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Introduction to "Philemon"

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Philemon

The shortest of all of Paul's letters, Philemon is a personal letter dealing with a domestic problem of the day—the relationship between a Christian slave owner and his fugitive but repentant slave, a young man named Onesimus. Although the epistle states no doctrine and offers no specific exhortation for the church as a whole, its call for reconciliation illustrates the very heart of the gospel Paul proclaimed. It is a reminder that Christians are called not merely to “know” the truth but to apply it to how they live life.

AUTHOR

The highly personal nature of the letter to Philemon is a strong argument in support of Paul as its author (1, 19).

DATE

The apostle wrote to Philemon sometime between AD 59 and 63 during his first imprisonment in Rome (1, 10, 23), around the same time he composed Ephesians and Colossians as well (Eph. 3:1; 6:19, 20; Col. 4:3, 18). We find further support for this as Aristarchus, Onesimus, Epaphras, and Demas were with Paul when he wrote both Colossians and Philemon (Col. 4:7-17; cf. Phil. 10, 23, 24). Tychicus and Onesimus return together to Colossae, bearing the two letters (Col. 4:8, 9; Phil. 12).

AUDIENCE

Paul writes to Philemon (1), a wealthy Gentile Christian from Colossae. Probably he was converted around the same time as Epaphras, also a native of Colossae (Col. 1:7; 4:12), during the time of Paul's ministry in Ephesus. The apostle also mentions Apphia and Archippus in the letter's greeting (2), who might have been Philemon's wife and son, or simply members of the church that gathered in his home. The fact that Paul includes the church meeting in Philemon's house in the letter's introduction (2) might indicate that he intended it to be read publicly to the church. That, of course, would put more pressure on Philemon as the leader of the church to comply with Paul's petition and to set an example of Christian love, kindness, and forgiveness to his fellow believers.

PURPOSE AND MAIN THEMES

Paul wrote to Philemon to intercede on behalf of Onesimus, Philemon's slave. Onesimus seems to have run away from Philemon, possibly because of something wrong that he did (10, 12, 18, 19). The apostle not only asks Philemon to forgive his slave but also to acknowledge Onesimus as a brother and fellow believer (16). Furthermore, Paul has come to love Onesimus and to value his service and requests that Phi-



Date of writing
between
AD 59 and 63

lemon allow him to return to work with the apostle (13, 14). While Paul acts according to Roman law in sending Onesimus back to his legal owner, at the same time, it is clear that the gospel should transform the relationship between the master and the slave. Also, the apostle asks Philemon to prepare a room for him (22), possibly anticipating a soon release from prison.

STRUCTURE

Although the shortest of Paul's surviving letters, Philemon is a literary masterpiece carefully written to persuade Philemon to apply his knowledge of the truth of the gospel with the way he conducts himself in his relationship with a fugitive slave within his household.

After beginning his letter in his customary manner (vv. 1-3), Paul gives thanks to God for the loving way in which Philemon's faith has been manifest to all the believers in Colossae (vv. 4-5), and he prays that that would continue as Philemon grows in God's grace (vv. 6-7).

In the body of the letter, Paul appeals to Philemon to no longer consider Onesimus as a slave, but as a beloved brother (v. 16). Although Paul does not use his spiritual authority "to command" Philemon to do what he wishes (vv. 8-9), he does everything else in his power to encourage him to grant his request (vv. 10-21).

Paul concludes his letter with instructions for Philemon to prepare a guest room for him since he hopes to make a personal visit to Colossae after his release from prison (v. 22). When Paul does come to visit, he expects his wishes for Onesimus would have been carried out. The letter then ends with greetings from Paul's colleagues (vv. 23-24), and a closing prayer (v. 25).

As you read through Philemon, notice how Paul longs to see the gospel carried out in practical ways in day-to-day human relationships.

OUTLINE

- I. Introduction (vv. 1-7)
 - A. Greeting (vv. 1-3)
 - B. Thanksgiving (vv. 4-7)
- II. Paul's Appeal for Onesimus (vv. 8-22)
 - A. An Appeal Based on Love (vv. 8-9)
 - B. An Appeal for Paul's Sake (vv. 10-14)
 - C. An Appeal in Recognition of Providence (vv. 15-16)
 - D. An Appeal in Light of Philemon's Debt to Paul (vv. 17-21)
- III. Conclusion (vv. 22-25)
 - A. Further Instructions (v. 22)
 - B. Final Greetings (vv. 23-24)
 - C. Benediction (v. 25)

ARCHAEOLOGY

Under Roman law, slaves were their masters' legal property. Roman society treated runaway slaves very harshly, often branding, mutilating, or forcing them to wear iron collars to ensure they did not escape again. Some were even crucified or thrown to beasts. In cases of grievances between a master and his slave, Roman law allowed the slave to find an intercessor, usually a friend of the master's (*amicus domini*), to help solve the problem. That could explain why Onesimus sought out Paul. Also, studies have shown that the language Paul uses in his letter to Philemon echoes that of legal petitions. In any case, it is clear that Paul follows proper protocol in sending Onesimus back to his legal owner and is very diplomatic in discussing such a sensitive issue (cf. *Slavery in New Testament Times*)

2 Peter

Recognizing that his death was imminent and concerned about the growing influence of false teachers within the church, Peter writes this letter to encourage the believers to hold fast to the apostolic faith, reminding them that it is built firmly on the testimony of his own experience as an eyewitness and the testimony of Scripture, especially prophecy (1:1-21).

