

Introduction to Philemon
Philemon 1:1-25
Key Verse: 1:16-17

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WELCOME ONESIMUS AS A BROTHER IN THE LORD

Key Verses: 1:16-17

“...no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord. So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.”

Author and Place of Writing

Verse 1 suggests that both Paul and Timothy were sending this letter. But verse 19a makes it clear that Paul himself wrote at least part of the letter with his own hand. There are several indications that Paul wrote the letter from prison (1,9,23), while he was in chains (10,13). He was likely somewhere in Rome.

Recipients and Date

Paul wrote this letter to his dear friend and fellow worker Philemon (1b). He also addressed Apphia and Archippus and the church that met in their home (2). Perhaps Apphia was Philemon's wife, and Archippus, their son. Paul said to Philemon in verse 19, **“you owe me your very self,”** suggesting that Paul was the one who led him to Christ. Philemon was also a slave owner (16). Combined with the fact that the church met in his home, Philemon seems to have been a man of means. He also was known for his love for all God's people, for his faith in the Lord Jesus (5) and for refreshing the hearts of the Lord's people (7). It seems that after his conversion, he used his means to serve God's people.

At the end of Philemon Paul mentions some people who were with him in Rome besides Timothy: Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke. These same people are mentioned in Paul's letter to the Colossians (Col4:9,10,12,14). Paul also addresses Archippus (Php1:2) in Colossians (4:17). Paul sent his letter to the Colossians with Tychicus along with Onesimus (Col4:9). Put together, this evidence seems to suggest that Paul's letter to Philemon about Onesimus was

written at the same time he wrote his letter to the Colossians. If so, Philemon was written during Paul's first Roman imprisonment, sometime between A.D. 60--61. For these reasons, Paul's letter to Philemon has been grouped with both Paul's other prison epistles of Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians, and his pastoral epistles of 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus.

Context

This letter mainly concerns a slave named Onesimus who belonged to Philemon and, at one time, had been rather useless; but after being with Paul and receiving the gospel, was changed and became useful (11,16). On this basis Paul is appealing to Philemon to welcome Onesimus as a dear brother in the Lord (16).

However, Paul was not necessarily asking Philemon to give Onesimus his freedom. In other places in the New Testament Paul gives clear instructions to slaves. He tells them in Colossians 3 to obey their earthly masters in everything and to work for them with all their hearts as working for the Lord (Col3:22-23). In Ephesians 6 he tells slaves to serve masters wholeheartedly as serving the Lord (Eph6:5-8). The reason slaves should work hard for their masters is that they can expect a reward from the Lord (Col 3:24; Eph 6:8). In 1 Timothy 6:1-2 Paul explicitly tells slaves not to expect freedom from their Christian masters, but to fully respect and serve them even better as dear fellow believers. And Paul's reasoning for not attacking the institution of slavery was **“so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered”** (1Ti6:1b). There was a danger that some believers could make use of freedom in Christ to justify social rebellion. This would lead those in the non-believing world to misunderstand and mistrust the Christian message and its influence. In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul encourages Christian slaves not to be troubled by their condition, but to gain their freedom if they could, and definitely not to sell themselves into slavery to other human beings (1Co7:21-23).

Paul was mainly concerned about the effects of the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus within the Christian community. Paul's view was that in Christ **“there is neither slave nor free...for you are all one in Christ Jesus”** (Gal3:28). This was a directive for relationships within the Christian community more than in society.

According to tradition, Onesimus became Bishop in Ephesus, succeeding Timothy. During the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian, in the persecution of

Trajan, Onesimus was imprisoned in Rome and may have been martyred by stoning (although some sources claim that he was beheaded).

Characteristics

Philemon is certainly a very personal letter-not written to a group of people, but to an individual, Philemon-a man who was using his home as a place for the church to meet (2). It is the shortest of Paul's letters. It is not at all doctrinal, nor is it dealing with a number of church issues. Rather, this letter has one clear goal: to express Paul's shepherd's heart for one person, Onesimus, and to **"appeal"** to Philemon **"on the basis of love,"** to **"welcome"** Onesimus as a **"brother in the Lord"** (9,10,16-17).

Theme

The story of Onesimus' change reveals the power of the gospel to transform a person from useless into useful, from someone with a slave mentality to a son and a dear brother in the Lord. Paul's appeal teaches how the Christian community should receive such a person transformed by the gospel, regardless of his or her social, economic, moral, educational or ethnic background.

Purpose of Our Study

Through this study we want to learn a shepherd's heart for one person, and how to accept people as brothers and sisters in the Lord, regardless of their human condition. We also want to learn how to help people in the Christian community to restore broken relationships based on Jesus' forgiving love.