



Paul's Epistle to Philemon



Introduction

This epistle is unique in that it is the only truly personal letter of Paul that has been preserved. Even so, the greetings at both the beginning and the end suggest that it was meant to be read publicly, likely in the church that met in Philemon's home. Throughout the letter, Paul demonstrates remarkable tact, grace, and courtesy. Yet beneath this gentle tone, it becomes clear that Paul expects Philemon to do even more than he explicitly asks (v.21). As you read, you will notice Paul's careful and deliberate craftsmanship in how he makes his appeal.

Paul is writing on behalf of Onesimus, a runaway slave who had apparently stolen from his master and fled to Rome. Rather than disappearing into the anonymity of that great city, Onesimus came into contact with Paul and was converted to Christ. Once spiritually *"unprofitable,"* he began to live up to his name, which means *"profitable"* (v.11). Although Paul would have preferred to keep Onesimus with him as a close companion and helper, he insists that Onesimus return to his wronged master in Colossae.

However, Onesimus did not return as the same man who had fled. He left as a pagan and came back as a believer. Because of this transformation, Paul asks Philemon to receive him no longer merely as a slave, but as a *"brother beloved"* (v.16). It is reasonable to conclude that Philemon did, in fact, respond positively to Paul's appeal—after all, he would hardly have allowed this letter to be circulated if he had refused to obey it.

These events occurred around the same time Paul received troubling news from Epaphras about a growing threat to the believers in Colossae. That report became the occasion for Paul to write the Epistle to the Colossians.

Paul entrusted Tychicus with several important responsibilities. He was to accompany Onesimus on the return journey, providing protection from slave catchers along the way, and to deliver Paul's letters to the churches. These included the letter to the Colossians, a letter intended for the believers in Laodicea (possibly what we know as Ephesians), and this personal letter to Philemon. Laodicea and Colossae were located very close to one another—only about a mile apart—making this delivery route both practical and strategic.



ONESIMUS

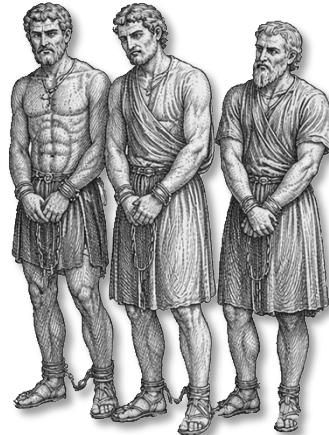


While the letter to Philemon stops short of directly asking that Onesimus be granted his freedom, this restraint may reflect the harsh social realities of the time. In many cases, formal emancipation offered little absolute security and could amount to little more than the freedom to starve. Paul's concern, therefore, is not merely Onesimus' legal status, but his restoration, protection, and complete acceptance within the Christian household.

Slavery

Estimates suggest that there were 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire. Men and women were often traded like pieces of chattel or merchandise. The average slave sold for 500 denarii. A single denarius was a day's wage for a common laborer. Educated and skilled slaves were sold for as much as 50,000 denarii. A master could free a slave, or a slave could buy his freedom if he could raise the money (Acts 22:28).

If a slave ran away, the master would register the name and description with the officials, and the slave would be on the "wanted" list. The law permitted a master to execute a rebellious slave. There were some masters who were cruel, giving slave owners a bad name. However, many of them were reasonable and humane, and their slaves would often become members of the household. A slave was an expensive and valuable piece of property, and it would cost the owner to lose him.



Philemon would be facing a dilemma. If he forgave Onesimus, what would the other masters (and slaves) think? If he punished him, how would it affect his testimony?

Paul the Beloved Friend (vv 1-7)



Philemon 1:1] *Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer,*

Referring to himself as a "prisoner," Paul is enlisting Philemon's sympathy, and contrasting his own suffering to the sacrifice he is asking Philemon to make.

Since Paul had never personally visited Colossae, Philemon was likely converted during Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus. The greeting sent by Timothy serves as a reminder that believers are bound together in the shared bonds of Christian brotherhood (v.9; Rom 1:7), a relationship patterned after the example of Christ Himself (Eph 5:22). Timothy's name also appears alongside Paul's in the salutations of five other epistles: II Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, and I & II Thessalonians.



This same Christ-like love is to be extended to Onesimus, the slave whom Paul now calls “*a brother beloved*” (v.16). Philemon is also described as Paul’s “*fellow-worker*,” indicating that he shares in the common responsibility of bearing witness to the gospel—both by word and by deed (vv 5, 7). He further demonstrates this partnership by consecrating his own home to the service of Christ, making it a meeting place for the church (v. 2).



