

Philemon

Fact Sheet

Overview:

Verses 1-3: Standard letter opener, identifies who's doing the sending and the receiving.

Verse 4-7: Also customary statement of gratitude to God for the commendable conduct of the letter's recipient.

Verses 8-22: Paul gets to the business at hand.

Verses 23-25: Again, first-century letter boilerplate, closing the letter with greetings and a benediction.

Cast of Characters:

•Paul: I think everyone knows Paul. At the writing of this letter, he was probably in prison (as he often was during his ministry), but still far from Rome.

•Timothy: One of Paul's closest associates in his missionary work. We also hear about Timothy in 2 Corinthians, Philippians, and 1 Thessalonians, and there are two books of the Bible with his name on them.

•Philemon: Philemon was probably a somewhat important or wealthy individual living in Colossae. This is the prevailing wisdom because only someone somewhat well-off could afford to host a house-church (verse 2; more on that later). It seems that Paul himself converted Philemon at some point in the past.

•Apphia & Archippus: Possibly Philemon's wife and son, respectively; at the very least, if they're not family members, they are members and leaders of the church that gathers in Philemon's house.

•Onesimus: the real subject of the letter, and Philemon's slave. His name means "useful." He is possibly a runaway slave or has in some way alienated his master, and thus Paul's intervention in the relationship.

•Epaphras: He's called a "fellow-prisoner" with Paul; we also hear about him in Colossians.

•Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke: more of Paul's companions and fellow workers, mentioned in Acts and elsewhere. Mark and Luke are thought to be the same Mark and Luke of the Gospels.

General background & notes:

•Reading a letter in the Bible is like hearing one side of a telephone conversation. This makes interpreting them difficult sometimes. This particular letter was probably written sometime in the late 50's.

•Paul's indirect, deferential tone in this bit of church diplomacy implies that Philemon really does have a good reason to be mad at Onesimus.

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•In the early church, Christianity was still not very popular with its Jewish roots or with the powers-that-were (Rome). For these reasons and because of Jesus' teachings, the original "churches" and gatherings were always in people's homes. There people would hear scripture, hear stories about Jesus (they hadn't been written down yet like we know them), sing hymns, share a meal, and take the leftovers with them for widows, orphans, and the poor. Many of the other letters in the New Testament - Galatians, Philippians, Corinthians, etc. - were written to such churches or groups of churches. Philemon, apparently, housed such a congregation.

•In verses 4-21 in the Greek, "you" is singular. That's probably why the letter is called "Philemon" instead of "2 Colossians."

- One last thing - the practice and concept of slavery in New Testament times is very different from our understanding of it today, especially in contrast to what our hemisphere experienced leading up to our Civil War. Slavery was so common in the Roman Empire, that it's estimated that up to 35% of the Roman population were slaves. Slavery was seen as an alternative outcome to death for conquered enemies. Slaves were often given middle-to-upper management positions over their masters' fields and accounts, and the income their labor helped to produce in part led to their masters not having to work at all, focusing on cultural matters. At the same time, slavery pretty much equaled social death, as the slaves were cut off entirely from their former lives. Their treatment depended on the character and mood of their masters.

Here are a few more distinctions: Race was not the defining factor in slavery during this time - anyone could be a slave. Education was encouraged and increased a slave's value. As mentioned already, many slaves held very sensitive and responsible positions. Some folks sold themselves into slavery to avoid debt and poverty. Slaves could control their own property, and even own their own slaves. Their cultural and religious traditions were not abolished, and there were no laws against public assemblies of slaves. Most expected to be set free by their masters by the age of 30. Most did not even see themselves as oppressed in any way. Christianity (and our Christian scriptures) really did not say anything either for or against slavery; it was just a part of the social fabric. However, Christian communities of brothers and sisters offered new "social life" to slaves, and Jesus' teachings to forgive debts, if followed through on, would have eventually undermined the entire system. Later Christians would use the Bible both to support and to condemn slavery.

"Sly Paul":

-Verses 8-9: "I *could* command..." Plus, Paul tugs at the heart-strings.

-Verse 11: Play on words with Onesimus's name.

-Verse 12-15: More guilt! Plus, in verse 14, we see more arm-twisting.

-Verse 17: Yet more guilt!

-Verses 18-19: The best yet!

-Verse 21: Paul's confidence.

-Verse 22: You never know - I might swing by to see how things are going...

Sources: HarperCollins Bible Dictionary, Paul Achtemeier, Ed.; HarperCollins Study Bible, esp. article on slavery by Ronald Hock.

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Discussion Questions

What do you think of Paul's persuasion?

How might we learn from this type of "Church diplomacy" for ourselves today?

What surprised you today?

Luther thought of the Scriptures as containing both Law and Gospel throughout, convicting us of our failures and then showing us God's grace. So...

Where in this book do you hear the Law? That is, what shows our sin, convicting us, driving us to seek God's grace?

Where in this book do you hear the Gospel? That is, what shows us God's future for us, our hope, God's grace in our lives?

Why do you think Philemon "made it in" to the Bible?