

# Session #1: Philemon Introduction

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## Introduction

A mere 25 verses long, this letter is the shortest of St. Paul's letters. Within it, though we will discover some of St. Paul's pastoral visions well as a glimpse into the life of the early Church. Because this letter was written to a specific person, regarding a specific problem hopefully to be resolved quickly, it is very unlikely that St. Paul thought this letter would go much further than a conversation between himself and Philemon shared with the family and home church, much less read by us two thousand years later.



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## Who is the Author and When Was it Written?

We read in Philemon verses 1, 9 and 19 the author identifies himself as the Apostle, Paul. This along with the personality and style of the letter, scholarship firmly agree that this document was penned by St. Paul. The second question of when is still being debated. It is grouped within the *Captivity letters* because it is clear that St. Paul is writing from prison (verses 1, 9, 10, 13, 23). What scholars disagree about is whether St. Paul wrote this when he was detained in Caesarea (Acts 23:31-35) or Rome (Acts 28:16-31). There is also a third option. Among the scholarship studying the scripture there are a growing number who are looking at the possibility that this letter was written during a possible but unnoted (in the scriptures) imprisonment of St. Paul in Ephesus. Their reasons for thinking so are:

Remember the riot of the Silversmiths. We read in Acts 19 of a hullabaloo that St. Paul's preaching created when he spoke out against the worship of the local idol, Artemis. Her temple was very close to Ephesus bringing to the city a healthy tourist trade. The local silversmiths were making a tidy profit off the "souvenirs" they made and sold to those who came to the city so as to visit the Temple of Artemis. St. Paul's preaching was so effective that the individuals may have come to worship Artemis but left as a believer in Christ thus vastly decreasing the sales of the miniature Artemis idols. With the silversmiths business depressed they challenged St. Paul and rioted in protest. Charges were brought against St. Paul which could have led to his imprisonment in the city but if so nothing was written about it in the Acts of the Apostles. Scholars base their opinion on the following reasons:

- St. Paul bypasses Ephesus on his return from his third missionary trip asking the elders of the Church in Ephesus to meet him at Miletus (Acts 20:16-17). Scholars suggest this choice to bypass the city hints at his concern to there being further incarceration should he enter the city.
- We read in 1 Corinthians 15:32: *at Ephesus I fought wild beasts...* Most scholars agree this had to do with the riot of the silversmiths but some suggest it could be a metaphor for prison.

- Colossae is a mere hundred miles from Ephesus. A very doable walking distance for a slave who is running away. Ephesus a very large city, easy to get lost in. It is possible (and in some ways more likely than his going to Rome) that Onesimus came to Ephesus, was converted by St. Paul or one of his disciples and lived within the Christian community there until St. Paul sent him back to right his original wrongs.

If this is true then the letter was written around 55 A.D., but all things considered most scholars date the Letter to Philemon as being written during St. Paul's house arrest in Rome somewhere between 60-62 A.D.

### **Who is the Audience**

This is a personal letter written to an individual or some would say a family group.

- First there is Philemon. Scholars understand him to be a convert of St. Paul living seemingly in Colossae. Philemon's home is deduced from Colossians 4:9 where we read about Onesimus, Philemon's slave as "*one of you.*"
- We hear St. Paul address Apphia (1:2) who could possibly be Philemon's wife, but we are not given any further information so there is no certitude as to who this individual is.
- Finally, we read St. Paul addressing a Christian leader Archippus (1:2) who some suggest might be Philemon's son, but again with no further information this is all just a guess.

Scholars see a close connection between this letter and the Letter to the Colossians but there is a possibility that Philemon lives in the city of Colossae or neighboring community.

### **Purpose in Writing**

St. Paul is writing this letter as an impassioned plea to Philemon asking him to welcome back a runaway slave, Onesimus. With little information given we can assume, from verse 11, that while a slave in Philemon's household Onesimus was relatively useless. (*Formerly he was useless to you...*) Some scholars suggest that he may have stolen from the family (*If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything...* verse 18). Onesimus runs away and somehow finds himself in the home of St. Paul. Onesimus has a conversion experience and becomes Christian. St. Paul is now sending him back but asking Philemon to receive him as a brother in Christ and no longer a slave.

### **Main Themes**

One of the conversations we need to have going into this study is on the subject of slavery. There are those who have used the words of St. Paul to support the idea of slavery but almost all scholarship this is an inappropriate understanding of St. Paul's work. Slavery was an acceptable institution throughout the Roman empire of the first century. As we discussed in our conversation about Ephesians 6:5-9, slavery was not based on race. You became a slave in one of three ways:

1. Inability to pay debts owed. At some point the justice system intervened and you (and sometimes immediate family) were made a slave to the one you owed money to, or you

# Session #1: Philemon Introduction

and/or your family were sold at auction with the money going to the other to pay off your debt.

