

Introduction to Philemon

NIV Study Bible

Author, Date, and Place of Writing

Paul wrote this short letter (see vv. 1,9,19) probably at the same time as Colossians (c. a.d. 60; see Introduction to Colossians: Author, Date and Place of Writing) and sent it to Colosse with the same travelers, Onesimus and Tychicus. He apparently wrote both letters from prison in Rome, though possibly from Ephesus (see Introduction to Philippians: Author, Date and Place of Writing; see also chart, p. 2261).

Recipient, Background, and Purpose

Paul wrote this letter to Philemon, a believer in Colosse who, along with others, was a slave owner (cf. Col 4:1; for slavery in the NT see note on Eph 6:5). One of his slaves, Onesimus, had apparently stolen from him (cf. v. 18) and then run away, which under Roman law was punishable by death. But Onesimus met Paul and through his ministry became a Christian (see v. 10). Now he was willing to return to his master, and Paul writes this personal appeal to ask that he be accepted as a Christian brother (see v. 16).

Approach and Structure

To win Philemon's willing acceptance of Onesimus, Paul writes very tactfully and in a lighthearted tone, which he creates with a wordplay (see note on v. 11). The appeal (vv. 4–21) is organized in a way prescribed by ancient Greek and Roman teachers: to build rapport (vv. 4–10), to persuade the mind (vv. 11–19) and to move the emotions (vv. 20–21). The name Onesimus is not mentioned until the rapport has been built (v. 10), and the appeal itself is stated only near the end of the section to persuade the mind (v. 17).

Outline

- Greetings (1–3)
- Thanksgiving and Prayer (4–7)
- Paul's Plea for Onesimus (8–21)
- Final Request, Greetings and Benediction (22–25)

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