

THE LETTER TO PHILEMON

Introduction to the Letter

The letter to Philemon is one of the shortest letters in the New Testament. It is a plea for merciful treatment for a runaway slave, Onesimus, a common name which means 'Useful'.

This letter is among the authentic letters written by Paul to Philemon, a Christian living in Colossae.

Occasion of the Letter

The circumstances of this letter's creation are unusual. Onesimus, a slave of Philemon, has run away from his master after having apparently caused damage to Philemon's property. Onesimus reached Paul who was in prison and he converted him to Christianity. Onesimus was a great help to Paul while in prison.

A master was free, under the Roman law, to beat and even to kill a runaway slave. But Paul decides to send him back to Philemon and appeals to him for mercy with a promise to pay for any damage that he had caused.

Philemon is a Christian brother and so, too, now is Onesimus. He is returning to Philemon no more as a slave but as a 'dear brother'. Paul, Philemon and Onesimus are confronting themselves with the teaching of Jesus who does not treat people as slaves or freemen, but as God's children. We do not know if Philemon agrees to Paul's request but there is a later mention of a bishop of Ephesus called Onesimus.

Date of the Letter

The letter was most likely written during the imprisonment of Paul in Ephesus during his stay in that city in 53-57 AD. It is uncertain where Paul had met Philemon or if he had ever met him personally. In fact according to the Letter to the Colossians, Paul did not establish the church in Philemon's city of Colossae. It was Epaphras, collaborator of Paul, who evangelised the city.

The Main division of the Letter:

vv. 1-3 Greetings

vv. 4-7 Thanksgiving

vv. 8-22 Paul's plea for Onesimus

vv. 23-25 Final greetings

Message of the Letter

The message of the letter is very simple. Paul does not explicitly condemn slavery. The early Church was not in a position to do this in the face of a world wide practice on which the economy of the Roman Empire depended. Paul helps the Christians to transform it from within by putting into practice the love of Christ. His teaching is clear: there should be justice, mercy and loyalty, since as Christian brothers both master and slave are equal before God.

The question that this letter asks us is, "how do we treat our fellow Christians?" Through this brief letter Paul states clearly that conversion to Christianity offers each convert a new relationship with one another.

Greetings and Thanksgiving

Paul greets Philemon and other friends in the community. Even though they are far away from each other they are united in the love of Christ. Paul thanks God for Philemon's love and faith of Christ and by praising him for his Christian way of living, Paul prepares the groundwork for his request.

Paul's plea for Onesimus

This is a difficult Christian choice. Paul asks Philemon to pardon a slave. He is asked to welcome Onesimus as a person, as he would welcome Paul himself. Paul presents Onesimus as

his child whom he instructed to become a Christian. Onesimus once was useless but now he is useful to both Paul and Philemon.

Paul leaves no room for Philemon to accept or reject his plea. Rather he openly tells him that he expect obedience from him and he is certain that Philemon will be ready to do much more than what Paul is asking of him.

Paul asks Philemon to prepare a room for him since his prison term will be over soon he shall visit him and the Church in Colossae.

Paul in his own words

WELCOMING

“Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good – no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother.”

Philemon 15-16