Philemon 1:2] *And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house:*

Scholars are pretty sure, for several reasons, that Apphia is Philemon’s wife. As the lady of the house, she had to supervise the duties of the slaves, and her own response would be a crucial factor in influencing her husband. Archippus may have been Philemon’s son; scholars are less definite about his familial relationship. However, he was engaged in a ministry role and may have had pastoral responsibility in the absence of Epaphras (Col 4:17). Paul’s naming of Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus is intentional:

- Philemon → legal authority
- Apphia → domestic authority
- Archippus → spiritual authority

Paul is effectively placing the question of Onesimus before the entire leadership structure of the household church.



Apphia



Archippus

Home Churches

The church was the congregation that would have to recognize Onesimus as a Christian. This would also put pressure on Philemon to heed Paul’s request. If Paul had not included this church in his salutation, they might have gossiped when they saw that Onesimus had returned.

The practice of churches meeting in private homes for worship was common until A.D. 200. Not until the third century did churches meet in separate buildings, and finally became state institutions in the fourth century. Home churches were frequently mentioned by Paul (Rom 16:5; Col 4:15).



Philemon 1:3] *Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

God alone is the author of salvation...and the source of all blessings. Grace is the unmerited favor of God, and peace is the state of spiritual well-being that flows from the reception of this grace. There is no grace unless God bestows it, and there is no real peace unless it flows forth from God’s reconciliation with sinful man.

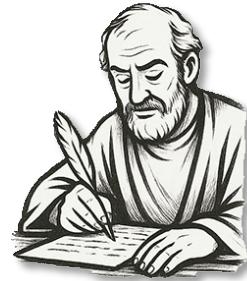


Philemon 1:4] *I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers.*



Paul does not congratulate Philemon on his conduct as a Christian. Paul's thanksgiving is like the overture in an opera: it introduces themes to be elaborated on in the body of the letter. In vv. 4-7 Paul introduces seven terms:

- 1) Love vv. 5, 7, 9, 16
- 2) Prayers v. 22
- 3) Sharing v. 17
- 4) Partnering v. 17 (koinonos)
- 5) Good/Goodness v. 14
- 6) Heart vv. 12, 20
- 7) Refreshed v. 20



Philemon 1:5] *Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints;*

Paul probably heard about Philemon's faith and love from Epaphras (Col 1:7, 8; 4:12). He is happy that Philemon is so forward in showing love for all saints, because he is about to ask for a further demonstration of it (vv 9, 16).



Philemon 1:6] *That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.*

The communication (Gr. Koinonia), or sharing, may demonstrate what God desires of believers (Rom 12:2; Gal 6:10; 1 Thess 5:15). Paul is preparing Philemon for the request in v 14. By acting out what God's grace has first worked in him, Philemon will be drawn closer to Christ and will serve to glorify Him.



Philemon 1:7] *For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.*

The word translated as "bowels" (Gr. splanchna) can sound jarring or even humorous to modern ears, but its meaning is actually very rich and emotional. Ancient people located strong emotions in the gut, not just in the head or in the heart. A good way to translate this would be "*because the hearts and spirits of the saints are refreshed by thee.*" Paul may be referring here to Philemon's actions in a particular ministry that he performed in a time of crisis, possibly the great earthquake in A.D. 60. The word "brother" at the end makes an effective appeal, as he is about to be called on again in the way he receives Onesimus!



Philemon 1:8] *Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient,*

Since Paul has been given impressive proof of Philemon's love, he declines to invoke his authority as an apostle to command what ought to be done.



Philemon 1:9] Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

Love is regarded as the principle that demands a deferential respect. Paul reinforces his appeal as “an old man” (*the aged*) who is penning this letter while in chains...[“aged” (Gr. Presbutes), can also mean ambassador.] Paul was nearly 60 and prematurely aged by his sufferings.



Philemon 1:10] I beseech thee for my **son** Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:

Having prepared the way, Paul now comes to his request. “His son” (1 Cor 4:15) “begotten in bonds.” Calvin said about Onesimus, “*Not by his own power, but only through his instrumentality; for it is not the work of any man to reshape and renew a human soul in the image of God, and it is with this act of spiritual regeneration that he is now dealing.*”



Philemon 1:11] Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:

Play on words, Onesimus means “profitable.” He apparently rendered only grudging service before his flight. Paul seems to be indulging in some playful humor: the slave that had been unprofitable to him in the past has now become profitable to them both (Col 3:22ff; v.13). **Christianity knows nothing of “hopeless” cases.** It can make the crooked places straight, and barren, fruitful.

