

## INVITATION TO PHILEMON

From prison in Rome, Paul sent his friends Tychicus and Onesimus to Asia Minor to deliver the letters we know as Colossians and Ephesians. Tychicus hadn't ever met the people Paul was writing to, so Paul had to introduce him in these letters (see pp. 1654 and 1664). Onesimus was originally from Colossae and the people there would have known him. Even so, Paul also had to write on his behalf; in fact, he had to write a separate letter for him. This was because Onesimus had been the slave of a wealthy Colossian named Philemon, who hosted the community of Jesus-followers in his own home. Onesimus had run away, probably robbing Philemon in the process, and had ended up in Rome. There he became a follower of Jesus. He'd been helping Paul in prison, but now Paul needed him to return to Colossae. Paul hoped that Philemon would not only forgive Onesimus, but welcome him no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. Paul's brief letter to Philemon stresses the change in Onesimus' life. His name means useful in Greek, and Paul tells Philemon that while Onesimus had formerly been useless (a servant he couldn't count on), he could now be useful to both of them. The letter reminds Philemon how much he owes Paul, since it was Paul's own co-workers who brought the good news of Jesus to his city. Paul addresses his letter not just to Philemon but also to Archippus, another leader of the church, and to Apphia (probably Philemon's wife), likely hoping that they would help persuade Philemon to do as he was asking. Even so, he doesn't put Philemon under any obligation. He ultimately appeals to him on the basis of love, but also promises to honor the demands of justice by making whatever restitution Philemon required. It's most likely that Paul's appeal was successful. This letter, and the other two that Onesimus and Tychicus

were carrying, would probably not have been preserved otherwise. One tradition says that Onesimus was not only freed to work with the churches, but eventually became the leader of the large and influential community of believers in Ephesus. In his life, therefore, we have a specific example of the kind of transformation that occurred in thousands of lives as the good news about Jesus spread throughout the Roman Empire.

