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PHILEMON

*Forgiveness and reconciliation*

WRITTEN

60-62 AD

KEY VERSE

*"I appeal to you for my son Onesimus,*

*who became my son while I was in chains."*

v. 10

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Encourage Philemon to receive Onesimus as a Christian brother.

PURPOSE

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## INTRODUCTION

The letter to Philemon is a "letter of recommendation" for Philemon's escaped slave Onesimus, who now risks the death penalty for having escaped. But since then, Onesimus has become a Christian, and Paul sends him back to Philemon with this letter. Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother since they are both Christians and to forgive him. The entire gospel is essentially at stake, and Paul balances on a fine rhetorical line between Roman law and Christian love.

In Col 4:7-9, Paul says that he sent Onesimus to Colossae together with Tychicus. In addition, he sends greetings from the same people at the end of Colossians as here in Philemon. Therefore, it seems that Philemon lives in Colossae and that Paul writes the Epistle to Philemon and the Epistle to the Colossians during the same prison stay. Traditionally, it is believed that this happened during the years 60-62 AD in Rome.

### STRUCTURE

Opening, including a prayer of thanksgiving: vv. 1-7

Argumentation: vv. 8-16

Conclusion: vv. 17-22

End of the letter: vv. 23-25

### HISTORICAL SITUATION

**Who is the author?**

Paul (and Timothy)

**Who is it written to?**

Philemon (and Apphia, Archippus and the congregation)

**Which congregation?**

The Colossians

**Where is Paul?**

In jail. That leaves us with two options.

* Caesarea 58-60 AD (Acts 24-26)
* Rome 60-62 AD (Acts 28)

If Onesimus was a slave that had run away, it is unlikely that he would flee to Caesarea because the city was too small to hide in.

**When was the letter written?**

60-62 AD

## SLAVERY IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

* *"Seize me if I should try to escape, and send me back to my master."*
* Slaves played an important role in Roman society. About 1/3 of the inhabitants of Rome and 1/5 of the Roman Empire’s total population were slaves.
* Some received harsh treatment, including forced labor on farms, in mines, and in mills.
* Many held important positions where special skills were needed (e.g., teachers, accountants, doctors).
* Could have possessions that, in reality, belonged to their master.
* They could earn their wages and save to purchase their freedom.
* Were seen as property and were not legally "persons". Since they were not Roman citizens, they could be physically punished, sexually exploited, tortured, or executed.

## PENALTY

* Crucifixion was mostly used on slaves, traitors, and robbers.
* It was forbidden to hide escaped slaves, and professional slave catchers were hired to track them down.
* Runaway slaves could be punished by flogging, branding ("F" or "FUG"), or execution.
* Lost working time was lost money and was seen as stolen property, for which whoever hid an escaped slave had to be held responsible.

## GENRE

Letter of recommendation/cover letter

Rhetorical features:

* Avoid provocative and offensive language
* Puns to soften the tension
* Start gently and gradually get to the point
* Appeals to emotions

## METHOD

1. Observation: Look!

2. Interpretation: Think!

3. Application: Live!

## THE MAIN CHARACTERS

**Paul**

* is a prisoner, in chains
* has become old
* has received Onesimus as a "son" in prison (led him to faith)
* has a close relationship with Onesimus

**Philemon**

* friend and co-worker of Paul (v. 1)
* the congregation meets in his house (v. 2), so he was probably rich
* have refreshed the hearts of the Lord’s people (v. 7)
* owe Paul himself (v. 19), as he came to faith through Paul.

**Onesimus**

* Philemon's slave
* Was separated from Philemon for a little while (v. 15)
* Called *"son"* and *"brother"* (has become a Christian through Paul)
* Is now returning to Philemon

## VERSES 4-9a

*"I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord’s people. Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love."* vv. 4-9a

## VERSES 9b-13

v. 1: *"Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus ..."*

*"It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus — that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel."* vv. 9b-13

## VERSES 14-16

v. 1: *"To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker... "*

v. 7: *"because you, brother,... "*

*"But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. 15 Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— 16 no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord."* vv. 14-16

## VERSES 17-22

v. 7: *"the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you."* (ESV)

v.12: *"I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you."*

*"So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask. And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers."* vv. 17-22

Paul's call stood in stark contrast to the treatment of slaves at that time:

*“I send you with this document to the famous city of Alexandria to look for my slave named […] about 35 years old, known to you. When you have found him, you are to place him in custody, with authority to imprison him and whip him, and to present a complaint to the proper authorities against any person who has concealed him, with a demand for compensation.”* Aurelius Sara Pammon (the quote has been translated)

## WHY DO WE HAVE THIS LETTER IN THE BIBLE?

1. Because Philemon forgave Onesimus.
2. Because it is a rhetorical masterpiece inspired by God where Christian principles and Christian love are put into practice on a sensitive topic.
3. Because it is the clearest testimony to how Christianity views slavery. Christians should be role models in the way they handle their relationships.

*"Paul went against slavery - in the only area where he could effectively bring about a change, namely in the church. He did so in this letter to Philemon.”* Van Dyke (the quote is translated)

*“It was Christianity that first transformed the relations between slave and master so completely that it added an explosive charge to the whole institution. The letter to Philemon gives us a close-up of this in action.”* Ben Witherington III (?), the quote is translated

## LIVE: TIMELESS TRUTHS - AND QUESTIONS

1. Reconciliation and forgiveness: How far do I go? Am I able to give someone what they don't deserve? Do I need to be reunited with someone?
2. Equal worth and no favoritism in Christ: Do I judge others based on their past? Do I treat all Christians equally?
3. In the congregation, persons no longer have private lives. Am I living as if my lifestyle concerns the whole congregation?