

Philemon

A Plea for Onesimus

Study by Jason Labonte

I. Author

- A. Paul (vv. 1, 9, 19)
- B. Perhaps penned by Timothy (v. 1)

II. Recipients

A. Philemon

1. Likely a rich man
2. Owned at least one slave
3. The church at Colossae met at his house. (v. 2)

B. Apphia — probably Philemon's wife

C. Archippus

1. Maybe Philemon's son, and/or...
2. ...Maybe the elder of the Church at Colossae (Col 4:16)

III. Deliverers

A. Likely Tychicus... (Col 4:7-8)

B. ...Along with Onesimus (Col 4:9), about whom the letter concerned

IV. Date

A. ~AD 60

B. While Paul was under house arrest for the first time (Acts 28:16, 30-31)

V. Origin — Most likely Rome

VI.Style — Follows that of ancient Greek and Roman writers in the making of appeals

1. Seek harmony. (vv. 4-11)
2. Convince the mind. (12-19)
3. Move the emotions. (20-21)

VII.Purposes

- A. To deliver a special request to Philemon distinct from his accompanying letter to the Colossians: to accept back his thieving and runaway slave Onesimus as a brother in the Christ
- B. To ask Philemon to prepare a place for him once he is released from house arrest (v. 22)

VIII.The Text

- A. In v. 10, Paul uses a play on words, as “Onesimus” means “useful”.
- B. Under Roman law, Onesimus would have been guilty of death for running away from Philemon.
- C. In vv. 22 & 25, Paul uses the plural “you”; elsewhere, he uses the singular “you”.
- D. v. 20 uses emphatic pronouns, most likely to tie up the whole appeal with v. 7.
- E. Epaphras (v. 23) is the one who first preached the Gospel in Colossae (Col 1:7). (He had told Paul about the problems in Colossae that encouraged him to write that letter.)

IX.Discussion

- A. In what ways is Paul’s writing in this letter the same as his letters to churches? In what ways is the style different?
- B. How can Paul be seen as a type of Christ in this letter?
- C. Is there any significance to the mention of Mark’s name at the end of the letter?
- D. Why is this letter included in our canon? What messages can apply to all of us?