

PHILEMON - A STUDY GUIDE

THE CENTRAL QUESTION:

What does this book/story say to us about God?

This question may be broken down further as follows:

- a. Why did God do it/allow it?
- b. Why did He record it for our study?

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1. What does the book of Philemon add to your picture of God? Why do you think the early church fathers included this book in the Canon? Who was Philemon? Who was Onesimus? Where did Paul meet Onesimus? Is Onesimus mentioned elsewhere? (Colossians 4:9)

Chronology of the Book of Philemon - See also Tentative Chronology of the Early Christian Church, e.g., at the beginning of the Teacher's Guide for Acts

A.D. 60 (approximately) - Onesimus, a pagan slave from Colossae or Laodicea, ran away from his master, Philemon, and fled to Rome taking some of his master's money or possessions. (Philemon 10-19; AA 456)

A.D. 60-62 - At Rome he met Paul and was converted. He then ministered to Paul in prison.

A.D. 62 - He was sent back to Colossae, along with Tychicus, carrying letters to Ephesus, Colossae, and Philemon. (Colossians 4:7-9; Ephesians 6:21; Philemon 1)

2. In light of the fact that Onesimus was a runaway slave, did Paul really have anything to do with sending him back to Philemon? (Philemon 12) Would Onesimus have been sent back to Philemon by the authorities to be punished or killed?
3. Why did Paul not take this opportunity to say that slavery was a terrible sin and that no Christian should be involved in it? (Compare Ephesians 6:5-9; 1 Timothy 6:1,2; Titus 2:9,10) Would slavery continue if all slaves had done what Paul told Onesimus to do and if Philemon had done what Paul suggested he should do? (See also Colossians 3:11)
4. Why do some translations have Paul calling himself an "ambassador" while others have "an old man"? (Philemon 1:9)
5. Do we have any idea what the outcome was of Paul's writing of this letter? What happened to Onesimus? It is interesting that in about A.D. 110, Bishop Ignatius of Antioch wrote a letter to the Bishop of Ephesus who was a man named Onesimus. Onesimus was a fairly common name, especially for slaves, and it meant "useful." Notice Paul's play on the name in Philemon 11. Do you think this could have been the same Onesimus? (See E. J. Goodspeed's *Introduction to the New Testament* p. 121 and following.) Is it possible that Onesimus helped to collect all Paul's letters together to form the New Testament? Many scholars believe that this may have taken place in Ephesus.

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