

Philemon – Overview

The Author of Philemon and the When and Where of Philemon are the same as Colossians. Tychicus and Onesimus most likely were the ones who delivered the letters of Colossians and Philemon. Paul sent them together to go to Colossae to deliver the letters and tell the church how Paul was doing. Onesimus was described to the Colossians as “one of you”.

Author: The apostle Paul. Paul had been a Pharisee who persecuted the church before God saved him on the road to Damascus. His life is documented, to a limited extent, in Acts chapters 7 through 9 and chapters 11 through 28. Some of his early years as a Christian are also recalled by Paul in Galatians 1:11-2:14. He received his ministry to the Gentiles from God and he received the message of the gospel directly from God.

When and Where: The book was written while Paul was a prisoner. The question is, where was he a prisoner? The answer to this question dictates the date of the book. The two main views are that he was a prisoner either in Ephesus or Rome. If in Ephesus, while Paul was in Ephesus for two years (Acts 19:8-10), then the book was written in the mid 50s. The most commonly held view by conservatives is that Philemon was written while Paul was a prisoner in Rome (Acts 27, 28). If Paul wrote from Rome then the date of the letter is 60-63 AD.

Recipients: The primary recipient of the book is Philemon. The letter was also addressed to Apphia, Archippus and the church in Philemon’s house. Some believe that Archippus was the primary recipient of the letter and the church met in his house. These people believe that Onesimus was Archippus’ slave. The general consensus is that the primary recipient of a letter was always mentioned first. Since Philemon is mentioned first, the church met at his house and Onesimus was his slave. Since Onesimus appears to have been from Colossae, Philemon is assumed to have lived in Colossae.

Purpose: Paul wrote to Philemon about Onesimus, Philemon’s slave. Onesimus is the primary focus of the letter. There are various views on how Paul and Onesimus met while Paul was a prisoner. 1) The traditional view is that Onesimus ran away from Philemon and possibly had stolen from Philemon. 2) Another view is that Onesimus went to Paul for asylum. 3) Another view is that Onesimus sought out Paul to mediate between himself and Philemon so that Onesimus could return to Philemon. Onesimus was not a Christian when he left his master. Onesimus became a Christian under Paul’s ministry. Views 2 and 3 violate the principle that darkness does not seek out light but rather prefers to remain hidden in the darkness. The second two options also do not reflect well on Philemon. Was Philemon’s treatment of Onesimus so horrible that Onesimus felt compelled to leave? Some think that Onesimus wronged Philemon and so sought Paul to mediate. But that still doesn’t reflect well on Philemon if Onesimus thought that wronging his master would bring unjust punishment. One question that favors the Ephesian imprisonment, in my mind, is this. How would a slave have the means to travel from Colossae to Rome, which was almost one thousand miles away? For the two views that involve Onesimus seeking out Paul in Rome, why would a non-Christian travel to Rome to seek out Paul? Was Paul the only person outside of Colossae that Philemon trusted and respected? What about other church leaders in Asia Minor? Some think that it would be virtually impossible for Onesimus to meet Paul by “chance”. I don’t find it difficult to believe that Onesimus met Paul without intending to. What matters is what God intended. G. K. Beale believes the third view, that Onesimus sought out Paul so that Onesimus could be reconciled to Philemon. Douglas Moo leans toward the traditional view of Onesimus being a runaway slave. William Hendriksen combines a couple of the views. He believed that Onesimus ran away and ended up in Rome. When he heard that Paul was also in Rome, he sought him for help. No matter how or why they met, Paul wanted Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother in Christ and not just a slave. Some think that Paul wrote to Philemon so that he would free Onesimus. Since Onesimus was useful to Paul, some think he was asking Philemon to let Onesimus continue to help Paul.

The Elephant in the Room: What does the Bible teach about slavery? Some believe that Paul was making a case in this letter that slavery was wrong. When most Americans hear the word “slave”, they think of African Americans being owned as property. In Paul’s time, slavery was not a racial issue. People of various nationalities and races were slaves. There were also different types of slaves. Some were temporary slaves that were paying off a debt or seeking to learn a trade or in need of making some money. Once they fulfilled their “contract”, they were free to go. Others were slaves for life and were looked at as property. Paul’s biggest concern was sharing the Gospel and seeing people freed from sin and sin’s penalty, death.