

Philemon

OVERVIEW

Paul's "postcard" to Philemon is the shortest and perhaps the most intimate of all his letters. It is a masterpiece of diplomacy and tact in dealing with a festering social sore in the Roman Empire: human slavery. Onesimus, a slave of the Philemon, had stolen from his master and ran away to Rome. It was there in Rome that he came in contact with Paul (who was under house arrest, Acts 28:16-30) and with the claims of Jesus Christ. After his conversion, Onesimus faced yet another confrontation, this time with his estranged master Philemon. Paul sends Onesimus back with this letter in hand, urging Philemon to extend forgiveness. Onesimus had left him as a bondservant, but now he was returning as his brother in the Lord. Paul's request is simple, "receive him as you would me" (verse 17).

INTRODUCTION

Does Christian brotherly love really work, even in situations of extraordinary tension and difficulty? Will it work between a prominent slave owner and one of his runaway slaves? Paul has no doubt! He writes to Philemon, his beloved brother and fellow worker, on behalf of Onesimus - a deserter, a thief and formally worthless slave, but now he is Philemon's brother in Christ. With much tact and tenderness, Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus back with the same gentleness with which he would receive Paul himself. Any debt Onesimus owes, Paul promises to make good. Knowing Philemon, Paul is confident that brotherly love and forgiveness will win the day.

AUTHOR

Philemon is recognized as Paul's work and is one of the four Prison Epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon). It is supported externally by consistent tradition and internally by no less than three references to Paul (vv. 1, 9, 19).

DATE & SETTING

Philemon was written in A.D. 60 or 61 and sent at the same time as Colossians during Paul's first Roman imprisonment. Philemon 22 reflects Paul's confident hope of release: "prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you."

Philemon was a resident of Colossae (vv. 1-2) and a convert of Paul, perhaps through an encounter with Paul in Ephesus during Paul's third missionary journey. Philemon's house was large enough to serve as the meeting place for the church there (v.2). He was benevolent to other believers (vv. 5-7), and his son Archippus evidently held a position of leadership in the church (Colossians 4:17; Philemon 2). Philemon may have had other slaves in addition to an Onesimus, and he was not alone as a slave owner among the Colossian followers of Jesus (Colossians 4:1). This letter and his response would provide guidelines for other master-slave relationships.

According to Roman law, runaway slaves such as Onesimus could be severely punished or condemned to a violent death. It is doubtful that Onesimus would have returned to Philemon even with this letter if he had not become a believer in Christ.