

Philemon

Introduction, Background, and Argument

1. Title and Destination

1.1 ΠΡΟΣ ΦΙΛΗΜΟΝΑ - “To Philemon”

1.2 The intended recipient of the letter is Philemon. He evidently lived in Colosse with his wife where the church met (2).

1.3 If Philemon owned more slaves besides Onesimus it would indicate he was wealthy. Further, the early church met in homes, usually of someone who was wealthy and had the space.

1.4 One third of the population in urban areas were slaves. These slaves were more like household servants in Victorian England than slaves in antebellum United States.¹

1.5 Philemon’s was probably related to Archippus, the man who took over the pastorate in Colosse when Epaphras was imprisoned with Paul (2; Col 4:12, 17)

1.6 Philemon’s home is where the church met at Colosse (2).

1.7 Philemon was a convert of Paul when he was in Ephesus (19)

2. Authorship

2.1 External evidence

2.1.1 Muratorian Canon

2.1.2 Ignatius

2.1.3 Origen

2.1.4 Eusebius

2.1.5 Marcion

2.2 Internal evidence

2.2.1 Paul’s name is used repeatedly (1, 9, 19)

2.2.2 Those associated with Paul are mentioned by name (1, 23, 24). These associates are also mentioned in other letters written at the same time (Col 4:9-17)

2.2.3 The author is older in age, which is consistent with how old Paul would be at the time of writing.

2.2.4 Paul’s usual style of beginning with thanksgiving and prayer is found in Philemon (4-7)

3. Date

3.1 Paul mentions his imprisonment several times in the letter (1, 9-10, 13, 22-23)

3.2 Paul mentions several of the same people in this letter that he mentions in Colossians.

3.3 These two facts together indicate Philemon was written at the same time as Colossians.

3.4 Thus, Philemon was written during Paul's 1st Roman imprisonment (Acts 28:16-31 , which indicates it was written about the same time as Ephesians and Colossian.

3.5 There is no hint of Paul's soon release in Ephesians or Colossians, but Paul did expect release Philemon and near release in Philippians (1:19-21, 25, 27; 2:24).

3.6 This indicates that Philemon was written after Ephesians and Colossians, but before Philippians.

3.7 It should be dated AD61, about the same time as Colossians.

4. Occasion

While Paul was in prison in Rome he met Onesimus. This man believed in Christ and began to help Paul. Paul eventually learned he was a runaway slave who in some way owed his master. Paul knew Onesimus needed to make amends and be reconciled with his master. When Paul discovered that his master was Philemon, a man who had believed in Christ under his ministry when he was in Ephesus, he sent Onesimus bearing this letter with the appeal that Philemon be reconciled to Onesimus.

5. Purpose(s) of Writing

5.1 To commend Philemon for showing compassion to believers (7).

5.2 To appeal to Philemon to be reconciled to Onesimus (10-21).

5.3 To announce his plans to visit Philemon upon his release (22).

5.4 To send greetings from his associates (23-24).

6. Theme(s)

6.1 Forgiveness and reconciliation

7. Outline

8.1 Introduction (1-7)

8.2 Paul's Appeal to Philemon (8-22)

8.3 Conclusion (23-25)

8 Uniquenesses

8.1 Philemon is only 334 words, the shortest of Paul's letters.

8.2 Philemon is written in Paul's hand and not by an amanuensis.

8.3 Philemon is the most intimate of all Paul's epistles.

8.4 Philemon shows Paul's applications of the doctrines he taught especially in Ephesians and Colossians:

8.4.1 Paul's triumph over difficult circumstances (1, 9), temptation to exert personal authority (8, 9), and temptation to fulfill personal desires (13, 14).

- 8.4.2 Onesimus' conversion that resulted in him changing from *useless* to *useful*.
- 8.4.3 Philemon demonstrates faith and love (5, 7).
- 8.4.4 Paul's relationship with Philemon shows that love does not seek its own (1 Cor 13:5).
- 8.4.5 Paul's relationship with Onesimus shows that love endures all things (1 Cor 13:7)
- 8.4.6 Presumably Onesimus' relationship with Philemon illustrates that "love is patient, love is kind...it keeps no record of wrongs" (1 Cor 13:4, 5).
- 8.4.7 Paul's hope that Philemon would accept Onesimus illustrates how God accepts us.
- 8.4.8 Paul's statement that Philemon owed him because God had saved him through Paul illustrates how we owe obedience to God.
- 8.4.9 Paul illustrated what it looks like to be filled with Spirit/word of Christ dwell richly by his diplomacy
- 8.5 Philemon is the only letter where Paul shows how to use diplomacy and tact to deal with a controversial issue. Baxter called it a "a little masterpiece of diplomacy."
- 8.6 Philemon shows several methods Paul used to persuade (7, 8-9, 13-14, 15-16, 17, 18-19, 20, 21).
- 8.7 Philemon shows the practical outworking of the doctrines of forgiveness and reconciliation.
- 8.8 Philemon gives an excellent example of the doctrine of justification in the concept of "charge that to my account" (18)
- 8.9 Philemon gives an excellent example of how Paul viewed God's sovereignty over situations (15-16).

9. Keys to Philemon

- 9.1 Key Word: Forgiveness
- 9.2 Key Verse: Philemon 15-16, "For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, 16no 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."
- 9.3 Key Idea: Our relationship with God through Christ should change how we live in our relationships with others.

¹ Constable, Tom. Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible. Galaxie Software, 2003.