

Study Series: Paul's Letter to Philemon

Discussion questions from key passages in Philemon

1. Paul describes himself as a "prisoner for (or *of*) Christ Jesus." Why is this significant?
2. Onesimus' name literally means 'useful' or 'profitable.' In verse 11, Paul makes a play on words in which he suggests that Philemon's attitude and actions toward Onesimus indicates that he [Philemon] views Onesimus as 'useless' or 'unprofitable.' How does Paul make his case, using the pun, that Onesimus is 'useful' and lives up to his name?
3. Most biblical scholars have understood verse 18 to indicate that Onesimus may have stolen from Philemon. Can you think of anything else Paul may have meant by it?
4. In verses 9 and 10, Paul indicates that he has a request to make, but in the original language and grammatical construction he never seems to state his actual request. Determining what this request is represents the interpretive crux of the entire letter, both for us and for the original recipient(s). Therefore, what do you think Paul is really asking of Philemon? (Be sure to look at everything from verses 8-22.) Furthermore, why do you think Paul is so ambiguous and vague, especially after saying he has the right to order Philemon (verse 8; cf. verse 14)?