

## **Philemon: *The Fugitive***

### **Introduction**

Among Paul's epistles Philemon is unique in at least three ways. First, it is the shortest of his letters containing only 335 words in the original. For this reason it is often referred to as a "Postcard from Paul." Second, it is the most personal epistle. Third, it serves as a beautiful illustration of the biblical doctrines of substitution, reconciliation and especially imputation.

**I. The Author**—The author specifically identifies himself as "Paul" three times in this brief letter (1, 9, 19), and mentions his imprisonment five times (1, 9, 10, 13, 19). Philemon was written by Paul in about A.D. 61 during his two-year house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:16, 30-31).

**II. The Audience**—The occasion for this letter involves the divine intertwining of the lives of three men: Paul, Philemon and Onesimus. While Paul was in Ephesus for three years during his third missionary (A.D. 53-56), the Gospel was proclaimed throughout the surrounding area of Western Asia Minor (Acts 19:10). During this period of time a wealthy man from Colossae named Philemon met Paul and was led to personal faith in Jesus Christ (Philem. 19). At the time of writing Colossians and Philemon, Paul had not personally visited the city of Colossae (Col. 1:4, 9; 2:1). Therefore, it seems likely that Philemon had visited Ephesus on business and come into contact with Paul there and believed the gospel. Philemon returned to Colossae and led his wife Apphia and son Archippus to Christ. When Epaphras came to Colossae to preach and church plant, Philemon opened his home for the meeting of the church in Colossae (Philem. 2).

In A.D. 60 Paul began serving two years of house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:16, 30-31). During this time a runaway slave named Onesimus came into contact with Paul, and he was led to faith in Christ (Philem. 10). Onesimus became a close friend and help to the imprisoned apostle. Somehow in their conversations, Paul discovered that this fugitive slave was from Colossae (Col. 4:9) and belonged to his friend Philemon. Paul also learned that Onesimus had robbed Philemon before fleeing (Philem. 18). Paul knew that Onesimus had to go back and make things right with Philemon. This letter is Paul's intercession on behalf of Onesimus to his friend Philemon.

**III. The Aim**—Unlike Paul's other letters, Philemon is not concerned with doctrine, but to show the life-changing effects of Christianity on social conditions and personal relationships. Paul wrote this letter to appeal to Philemon to forgive and receive his runaway slave Onesimus.

### **IV. The Arrangement**

- I. The Prayer for Philemon (1-7)
- II. The Plea for Onesimus (8-17)
- III. The Pledge of Paul (18-25)

## **V. The Analysis**

### Key Characteristics:

Warm and affectionate

Many people (eleven) are mentioned

Play on the name Onesimus (10-11, 20)

Excellent illustration of imputation (18-19)

I. The Prayer for Philemon (1-7)

II. The Plea for Onesimus (8-17)

III. The Pledge of Paul (18-25)

## **VI. The Application**