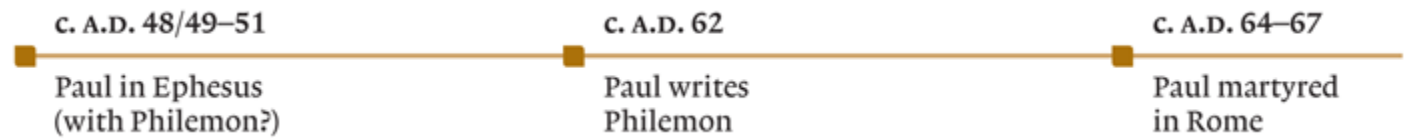


## Introduction to Philemon      Timeline



**Author, Date, and Recipients** This is a personal letter from the apostle Paul to Philemon, a wealthy Christian from Colossae. It was also intended for reading to the entire church that met in Philemon's home. It was probably written c. A.D. 62, while Paul was in prison following his voyage to Rome ([Acts 27–28](#)). Compare to Col 4:7-17

**Theme** The theme of Paul's letter is the power of the gospel to transform individual lives (v. [11](#)) and human relationships (v. [16](#)). Onesimus had experienced that transforming power in his life ("formerly he was useless" but "now he is indeed useful"; v. [11](#)). Paul therefore urged his friend Philemon to form a new relationship with Onesimus, his runaway slave.

**Purpose** Apparently, during Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus (A.D. 52–55), Philemon heard the gospel and was saved. He began serving Christ in the Colossian community. He opened his home for a group of Christians to meet there regularly.

At some point, Onesimus, one of Philemon's bondservants, fled to Rome. Before he left, he possibly had stolen money or property from Philemon. While in Rome, Onesimus came into contact with Paul and became a Christian. As he grew in Christ, he was a great help to Paul during Paul's imprisonment.

As much as Paul would like to have retained the services of Onesimus, Paul knew that Onesimus's wrongdoing against his master Philemon needed to be addressed. He wrote this letter urging Philemon to appreciate the transformation that had occurred in Onesimus. Paul asked Philemon to receive Onesimus back not merely as a bondservant but as a "beloved brother" (v. [16](#)).

It is difficult to know if Paul sought Onesimus's full freedom. It is clear, however, that he was seeking a transformed relationship between bondservant and master. This new relationship would defy all of the ingrained status distinctions of the surrounding Greek and Roman culture. It would have been difficult for the kind of servitude practiced by Rome to survive in the atmosphere of Christian love exemplified by the letter.

This simplified letter is in the form of letters that people ordinarily write, in contrast to the more stylized and literary five-part format of most NT epistles. The letter is a masterpiece of persuasion as Paul seeks a favorable reception for the returning bondservant, where normally one might expect the master to be vindictive.

### Key Themes

- I. Reconciliation is the theme of this letter. Onesimus is reconciled to God. He is in the process of being reconciled to a fellow believer.
- II. The basis for Paul's appeal to Philemon is the supreme Christian virtue of love. Paul praises Philemon for the love he has shown not just to him but to all the believers in that area.

### Outline

- I. Greetings (vv. [1–3](#))
- II. Thanksgiving and Prayer (vv. [4–7](#))
- III. Paul's Appeal to Philemon for Onesimus (vv. [8–20](#))
- IV. Personal Remarks and Greetings (vv. [21–25](#))