

Philemon

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Author This letter was written by Paul, who was in prison at the time, and Timothy, who was the leader of the church in Ephesus. (1:1).

Written to Philemon. The only information we know about Philemon is found in the letter. Philemon may have come from Colosse and obviously knew Paul well because he is referred to *our dear friend and co-worker*. Paul may have known Philemon while he was in Ephesus (Acts 19:8-10 and 20:31). Obviously, he had built a strong relationship with Philemon as this is a very personal letter. The letter is also addressed to *Apphia, our sister*, and to *Archippus our fellow-soldier* and to the church that met *in their home*, and greetings are sent from Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, who were Paul's *fellow-workers*. This shows the close relationships that had developed in the early church and how the whole church community is affected when one of its members gets into difficulties. (1 Corinthians 12:26).

Place May have been written in Ephesus or in Rome. The New Testament doesn't describe Paul being in prison in Ephesus, but he certainly had much opposition in the three years he was there and is likely to have spent some of that time in prison. It is only 160km from Ephesus to Colosse so it would have been relatively easy for Paul and Philemon to meet. Paul was intending to visit Philemon after he was released from prison (verse 22). If the letter was written while Paul was in prison in Rome it is likely that it was written at about the time he wrote Ephesians and Colossians. (AD 57-62).

Purpose Philemon's slave, Onesimus, had done something wrong and had then run away and somehow met Paul. He had become a Christian (v10) and had been a great helper for Paul while he was in in prison. Paul would have liked Onesimus to stay with him but doesn't want to do anything without Philemon's consent. He writes to Philemon asking that he would take Onesimus back, no longer as a slave, but as a dear brother in the Lord. The tone of the letter indicates that Paul is wanting Philemon to think through his attitudes to his slaves and to recognise the different relationship that comes when people become brothers and sisters in Christ. Philemon should treat his slaves in the same way that he would treat Paul.

It is likely that Philemon agreed to Paul's request and freed Onesimus. If he had not freed him there would have been no reason to preserve the letter. Some think that Philemon later became one of the leaders in the church in Ephesus.

Theme Forgiveness.

Key verses

Onesimus is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord. So, if you consider me to be a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 2:16,17.

Outline

1.1-1.3 Greeting

Paul and Timothy send their greetings to Philemon, Apphia, Archippus and the church that met in their home. (Early New Testament churches typically met in homes).

1:4-7 Prayer for Philemon

Paul thanks God for Philemon's *faith in the Lord Jesus* and his *love for all the saints*. He prays that he may be *active in sharing his faith* and will have a *full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ*. He explains how Philemon's love has given him *great joy* and *encouragement* and has *refreshed the hearts of the saints*.

1:8-21. Paul's request on behalf of Onesimus.

Paul appeals to Philemon *on the basis of love*, and as a prisoner for Christ. He is sending Onesimus back to Philemon even though he would have liked to keep him so he could continue helping while Paul is *in chains for the gospel*. Paul didn't want to do anything without Philemon's consent so that his response would be *spontaneous and not forced*. Paul wonders whether the situation happened so Philemon could get Onesimus back *no longer as a slave but as a dear brother*. Paul has a lot of confidence in how Philemon will react. He offers to pay for anything Onesimus might owe and reminds Philemon that he owes Paul his *very self*. (This indicates that Paul may have led Philemon to the Lord). Paul hopes he can get some benefit from this and that this will refresh his heart in Christ. He is so confident he believes Philemon will *do even more* than he asks.

1:22-25. Conclusion.

Paul asks Philemon to prepare a guest room for him because he hopes he will be released from prison and be able to visit. He sends greetings from his fellow workers Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, and finishes with a blessing: *The grace of the Lord Jesus be with your spirit*.

Lessons from Philemon

Becoming a Christian challenges all aspects of our behavior and lifestyle. Philemon was a successful and wealthy business man with a number of slaves. There is no indication that he maltreated his slaves, but this letter was written to challenge his attitude towards others, especially his slaves. When we become Christians we become part of God's family and *there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*. Galatians 3:28. All have equal status in Christ and there is no place for judging, bigotry, racism, sexism, power plays, cliques, hierarchies, hatred, or intolerance. We are to love one another equally as God in Christ loved us (John 13:34) and to be the servant of all. (Matthew 20:26).

The gospel changes people and has the potential to change society. Onesimus was significantly changed when he became a Christian, moving from being a slave to being *free indeed*. John 8:36. We can assume that Philemon also changed markedly after receiving this letter. His mindset and practice regarding slavery was challenged and he was encouraged to regard other people as equals rather than as inferiors. This letter is a condemnation of the practice of slavery and of people relating to others in a superior way. It took many years for slavery to be abolished. The need for all Christians to see themselves as servants is still not widespread in the church, let alone in the wider community. When people accept Jesus as Saviour and follow His ways it should lead to respect for others and for the dignity of all human beings.

Paul models a respectful and conciliatory way of approaching interpersonal conflicts. He isn't hostile, accusing or belligerent. Rather he commends both Philemon and Onesimus, emphasizes servanthood by all, offers to take responsibility himself for losses and makes sure that no-one suffers any embarrassment or condemnation. He strongly reminds both parties of their responsibilities before the Lord but stays friendly, strong and persuasive. Christian leaders would do well to follow this model, rather than trying to impose some kind of authoritarian power over people based on status. These days Paul's approach might be called mediation or facilitation. Whatever it is called, it is based on love - a love that wants the best for those who are involved, and that puts into practice Jesus' teaching that we should 'love one another' as He has loved us.

Although it is one of the shortest books in the Bible, the letter to Philemon teaches us the dignity and equality conferred by Christ on all humans regardless of rank, gender, class, or status. It also offers Christians a way of living together in love and effectively changing the communities in which we live.

Discussion questions

Why did Paul write Philemon? What techniques did he use in the letter to help him achieve this goal?

How was Paul modeling servant-hood in the writing of this letter? Why is servant-hood more effective than exercise of power when seeking to influence others? Give examples from your own life.

What do you think motivated Paul, Philemon and Onesimus in this situation? How would the writing and reading of this letter influence this motivation? How would you have reacted if you had received a letter like this? Why?

Think of a modern day situation where there is inter-personal conflict. How could the principles followed in Philemon be applied in this situation?

What have you learned from your study of Philemon? How will you apply this in your life?