

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

# PHILEMON

## THEME

### Author and Title

Paul and Timothy are explicitly named as the authors in [verse 1](#). It becomes apparent, however, that the apostle Paul is the principal author when the first person singular (“I”) is used from [verse 4](#) throughout the rest of the letter. The title indicates that it is a personal letter to a man named Philemon. Nevertheless, Paul intends it to be read to the entire church that meets in Philemon’s home ([v. 2](#)).

### Date

The letter was probably written c. A.D. 62. Paul may have written it at roughly the same time that he wrote Colossians and Ephesians. All three letters were sent with Tychicus and Onesimus. This date assumes that the imprisonment Paul refers to (see [vv. 1, 9, 10, 13, 23](#)) is his imprisonment in Rome ([Acts 27–28](#)).

### Theme

The theme of Philemon is the power of the gospel to transform lives (“formerly he was useless” but “now he is indeed useful,” [v. 11](#)) and to impact human relationships (receive him “no longer as a bondservant [or slave] but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother,” [v. 16](#)). On the Gk. word *doulos*, see the ESV [Preface](#).

### Purpose, Occasion, and Background

Philemon was a wealthy Christian who lived in the city of Colossae, about 100 miles (161 km) inland from Ephesus (see [map](#)). Apparently during Paul’s three-year ministry in Ephesus (A.D. 52–55), Philemon heard the gospel and was saved. He began serving the cause of Christ in the Colossian community, opening his home for a group of Christians to meet there regularly.

At some point, Onesimus, one of Philemon’s bondservants, fled to Rome. Possibly having stolen money (or property) from Philemon and now a fugitive, Onesimus was living in the most populated city of the Roman Empire, hoping to escape detection. In a rather remarkable set of circumstances—not recounted in the letter but certainly

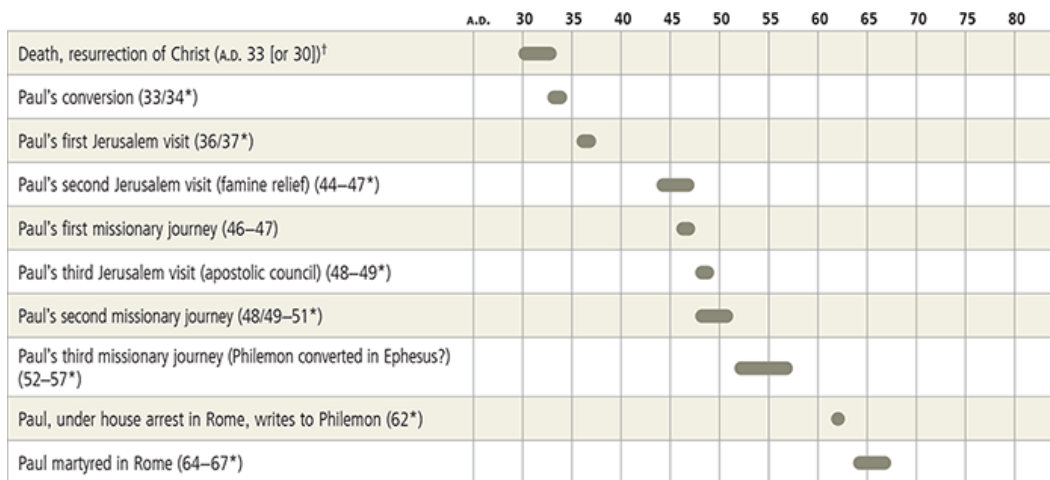
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reflective of God's sovereignty—Onesimus somehow came into contact with the apostle Paul and became a Christian. As he grew in Christ, he spent much time and effort helping Paul, who was severely constrained by his imprisonment.

As much as Paul would like to have retained the services of Onesimus, Paul knew that Onesimus's fugitive status, severed relationship, and wrongdoing against his master needed to be addressed. Paul thus wrote this letter as an appeal to Philemon to appreciate the transformation that has occurred in Onesimus's life and to receive him back not merely as a bondservant but as a "beloved brother" ([v. 16](#)).

It is difficult to know if Paul was seeking Onesimus's full emancipation and freedom (see notes on [vv. 16](#) and [21](#)). It is clear, however, that he was seeking a transformed relationship between bondservant and master—a new relationship that would defy all of the ingrained status distinctions of the surrounding Greek and Roman culture. There is no doubt that it would have been difficult for this kind of servitude to survive in the atmosphere of love created by the letter, and in fact the elements of Paul's appeal found in this letter helped lay the foundation for the abolition of such servitude.

## Timeline



\* denotes approximate date; / signifies either/or; † see *The Date of Jesus' Crucifixion*, pp. 1809–1810

## History of Salvation Summary

Christians' treatment of one another in Christ is to be transformed in the light of his grace toward them. (For an explanation of the "History of Salvation," see the [Overview of the Bible](#).)

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## Literary Features

This simplified letter approximates the letters that people ordinarily write, in contrast to the more stylized and literary five-part format that characterizes most NT epistles. The letter is a masterpiece of persuasion and can be analyzed in terms of how Paul seeks a favorable reception for the returning bondservant, where the normal response of the master would be vindictive. Paul's strategy follows that prescribed by Greek and Roman rhetoricians of the day: begin by building rapport and goodwill with an audience ([vv. 4–10](#)), then lay out the facts in a way that will convince the mind or intellect ([vv. 11–19](#)), and finally appeal to the emotions of the audience ([vv. 20–21](#)).

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## Key Themes

1. At the heart of this letter is the theme of reconciliation. Onesimus is reconciled to God, and now he is in the process of being reconciled to a fellow believer.
2. The basis for Paul's appeal to Philemon is the supreme Christian virtue of love (not Roman social convention). Paul commends Philemon for the love he has shown not only to him but also to all of the believers in that area.

## Outline

- I. Greetings ([vv. 1–3](#))
- II. Thanksgiving and Prayer ([vv. 4–7](#))
- III. Paul's Appeal to Philemon for Onesimus ([vv. 8–20](#))
- IV. Personal Remarks and Greetings ([vv. 21–25](#))<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Crossway Bibles. (2008). *The ESV Study Bible* (pp. 2353-2354). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.