relationships are refocused on Christ and each other in love and forgiveness.

We can look at this letter as an object lesson in dealing with disruptions in a congregation. Paul is the loving outsider who brings about the reconciliation. Both parties are acknowledged and treated respectfully. The breach is addressed rather than ignored. There are expectations of Christian behavior toward one another. Reparations are offered for losses. The future is envisioned in a positive, hopeful way.

4 Philemon – Chapter 1 - Application Questions

1. Why do you think this letter is in the Bible? What good does it do?
2. Philemon is described by Paul as a faithful, loving person—but he is a slave owner. Why didn't Paul take this opportunity to criticize slavery?
3. Onesimus may have stolen from Philemon when he ran. Paul offers to make it good. Have you ever 'made things right' on behalf of someone else? How did it work out?
4. This matter could have been considered a personal business matter since slaves were considered property. How intertwined should church and personal life be? Should people feel free to campaign for public office in Sunday School? Should it be okay for people to try and sell things to other believers in Coffee Fellowship time?