

PHILEMON

“Two questions require an answer as we approach the letter: ‘Why was it written?’ and ‘Why has God put the letter in the Bible?’ The answer to the first question is fairly obvious, for the story behind the letter is quite simple...

[As for the second question,] it is in our Bible because it is a perfect picture of our salvation. We are the slave who ran away from God. We were no use to God, but Jesus came and paid our debts and presented us back to God as a useful servant again.”

(Pawson, 2007, p. 654, 656)

Author: The briefest of Paul’s letters.

Date: 60-61 AD

Big Point: This letter is a model of courtesy, discretion, and loving concern for the forgiveness of one who would otherwise face severe consequences.

Message: Paul’s epistle to Philemon is a testimony to the power of the grace of God in Christ Jesus and to the Christian love which unites believers. While he was formerly a thief and runaway slave, Philemon’s slave Onesimus had been transformed by God’s grace and was now a “beloved brother” of Philemon.

Memorable Verses:

“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.” (Philemon 17-18)

Unique:

While on the surface, it would appear that Philemon could easily have forgiven Onesimus, in fact, this issue of Onesimus’ fate would have caused much anxiety in the church. For if Onesimus is forgiven, what would prevent other slaves from leaving and then stating that they too had become Christians? The economic collapse of the household, and city could occur.

Outline of Book:

1. ***Commendation of Philemon’s Love***
 - a. **Character of Philemon (1:1-8)**
2. ***Intercession for Onesimus***
 - a. **Conversion of Onesimus (1:9-17)**
3. ***Confidence in Philemon’s Obedience***
 - a. **Confidence of Paul (1:18-25)**

Adapted, by permission, from Dr. Bryan R. Jones (2016)

Application:

1. *Serve God:* As a now-justified child of God by the work of Jesus, commit yourself to good works in service to God, knowing they have both value now and in eternity.
2. *Learn to see all people through the lens of the Gospel:* Christians should model for each other, and the watching world, love for all people upon the basis of our shared humanity as divine image bearers, and love for other believers as brothers and sisters of the same family of God. This is how the Gospel broke down slavery as it is how the Gospel will break down persisting human conflicts such as racism.
3. *Take every opportunity to model the Gospel narrative in your relationships.* Paul did for Onesimus what Jesus did for him. He paid his debt and sent him back as a brother who was useful to Philemon.