

THE BOOK OF PHILEMON

ORIENTING DATA FOR PHILEMON

- **Content:** the sole purpose of this letter is to secure forgiveness for a (probably runaway) slave named Onesimus
- **Author:** the apostle Paul, joined by his younger companion Timothy
- **Date:** probably A.D. 60–61 (see “Orienting Data for Colossians,” p. 359).
- **Recipient(s):** Philemon is a Gentile believer in Colosse (see Col 4:9), in whose house a church meets; the salutation and final greeting indicate that Paul expected Philemon to share the letter with the church
- **Occasion:** Onesimus has recently been converted and has been serving Paul, who is in prison; now Onesimus is being sent back to Philemon, accompanied by Tychicus, who is also carrying letters to the churches in Colosse (Colossians) and Asia (Ephesians)
- **Emphasis:** the gospel reconciles people to one another, not only Jew (Paul) and Gentile (Philemon), but also (runaway) slave and master, making them all brothers!

OVERVIEW OF PHILEMON

This, the shortest of Paul’s letters, was an extremely delicate letter to write. Paul is explicitly asking forgiveness for a crime that deserved punishment (Onesimus’s crime)—and implicitly for another crime that could have been brought before the proper authorities (Paul’s harboring a runaway slave).

You will want to observe how carefully Paul puts all of this into gospel perspective, beginning with the prayer and thanksgiving (vv. 4–7), where he praises God for the way the gospel has already been at work in Philemon’s life. Note especially that Paul refuses to lean on his apostolic authority (see vv. 1, 8–10, 17, 21); rather, he appeals on the basis of the gospel of love (vv. 8–11). He also reminds Philemon that he, too, is one of Paul’s converts (v. 19), whom he regards now as a “partner” in the gospel (v. 17).

Verses 12–16 are the coup. Onesimus has really been in the service of Philemon without his knowing it, and his having been a runaway may finally serve the greater interests of all, especially the gospel. Even though Onesimus is returning as a repentant slave, the first relationship between slave and master, Paul reminds Philemon, is that of brother in Christ.

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING PHILEMON

Slavery in the first-century Greco-Roman world was not based on capture and race, as in North American (and European) history, but, by Paul’s time, on economics—and birth. But even

household slaves, as Onesimus probably was, were at the bottom of the social ladder, having absolutely no rights under Roman law. Thus they could be treated as a master willed, and runaways were often crucified as a deterrent to other slaves.

So imagine yourself in Onesimus's shoes. Apparently he had stolen from Philemon (vv. 18–19) and run away as far as he could get (Rome). But he became repentant, fell in with Paul, who was in prison in Rome, and now, back home, stands in the midst of the Christian community, while Colossians and this letter are read to the congregation. How do you think you would feel?

But we may surmise that the letter had already been read by Philemon so that the reading of it in church was a public expression of Philemon's acceptance of both Paul's letter and his wishes. You might also want to go back and do a quick reread of Colossians, keeping in mind that the Colossian believers are hearing it read with Onesimus present and that they, too, must accept Onesimus back as "a dear brother" in Christ.

Did the letter work? Of course it did; it is hard to imagine either of these letters being preserved if it hadn't! Whether this Onesimus is the one who eventually became overseer of the church in Ephesus cannot be known for certain, but Christian tradition believed it so. We know about him from Ignatius, who, on his way to Rome to be martyred, wrote to the church in Ephesus: "In God's name, therefore, I received your large congregation in the person of Onesimus, your bishop in this world, a man whose love is beyond words. My prayer is that you should love him in the Spirit of Jesus Christ and all be like him. Blessed is he who let you have such a bishop. You deserved it." The gospel does things like that!¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 387–389.