

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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This resource has been adapted into multiple languages, including English, Tok Pisin, Arabic (عربي), French (Français), Hindi (हिन्दी), Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia), Portuguese (Português), Russian (Русский), Spanish (Español), Swahili (Kiswahili), and Simplified Chinese (简体中文).

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Philemon

This brief letter, the shortest and most personal of Paul's letters, shows how attitudes and relationships are transformed by Christ. It was written on behalf of Onesimus, a runaway slave, who was returning to Philemon, his master. Paul encouraged Philemon to go beyond the traditional master-slave relationship by welcoming Onesimus back as a beloved brother in Christ. With these words of reconciliation, Paul reminds us that all relationships among Christians, regardless of a person's social standing, are transformed by the love of Christ.

Setting

A slave named Onesimus seems to have run away from his Christian master, Philemon. Philemon resided in Colosse, a small town in the Roman province of Asia (now western Turkey) about 120 miles (193 kilometers) east of Ephesus. When Onesimus ran away, he might have stolen some of his master's things. Somehow Onesimus came into contact with Paul, who was in prison, and became a believer through Paul's ministry. When Paul became aware that Onesimus was a runaway slave, he encouraged him to return to his master.

Slavery was widespread in the Roman world and, by law, captured runaways had to be returned to their owners. They often faced severe punishment, such as whipping, branding, or execution, as an example to other slaves. However, Philemon was a well-respected Christian leader and a gracious, loving person. Paul wrote this letter to Philemon from prison and sent it with Onesimus to ensure a warm Christian welcome for the runaway on what might have been a rather fearful return to his master. The letter resembles a letter of recommendation and carries the full weight of Paul's apostolic authority.

We do not know what happened when Onesimus returned. Some fifty or sixty years later, however, in a letter written to the Christians at Ephesus by the Christian martyr Ignatius, the name Onesimus appears again, this time as the name of the highly-regarded bishop of the province of Asia. We cannot be sure it was the same person, but it is quite possible that, because of his close association with Paul, the young slave rose to prominence in the church and eventually became bishop of the entire province. Paul's letter is a reminder that traditional class distinctions are of no significance in the church of Jesus Christ.

Summary

Paul encourages Philemon to treat Onesimus no longer simply as a slave but as a genuine brother in Christ. Using his traditional opening ([1:1-3](#)), Paul introduces himself, greets Philemon, his family, and the church that meets in their home, and invokes grace and peace upon them. Paul then thanks God for Philemon, especially for his trust in the Lord Jesus and the love he has shown to so many of God's people ([1:4-7](#)).

Paul then makes his appeal for Onesimus ([1:8-22](#)). Though formerly a runaway, Onesimus has now become a believer in Christ and has proven himself to be a changed person. Paul asks Philemon to be gracious and forgiving in welcoming his slave back. Paul's real desire is for Onesimus to stay with him, to assist him in his ministry from prison. Although he has the apostolic authority to demand that Philemon release him for that purpose, he refuses to use that authority, desiring that such an expression of mercy come from Philemon himself and not be forced. But Paul clearly hints that Philemon should consider freeing his slave for the work of the Good News.

The letter ends in a customary way ([1:23-25](#)). Paul sends greetings to Philemon from various Christians, then invokes the grace of Christ upon him and all those in his home.

Occasion of Writing

Though the traditional interpretation is that Onesimus was a runaway slave, other possibilities have been posed. For example, Onesimus might have been sent as a messenger to Paul, or he might have turned to Paul to mediate a problem that had arisen between him and his master. In reality, we do not know why he left his master's home, but the traditional interpretation fits the letter well.

Date and Place of Writing

It is traditionally believed that Paul wrote the Prison Letters (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon) when he was in prison in Rome (AD 60–62 or about AD 64~65). It is also quite possible that these letters were written from Ephesus during an earlier imprisonment. See Ephesians Book Introduction, “Date and Place of Writing.”

Meaning and Message

This letter is a vivid illustration of the way that attitudes and relationships are transformed in Christ. Those who know Christ are to see people through the eyes of love and to express that love in their relationships with others.

Paul's appeal to Philemon reminds us that, as Christians, we must always be willing to forgive one another. No matter how much we have been wronged by others, we must be quick to give them a warm-hearted welcome and show them our acceptance and love.

In the church of Christ, traditional social distinctions, such as the relationship between slave and master, must be transcended. We must show genuine love to all Christians, regardless of their economic or cultural status, education, ethnicity, or gender (see [Gal 3:28](#); [Col 3:11](#)). Paul's desire to reconcile Philemon and Onesimus is an example of such love.

Many people have wondered why Paul did not explicitly call for Onesimus's freedom or for the abolition of slavery as an institution. In the Roman world, slavery was widespread; it was an integral part of society, and the whole of society was built on it. Paul, like most early Christians, seems to have accepted the traditional structures of society, including slavery. The mission of the early Christians was not to overthrow the structures of society but to see people converted and built up in Christ. Proclaiming the Good News of salvation would result in lives and relationships being transformed by Christ within the fellowship of the church.

Though Paul did not explicitly call for Onesimus's release, he clearly hinted that he would like to see him freed for the work of the Good News. In his consistent emphasis on the importance of Christians living together in forgiveness and mutual love, he was planting the seeds that would one day result in the overthrow of slavery as an institution.