2. Captured as prisoners of war. It was the common custom for the victorious army to bring back inhabitants of their defeated land to function as slaves in their household.
3. Born into slavery. In that slaves had the right to marry, their offspring belonged to the master.

While slaves were considered the property of their master, their living conditions depended on the type of work they did and the temperament and status of their master. Some did physical labor while others were educated as craftsmen, physicians, architects, scribes and teachers. Slaves in the 1<sup>st</sup> century did have rights. They could marry, acquire money, own property and even buy their freedom. It was often customary for the master to free some of his “favorite” slaves with his impending death or as a reward for some grand accomplishment of the slave. While slavery in the Roman Empire was not the will of God, it was more humane than what we have heard regarding the horrors of slavery here in this country in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century and continues to exist throughout the world.

## Meaning for Today

One might challenge the idea of the study of this obvious “personal correspondence” of St. Paul. And while it is true that the specific reason for this letter has to do with repairing a broken bond between master and slave there are some deep theological themes one can reflect on.

1. In his discussion of reconciling Onesimus to Philemon, St. Paul reminds us all that our first identity is not one defined by the world but based in our relationship through Jesus Christ. We should always understand ourselves first as the adopted and greatly loved children of God, our Father.
2. Going a step further, as the children of God, as we studied in St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, our relationship with everyone around us should be as servant. *Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ* (Ephesians 5:21). Again, it is not the world that should define how we are to be in relationship to one another, but as Christians we see all things as defined by Christ.
3. For those in leadership, they would be wise to study St. Paul’s style in this letter. It is both authoritative but extremely loving and compassionate. It is very pastoral and a great model for those in any leadership roles in the Church.

## Structure and Outline

- A. Opening Address and Greeting (1-3)
- B. Thanksgiving and intercession (4-7)
- C. Appeal to Philemon for Onesimus (8-20)
- D. Closing Comments (21-25)

### **Why Was this letter Included in the Canon of the Bible**

Before we move into the letter itself lets take a moment and ponder why this personal letter was placed within the canon of the Bible? One theory has to do with another letter written some 50 years later. Ignatius was one of the martyrs of the early church. As he was being taken to Rome for execution, in the travel he wrote many letters which still survive today. One of those surviving letters was to the church in Ephesus and in the first chapter he raves about their bishop – Onesimus! Why would we think this is the same slave turned Christian? Because Ignatius makes the exact same pun we will read about in verse 11. Onesimus’ name means profitable and St. Paul uses that in asking Philemon to take him back. If this is true, that Onesimus because the Bishop of Ephesus as the early church discussed which documents and letters would be included in the canon of the Bible, specifically the New Testament Bishop Onesimus may well have argued for it’s inclusion as a way of showing what God had done for him and what can happen in the love of God.

### **Opening Greeting Verses 1-3**

#### ***Verse 1 Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus***

As discussed in the introduction, scholars have placed this letter within what the Church calls St. Paul’s Captivity Letters. Most will say that St. Paul wrote this while under house arrest in Rome awaiting trial. But as we discussed in the introduction this letter could have also been written in Ephesus if St. Paul was in prison there. We can and should understand the idea of “prisoner” in another way. In 1 Corinthians St. Paul calls himself *an apostle of Christ Jesus* (1;1). In Romans he calls himself *a slave of Christ Jesus* (1:1) In many translations what you will read here in Ephesians is *a prisoner OF Christ Jesus*. Prisoner FOR or prisoner OF, scholarship agree that St. Paul accepted his responsibility to the mission of spreading the gospel with radical allegiance and love. In his love and devotion he can do nothing else but work in his call to spread the gospel.

#### ***and Timothy, our brother***

Timothy was a long-time companion and co-worker of St. Paul. We read in Acts 16:1: *the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek*. He joined St. Paul on his second missionary trip. Timothy wrote two letters: 1 and 2 Timothy and is named as coauthor to five other letters of St. Paul. (2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians)

#### ***to Philemon***

There is really very little we know about this man other than he is most likely wealthy, given that he has slaves; that he is well known to St. Paul for why else would he be writing a personal letter to, besides he call Philemon ***beloved***. And finally, that Philemon is a fellow worker meaning that Philemon is a Christian who has dedicated at least of part his life to the work of spreading the gospel.

# Session #1: Philemon Introduction

## **Verse 2 Apphia, our sister and Archippus**

Even less is known of these two individuals. We know that both are Christians, why else would St. Paul call her **our sister**. As stated in the introduction some scholars suggest, because she is mentioned, as a woman of status, that she might be Philemon's wife. Archippus also is a Christian and co-worker in the cause for Christ in some form of pastoral ministry. He is believed to be Philemon's son. He is also mentioned in Colossians 4:17.

