

Key to PHILEMON

1. BACKGROUND:

The writer is Paul; date of writing is about A.D. 64 from Rome.

Philemon was a Christian gentleman, a member of the church of Colosse. He was a well-to-do man and possibly the church met in his house. It seems that he was an intimate friend of Paul.

The occasion: Onesimus, a slave of Philemon, had apparently stolen money and fled to Rome. While there he somehow met Paul. After Onesimus received CHRIST, Paul told him to return to his master Philemon.

Paul writes this letter to Philemon asking forgiveness for Onesimus and sends it by him. This is one of the "prison epistles."

2. THEME:

This is purely a personal letter dealing with a domestic matter. Out of all the voluminous mail of Paul, this letter alone is preserved for our edification. Not only is the subject matter dealt with, but the teaching of the letter constitutes a lovely, tender, sincere example of the outworkings of the grace of GOD in the heart of a Christian.

3. MAIN DIVISIONS:

Greeting (vv. 1-3);
character of Philemon (4-7);
appeal for Onesimus (8-21);
salutations (22-25).

4. SPECIAL CHARACTERISTICS:

"Apphia" (v.2) was no doubt the wife of Philemon; "Archippus" was either his son or the local pastor.

There is a planned play on words in verse 11, as the name Onesimus means "profitable."

The use of the word "**forever**" in verse 15 was a hint of the extension of earthly friendships throughout eternity.

This letter is a perfect gem of tact, delicacy, courtesy, and generosity as Paul pleads for Philemon to receive Onesimus "**as myself**."

There is no hint in Scripture as to how Philemon received Onesimus. However, tradition has it that he not only took him back, but, taking Paul's hint, gave Onesimus his freedom.

There is a tradition that Onesimus became a bishop in the Greek city of Berea. A writer, some

years later, makes mention of one named Onesimus as being bishop there in that very city of Berea.

5. OUTLINE:

Greetings (1-3)
Thanksgiving (4-7)
Purpose (8-21)
Paul
Onesimus
Brotherly Love
Conclusion (22-25)
Hope of Release
Salutations

6. OUTSTANDING TEACHINGS:

Paul styles himself a "**prisoner of Jesus Christ**," not a prisoner of the Roman government or of Nero. This is in keeping with his conviction that GOD had placed him in Rome for a special ministry (Philippians 1:12).

There is no doubt that Philemon was not only a Christian brother, but a dear, good, generous, benevolent man of GOD. No doubt he was a large source of evangelism and edification in Colosse. The close relationship of all believers in CHRIST is beautifully taught by Paul's new kinship to Onesimus. He is called Paul's "**son**" (v. 10).

Even though as a Christian Onesimus was now truly free, still Paul was careful to send him back directly to his former life. The miracle of salvation is not designed to produce a revolution, but a complete regeneration of the heart.

Paul's offer to "repay" what Onesimus had stolen is one of the most touching incidents in the New Testament (v. 18).

The fulfillment of Paul's promise to come and visit Philemon (v. 22) is thought to have been accomplished between his first and second Roman imprisonments.

7. KEY:

A tender illustration of how the Gospel operates in hearts and results in good deeds.

~ end of Philemon ~

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