AUTHOR

Although this epistle identifies Peter as its source (1:1), the authorship of the letter is highly disputed among some commentators. They claim that Peter could not be the author because the vocabulary and style are quite different, not only from 1 Peter but also from any other New Testament document. The very eloquent and elaborate language seems to be a conscious effort on the part of the author to imitate the Asiatic style of Greek common in Asia Minor (see *Audience*). While the vocabulary and style are different from 1 Peter, they need not prohibit Peter as being the author of both letters. Some of the difference are likely due to Peter's use of a secretary, while other differences may also be the result of Peter's use in his letter of material he appears to have borrowed and expanded upon from Jude. Finally, though some within the early church were skeptical about Peter being the letter's author, Eusebius affirmed its authenticity as a Petrine letter. Had its author been entirely unknown, the church fathers as a whole would have rejected it.

DATE

2 Peter was most likely written shortly before AD 65, the time when, according to tradition, Peter was martyred in Rome. The epistle itself implies that Peter's death was imminent at the time of its composition (1:13, 14).

AUDIENCE

The introduction does not explicitly state its audience (1:1). The letter itself, however, indicates that 2 Peter had in mind the same Asia Minor audience as 1 Peter (cf. 1 Pet. 1:1). The epistle was the second letter that its readers received from Peter (2 Pet. 3:1). Thus the audience was likely Gentile believers.

PURPOSE AND MAIN THEMES

We find the goal of 2 Peter summarized in 3:18, in which the author exhorts his audience to grow in grace and knowledge (cf. 1:2). The threat of false teachings demonstrates their need to increase in knowledge, and at the same time, the apostle strongly encourages spiritual development. False teachers have been threatening the message



Date of writing
shortly
before AD 65

of the gospel (2:1-3). They deny the teaching of the judgment, scorn the idea of Christ's second coming (1:16-21; 3:3, 4), engage in a sinful lifestyle (2:13-20), and despise authority (2:10, 11). In response, 2 Peter emphasizes the surety of the judgment and the Second Coming and explains them in the context of salvation: God is patient, not because there is no judgment, but so that people may repent (2:9; 3:8, 9, 12, 13).

STRUCTURE

In the course of penning his salutation, Peter introduces the theme he focuses on throughout his epistle: the "precious" Christian faith (1:1). As he commences his letter, Peter elaborates on (1) what God has done for believers (vv. 3-4); (2) what believers should do for Him (vv. 5-9); and (3) the reward Christians would have if they remain faithful until Christ's return (vv. 10-11). Then to encourage his readers to remain faithful, Peter reminds them of the reliability of the apostolic testimony (vv. 15-18) and the prophetic witness about the certainty of Christ's return (vv. 19-21).

The reason for Peter's concern emerges in the central section of his letter (2:1-22). It is the presence of false teachers in the church, who like the false prophets of old, were working to undermine the faith of God's people (vv. 1-3). In response to their claim that God would not intervene in human history to judge the world, Peter gives three examples of God's judgment in the past: (1) the case of the fallen angels; (2) the destruction of the world by Noah's flood; and (3) Sodom and Gomorrah (vv. 4-10a). The section ends with a series of denunciations against the false teachers that highlight their true nature (2:10b-22).

In the last major section of the letter (3:1-18a), Peter again encourages the believers to cling to the apostolic faith (cf. 3:1-2; 1:12-15) and to live their lives in a way that glorifies God (vv. 11-18a).

As it was in Peter's time, scoffers continue to deny that the second coming of Jesus will take place. As you read through Peter's final epistle, pay close attention to the reasons the apostle gives for why Christians can be sure of their faith in Christ's return.

OUTLINE

- I. Introduction (1:1-11)
 - A. Greeting (1:1-2)
 - B. Exhortation (1:3-11)
- II. Purpose of the Epistle (1:12-21)
 - A. To Establish Believers in Truth (1:12-15)
 - B. Confirmation of the Gospel through Personal Experience (1:16-18)
 - C. Confirmation of the Gospel in Prophecy (1:19-21)
- III. Warnings against False Teachers (2:1-22)
 - A. False Teachers and Their Deceptive Heresies (2:1-3)
 - B. Punishment of the Ungodly and Deliverance of the Righteous (2:4-10a)
 - C. True Nature of False Teachers (2:10b-22)

- IV. Christ's Second Coming and Preparation for It (3:1-18a)
 - A. Reference to the Testimony of Prophets and Apostles (3:1, 2)
 - B. The Fact of the Flood Refutes Religious Skeptics (3:3-7)
 - C. The Certainty of Christ's Return (3:8-10)
 - D. Exhortation to Holy Living in Anticipation of the Second Coming (3:11-18a)
- V. Conclusion (3:18b)

ARCHAEOLOGY

Epicureanism, a popular philosophy in the Greco-Roman world of the first century AD, was known for its support of pleasure in the sense of living a peaceful life undisturbed by suffering or pain as the highest virtue in life. Some people took the notion of pleasure to an extreme and led licentious and sensual lifestyles. The notion that humans are not accountable to the gods or that the gods were "slow" in punishing the wicked (cf. 2 Pet. 3:9) encouraged such behavior. Epicureanism denied providence, the afterlife, and divine judgment. The philosopher Epicurus himself was quoted as saying that "the gods take no notice; that they are not affected with anger or kind feeling; that the punishment of a future state is not to be dreaded, because the souls die after death, and there is no future state of punishment at all" (Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, Book III, 17). The author of 2 Peter seems to be responding to a distortion of the gospel that was influenced by Epicureanism. According to the philosophy, divine judgment was a "myth," and those swayed by it rejected the authenticity of prophecy. These were points that Peter explicitly disputes (Plutarch, *Obsolescence of Oracles*, 420b; cf. 2 Pet. 1:16, 19-21; 2:13, 14).