

**NAME**

The title of the epistle is taken from the name of the addressee, Philemon, Paul's beloved brother and fellow-worker.

**AUTHOR**

Laney:

The Pauline authorship of Philemon is quite certain from both internal and external evidence. Paul claims authorship in the salutation (1) and later states that he is writing the epistle with his own hand (19). Writing in the first person in verse 9 he again identifies himself as "Paul." The historical setting of the epistle fits that of Colossians (Colossians 4:10-14; Philemon 23,24) and if the Pauline authorship of Colossians is accepted, then Philemon should be considered authentic also.

The testimony of the church fathers also indicates that the claim of Pauline authorship is authentic. The epistle is quoted by Origen (185-254 A.D. - scholar and theologian from Alexandria - then Caesarea?) as Pauline, and is found in the Muratorian Canon (c. 170 A.D.) as well as the Canon of Marcion (c. 140 A.D.). The authenticity of Philemon was rejected by F.C. Baur (1792-1860, German theologian, founded the Tubingen School - developed the idea of explaining the development of early Christianity without references to divine influences or divine mandates), but most scholars accept the epistle as genuine. Timothy is associated with Paul in writing the epistle, but Paul is clearly the sole author (cf. 9,19).

**DATE**

Laney:

The close connection of Philemon with Colossians makes it virtually certain that the two epistles belong to the same period. It is most probable that Tychicus accompanied by Onesimus carried them both to Colossae at the same time (Colossians 4:7-9) during Paul's first Roman imprisonment (February 60 - March 62 A.D.). Colossians and Philemon were probably written in the early spring of 62 A.D. shortly before Paul's release from prison.

**THEME**

Halley (page 44): *"Conversion of a Runaway Slave"*

Laney: *"Reconciliation is Possible Through the Merit of a Mediator"*

Mitchell: *"The Christian Life is One of Changed Relationships"*  
(see below under Contribution To Canon)

Key Words (Nelson's): Forgiveness From Slavery - Philemon develops the transition from bondage to brotherhood that is brought about by Christian love and forgiveness. Just as Philemon was shown mercy through the grace of Christ, so he must graciously forgive his repentant runaway who has returned as a brother in Christ.

Key verses (Nelson's):

*"No longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me."* (16,17)

Key Verse (Mitchell):

*"If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account."* (18)

Laney:

The purpose in writing was to help Onesimus return to Philemon by urging Philemon to accept him as he would Paul, and by promising Philemon restitution for any damages he suffered when Onesimus fled. The letter was also intended to inform the believers at Colossae of Paul's future visit and to have Philemon arrange a place for Paul to lodge.

Outline:

- I. Paul's Prayer For Philemon 1-7
- II. Paul's Petition For Onesimus 8-20
- III. Paul's Plea For Himself 21-25

### **RECIPIENTS**

Laney:

Paul's letter is addressed to Philemon "the beloved" and "our fellow-worker" (1). The only source of information about Philemon is this letter. It is evident from the context that Philemon was a slaveholder (15,16) who had been converted, possibly as a result of Paul's ministry (19). This verse indicates that Philemon is at least indebted to Paul in some way. Philemon was beloved by Paul and had worked with him or helped him with his ministry (1). He was acquainted with Epaphras, Mark, Zristarchus, Demas, and Luke, all of whom sent greetings to Philemon (23,24). Since the church met at Philemon's house, he must have been a person of substance and influence (2).

Apphia, the female addressee, some have speculated, was the wife of Philemon. This is a possibility, but not specifically stated in the text. Paul calls her a "sister" (2) and this is evidence that she is a believer.

Archippus was a believer at Colossae and a fellow-soldier of Paul and Timothy (2). It is possible that Archippus could have been Philemon's son. The term "fellow-soldier," is used figuratively as a term of honor to denote those who have devoted themselves to the service of the gospel. The term is used of only one other man in Scripture: Epaphroditus - who came close to death in serving Christ and helping Paul (Philippians 2:25-30). Archippus resided at Colossae and was involved in the ministry there (Colossians 4:17). Some have suggested that Archippus may have been Philemon's pastor, but his is not specifically indicated in the text.

This letter, while being person in content, is also addressed to the church at Philemon's house (2). It seems as though Paul wanted to make a public example of this matter, perhaps to encourage other slaveholders to follow Philemon's example, or to apply social pressure to Philemon that he might heed Paul's request.

Historical Setting:

Laney:

The gospel was introduced to Colossae as a result of Paul's long and influential ministry at

Ephesus (Acts 19:10,26). Evidently the people of the surrounding districts heard Paul's teaching either directly or indirectly, and as a result of Paul's witness Philemon was saved (19). Epaphras, who was also from Colossae (Colossians 4:12) and had brought news of the church to Paul in Rome (Colossians 1:8), was probably converted under Paul's ministry in Ephesus and was influential in establishing the church at Colossae (Colossians 1:7,8; 4:12,13). Archippus was actively ministering among the believers at Colossae as a "fellow-worker" of Paul and Timothy (Colossians 4:17; Philemon 2). It is possible that Paul had never visited the church at Colossae when he wrote to the believers there. Colossians 1:14 indicates that Paul only heard of the results of the work at Colossae, and Colossians 2:1 would indicate that there were those there who had not seen Paul.