Philemon means “affectionate,” or “one who is kind.” If the slave is to live up to his name, what about his master?



Philemon 1:12] Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:

“...thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels,” means to treat Onesimus as if he is Paul’s own flesh and blood. This shows the strength of Paul’s affection for his new son in the faith (v.10). Can there be any question how Philemon will treat what Paul sends him?



Philemon 1:13] Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel:

Onesimus has demonstrated such a dramatic change that Paul would have loved to retain him. However, Onesimus’ conversion did not alter his legal position as a slave, nor did it cancel his debt to the law or his master. Nonetheless, it did give him a new standing before God and before God’s people, and Philemon has to take this into consideration.



Philemon 1:14] But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.

Love cannot be compelled, so Paul refuses to intrude on a decision that must be Philemon’s own; his reception of Onesimus must not even seem to be forced. I suppose what Paul is doing could be considered a form of “duress,” i.e., “...an offer that cannot be refused.”



Philemon 1:15] *For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever;*

Instead of focusing on Onesimus' desertion, Paul suggests the euphemism which Joseph used (Gen 45:5; 50:20)—**God overruled evil for good**. Paul is saying that although Philemon lost Onesimus for a season, he has gained him as a brother in Christ for eternity.

It seems that God's purpose in this brief parting was that Philemon might enter into a new relationship with Onesimus, which not even death could dissolve (v.16)! We can assume that Philemon and his family had witnessed to Onesimus and prayed for him. He had left for Rome as a slave and returned as a brother.



Food for thought:
How often our own hardships are but a gateway to blessings we would have otherwise been denied!



Philemon 1:16] *Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?*

Although Onesimus is still a slave, he is now much more than that. The relationship between master and slave is now on an entirely different plane because both are in Christ (1 Cor 7:21-24; Col 3:11). Onesimus was now both Philemon's slave and his brother. He had a brother for a slave and a slave for a brother.

Philemon's Dilemma



This posed a real dilemma for Philemon: If he was too easy on Onesimus, it might influence other slaves to “become Christians” to influence their masters. If he was too hard on the man, it would affect Philemon’s testimony and ministry at Colossae. Paul got an “A” in sneaky...

Onesimus may have robbed Philemon of a substantial sum—perhaps the cost of the long journey to Rome—and Paul offers his own “credit card” (vv 17-25), so to speak, for restitution. It takes more than love to solve the problem: Love must pay a price. The debt must be paid.



Philemon 1:17] *If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.*

“Partner” (Gr. *Koinonon*) means “to have in common.” It is also translated “communion,” “communication,” or “fellowship.” As Paul’s fiduciary, Philemon was to receive Onesimus as Paul himself! To do otherwise is to deny the reality of the bond that makes all believers fellow members of the body of Christ.

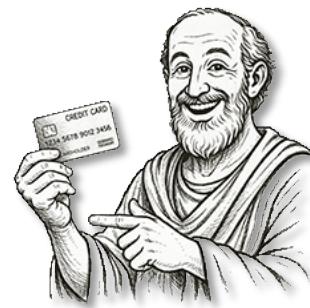
Remember, a **fiduciary** is one who God has entrusted with the care of another’s well-being and resources, and who is morally bound to act not for personal advantage, but in faithful love, integrity, and accountability before Christ.

“*Receive*” means “to receive into one’s family circle.” Imagine a slave entering his master’s family! However, imagine a guilty sinner entering God’s family! Some heavy lessons are being taught by Paul here!



Philemon 1:18] *If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account;*

Isn't this exactly what Christ has done for us as his believers? This is the Doctrine of Imputation. My sins were put on His account. He was treated the way I should have been treated.



The Doctrine of Imputation (Justification)

God's people are so identified with Christ that He receives us as He receives His own Son. We are "accepted in the Beloved" (Eph 1:6) and clothed in His righteousness (2 Cor 5:21). The reality of Galatians becomes evident here in Philemon: "*There is neither...slave nor free...in Christ Jesus*" (Gal 3:28).



