

PHILEMON

Contents:

[Background](#)

[Author](#)

[Date and Location](#)

[Recipient](#)

[Purpose](#)

[Unique Features](#)

[Comparison with Other Bible Books](#)

[Outline](#)

[Timeline](#)

BACKGROUND

Onesimus, the slave of a Christian in Colosse named Philemon, had apparently stolen from his master and fled to Rome. There he encountered Paul, who led him to Christ ([Philemon 1:10, 18-19](#)), after which Onesimus had been a great help to Paul ([Philemon 1:11, 13](#)). Having asked Tychicus to deliver his letters to the Ephesians and Colossians ([Ephes. 6:21-22; Col. 4:7-8](#)), Paul also asked him to return Onesimus to Philemon ([Col. 4:9](#)), along with this letter sharing the news of Onesimus's conversion and urging Philemon to forgive him and receive him as a brother in Christ.

Philemon, as a Christian, would surely have treated Onesimus well, even before his conversion. Under the Roman Empire, however, slaves had none of the rights mandated by Mosaic law (see exposition on [Leviticus 25:35-55](#)). Though Paul didn't directly challenge the institution of slavery here or elsewhere ([1 Cor. 7:20-24](#)), the kind of relationship he envisioned between Philemon and Onesimus would have greatly improved the lot of any Roman slave with a Christian master ([Philemon 1:15-16; 1 Cor. 12:13; Galatians 3:28](#)).

AUTHOR

Paul ([Philemon 1:1, 9, 19](#); see [Romans: Author](#)).

DATE AND LOCATION

A.D. 61, during Paul's house arrest in Rome ([Acts 28:30-31](#)), about the same time as Ephesians and Colossians.

» **See also:** [Illustration: Epistles of Paul, The](#)

RECIPIENT

Philemon was a personal note to its namesake, probably an elder in the church that met in his home at Colosse (see [Colossians: Recipients](#)). He was a wealthy man, known for generosity ([Philemon 1:7](#)). [Philemon 1:19](#) suggests that Philemon was converted by Paul. Since Paul had never been to Colosse, he may have met Philemon during his extended ministry in nearby Ephesus ([Acts 19](#)).

PURPOSE

- To commend Philemon for his compassion to other believers ([Philemon 1:1-7](#))

- To commend Onesimus to Philemon and ask for his complete forgiveness and restoration ([Philemon 1:8-21](#))

UNIQUE FEATURES

- Philemon is the only totally private letter in Scripture.
- It gives a valuable glimpse into the social life of apostolic times.

COMPARISON WITH OTHER BIBLE BOOKS

1 Corinthians:

- The entire letter is a concrete example of the truth of [1 Cor. 12:13](#).

Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and 2 Timothy:

- All were written by Paul from prison.

Ephesians and Colossians:

- These show that Christians form the body of Christ; Philemon illustrates love within the body of Christ.

Colossians:

- Except for Philemon and Apphia, everyone mentioned in Philemon is mentioned in Colossians as well (compare [Philemon 1:1-2](#), [10, 23-24](#) with [Col. 4:9-17](#)).

OUTLINE

1. COMMENDING PHILEMON ([Philemon 1:1-7](#))
 1. Salutation ([Philemon 1:1-3](#))
 2. Commendation of Philemon ([Philemon 1:4-7](#))
- II. INTERCEDING FOR ONESIMUS ([Philemon 1:8-25](#))
 - A. Intercession for Onesimus ([Philemon 1:8-21](#))
 - B. Plans for a visit ([Philemon 1:22](#))
 - C. Greetings ([Philemon 1:23-25](#))

TIMELINE

A.D. 35:	Paul's conversion
A.D. 54-57:	Paul meets Philemon in Ephesus?
A.D. 60-62:	Paul imprisoned, meets Onesimus, writes Philemon
c. A.D. 67:	Paul martyred

Philemon 1:1-3 *From a prisoner to his personal friend.* Paul greeted Philemon, his "much-loved coworker," along with Apphia, Archippus, and the church that met in their house. Though Paul had never been to Colosse, he may have led Philemon to Christ (see [Philemon 1:19](#)), and we may suppose this wealthy believer had prayed for and financially invested in Paul's ministry. Apphia was probably Philemon's wife and Archippus his son. In Colossians, Paul seemed to imply that Archippus had become pastor in Colosse when Epaphras, founder of the church, went to Rome to visit Paul in prison (see [Col. 4:17](#)). At any rate, Philemon seemed to have his family well in hand (compare [Joshua 24:15](#)).

Philemon 1:4-7 *Praise for a true refresher.* Paul thanked God for Philemon's love and generosity and his ministry of "refreshment" toward Paul and other believers ([Philemon 1:4-5, 7](#)). He prayed for the continued effectiveness of Philemon's witness for Christ ([Philemon 1:6](#)). Paul's praise may have been both an expression of respect for Philemon and an attempt to butter him up for the request that was coming ([Philemon 1:8-20](#)).

Philemon 1:8-16 *"Remember your slave Onesimus? He's now your brother Onesimus!"* Paul now got to the main purpose of his letter: He asked Philemon to take back into his household Onesimus, his runaway slave ([Philemon 1:8](#)). Onesimus had apparently found his way to Rome and been led to Christ by Paul ([Philemon 1:10](#)). Onesimus had been a great help to Paul ([Philemon 1:11, 13](#)), who had come to love him dearly ([Philemon 1:12-13](#)). He appealed to Philemon to receive his former slave as a brother in Christ ([Philemon 1:16](#)), urging Philemon to see God's providence even in Onesimus's disobedience, since it had resulted in his salvation ([Philemon 1:15-16](#)).

Onesimus means "profitable" or "useful." Until his conversion, any resemblance between Onesimus's name and his actions was purely accidental. But now that Christ had made all things new, Philemon was invited to give Onesimus a chance to live up to his name ([Philemon 1:11](#)). Though Paul, as an apostle, could have pulled rank on Philemon, he preferred to appeal to him as a friend ([Philemon 1:8-9](#)). Nowhere besides this very personal letter does Paul refer to himself as "an old man" ([Philemon 1:9](#)).

Philemon 1:17-21 *"If for no other reason, do it for me."* Paul appealed for Onesimus on the basis of

- his friendship with Philemon ([Philemon 1:17](#))
- his willingness to reimburse Philemon for Onesimus's misdeeds ([Philemon 1:18-19](#))
- the spiritual debt Philemon owed him, as the one who had led him to Christ ([Philemon 1:19](#))

Paul's remarks about his own suffering in prison ([Philemon 1:9](#)) may also have been a not-so-subtle effort to transfer to Onesimus Philemon's sympathy for Paul.

Philemon 1:22-25 *"Oh, yes, could you have my room ready?"* Evidently expecting to be released from house arrest, Paul announced his hopes to visit Philemon soon. Evidence suggests he was indeed released but was later arrested again and put to death (see exposition on [§][Acts 28:30-31](#); [1 Timothy: Date and Location](#)).