Paul wrote this letter to Philemon on behalf of Philemon's slave, Onesimus of Colossae (Colossian 4:9), who had run away (Philemon 15), possibly robbed his master (18) and had traveled to Rome. There he had evidently been converted under Paul's ministry (Philemon 10). Onesimus had become a useful servant of the apostle in his imprisonment (Colossians 4:9; Philemon 11) and Paul desired to keep Onesimus with him to continue his ministry (Philemon 13), but he recognized the fact that he was the property of Philemon and must be subject to his master (Ephesians 6:5). Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon with Tychicus (Colossians 4:7,8) with a letter requesting Philemon to demonstrate grace and receive Onesimus as a brother in the Lord.

### About Slaves and Onesimus' Return:

It is reported that that 60,000,000 slaves inhabited the Roman Empire in the first century. Conditions were unbearable. Slaves were living tools... two-footed animals viewed as creatures without souls. At will, their masters could terminate their lives without a question being raised.

Repentant, and ready to make all amends in his power, Onesimus undertook to return to his old master. But, the apostle Paul knew that Philemon could not be aware how changed a character returned to him. Paul knew that by law Philemon could inflict on Onesimus the extremest punishment (death by crucifixion was no unusual penalty for a heathen master to inflict for such offenses). Paul's desire, for one who had grown to be like a son to himself, gave this letter to Onesimus to deliver to Philemon.

### CONTRIBUTION TO CANON

Mitchell:

The two purposes of the letter express a very significant Biblical truth:

1. Practical Purpose: To effect a reconciliation between slave and master
2. Doctrinal Purpose: To illustrate the Doctrine of Substitution - The letter portrays a drama with three actors: Philemon is the Father. Onesimus is the slave. Paul is Christ. We have wronged our Master, misused His mercies, and trampled His grace. Jesus has paid our debt and discharged our obligations. And now we can be accepted by our Master.

Martin Luther: *"Here we see how Saint Paul layeth himself out for poor Onesimus, and with all his means pleadeth his cause with his master; and so setteth himself, as if he were Onesimus, and had himself done wrong to Philemon... Even as Christ did for us with God the Father... For we are all His Onesimus to my thinking."* (quoted by Mitchell)

The letter illustrates that the Christian life is one of changed relationships (theme).

There is a change with reference to God, from aliens to citizens, from enemies to friends, as illustrated with Philemon and Onesimus. There is a change with reference to self. Onesimus became a new man and began to live up to his name which means “serviceable,” or “profitable.” There is a change with reference to circumstances. Things are different now. A Christian is never a victim of circumstances but a victor. This is seen in Onesimus.

One should also note that Philemon is a magnificent study in forgiveness, grace, and mercy.

### NOTE regarding the Doctrine of Substitution:

*“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us - for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.” (Galatians 3:13)*

Adam, representing mankind as the head of our race, through disobedience brought God’s condemnation upon us. Jesus, representing mankind, through obedience made possible our acquittal from the penalty for our sin and life with God (Romans 5:18,19; 1 Corinthians 15:45,47). That Jesus is fully man enables Him to die as our representative, substituting Himself in our place, paying the penalty for our sin (Hebrews 2:14-18). That Jesus is fully God enables Him to act as our mediator and to bear the full penalty for the sins of all mankind since only God is able to save man (Jonah 2:9; 1 Timothy 2:5). Jesus is the firstborn representative of those who have been made alive through His vicarious sacrifice (1 Corinthians 15:20-23; Colossians 1:18; Revelation 1:5).

*“Sin is an accursed thing. God, from the necessity of his holiness, must curse it; he must punish men for committing it; but the Lord’s Christ, the glorious Son of the everlasting Father, became a man, and suffered in his own proper person the curse which was due to the sons of men, that so, by a vicarious offering, God having been just in punishing sin, could extend his bounteous mercy towards those who believe in the Substitute.” — C. H. Spurgeon, “Christ Made A Curse For Us,” May 30, 1869 (From: <http://www.angelfire.com/va/sovereigngrace/doctrinesubstitution.html>)*

Mitchell:

Peculiarities:

1. Only letter to a friend on a matter of private business. The entire content is strictly private. Paul deals with no church business at all.
2. Shortest of Paul’s letters - 340 words. Brief but beautiful.
3. A real study in psychology and salesmanship. Paul is a real gentleman. He demonstrates tact and a real sense of delicacy.

**RESOURCES**

Gromacki, Robert C. *New Testament Survey*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Book House, 1978

Robert H. Gundry, Ph.D., *A Survey Of The New Testament*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan Publishing House, 1970

Halley, Henry H. *Halley's Bible Handbook*, Grand Rapids, Michigan; Zondervan Publishing House

Horton, David, General Editor. *The Portable Seminary*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Bethany House Publishers, 2006

*Nelson's Quick Reference - Bible Maps And Charts*, Nashville, Tennessee; Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1994

As general resources I've relied on my class notes from various professors at Biola University (especially those of Dr. Curtis Mitchell), Western Conservative Baptist Seminary (WCBS - [especially those of Dr. J. Carl Laney]), and Talbot Seminary as well as notes shared with me by Annie Kartoizian.

Additional reference material has come from the study Bibles of the English Standard Version, New American Standard Version, and The New Living Translation.

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