

Philemon

Authorship

Pauline authorship has not been seriously challenged. There are many common features with others of Paul's letters and three times the author refers to himself as Paul.

Date

Philemon has a close connection with the letter to Colossae, perhaps being delivered at the same time by Tychicus who was traveling with Onesimus, the principal character of this letter (cf. Col 4:7, 9). Archippus is also mentioned in both letters (Phile 2; Col 4:17). Paul is a prisoner according to verse 9. This would most probably refer to his first Roman imprisonment, which would make it the winter of A.D. 60/61.

Original Readers

Though known as the letter to Philemon, an individual, the salutation also includes Apphia, Archippus and the church that meets in Philemon's house (1:1-2). The contents are mostly directed to an individual, marked by the singular "you," yet the benediction has "you" plural. This is, then, a letter to an individual, yet with the apparent intention that the whole church would be encouraged and instructed by it.

Occasion

Onesimus, an escaped slave from the household of Philemon of Colossae, has been led to Christ by Paul during his imprisonment in Rome, and become helpful to him in the ministry. Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon with a request that he be treated as a brother, which in the Spirit he now is.

Message

Brotherhood in Christ transforms the nature and demands of human relationships.

Outline

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| I. | Salutation: Paul, a prisoner of Christ, writes to Philemon, his friend and fellow laborer. | 1-3 |
| II. | Preface: Paul reflects positively upon Philemon's character and ministry. | 4-7 |
| | A. Paul thanks God for Philemon's love and faith. | 4-5 |
| | B. Paul prays for the effectiveness of Philemon's testimony. | 6 |
| | C. Paul expresses appreciation for Philemon's ministry to the saints. | 7 |
| III. | Body: Paul requests respectfully that Philemon welcome Onesimus as a brother. | 8-22 |
| | A. Paul appraises Philemon of Onesimus' current status. | 8-16 |

1.	Paul resists appealing to Philemon by way of command.	8-9
2.	Paul reports on Onesimus' conversion.	10
3.	Paul reflects on Onesimus' current condition.	11-16
	a. He has become useful to Paul.	11-13
	b. He has become a brother to them both.	12-16
B.	Paul appeals to Philemon to receive Onesimus as his brother.	17-22
1.	Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus.	17
2.	Paul accepts debts that Onesimus may have incurred.	18-19
3.	Paul expects Philemon to grant his request.	20-22
IV.	Greeting and Benediction: Paul sends greetings from others and wishes God's grace for Philemon.	23-24

Argument

With great sensitivity and tenderness, Paul seeks to redress the loss experienced by his friend Philemon in the person of a slave, Onesimus. This personal letter reveals how the gospel radically transforms human, social relationships. Social conventions and economic considerations, two of life's most restricting factors of relationship, are greatly minimized when by the spiritual conversion.

I. Salutation: Paul, a prisoner of Christ, writes to Philemon, his friend and fellow laborer (1-3).

This otherwise stylized greeting by Paul is greatly personalized by reference to Philemon as his "beloved friend." Paul will appeal to him not out of authority but rather as a brother in the faith.

II. Preface: Paul reflects positively upon Philemon's character and ministry (4-7).

It is characteristic of Paul to begin his letters with a prayer of thanksgiving for the positive qualities of the recipients and for what God has been doing in their lives. This pattern is followed in giving thanks for Philemon's love and faith, especially with respect to the encouragement experienced by the saints (4-7).

III. Body: Paul requests respectfully that Philemon welcome Onesimus as a brother (8-22).

The essence of the letter is that Paul wishes his friend Philemon to receive his run-away slave Onesimus, not as property but as a newly found brother. While a prisoner in Rome, Paul has somehow come into contact with Onesimus and has led him to Christ (10-11). Paul now wants to send him back to Philemon in order to redress the loss that Onesimus has caused his owner (12, 18-19). However, it is not just a matter of economics or social convention. Onesimus is now a brother in Christ who has become useful to Paul in the

ministry (11) and whom Paul wishes to retain as an associate (13). Paul does not feel free to retain his services, though, without the willing consent of his lawful owner, Philemon (14). Paul slants the request in such a way that Philemon might view it as a way to “receive” his slave in a way that could never be severed, that is as a full brother in Christ (15). In addition Paul wishes Philemon to send him back as an investment in his own ministry (16).

Only after the careful crafting of this new perspective does Paul actually make his request of Philemon to receive Onesimus (17), promising to repay out of his own account whatever Onesimus might rightfully owe (18). Paul expects Philemon, on the basis of the power of the gospel to transform attitudes and relationships, not only to grant his request but to go beyond it (20-22).

IV. Greeting and Benediction: Paul sends greetings from others and wishes God’s grace for Philemon (23-24).

Paul concludes with a characteristic greeting and benediction. Philemon is part of a fellowship that extends far beyond human conventions, sustained by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, who himself has paid the debt that we owned in order to redeem us from the slavery of sin.

The importance of this short letter lies not in how it deals with the social issue of slavery, but in the revelation of the power of the gospel to transform human relationships by changing master and slave into brothers in Christ.

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