

11-2017

Article 57: Philemon at a Glance

Harold Willmington

Liberty University, hwillmington@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/owners_manual



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Practical Theology Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Willmington, Harold, "Article 57: Philemon at a Glance" (2017). *The Owner's Manual File*. 55.
https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/owners_manual/55

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Theological Studies at Scholars Crossing. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Owner's Manual File by an authorized administrator of Scholars Crossing. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunications@liberty.edu.

PHILEMON AT A GLANCE

This book was written by Paul to a slave owner (Philemon) exhorting him to forgive his runaway slave (Onesimus) who was now returning home. This should be done for two reasons:

1. For Jesus' sake! Onesimus had just been led to Christ by Paul.
2. For Paul's sake! The apostle and Philemon had been friends for many years.
3. For Philemon's sake! As a brother in Christ Onesimus would prove to be a much more faithful associate to Philemon.

BOTTOM LINE INTRODUCTION

THIS IS A LETTER FROM A PRISONER TO A MASTER ABOUT A SLAVE.

The master was Philemon; the slave was Onesimus; and the prisoner was Paul.

FACTS REGARDING THE AUTHOR OF THIS BOOK

1. Who? **Paul**. He was also known as Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:11). This relentless enemy of Christians (Acts 8:3; 22:5, 19; 26:11; Gal. 1:13) would, following his conversion (Acts 9:3-9), become the greatest missionary, church planter, soul winner, and theologian in church history, authoring nearly half of the New Testament books!
2. What? The books of Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon.
3. When and where? Written in 61 A.D. from Rome.
4. Why and to whom? To obtain forgiveness for a runaway slave. Addressed to Philemon.

KEY EVENTS

1. Paul's plea for Philemon to forgive Onesimus
2. Paul's plan to soon visit Philemon

KEY INDIVIDUALS

1. **Paul**, author of Philemon and at least 12 other New Testament books, church planter, evangelist, missionary, and perhaps the greatest of all the apostles
2. **Philemon**, wealthy friend of Paul living in Colosse to whom the apostle wrote the Book of Philemon
3. **Apphia**, probable wife of Philemon
4. **Archippus**, probable son of Philemon
5. **Onesimus**, runaway slave whom Paul led to Christ and sent back to his master Philemon

KEY PLACES

1. **Rome:** capital city of the mighty Roman Empire. Paul wrote four New Testament epistles during his two year imprisonment there, including the Book of Philemon
2. **Colosse:** a city in Asia Minor and home of Paul's friend Philemon

UNIQUE FEATURES

1. This book, the shortest of all Paul's epistles, is one of the four letters written during his first Roman imprisonment. The other letters are Philippians, Colossians, and Ephesians.
2. It is one of four personal letters to individuals penned by Paul. The others are 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus.
3. Dr. J. Vernon McGee writes: "The Epistles present a different style in revelation. God had used law, history, poetry, prophecy, and the Gospels heretofore, but in the Epistles He adopted a more personal and direct method. In this intimate way, He looks back to the cross and talks about the church. Someone has said that the Epistles are the love letters of Christ to us. Dr. Deissman divided them into two classifications: epistles and letters. The epistles are general, while the letters are more personal and individual. Under this division, the Epistle of Philemon would be classified as a letter, for it is individual and intimate. There is reason to believe that Paul did not expect its contents to be divulged (at other times he knew that he was writing scripture). This does not detract from the inspiration and value of Philemon, but rather enhances its value and message" (*Through the Bible*, p. 211).
4. The historical background of Philemon is as follows:
 - Onesimus, a slave owned by Philemon (wealthy Colossian believer and long time friend of Paul) had robbed his master and run away to Rome.
 - In some wonderful way, Onesimus' path crosses that of Paul, resulting in his glorious conversion to Christ.
 - Upon hearing his testimony, Paul determines to send him back to Philemon.
 - To prepare the way (for what could be a very tense meeting), Paul pens this beautiful letter to Philemon. It is a masterpiece of Christian tact and ethics.
5. The letter provides us with one of the finest illustrations of that great theological truth of imputation (the act of reckoning something to another's account) as can be found anywhere in the Bible.
6. This epistle demonstrates that our letter writing can be a ministry for God if we allow it to be so. Some who find it difficult to speak for God may well write for him.
7. It is Paul's only letter where he hints at his age (Philem. 9).
8. Philemon is the only totally private letter in scripture.
9. It gives a valuable glimpse into the social life of apostolic times.
10. It refers to the third of those house churches in the New Testament
 - The one meeting in the home of Priscilla and Aquila (Rom. 16:3-5; 1 Cor. 16:19).
 - The one meeting in the home of Nymphas (Col. 4:15)
 - The one meeting in the home of Philemon

11. It provides what is probably the clearest insight in regard to God's position on slavery in all the Bible. Thus:
 - General statements (1 Cor. 7:20-24; Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1; 1 Tim. 6:1, 2; 1 Peter 2:18-25)
 - Specific statements in Philemon Paul refers to Onesimus as "a brother beloved" (v. 16), and, after asking Philemon to forgive him, adds that he hopes Philemon will do "more than I say," in other words to totally free him (v. 21)!
12. Finally, this little epistle seems as a beautiful example of Eph. 4:32:
"And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you."

COMPARISON WITH OTHER BIBLE BOOKS

1. 1 Corinthians:

- The entire letter is a concrete example of the truth of 1 Cor. 12:13.

2. Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and 2 Timothy:

- All were written by Paul from prison.

3. Ephesians and Colossians:

- These show that Christians form the body of Christ; Philemon illustrates love within the body of Christ.

4. Colossians:

- Except for Philemon and Apphia, everyone mentioned in Philemon is mentioned in Colossians as well (compare 1:1-2, 10, 23-24 with Col. 4:9-17).

TITLES FOR AND TYPES OF JESUS

1. Jesus Christ (1:1)
2. The Lord Jesus Christ (1:3)
3. Lord Jesus (1:5)
4. Christ Jesus (1:5)