

THE LETTER TO PHILEMON

Once again, we shoot back in time for the date of this letter, which was written in parallel with the one to Colossians. It was delivered by the same messengers, Tychicus and Onesimus (see Colossians 4:7-9). The difference is that the Colossian letter was intended for the whole congregation, but this was a personal letter to Paul's friend Philemon, of whom he had a special favour to ask.

Reading between the lines, an amazing story begins to emerge. Philemon was evidently a wealthy man, for his house was large enough for the brothers and sisters to hold their meetings there (see verse 2; this was common in the First Century – Aquila and Nymphas are similarly recorded as hosts to a church group). In his greetings, Paul commends his friend's reputation for love and care for others. But now he comes to the point. He wants to make a special appeal.

It seems Philemon had slaves, as most rich men did. One of these, Onesimus, had run away to Rome, where he could hide in the huge population there. Somehow he had made contact with the apostle in his prison. We cannot be sure how this happened, except that God often overrides the circumstances of our lives to bring us to the Gospel. Perhaps Onesimus had met the apostle at Ephesus while attending on his master, and come to know him, and now, being lonely and afraid, came to ask his advice. However it was, Paul had persuaded

him to be a Christian, and he had become a valuable minister to his needs. But this left a problem. Paul felt honour bound to return Onesimus to his master. Yet under Roman law, that could leave the slave open to severe punishment or even execution. So he asks Philemon, as his friend, to take Onesimus back, not just as a slave, but a Christian brother. The name 'Onesimus' means 'useful'. Paul makes a play on words, saying he had not been very useful up to now, but perhaps this would be a turning point. And if Onesimus had stolen anything before he left, Paul promised to pay for it.

We are left to imagine the scene as Onesimus steels himself to knock on Philemon's door, and the angry face of his master as he recognises him, and then his astonishment as he reads through the letter Onesimus holds out. In the letter to the Colossians Paul takes care to introduce Onesimus to the congregation as "*the faithful and dear brother who is one of you*" (Colossians 4:9), so that there will be no misunderstandings.

The short letter is a model of tact and grace, with a touch of humour. It completes the set of those known to be from Paul, although our next letter, to the Hebrews, may well be from his pen.