### **the church in your home**

For the first three hundred years of Christianity, the activity of Church happened in private homes that had large rooms for the community of believers to gather and worship. Scholars believe that the average "church home" was approximately 35 people. If we look at Acts 2:46 we can capture a glimpse into the life of those early believers: *Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes.* Now it is very unlikely that Philemon and his Church were in Jerusalem so meeting in the temple would be out, but there is no doubt they gathered in the homes for community, prayer and the breaking of bread (Eucharist). This letter is addressed to them as well because Onesimus has or at least should have a relationship with the whole community upon his return. St. Paul wants Onesimus to be seen by this Church as not a slave but as their brother in Christ who will share in their work to spread the Gospel. If Philemon accepts this and the community does not then there is a problem. If the community accepts and Philemon doesn't, again a problem. So, St. Paul writes to the community as well in hopes that all will accept Onesimus.

## **Verse 3 Grace...peach from God our Father**

These words of greeting will be found in other letters of St. Paul (Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3). This greeting along with the ending blessing frames this (and other letters) to be read in the context of God's grace. St. Paul will not go on to develop theological concepts as he does in other letters since this is not a teaching document.

## **Giving Thanks Verses 4-7**

### **Verse 4 I give thanks...remembering you**

After acknowledging not only Philemon but Apphia and Archippus and their home church, St. Paul moves right into an "I – you" exchange. This letter was meant for Philemon but St. Paul knew there would be other ears to hear. If the letter was meant for everyone he would have written something like what we read in Romans 1:8: *I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you.* While this letter was shared with others, its intention was directed at one, Philemon.

### **Verse 5 of the love and faith you have ...for**

St. Paul is recognizing the work of Philemon, that his faith is not just something that he assented to but that he has lived out in the lives of others. St. Paul sees this *faith working through love* (Galatians 5:6) but what Philemon has done to build up and nurture his home church.

### **all the holy ones**

In some translations we can read in place of holy ones *all the saints*. St. Paul is giving thanks not for those men and women who we would identify as official Saints of the Church (St. Therese, St. Anthony...) but St. Paul is identifying all believers. Calling anyone who believes in Jesus Christ as a saint is something St. Paul did in other letters (Ephesians

4:12; Romans 8:27; 1 Corinthians 6:2). St. Paul is using this as an identification as a people dedicated to Jesus Christ and set apart for the service of God. If we are believers in Jesus Christ then we are all “saints” in this identification of St. Paul, but we are all meant to be Saints in the making of our lives. *The best rendering of the phrase “all the holy ones (saints)” may well be “all God’s dedicated people”.* (Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture)

**Verse 6 that your partnership in faith**

With this verse St. Paul moves into a prayer of petition for Philemon. In some translations we will read: *that the sharing of your faith may become more effective.* If we look to the substance of the letter we will see that this letter is less about Philemon communicating, preaching the faith and all about his being called by St. Paul to live the faith as God intended him to. And just how does St. Paul hope Philemon will live out his faith? As the verse continues we hear St. Paul’s prayer: **recognizing every good there is in us that leads to Christ.** In the study of Ephesians 4:1-15 St. Paul challenges all the readers, all believers to accept the responsibility that a part of our call in faith is to build up the Church, to build up the Body of Christ. St. Paul is setting up the challenge that he will deliver in verses 8-14; that Philemon put aside his personal problems with Onesimus and think about being a public witness of the good of God in accepting Onesimus back in forgiveness and as a brother in Christ.

**Verse 7 For I have experienced much joy**

In this verse we hear of St. Paul’s pride and pleasure in the work of Philemon as a leader in this home church, the work Philemon has done to build up and nurture that community. St. Paul speaks with such satisfaction **because the hearts of the holy ones have been refreshed by you, brother.** The “holy ones” again refers to those members under Philemon’s leadership in their home Church. Interestingly, where we have “hearts” in this verse the work used in Greek is *splanchna* which literally translates to *innards* or *bowels*. For the Jews of that period the bowels or the inner organs was where they believed the emotions dwelt. In the original Greek *splanchna* will occur again in verses 12 and 20. This also shows that translating scripture is an art. What means something in the first century would leave us 21<sup>st</sup> century students scratching our heads.

**brother**

This identification is not to be taken lightly. St. Paul is including Philemon within the ranks of those that, not only does he dearly love, but who have, like himself, dedicated themselves to the mission of spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

**Reflection Questions:**

1. What are your hopes and expectations for this study?
2. Is there anything today that the world finds acceptable but you hope with time will be abolished such as slavery was in St. Paul’s time but is unacceptable today?
3. In these initial verses St. Paul offers joy and rejoicing. How often do you express joy in your day? Do you think it is important to do so?

**Catechism of the Catholic Church**

**Title of Christ: 436-40**

# Session #1: Philemon Introduction

Meaning of Lord: 446-51

Prayer of Thanksgiving: 2697-38

Christian Holiness: 2013-14

Saints: 823

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- [Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: Philippians, Colossians and Philemon](#) by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch
- [Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: Philippians, Colossians and Philemon](#), by Dennis Hamm, SJ