PHILEMON:

1. **Background:**
    a. **Author, and Date of writing:** The epistle identifies Paul as the author, and historically there has been virtually no dispute of Pauline authorship. The epistle is closely associated with the epistle to the Colossians, of which Philemon was part of the leadership for the Colossian church. Philemon was a man of wealth, and the church is believed to have met at his home. Apphia was probably his wife, and Archippus was another Colossian church leader that Paul knew. Being a wealthy man of the Greco-Roman era, Philemon owned slaves. One that was of particular importance in this epistle was Onesimus – see Colossians 4:16-17. Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon were all written within a relatively short timeframe and based on what is known of Paul's missionary travels, these epistles were most likely written around 61 AD.

    b. **Purpose:** Paul was under house arrest in Rome when he came into contact with Onesimus, a non-believing slave. It seems Paul was initially unaware that Onesimus was a runaway slave. Onesimus' Christian transformation was dramatic, and he became of great use to Paul as an evangelist. As a result of his transformation, Onesimus likely confessed to Paul that he was a runaway. Based upon the culture of the time, Paul would have insisted that Onesimus return to his master, and this epistle was written to encourage Philemon from exacting punishment against this new believer. Colossians 4:7-9 explains that Tychicus (evidently a free man) and Onesimus would be returning to the Colossian church to explain in detail what was happening in Rome, and both Tychicus and Onesimus are described as "faithful brothers" in these verses. It is clear that Onesimus is being sent back to be repatriated with Philemon, however Paul encourages Philemon to welcome Onesimus as a "brother in Christ" and forego punishing him for his pre-Christian indiscretion. Thus, Philemon is advised to welcome Onesimus back with a transformed status – first as a brother in Christ, and secondly as his slave. The primary purpose of the letter is personal between Paul and Philemon with regards for Onesimus – to emphasize the primacy of Christian fraternal relations as more important and relevant that prevailing social customs.

    c. **Theological Value:** Zondervan's **New International Version Bible Commentary** makes an insightful statement of the theological importance of Philemon in an article by Arthur Ruprecht:
        i. Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus are persons in a real-life drama of profound social significance. Each has heard the claims of Christianity from totally different backgrounds. Paul was once a rigorous Jew of the Dispersion who advanced in Judaism beyond all his contemporaries. Philemon was a wealthy Asiatic Gentile. Onesimus was the most despicable of all creatures, a runaway slave. These three find themselves united in the Gospel of Christ. Here is a living example of Paul's statement that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). It was in this oneness that Paul sought a solution to the problem presented by the relationship of Onesimus to Philemon.
        ii. Neither Paul nor the other authors of the New Testament ever call for the abolition of slavery, to do so would have been suicidal in the ancient world. Paul's main concern is that Philemon not act out of obligation to the apostle; rather, he is to be motivated by the love of Christ within himself. Out of that love, should come more than mere reconciliation (v.21).

        iii. Freedom of slaves, like all freedom, must come from the heart of Christ-inspired people. Under this voluntary compulsion, slavery will ultimately wilt and die. While all ethical behavior for Christians should arise out of love rather than regulation or constraint, yet it takes fully committed disciples to put it into practice.

    d. <u>Themes:</u>

        i. Forgiveness – Though Onesimus had previously harmed Philemon as a troublesome slave, he is now a new creation in Christ as are both Philemon and Paul. Paul asks that Philemon accept Onesimus as he would accept Paul, and receiving the same love and acceptance they both received from God (Colossians 3:13). Paul is writing as one leader to another, as one transformed believer to another, in regards to another new transformation.   In this very personal appeal, this letter deals with failure, intercession, conviction, repentance, forgiveness, restitution and restoration.

        ii. Equality in Christ – Though Paul does not openly challenge the social-system of slavery openly, he speaks of the higher value of the Gospel-system of the brotherhood [and sisterhood] of humanity in Christ. Onesimus' conversion and faith transformation now sets the stage for the transformation of all personal relationships. In Christ, all humanity is equal and all injustice is removed. We are all on the same footing with the King of Glory.

    e. <u>Slavery in the Greco-Roman World</u>: Scripture makes the distinction that there were different categories of slaves in Scriptural Cultures. Though not always clear in term usage, it is fairly clear from the context. Here are the major distinctions:

        i. "Helot" – was a citizen of a city or city-state that was in permanent subordination to another city or city-state. Such was the situation of the Hebrew's who fell into slavery in Egypt to the Pharaoh after Joseph died – see Exodus Chapter 1. Also, the "Gibeonites" – those who tricked Joshua who was cleansing Canaan at the time, into thinking they were a people from far away and placed themselves in perpetual servitude as menial workers for the sanctuary – Joshua Chapter 9. This also applied to the Hebrews in the Exile to Babylon – see the book of Daniel.

        ii. "Indentured Servant" – a person/family reduced to slavery by debt but who could work off their debt and obtain their freedom. This was a most common relationship in Hebrew culture, and the Prodigal son upon his return home requests this form of slavery as an appropriate homecoming. His father of course, welcomes him back as a son and restores him to his full rights as a son. This speaks of the transformation Paul is requesting Philemon to consider.

        iii. "Chattel Servant/Slave – a person who was the common property of a master. Though they had few rights, they were generally treated according to the character of their owners and were provided with food and shelter.

        iv. Zondervan's <u>New International Version Bible Commentary</u> offers this additional insight into the context of slavery in the Ancient Near East:

            1. The situation of both Paul and Onesimus is all-important to the understanding of this section of the letter. Paul's circumstances are just as significant as those of Onesimus--a fact often overlooked by commentators. Because he is in prison, he

cannot do the things a free man might do to help the slave. He can do little more than write a letter asking for clemency for his new-found brother, and he can suggest that he hopes to visit the Lycus Valley soon to put additional pressure on Philemon. Under more usual circumstances, a free man could have assumed custody of a runaway slave after he had given guarantees of his return to the public officials, and he could have suggested that the slave be formally assigned to him for a time. This was not uncommon in the Greco-Roman world.

