

Philemon

Paul's letter to Philemon is the shortest of all of his letters. It is a personal letter between friends. Philemon owes Paul a favor, and Paul writes to request Philemon to do something for him. But the favor that Paul seeks is not for himself but for a slave named Onesimus. As an enslaved person, he was at the bottom of the social ladder and had no right to ask anyone for anything. So Paul uses Philemon's obligation to appeal on behalf of someone who couldn't ask for themself.

Writer: The Apostle Paul and his coworker, Timothy.

Date of writing: Between 60-61 AD

Original Audience: Philemon, a Gentile (non-Jewish) follower of Jesus who lives in the city of Colossae (Colossians 4:9). A church meets in Philemon's house, and Paul indicates that Philemon should share the letter with the church (1:2).

The Reason for the Letter:

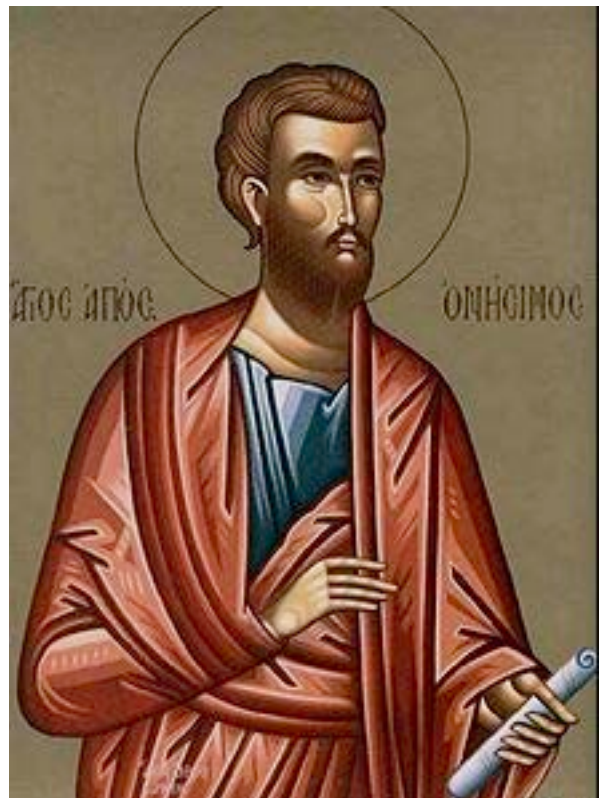
Onesimus has recently started following Jesus and serving Paul in prison. Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon. A man named Tychicus is traveling with Onesimus, who is also carrying letters to the churches in Colossae and Ephesus (Colossians 4:7-9 and Ephesians 6:21-22).

The Main Message of the Letter:

After a brief greeting (1:1-3), Paul offers a prayer of thanksgiving for Philemon's faith, saying that he has "refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people" (1:4-7). Then he gets to the reason for the letter: an appeal on behalf of Philemon's slave Onesimus. Paul says that Onesimus has become like a son to him during his imprisonment (1:10). Still, he is now sending Onesimus back (1:12). He does so reluctantly and hints that Philemon might allow Onesimus to return to him (1:13-14). Paul wants Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother and friend, and he offers to repay any debt that Philemon has incurred because of him. Paul reminds Philemon that he also owes a great debt to Paul (1:15-19). Paul expresses confidence in Philemon's obedience (1:21) and asks him to have a guest room prepared for when he visits (1:22). He closes the letter with a series of greetings from his companions (1:23-24).

Slavery in the Roman Empire

Slavery was very common in Roman society. When Rome conquered an area, many residents would be forced to become slaves. Individuals could be sentenced to slavery as punishment for various crimes, and entire families were sold into slavery when someone couldn't pay back a debt. When parents who were slaves had children, those children



automatically became slaves. By the time of Paul, between one-fourth and one-third of all people in the Roman Empire were slaves. The life and condition of slaves seem to have varied enormously. The Roman society encouraged humane treatment, and Roman law prohibited the extreme abuse or killing of slaves. Still, the welfare of slaves generally depended on their masters. For example, the conditions were terrible for slaves who worked in mines or rowed the oars of galley ships. However, in other situations, slaves were given an education and a lifestyle similar to employees today. Some people willingly sold themselves into slavery to be taught a trade or obtain employment. Slavery was not always permanent. In some cases, slaves were paid a wage and allowed to purchase their freedom after some time. In other cases, slaves were automatically freed when they reached the age of thirty. Nevertheless, slaves had few legal rights.

Paul's Teaching on Slavery

In four of Paul's letters, he tells slaves to "obey their earthly masters" (Colossians 3:22–24, Ephesians 6:5–8, 1 Timothy 6:1–2, and Titus 2:9). Does this mean that Paul believes slavery is a good thing or that enslaved people were less important? No, Paul says in his letter to the Galatians, "So in Christ Jesus, you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26–28). Paul also says, "Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings" (1 Co 7:21–23). When writing to Philemon, Paul urges him to receive Onesimus back "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother" (1:16).

Like all letters, it is best to read or listen to the whole letter from beginning to end. While reading, imagine yourself as Titus receiving this letter from Paul. Then go back and reread each section from the outline above and discuss these questions:

1. What do you learn about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit?
2. What do you learn about people?
3. What do we need to do to obey this Scripture?
4. Who can I share this letter with?