

Philemon

Key message of the book: 'Receive the repentant brother, as Christ has received you.'

Background information:

This epistle is one of Paul's prison epistles, likely written during his **first** Roman imprisonment, during which he also wrote **Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians**. So the date could be around 61 A.D.

Paul writes to Philemon (his name means 'friendly'), who was a member of the church at **Colosse**, which met in his house. If Apphia (see verse 2) is his wife, then Archippus is possibly the son, likely filling a pastoral capacity (see Col 4:17) which Epaphras may previously have occupied (see verse 23, and also Colossians 4:12). Onesimus (his name means '**profitable**'; note verse 11) appears to be Philemon's runaway slave, who somehow came into contact with Paul in Rome, and was converted under his ministry there. How amazing providence is! Paul sends this epistle by the hand of Onesimus to Philemon with the hopes that there may be a reconciliation, and even that Onesimus may return and minister to Paul. We do well to assume that Philemon did as Paul requested.

Consider Onesimus' courage in delivering this letter: 'In those days, if a slave ran away, at best he could be branded with a red-hot iron on the forehead with the letter F, standing for a fugitive runaway, and at the worst he could be crucified.' (H. Hester, *New Testament Bible History Handbook*, p. 242).

Some fifty year later, Ignatius wrote a letter to the church at Ephesus, and spoke in glowing terms of the bishop there, whose name was 'Onesimus'. 'It may well be that the runaway slave had become with the passing years the great bishop of Ephesus.' (H. Hester, *New Testament Bible History Handbook*, p. 243)

Message explained:

Paul begins by expressing his appreciation for Philemon. He then explains the situation that concerns Onesimus, and makes request for Philemon to forgive Onesimus, and to receive him as a brother, promising to pay anything that Onesimus had previously stolen.

As we read Paul's passionate plea on behalf of Onesimus, we get a glimpse of God's message to his own blood-bought children: **Romans 15:7** 'Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God.' It is as if Paul stands in the place of Christ, beseeching Philemon to receive Onesimus, even as Paul (and Christ) had received Philemon (note verse 19).

Christians are to do the same for their brethren who have repented after sinning. We are to receive the repentant brother or sister back into fellowship, just as Christ received us.



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