

## SLOW FOOD: THE LETTER TO PHILEMON (7 studies)

### INTRODUCTION

Paul's short but heartfelt letter to Philemon seems to have been written at the same time as the longer letter to the Colossians. Philemon hosted a house-church at Colossae and it seems that his slave Onesimus had absconded and had been converted through Paul's ministry. Paul is sending him back to his master with a plea for his restoration. The letter is both a social document of first importance and an incentive to Christian compassion. It rests implicitly on the Pauline theology of Christ's cross and the Holy Spirit whose first fruit is love.

Commentaries: Dick Lucas *The Message of Colossians and Philemon* (IVP BST 1980, study guide 2000); N T Wright *Colossians and Philemon* (Tyndale NTC 1986); Tom Wright *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters* (SPCK 2<sup>nd</sup> ed 2004), with Study Guide (2009). The rhetorical aspects of this letter have been explored by Ben Witherington III in his *Letters to Philemon, Colossians and Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles* (Eerdmans 2007).

For *Slow Food: Colossians* (30 studies) see TNV 41. Both that and *Slow Paul: Thinking through Colossians and Philemon* can be found on [www.tisca.org/downloads](http://www.tisca.org/downloads).

### STUDY GUIDE

**1-3** Can I learn anything from the warmth with which Paul greets his fellow-Christians? *Ps 16:3; Rom 12:9a, 10; 1 Th 5:12-13.*

**4-7** Verse 6 may refer to Philemon's 'partnership' with members of the church (the NIV inserts 'with us' unnecessarily) in building them up in the knowledge of Christ through one-to-one or small group Bible study. Is this something I feel called to practise? *Deut 6:6-7; Mal 3:16; Acts 20:20, 32; 2 Tim 3:14-17.*

**8-11** Onesimus' name means 'Useful'. Can I echo John Wesley's prayer, 'Lord, let me not live to be useless'? *1 Cor 9:27; 2 Tim 2:20-21, 4:11*

**12-16** What personal dilemmas face both Paul and Philemon? How can they be resolved? *Jn 8:32, 1 Cor 7:20-24, Col 3:22-4:1*

**17-19** How is Paul's offer to pay all Onesimus' debts a picture of what Christ has done for us? *Ps 32:1-2; Isa 53:11; Mt 18:27; 1 Pet 1:18-19.*

**20-21** How can I refresh someone's heart today? Or am I constrained by 'the basic minimum'? *Mk 7:24-30; 2 Cor 6:11-13; 1 Jn 3:16-18.*

**22-25** Trace the story of Epaphras. How can I follow his (and Paul's) example of service and prayer? *Col 1:7-8; 4:12-13; 1:28-2:3.*