

# New Testament Survey

## Philemon

### I. Attestation and Authorship<sup>1</sup>

#### A. External

1. Ignatius seems to allude to 1:20 in *Ephesians* (chapter 2) and in *Magnesians* (chapter 12).
2. Tertullian knew about this book.
3. Origin ascribes the book to Paul and quotes 1:14.
4. Eusebius includes Philemon in the *homologoumena* (the books accepted as canonical with little disputation in the early church).
5. Philemon is recognized by the Muratorian Fragment and is also found in Marcion's canon and the Old Latin and Old Syriac.

#### B. Internal

1. The writer calls himself Paul three times (1:1, 9, 19).
2. The thought and sentiment expressed in the letter is definitely Pauline.
3. This epistle is closely linked with Colossians which lends significant credence to its validity.

### II. Background and Destination

#### A. The Recipient - Philemon, a wealthy slave-owner.<sup>2</sup>

1. Evidently, Philemon had been converted to Christianity by Paul at some earlier time (Philemon 19).
2. Philemon also appeared to be wealthy in that he had the church meeting in his house (Philemon 2).
3. He appears to be active in service since Paul called him a "fellow worker" (Philemon 1).
4. He also owned at least one slave, Onesimus.
5. Philemon appears to have been from the city of Colossae (compare Colossians 4:9 which associates Onesimus with Colossae).

#### B. The Subject - Onesimus, a runaway slave.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Co., 1987), p. 235.

<sup>2</sup> John F. MacArthur, *Colossians and Philemon*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), pp. 203-204.

1. The name Onesimus means “profitable”. We find a word-play in Philemon 11 in which Paul says at one time Onesimus was unprofitable, but now he is profitable.
  2. Evidently Onesimus had fled to the city of Rome, a popular haven for runaway slaves. There he had run into the Apostle Paul and was converted (Philemon 12-13).
  3. Also, it appears as though Onesimus stole a sum of money from Philemon as he ran away, a matter which needed to be reconciled (Philemon 18).
  4. Because Onesimus was a runaway slave, he needed to be returned to his master Philemon. For him to have undertaken this journey alone would have imperiled him by exposing him to the slave hunters. When Tychicus showed up, Paul had a perfect person to send Onesimus with back to Colossae.
  5. Since Roman law allowed a master to kill a slave who had run away, Paul writes this letter to Philemon in order to encourage him to receive Onesimus back as a fellow-believer and not a criminal.
- C. The Background - Roman Slavery<sup>3</sup>
1. Slavery was a normal and integral part of the Roman Empire. Nearly ten million slaves lived in the Roman Empire which means that nearly 1/3 of people in the Roman world were slaves.
  2. At first, most slaves were war captives. As time went on, however, many were born into slavery from parents who were slaves themselves.
  3. Under strict Roman Law a slave:
    - a. Was not a person but a tool.
    - b. Had no legal rights whatsoever.
    - c. Could be bought, sold, or seized as collateral for debts incurred by their masters.
    - d. Could be killed, beaten, or mutilated at the whim of their master.
  4. During the New Testament times slavery was beginning to slowly change as the Romans saw that treating their slaves made life easier for them. Some of these changes included:
    - a. A slave who committed a crime could be tried as though he was a free man.
    - b. Some masters freed their slaves as part of their will upon their death.
    - c. Many times, slaves were better off than free men, as it was the duty of the master to cloth, feed, and shelter them.
  5. Slavery and the New Testament

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<sup>3</sup> MacArthur, pp. 204-206

- a. No where does the New Testament forbid slavery directly.
- b. Many passages in the New Testament encourage slaves to honorably obey their masters, and for masters to treat their slaves well (Ephesians 6:5-9, 1 Peter 2:18-20).

### III. Occasion and Date

- A. Written in A.D. 60-61 as one of Paul's prison epistles.
  1. Colossians and Philemon were both carried by Tychicus to their destination (Colossians 4:7-9).

### IV. Purpose and Plan<sup>4</sup>

- A. To encourage Philemon to take Onesimus, his runaway slave, back as a brother.
- B. To encourage Philemon to forgive Onesimus for any wrong he may have done to Philemon.

### V. A Basic Outline<sup>5</sup>

- A. Introduction - Philemon 1-3.
- B. The Spiritual Character of One Who Forgives - Philemon 4-7.
- C. The Spiritual Action of One Who Forgives - Philemon 8-18.
- D. The Spiritual Motivation of One Who Forgives - Philemon 19-25.

### VI. Chapters To Remember

Philemon 1          Forgive!

### VII. Points and Peculiarities

1. Philemon does not attack the Roman institution of slavery.
2. Philemon is the greatest treatise in the New Testament on forgiveness.
3. Philemon is thought by many to be the greatest social document found in the New Testament.

### VIII. A Closer Look<sup>6</sup>

- A. Introduction - Philemon 1-3.
- B. The Spiritual Character of One Who Forgives - Philemon 4-7.
  1. A Concern for the Lord - Philemon 4-5a.
  2. A Concern for People - Philemon 5b.
  3. A Concern for Fellowship - Philemon 6a.

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<sup>4</sup> Thiessen, pp. 238.

<sup>5</sup> MacArthur, p. 206.

<sup>6</sup> MacArthur, pp. 210-235.

4. A Concern for Knowledge - Philemon 6b.
  5. A Concern for Glory - Philemon 6c.
  6. A Concern to be a Blessing - Philemon 7
- C. The Spiritual Action of One Who Forgives - Philemon 8-18.
1. Forgiveness Involves Reception - Philemon 10-14.
  2. Forgiveness Involves Restoration - Philemon 15-16.
  3. Forgiveness Involves Restitution - Philemon 17-18.
- D. The Spiritual Motivation of One Who Forgives - Philemon 19-25.
1. The Recognition of an Unpayable Debt - Philemon 19.
  2. The Possibility of Being a Blessing - Philemon 20.
  3. The Necessity of Obedience - Philemon 21.
  4. The Acknowledgement of Accountability - Philemon 22.
  5. The Importance of Maintaining Fellowship - Philemon 23-24.
  6. The Requirement of Grace - Philemon 25.