

LESSON 13

INTRODUCING THE LETTER TO PHILEMON; THE LETTER TO PHILEMON

INTRODUCTION

Almost hidden in the New Testament at the end of the writings by the apostle Paul is the tiny letter of Paul to Philemon. Containing only twenty-five short verses, the Book of Philemon is easily overlooked and often ignored. This brief epistle contains no great doctrinal discussion and not even a single classic memory verse. Perhaps the most frequently asked question about Philemon is “Why is it in the Bible at all?” Nevertheless, it continues to be an important part of the Scriptures today, for it brilliantly models Christian persuasion and demonstrates the dramatic impact that the Christian faith should have on the way followers of Jesus treat one another.

THE AUTHOR

In the first word of this letter, the author introduced himself as “Paul.” At the time of his writing he was “a prisoner of Christ Jesus” (v. 1) as well as “Paul, the aged” (v. 9). Every indication in the letter points to the conclusion that the letter was written by the apostle Paul while he was in prison during the latter years of his life.

1. In what other New Testament books does Paul list Timothy as his cowriter?

THE RECIPIENTS

The letter was addressed to “Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker, and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house” (vv. 1, 2).

2. Who were each of the people to whom this letter was addressed?
3. Was this letter intended to be publicly or privately read? Explain.

THE DATE AND THE PLACE OF WRITING

The letter to Philemon and the letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians have long been labeled “The Prison Epistles.” That Paul was in prison when he wrote Philemon is unquestioned because of the extensive internal evidence (vv. 1, 9, 10, 13, 23).

4. From where was this letter most likely written, and why has more than one suggestion been made on the topic?

SLAVERY IN THE FIRST CENTURY A.D.

The first-century Roman Empire was a slave culture. In the great cities of the day, slaves accounted for more than one third of the total population.

5. What were five different ways that a person might have become a slave in the Roman world?
6. What was life like for a Roman slave, and how were slaves treated?

GREETING (1–3)

Greetings, whether in ancient letters or in modern e-mails, are often set formulas with which the writer gently begins a message. Consequently, they are sometimes read hurriedly or skipped entirely as the reader anxiously moves on to the substance of the letter. A careless reading must not be given to the opening of the letter to Philemon. Indeed, the social dynamics and the emotional intensity of the letter are revealed in the opening verses.

7. Why, most likely, did Paul not introduce himself as an apostle in this letter as he so often did in other letters?
8. What is significant about Paul’s use of the word translated “Lord” in verse 3?

THANKSGIVING AND PRAYER (4–7)

Paul typically began his letters with a statement of thanksgiving and prayer. Though this was a standard form for him, we should not think that this was a mere ritual or simply a polite way to lead into the “meat” of the message. Rather, the thanksgiving and prayer often introduced the central themes which Paul developed more fully in the body of the letter.

9. What themes brought up in verses 4–7 appear in the body of Paul’s letter, verses 8–22?
10. What should we understand verse 6 to mean?
11. What do Paul’s words in verse 7 say about the kind of person Philemon was?

PAUL’S APPEAL FOR ONESIMUS (8–20)

Having prepared Philemon for a difficult discussion, Paul plunged into his request. What follows is often called “a masterpiece of Christian persuasion.” With a Christlike combination of firmness and gentleness, Paul called on Philemon to do what was right. Verses 8 through 14 in the Greek text are one lengthy, complex sentence.

12. Where else in the New Testament is the word translated “order” in verse 8 used, and why does Paul not “order” Philemon to act in a certain way?
13. What does the phrase translated “the aged” mean, and why might Paul have included it in verse 9?
14. In the Greek text, where does the name Onesimus first appear in the letter?
15. Why might Paul have said that Onesimus had been “useless” to Philemon?
16. Why might Paul have mentioned his being in prison so often in this letter?
17. What does Paul mean by saying that Philemon would have Onesimus back “forever”?
18. Why was the word “accept” a weighty word for Paul to use in verse 17?
19. What financial language does Paul use in verses 18 and 19?
20. What is significant about Paul asking Philemon, “refresh my heart” in verse 20?

CLOSING (21–25)

The main discussion in Paul’s letter to Philemon concludes at the end of verse 20. The difficult part was over, and all that remained was to summarize what had been said, share future travel plans, pass along greetings, and offer a final word of blessing. If Paul was distraught in the writing of this letter, when he reached the words of verse 21 he was able to exhale, relax, and enjoy writing the rest of his thoughts to Philemon.

21. Why might Paul have used the word “obedience” in verse 21 when he had refused to “order” Philemon to act in a certain way?
22. What two things did Paul accomplish by asking that Philemon “prepare [him] a lodging” in verse 22?