

# *A Survey of the Letter to Philemon*

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## Author:

Paul, the apostle (**Philemon 1**), formerly Saul of Tarsus (**Acts 8-9**) identifies himself as the author of this letter. The early church unanimously accepted it as from Paul. This letter is unlike the other prison epistles in that it is addressed to a person and not to a congregation. However, it was circulated and read along with other letters. Paul was also aided by Timothy in this letter.

## Date:

It is generally accepted that Paul wrote it around 60-62 AD in the city of Rome, while in a Roman prison (**Philemon 1, 9-13, 23**). This is why it is lumped with the other prison epistles (Ephesians, Colossians, and Philippians). He also wrote another letter to the Laodiceans (**Colossians 4:16**) but unfortunately it has been lost. Philemon can be compared to the book of Colossians because many of the same people in this little letter are also mentioned in that book (i.e. Timothy, Aristarchus, Archippus, Mark, Epaphras, Luke, Onesimus, and Demas). They were no doubt written at the same time.

## Theme:

This letter is about brotherly love and forgiveness. The recipient is a member of the church and a master of slaves. It should be noted that this was not uncommon, but when an opportunity to show grace to a former slave presents itself Paul takes the opportunity to teach. Paul's letter gives us inspired insight into the slavery system and the growing conflicts and prejudices facing the New Testament church.

## Audience:

The letter is personally addressed to Philemon, Apphia (wife), Archippus (son), and the church in their house. The letter concerns Onesimus, a slave who stole from his master (**Philemon 19**) and escaped to Rome, where he came into contact with Paul. We have no way of knowing how or why Onesimus visited Paul in prison. However, Paul converts him and sends him back to his master. Evidently actions taken before you become a Christian still count and repentance includes recompense for past sins, so long as one is able.

This letter does not denounce Philemon's right to hold slaves, but does command that forgiveness be given to Onesimus. Upon his return he is no longer a slave but a beloved brother (**Philemon 16**). This would have been a hot topic in this day because in the Roman Empire there were about 60 million slaves. Hefty rewards were given for their return. During our own Civil War in America the letter to Philemon was heralded.

## Key Verses:

**Philemon 4, 7, 11, 15-17, 20, 21**

## Outline:

- I. *Paul's Prayer (1-9)*
- II. *Paul's Plea (10-16)*
- III. *Paul's Pledge (17-25)*