

## **Book of Philemon**

### **Title:**

The title of this letter is the name of the addressee, taken from (verse 1).

### **Authorship:**

There is little doubt that Paul wrote this epistle, since he refers to himself at least three times (in verses 1, 9 and 19).

Its canonicity was widely recognized in the early church, particularly by Ignatius, Tertullian, Origen, Eusebius, Marcion, and in the Muratorian Canon.

Even destructive critics do not question its authenticity.

The letter from Paul to Philemon was of a very personal nature.

Paul was a prisoner at the time (see the verses 1 and 9), so this is one of the four “prison epistles,” along with Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, which Paul wrote during his first Roman imprisonment.

According to (Colossians 4:7-9), Onesimus accompanied Tychicus to Colossae, so Paul must have written to the Colossians and to Philemon at approximately the same time.

Suggested dates range from 60-63 A.D.

### **Background – Setting:**

This epistle concerns the story of its three main characters, Onesimus, Philemon and Paul and also their interaction.

Onesimus, a slave in Colossae, had evidently robbed Philemon, his master (verse 18), and he had then run away.

During his flight, Onesimus then encountered Paul in Rome, and through his ministry came to faith in Christ.

Subsequently, Onesimus became a helper to Paul (verses 12-13).

But Paul recognized Onesimus’s duty to his master, so sent him back to Philemon, along with Tychicus, who carried Paul’s letter to the Colossian church at the same time (Col. 4:7-9).

In the letter, Paul implores Philemon to receive Onesimus, not as a slave, but as “a brother beloved” (verse 16).

Paul himself, in a gracious act of Christian love, assumed Onesimus’s debt in full: “Put that on mine account” (verse 18).

Though very brief, the epistle is a valuable addition to the New Testament record for three reasons:

1. It reveals more of the apostle’s own character than most of his letters;
2. It gives important insight into the institution of slavery in the ancient Roman world; and
3. It serves as a vivid picture of the truth of Galatians 3:28, that in Christ “there is neither bond nor free.”

We know from this letter, that Philemon was probably a man who had some wealth.

At least he had a nice home, and it was believed it was large enough that the church had been held in his home.

### **Historical – Theological Themes:**

Philemon provides valuable historical insights into the early church’s relationship to the institution of slavery.

Slavery was widespread in the Roman Empire (according to some estimates, slaves constituted one third, perhaps more, of the population), and an accepted part of life.

In Paul’s day, slavery had virtually eclipsed free labor.

Slaves could be doctors, musicians, teachers, artists, librarians, or accountants; in short, almost all jobs could be and were filled by slaves.

Slaves were not legally considered persons, but were the tools of their masters.

As such, they could be bought, sold, inherited, exchanged, or seized to pay their master’s debt.

Their masters had virtually unlimited power to punish them, and sometimes did so severely for the slightest infractions.

By the time of the New Testament, however, slavery was beginning to change.

Realizing that contented slaves were much more productive, masters tended to treat them a lot more leniently.

It was not uncommon for a master to teach a slave his own trade, and some masters and slaves became close friends.

While still not recognizing them as persons under the law, the Roman Senate in A.D. 20 granted (or allowed them), to purchase their freedom.

Some slaves enjoyed very favorable and profitable service under their masters and were better off than many freemen because they were assured of care and provision.

Many freemen struggled in poverty.

The New Testament nowhere directly attacks slavery; had it done so, the resulting slave insurrections would have been brutally suppressed and the message of the gospel hopelessly confused with that of social reform.

Instead, Christianity undermined the evils of slavery by changing the hearts of both the slaves and masters.

By stressing the spiritual equality of master and slave (verse 16; Gal. 3:28; Eph. 6:9; Col. 4:1; 1 Tim. 6:1-2), the Bible did away with slavery's abuses.

The rich theological theme that alone dominates the letter is forgiveness, a featured theme throughout New Testament Scripture (compare Matt. 6:12-15; 18:21-35; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13).

Paul's instruction here provides the biblical definition of forgiveness, and that without ever using the word.