

Philemon 1:1-7 – Paul to Philemon

Philemon is mostly a personal letter from Paul to Philemon. Other recipients were included in the letter but in verses 4 through 22a, Paul only used “you” in the singular form. The bulk of the letter was directed to Philemon. In 22b, Paul talked about hoping to come to “you” in the plural form. The greetings of Paul’s companions, in 23 and 24, were directed to “you” in the singular form. The letter ends, in verse 25, with the closing addressed to “you” in the plural form. KJV uses “thee” and “thou” for “you” in the singular form. Most modern translations do not differentiate between the singular and plural forms of “you”. Just beware of that as we study Philemon.

Read Philemon 1:1-3.

Paul wrote the letter. How did Paul describe himself? How does his description of himself help us to identify where he wrote the letter? Who else did Paul mention besides himself? Who was Philemon? (1:1)

Who was Apphia? Who was Archippus? The letter was also addressed to the church in “your” (singular) house. It is interesting to note that Colossians was not addressed to the church at Colossae but to “the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae”? Do you think that there were other home churches in Colossae or do you think that all the Christians in Colossae could meet in Philemon’s house? (1:2)

Some people believe that Archippus was the main recipient of the letter and that he was the “you” (singular) in the letter. They believe that the church met at his house and that he was the owner of Onesimus. What evidence is there for and against this view? (1:1-2)

Verse 3 contains the standard greeting of Paul. What is the significance of Paul greeting them with “grace and peace”? (1:3)

Read Philemon 1:4-7.

I believe the letter was primarily written to Philemon. Some questions will be based on that belief. Similar to Paul’s letter to the Colossians, Paul remembered Philemon in his prayers and gave thanks to God for him and prayed for him. Verses 4-7 all use the singular form of “you”. Based on verse 5, what was Paul thankful for? (1:4-5)

In verse 5, ESV has “your love and of your faith... toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints”. KJV and NASB are similar. NIV has “your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus”. This is not due to any variants. It is a translation decision based on Paul’s other writings. Is it appropriate to talk about our faith in fellow believers in the same way we have faith in Jesus? It is normal to talk of faith in Jesus and love for fellow believers. The NIV therefore translates verse 5 based on this pattern in the NT. Which translation do you think best fits the context? Another option, that only 4 of the 50 English translations use, is that “faith” could be translated as “faithfulness”. That is a valid translation of the original, although the meaning occurs much less frequently. (1:5)

Verse 6 is the most challenging verse to interpret in Philemon. Most translations understand verse 6 as the content or purpose of Paul’s prayer for Philemon. The words “and I pray” are inserted to aid in understanding the verse. ESV begins with “[and I pray] that the sharing of your faith”. KJV has “That the communication [sharing NKJV] of thy faith”. NASB has “*and I pray* that the fellowship of your faith”. NIV has “I pray that your partnership with us in the faith”. After “may become effective”, ESV has “for the full knowledge”. KJV has “by the acknowledging”. NASB has “through the knowledge”. NIV has “in deepening your understanding”. Douglas Moo recommends the following paraphrase of verse 6. “Philemon, I am praying that the mutual participation that arises from your faith in Christ might become effective in leading you to understand and put into practice all the good that God wills for us and that is found in our community; and do all this for the sake of Christ”. What does verse 6 mean? (1:6)

Paul said that he had derived much joy and comfort from Philemon’s love. How did Philemon manifest his love toward other believers? In verse 7, how did Paul refer to Philemon? (1:7)

In verses 5 and 7, Paul used the word “saints”. It is based on an adjective used as a noun. The adjective can mean holy, sacred or dedicated to God. It could be translated “the holy ones”. What did Paul mean when he used this term? (1:7)

While Onesimus is only mentioned in verse 10, he is central to the letter. Some key questions will arise in the remainder of the letter. Some of the questions may not have definitive answers. How did Onesimus end up with Paul? Was Onesimus a fellow prisoner with Paul for a time? Did Onesimus seek out Paul or did divine providence bring them together? What did Paul want Philemon to do about Onesimus? Did he want Philemon to free Onesimus? Did Paul want Philemon to allow Onesimus to continue to aid Paul in his ministry?