

May 30 Philemon

Intro

Philemon is Paul's shortest letter, and the only undisputed letter written to an individual person (not to the whole congregation in a given area). The tone of Philemon resembles a letter of recommendation for a new position: one powerful person of authority (Paul) is writing to another powerful person (Philemon) on behalf of the fate of a less powerful/powerless person (Onesimus). In this letter, Paul masterfully barter his relationship and history with Philemon for the sake of creating a new relationship between Philemon and Onesimus. The theme of this letter is reconciliation.

It's uncertain as to exactly where Philemon lived, and which prison Paul was writing from for sure. However, since Onesimus and Archippus are both mentioned in Colossians, it's likely that they and Philemon lived in Colossae (Turkey), and if that's the case, then Paul was almost certainly writing this letter from prison in Ephesus (not far from Colossae), which would put the writing around 55CE.

Many people struggle with the letter of Philemon because Paul clearly sends Onesimus, a slave, back to his master. However, through the end of the letter it becomes clear that Paul's rhetorical intent is for Philemon to choose to send Onesimus back to Paul as a brother in Christ.

Beginning

Vs. 1-7, Paul addresses the letter to Philemon primarily, who is described as "our dear friend and coworker", who is likely the wealthy patron of the congregation in Colossae (since the church meets in his house), and secondarily to a few others from the local Christian community (Apphia, our sister, Archippus –likely an actual soldier, who is now a soldier for Christ, and to everyone who meets as the Church in Philemon's house). Paul begins by commending Philemon on his genuine love and faith (the most important marks of a Christian). Paul thanks Philemon for his ministry, and notes what a source of joy and encouragement his love and ministry has been for Paul. Paul does not even mention Onesimus to begin with, he wants to establish good will and get in Philemon's good graces from the start. He's buttering him up, but it seems that he's buttering him up with the truth of all the good he's doing.... In order to reveal to him a greater good that he can do, which he may not have chosen to do without this letter from Paul.

Middle

Vs. 8-16, Paul now gets to the point of this letter. He says that he has so much authority within the church that he could command Philemon to do his Christian duty with regards to Onesimus, but instead he'd rather give Philemon the opportunity to choose to do the right thing on his own (because he is such a loving person). Paul lays it on thick with regards to his authority. He's an apostle, an old man, and now also a prisoner because of his work for the gospel. Paul says that he has come to regard Onesimus (Philemon's absent slave) as his own child, whom he has come to know and love during this time of imprisonment. Paul has a good relationship with Philemon and with Onesimus, he is trying to bridge the relational gap between the two of them. We're not told the exact reason that Onesimus was separated from Philemon. The fact that it's written with a passive voice (was separated) seems to indicate that this was God's activity. It's possible that Onesimus ran away because Philemon was treating him badly, it's possible that he stole some property and ran away, it's equally possible that Philemon had sent Onesimus to attend to a business matter for him and he was detained longer than expected. Regardless of the reasons for his late return, during his absence he met Paul and came to faith in Jesus Christ and has been faithfully serving Paul (as Philemon himself would have if he were there with Paul). Paul connects Philemon and Onesimus as brothers in Christ through this letter, both of them are working for the same Lord now, and both wish to render comfort and service to Paul during his imprisonment. Paul describes Onesimus as "my own heart" –in other words "don't you dare mistreat him." Paul gives Philemon a greater meaning for what must have been an irritating inconvenience at best, that Onesimus was detained so that he might return to him as more than a slave, as a brother in Christ. The greatest gift that Philemon could give to Paul would be to send Onesimus willingly back to his side.

End

Vs. 17-25, Paul's "If you consider me your partner" is better translated as "since you consider me your partner welcome him as you would welcome me." Paul knows where he stands in relationship with Philemon and has full faith that Philemon will oblige Paul's request to return Onesimus to his side. Paul basically says that if Philemon does him this favor of returning his slave to Paul's side, then Paul and Philemon will be equal in honor, Philemon will owe Paul nothing more ever. Benefit is "onaimen" in Greek, it is a play on words, suggesting that the "onaimen" is Onesimus himself.

Paul reiterates that he's confident in Philemon's generosity and obedience, and asks him to prepare a guest room for him, suggesting a continuation of the positive relationship between the two men.