2. Onesimus' status was the lowest that one could reach in the ancient world. Because he was a runaway slave, he was protected by no laws and he was subject to any manner of abuse. Fugitive slaves usually went to large cities, remote parts of the Roman state, or into unsettled areas. Their capture and return was largely an informal arrangement between the owner and a provincial administrator. They were frequently beaten unmercifully or put to tasks in which their life expectancy was very short.

3. Paul must have put Philemon in a precarious position indeed. In pleading for forgiveness and restitution for Onesimus without a punishment that was obvious and expected by all, he was confronting the existing social and economic order head-on. While he does not ask for Philemon to free his slave, even his request for clemency for Onesimus and hint of his assignment to Paul defied Roman tradition. By this plea, Paul is also giving new dignity to the slave class.

2. **Structural Outline #1 – Dr Gary Tuck**
   a. **1-3 – Salutation**
      i. **Vs 1a – Senders**
      ii. **Vs 1b-2 – Receivers**
      iii. **Vs 3 – Benediction**
   b. **4-7 – Paul's prayer concerning Philemon**
      i. **Vs 4-5 – Thanks**
      ii. **Vs 6 – Request**
      iii. **Vs 7 – Commendation**
   c. **8-21 – Appeal on behalf of Onesimus**
      i. **Vs 8-17 – Paul's request**
         1. **Vs 8-13 – Commendation of Onesimus**
         2. **Vs 14-16 – Appeal to Philemon's Christian sensibilities**
      ii. **Vs 18-21 – Paul's persuasion**
   d. **22-25 – Closing**
      i. **Vs 22 – Personal request**
      ii. **Vs 23-24 – Greetings**
      iii. **Vs 25 – Benediction**

3. **Structural Outline #2 – Zondervan's <u>Archaeological Study Bible</u>**
   a. **1-3 – Greetings**
   b. **4-7 – Thanksgiving and prayer**
   c. **8-21 – Paul's appeal for Onesimus**
   d. **22-25 – Conclusion**

4. **<u>Exposition – The Message of Philemon</u> – Roughly following Dr Tuck's Outline:**
   a. **1:1-3 – The first verse of the text sets the stage for Paul's message – they are identified as brothers, dear friends, and fellow workers. Paul is not only speaking to Philemon, but also to his wife Apphia and an elder Archippus of the church that meets in Philemon & Apphia's home. Paul and Timothy would be well known and have considerable influence in the churches throughout the Roman provinces of Phrygia and Galatia, where Philemon & Apphia resided. Yet Paul's introduction establishes leadership without unnecessarily invoking authority; being presented in both a respectful and deferential manner as he begins his appeal in establishing fraternal relationships among leaders and members in the church.**
   b. **1:4-7 – Paul's message includes prayer, gratitude, commendation as well as his request. These all reflect the vertical relationship of these leaders with God, as well as the horizontal relationship of brothers and sisters within the faith community.**
   c. **1:8-13 – This passage effectively presents Paul's commendation of Onesimus not as just a reformed slave, but as a transformed brother in Christ. Paul's deft handling of this matter demonstrates the difficulty he knows his appeal will cause all of them. While not offering a repudiation of slavery, this whole matter offers a stunning affirmation of human dignity in Christ regardless of social status, and regardless of what the prevailing laws and customs allow.**
   d. **1:14-17 – Paul praises Onesimus' devotion to the faith community; and how dear Onesimus is to Paul personally. Paul encourages Philemon to accept Onesimus back out of Christian love rather than out of obligation, and affirms that Onesimus' redeemed spiritual status should as lead to his reformed social status. Meaning that Philemon should treat Onesimus first as a brother and secondly as a slave, and that he should welcome Onesimus as he would welcome Paul.**
   e. **1:18-21 – Paul accepts any wrong inflicted or any financial loss or burden resulting from Onesimus as his own debt, which he expects to make right when they meet next. The inference here is that there was some financial loss, whether Onesimus stole from Philemon or merely deprived him of his obligated service is not clear. Either way, Paul accepts responsibility for any debt, and reminds Philemon that he also owes a debt and that as Philemon carefully considers it, he will do all and more than what Paul has asked.**
   f. **1:22-25 – In closing, the request to stay in Philemon's guest room was a means of returning honor to Philemon, knowing he will be given some grief from non-believers for the grace he is being asked to offer Onesimus. Sending greetings from the five well-known co-workers of Paul was further honoring Philemon, and the Grace of the Lord Jesus reinforced the blessings Philemon had already received. This closing taken all together reinforced the primacy of Christian fraternal relationships.**