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A one-year journey with the early church



Introduction to Dr. Tom Constable and His Bible Study (Expository) Notes

Dr. Constable is one of the most respected and beloved teachers of God's Word at Dallas Theological Seminary, and he has served as a Bible teacher and elder at Plano Bible Chapel for many years. Learn more about him at: www.soniclight.com/constable/index.htm. You can explore the rest of the Sonic Light website by left-clicking in the top lighthouse graphic to return to Sonic Light's homepage, or click on one of the tabs to see other pages:

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NOTES ON

PHILEMON

2007 EDITION

DR. THOMAS L. CONSTABLE

INTRODUCTION

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Philemon appears to have been a comparatively wealthy Colossian who owned slaves, as did most of the rich in his day.¹ He evidently came to faith in Christ as a result of Paul's influence (v. 19), perhaps when Paul was residing at Ephesus. Onesimus was one of Philemon's slaves and was probably a native Phrygian. He ran away from his master probably not because Philemon treated him cruelly but perhaps because he dealt with him graciously. Onesimus may have been a runaway slave, or he may simply have been involved in some domestic trouble with Philemon.² He eventually made his way to Rome where he could have hidden in the crowd. There, as a result of divine providence, he came into contact with Paul and became a Christian (v. 10).

Following his conversion Onesimus became a valuable helper to the apostle (v. 11). Paul desired to keep Onesimus with him but felt a greater responsibility to return the slave to his Christian master (vv. 13-14). Onesimus had to make things right with Philemon whom he had wronged. Paul and Onesimus both knew the danger the slave faced in returning since slave owners had absolute authority over



FOOTNOTES

- 1 James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, pp. 252 and 302, likened slaves in the Roman Empire to household servants in Victorian Britain and estimated that as many as a third of the inhabitants of most large urban centers would have been slaves. G. W. Barker, W. L. Lane, and J. R. Michaels, *The New Testament Speaks*, p. 211, believed this figure was true of the population of Rome. See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, pp. 25-33, for an excursus on slavery in antiquity. He estimated that about one third of the populations of Greece and Italy were slaves.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 17-19.
- 3 See Arthur A. Rupprecht, "Philemon," in *Ephesians-Philemon*, vol. 11 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 460.
- 4 Dunn, p. 299.
- 5 E. J. Goodspeed, *The Key to Ephesians*, pp. xiv-xvi, suggested that Philemon is the lost letter to the Laodiceans that Paul mentioned in Col. 4:16. John Knox, *Philemon among the Letters of Paul*, pp. 91-108, agreed with Goodspeed but believed Archippus lived in Colosse, owned Onesimus, and received this epistle. The views of neither of these influential commentators have overthrown the majority opinion that I have expressed above. Some commentators, e.g., Fitzmyer, p. 11, believed Paul wrote this epistle from Ephesus, but this is a minority view.

their slaves and often treated them as property rather than as people.³ Paul wrote this brief appeal to pacify Philemon and to affect reconciliation between the slave and his master. His other purposes were to commend Philemon for showing compassion to other believers (vv. 1-7), to announce his plans to visit Philemon following his anticipated release (vv. 8-22), and to send greetings from his associates (vv. 23-25).

“ . . . Philemon provides insight both into the social realities of ancient society, in this case the relations between master and slave, which is surpassed only by 1 Corinthians, and into the way in which influence was brought to bear within the earliest churches between parties of differing social status.”⁴

Paul probably addressed the epistle to Apphia, Archippus, and the church meeting in Philemon’s house to rally the support of other Christians to encourage Philemon in his Christian responsibility.

When Paul sent Tychicus with epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians, Onesimus probably went with him. Paul intended that this letter, along with Tychicus’ personal entreaty for Onesimus, would secure the slave’s forgiveness and acceptance. Since Paul evidently sent this letter with the Epistle to the Colossians, as comparison of the two documents suggests, he probably wrote them in Rome at the same time (60-62 A.D.).⁵

OUTLINE

- I. Greeting vv. 1-3
- II. Thanksgiving and prayer for Philemon vv. 4-7
- III. Plea for Onesimus vv. 8-21
 - A. Paul’s appeal vv. 8-11
 - B. Paul’s motives vv. 12-16
 - C. Paul’s request v. 17
 - D. Paul’s offer vv. 18-20
 - E. Paul’s confidence v. 21
- IV. Concluding matters vv. 22-25