

Introduction to Philemon

- 1) The Nature of the Letter.
 - a) The letter to Philemon is the shortest of Paul's letters.
 - b) Also, it is more closely related to an ordinary personal and private correspondence compared to other Pauline letters that are primarily addressed to groups (Rom. 1:7, Phil. 1:1).
 - c) As the letters to Timothy and Titus, this letter is addressed to an individual. However, the letter to Philemon possesses a different tone (e.g. general instructions to communicators vs. an appeal to the grace orientation of an individual).
 - d) The apostle functions as an intermediary between a master and his slave.
 - e) In this regard, Paul displays sensitivity and tact when dealing with a potentially volatile situation.
- 2) Authorship and Authenticity.
 - a) Paul was the author of the letter.
 - b) Only the most extreme critics have challenged this position.
 - c) Pauline authorship is evident since the apostle refers to himself on three occasions (Philemon 1:1, 9, 19).
- 3) The Time and Place of Origin.
 - a) The letter was composed in Rome during Paul's first imprisonment (c. 61 A.D.) along with the letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, and the Colossians (i.e. the Prison Epistles).
 - b) The letters to the Colossians and Philemon have various common characteristics.
 - i) Both are addressed to the same church. Onesimus and Archippus were residents of Colossae. Hence Philemon was also a resident of the same city (Onesimus: Col. 4:9 cf. Philemon 1:10; Archippus: Col. 4:17 cf. Philemon 1:1).
 - ii) Both letters make reference to Paul's imprisonment (Col. 4:3, 18 cf. Philemon 1:1, 13).
 - iii) The personal greetings are very similar. Timothy is mentioned by Paul in the initial salutations (Col. 1:1, cf. Philemon 1:1).
- 4) The Recipients.
 - a) The letter was written to Philemon, a believer who resided in Colossae. He was also the owner of the slave, Onesimus.
 - b) In vv. 1-2, Philemon is addressed first and "your house" (2nd person singular pronoun) indicates that it was his home in which a group of believers assembled.

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- c) Although, Paul addresses Apphia, Archippus, and the church, the letter is primarily addressed to an individual, Philemon (Philemon 1:4, 12, 18).
- d) The inclusion of other believers in the salutation may be seen as a courtesy extended by the apostle.
- 5) The Occasion of the Letter.
 - a) A slave named Onesimus had run off from his master, Philemon.
 - b) Eventually, Onesimus found his way to Rome.
 - i) In the Greco-Roman world of 61 A.D., slaves often fled from their masters.
 - ii) Many fugitives fled to larger cities where they sought to blend in and be absorbed into the workforce.
 - c) While in Rome, Onesimus came into contact with Paul and was subsequently converted to the Christian faith (cf. Philemon 1:16).
 - d) After his conversion, Onesimus proved to be a useful assistant to the apostle (Philemon 1:11, 13).
 - e) However, Paul knew Onesimus must return to his legal master (Philemon 1:13-14).
 - f) Paul sent him back to Colossae as the companion of Tychicus (Col. 4:7-8).
 - g) The letter is a personal appeal to Philemon to welcome Onesimus back as a “beloved brother” or Christian brother (Philemon 1:16).
 - h) Paul does not assert his apostolic authority. Rather, he desires the willing consent and cooperation of Philemon.
- 6) The Analysis of Philemon.
 - a) Introductory greeting (vv. 1-3).
 - b) Thanksgiving and intercession for Philemon (vv. 4-7).
 - c) Paul’s appeal to Philemon for Onesimus (vv. 8-20).
 - d) Final remarks and greetings (vv. 21-25).