

Introduction to Philemon

Where is it in the Bible?

Philemon is the eighteenth book in the New Testament between Titus and Hebrews. It is the last of the Pauline epistles because it is the shortest, only 335 words in Greek.

Who wrote it?

The salutation (1:1) identifies Paul as the author of this epistle, and his authorship is not disputed. Timothy is also mentioned as a co-author, although most of the letter uses first person singular references.

When was it written?

Paul identifies himself as a prisoner three times (vv. 1, 9, 23), so the date of the letter depends on which imprisonment is meant. There are several possibilities, and there is no clear evidence in favor of one or the other. The best that can be said is that the letter was probably written sometime between 54 and 61.

What is it about?

The letter is a personal appeal from Paul to Philemon, a fellow Christian, on behalf of Onesimus, his runaway slave.

How is it structured?

- I. Salutation (1-3)
- II. Thanksgiving and Prayer for Philemon (4-7)
- III. Paul's Plea for Onesimus (8-21)
- IV. Final Request, Greetings, and Benediction (22-25)

What are some things to look for?

- **Christian Community:** Paul's language emphasizes the connection between believers, for example, brother, sister, partner, co-worker, and fellow soldier. They are joined together in a new relationship based on love. This forms the basis for good deeds that Christians do for one another.
- **Persuasive Tactics:** Paul tries a number of approaches to convince Philemon to respond as Paul hopes. By identifying himself as a prisoner, he encourages Philemon's sympathy. He includes greetings for the entire church, indicating that the letter should be read to everyone. He gives thanks for Philemon and his love for fellow Christians before making his request. Paul also reminds Philemon that he would not have been saved if it had not been for Paul's efforts. In short, Paul makes it difficult for Philemon not to do what he asks.
- **What Does Paul Want Philemon to Do?** There is debate about exactly what Paul wanted Philemon to do. It is clear that he wants Philemon to welcome Onesimus back, but is that all? Some have suggested that Paul wants Onesimus to be freed, possibly so that he can return to help Paul.