

Philemon

Purpose: “To ask Philemon to receive Onesimus back not as a slave but as a Christian brother” (edited from New Geneva Study Bible).

Outline: 1-3 – Introductory Greetings
4-7– Thanksgiving
8-21 – Paul’s Plea for Onesimus
22-25 – Final Greetings and Benediction

Author: Paul

Date: 60-62 AD while imprisoned in Rome

Highlights:

This personal letter to Philemon – along with the letters to the Colossian, Philippian, and Ephesian Christians – are called the “Prison Epistles” because Paul wrote them while he was under house arrest in Rome.

This letter was probably sent to Philemon together with the letter to the Colossians. Philemon was a Christian brother and slaveholder in Colosse. His slave, Onesimus, had apparently run away and had somehow met Paul in Rome. Through Paul’s teaching, Onesimus had become a Christian. Paul’s request to Philemon, on behalf of Onesimus, is about as powerful an appeal as he can make.

This letter shows us the apostle using all his personal force to bring about a Christian answer to a very serious problem.

Christian Love gets defined for us in this letter to Philemon. In verse 4, we see it meaning to be grateful for the best in others. In verse 10, Christian Love seeks the welfare of others. In verse 12, it deals honestly with others. Verse 18 reveals that it bears the burdens of others. And in verse 21, we see that Christian Love believes the best of others.

HUMOR ALERT: The Greek word, which gets translated “heart” (v. 7, 12, 20) is the English equivalent of “bowels.” Paul is saying that Philemon has “refreshed the bowels of the saints.” The sense is still the same. The bowels are the seat of our emotions, which is to say that you can’t get much deeper than bowels. Heart just sounds nicer, and is in English the seat of our emotions.

The name, Onesimus, means “useful.” In verse 11, Paul makes a play on words talking about how Onesimus was once useless, but is now useful.