

Philemon

Open up your Bibles to Philemon. Can you find it?

Philemon is a letter...with a story...whose details we're not exactly sure about. It is a mystery! For centuries, scholars have tried to piece this puzzle together. What exactly was going on?

It's 1 of only 2 NT letters addressed to an individual person (also 3 John) - from Paul to Philemon. Thus, it's a private letter. So, why is it in the Bible?

In fact, early scholars argued over whether it should even be in the Bible

(not as weighty as Paul's other letters)

It concerns one person, the slave, Onesimus (v.10),
and what his master, Philemon, should do about him.

There are so many things we are not absolutely sure of in this letter. That's part of the mystery we are piecing together. From the clues found in these verses, we deduce:

- 5X Paul refers to himself being a prisoner, or imprisoned. Thus, this letter is seen as one of Paul's 4 Letters from prison (Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, Philemon)
- From Acts 28, Paul is imprisoned in Rome, he's appealed to see Caesar & waiting for 3 yrs (on house arrest, later released). We deduce this letter was written from Rome.
- The names mentioned at the end (vv23f), also appear in Colossians 4 (including Onesimus). Thus, we deduce that Philemon also lived in Colossae.
- From v.18 we deduce that Onesimus was a runaway slave of Philemon, & probably a thief.
- It's believed he ran away to Rome, where he comes into contact w Paul & becomes a Xn.
- What should happen to O now? What should Philemon do?

Under the law:

1) O is a criminal deserving of the penalty of death, & 2) Paul is obliged to return him.

So, Paul is returning O to Philemon, his master. What will happen to O now?

1. Read the Intro – vv. 1-3

- 1 Paul, a prisoner of X (he's in prison...but foremost, he's X's prisoner)
- 2 Philemon – dear friend, co-worker, Apphia (his wife?), Archippus (his son?)

2. Read vv.4-7, who is Philemon? (v6 is difficult)

- 4 your love for all the saints, your faith, all the good we may do,
- 7 Paul has received much joy & encouragement, the hearts of the saints have been refreshed thru Philemon!

3. Read vv. 8-22, The Plea for Onesimus

Notice the persuasive words Paul uses as he makes his plea to Philemon.

- 8 As an apostle I could command you,

9 but I appeal on the basis of Love. - & remember, I'm an old man, in prison!
 10 O is my child, I've become his father in prison!
 11 Formerly he was useless (the name O means "useful" or "beneficial") Now he IS useful!
 12 He is MY OWN HEART that I send back to you.
 13 I wanted to keep him (in your place!) serving me while I'm IN PRISON
 14 Paul wants Phil to do a good, voluntary deed = accept O as a brother in X (& don't kill him!)
 16 as more than a slave...as a beloved brother
 17 welcome him as you would welcome me
 18 charge his debts to me
 19 Now Paul grabs the pen – remember, Phil, you owe me your own self!
 20 refresh my heart!
 21 you will do even more than I say!
 22 and I'm coming to visit you!

4. Read vv. 23-25, Final Greetings

23-24 These names are also mentioned in Colossians 4:10ff – Aristarchus, Mark, Epaphras, Demas. Archippus is mentioned in Colo 4:17, as is Onesimus himself in Colo 4:9 – “the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you.”

Conclusion: Why is this book in the Bible?

This letter is about 2 things:

- 1) A plea for forgiveness – as a Xn, can Philemon forgive O for stealing from him & running away?
- 2) The power of the gospel to undermine the evils of slavery. How?
by changing the hearts of both masters and slaves – because they are both brothers in Christ.

Slavery Why didn't Paul just outlaw and condemn slavery?

It was so entrenched that to try to do so would cause such an uproar that it would cause more harm and associate Xnity with dissent and revolution.

What happened to Onesimus?

1. We believe he was freed (otherwise, why did this letter survive?)
2. Did O himself come back to serve with Paul? (Paul wanted him to.)
3. 50 years later, an Onesimus is the Bishop of Ephesus. O was a common name, but was it the same person? About that time, the NT was being formed. Did the Bishop of Ephesus himself want this letter included in the NT?
4. Other scholars wonder if instead of this being a master-slave relationship, perhaps the two were estranged brothers. Thus, Paul is trying to heal their family for the sake of the gospel.

CliffsNotes online:

The Epistle to Philemon, a very short letter dealing with only one topic, certainly was written by Paul. Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave, had in some way contacted Paul and come under the influence of the Christian gospel. For Paul, the situation was in some respects threatening: For a slave to desert his master was considered a very serious offense legally punishable by death, and anyone who apprehended a runaway slave was to return the slave immediately to the slave's master. How long Paul knew about Onesimus we are not told, but evidently it was long enough for Onesimus to receive instruction concerning the meaning of the gospel. Once Onesimus accepted the Christian gospel, Paul insisted that the slave return to his master.

Paul's purpose in writing this letter is to request that Philemon not only take back Onesimus as his slave but that he treat him as a brother in Christ. The letter is written in a most tactful manner, for Paul knows that Philemon has a legal right to put Onesimus to death. Paul therefore appeals to Philemon's conscience as a Christian brother to recognize that Onesimus is not only a slave but also a child of God. In the eyes of the Roman government, Onesimus is a criminal deserving of death, but as Christians, both he and his master are brothers in Christ.