

Introduction to Philemon

The Bible is God's love letter to mankind. The epistle (Greek *epistole*) or letter to Philemon is one of the personal letters of the apostle Paul along with Timothy and Titus that have become part of the canon. The Old Testament revelation consisted of history, Law, prophecy, poetry, wisdom literature, etc. God in the last days has spoken to us through His Son (Heb. 1:1-2). In the New Testament the Gospel accounts record the life of Christ and early church history in the Book of Acts but it is the epistles that convey the rich **theology** of God's **character** and **nature** and the practical aspect of the outward work of the indwelling Christ. The epistle to Philemon reveals God's attributes in a personal way that is unique in all of scripture.

The author is the apostle Paul (Acts 8:1-3, 9:1-31). He has completed three missionary journeys and is now imprisoned in Rome awaiting trial. He writes the **prison epistles** of Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon, probably around 60-62 A.D. The letter is addressed to Philemon, a member of the church at Colosse, whom Paul has led to the Lord. The letter is sent with Onesimus along with the Colossian letter carried by Tychicus (Col. 4:7-9). Onesimus is Philemon's **runaway slave** who has journeyed to Rome where Paul has also led him to Christ. This beautiful piece of correspondence reveals God and His ongoing Kingdom work. The following are some illustrations of this found throughout the letter.

God's sovereignty. A personal letter that is preserved through the millennia and incorporated in the canon of scripture is remarkable evidence of God's preservation of all that is needful for His people (2Tim. 3:16).

God's providence. His hand in the life of Saul who becomes the apostle Paul to the conversion of Philemon to a runaway slave finding his way to Rome and meeting Paul could only be orchestrated by divine decree.

God's love. Jesus illustrated the love of His heavenly Father in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-31). That love is clearly shown to a lowly slave who is looking for freedom from slavery in Rome but instead finds the One who can truly set him free for eternity (John 8:36).

God's forgiveness. Tychicus is carrying the letter that states we have redemption and forgiveness in Christ (Col. 1:13-14). Onesimus is living proof of a transformed life (2Cor. 5:17) and Philemon will be asked

by Paul to forgive as Christ had forgiven him (Eph. 4:32).