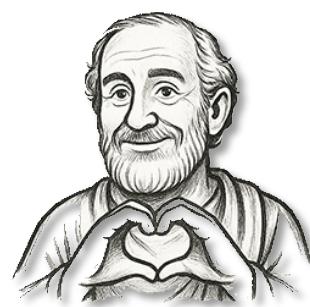
Philemon 1:19] *I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.*

When Paul writes, "*I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it,*" he is making a formal, personal guarantee to cover any financial loss Onesimus may have caused Philemon. In the ancient world, this language echoes the structure of a legal IOU, underscoring Paul's seriousness and personal accountability. Yet Paul immediately deepens the appeal by reminding Philemon, gently but unmistakably, that Philemon himself owes Paul a far greater debt: "*albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.*" Paul is not manipulating or coercing; rather, he is framing the situation spiritually. He contrasts material loss with eternal gain and subtly calls Philemon to act out of grace rather than calculation. In this moment, Paul also functions as a Christ-like mediator, voluntarily assuming another's debt in order to restore fellowship; a living illustration of substitution, reconciliation, and gospel ethics applied in real life.



Philemon 1:20] *Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels (heart) in the Lord.*

Paul begins with the word "Yea," saying, "*Yes, after everything I've just said, here is my final request.*" He gathers all of his arguments on behalf of Onesimus and turns them into a warm, personal appeal. Paul reminds Philemon that he is already known for refreshing the hearts of other believers through acts of love (v.7). Now Paul asks him to do the same thing again, this time by refreshing Paul's heart through a gracious response to Onesimus. Paul knows that forgiving someone who has caused real harm is not easy, and he makes it clear that only the Lord can give Philemon the strength and grace to do this. In simple terms, Paul is saying, "*You've done this kind of loving thing before, now please do it once more, and let God work through you.*"



Philemon 1:21] *Having confidence in thy obedience, I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.*



With the earthly master's obedience to his Master in heaven thus assured, Paul is confident that Philemon will do even more than he says. Some infer that Paul is requesting Onesimus' freedom, but this isn't warranted. Paul refuses to specify how the love is to be expressed.

Slavery

Paul did not "condemn" slavery, though he had many words for both slaves and masters (Eph 6:5-9; Col 3:22-4:1; 1 Tim 6:1-2; Titus 2:9,10). In fact, he encouraged slaves to obtain their freedom if they could (1 Cor 7:21-24).

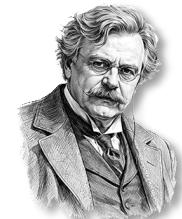
Christians, both noble and slave, are the salt of the earth and light of the world (Mt 5:13-16), and their influence must be felt in society for the glory of God. God used Joseph in Egypt, Daniel in Babylon and Persia; Esther and Nehemiah in Persia; and throughout history, believers have faithfully served the Lord in positions of leadership. But Christians in the Roman Empire could not work through the political structures there as we can today.

Due to our representative form of government, we have/had a unique mandate and stewardship responsibility, for which our country and its citizens will be held accountable. Our early citizenry was Biblically literate, and despite their different beliefs (Anglicans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Deists, and Theistic Rationalists), they believed in a moral Creator God and that 'glue' helped our unique form of government work.

John Adams, in 1798, famously said, "*Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.*" Adams meant that the Constitution (our form of government) assumes a built-in morality grounded in belief in God. The American system of limited government, personal liberty, and self-restraint only works if citizens **already possess internal moral discipline**.



Today, our population is astonishingly Biblically and historically illiterate. Why is this a problem? G. K. Chesterton famously said, "*When men choose not to believe in God, they do not thereafter believe in nothing; they then become capable of believing in anything.*"



Philemon 1:22] *But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you.*

Paul evidently anticipates an early release from prison and requests that a guest room be readied. Paul plans to come and see for himself that Philemon has not disappointed his expectations.

"*Your*" is in the plural: it includes the local church. Paul was planning to visit Macedonia after being set free (Phil 2:24); perhaps he intended to come to Colossae via Macedonia.

The testimony of Clement (95 a.d.) suggests that he fulfilled this long-cherished ambition before he was again arrested and brought back to Rome to suffer death at the hands of Nero (67 a.d.?).



Philemon 1:23, 24] *There salute thee **Epaphras**, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus; **Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas**, my fellowlabourers.*



Paul starts closing the letter by passing along greetings from five men he calls his “*fellow workers*.” These names remind us that Paul was never alone in ministry; he worked as part of a team, even while imprisoned.

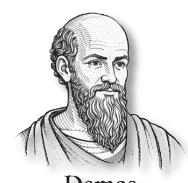
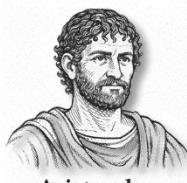
“*Epaphras*” is a shortened form of the name Epaphroditus, which was very common in the Roman world, but he should not be confused with the Epaphroditus who served as a messenger for the Philippian church. This Epaphras was closely associated with Paul the Apostle and was with him during part of Paul’s first Roman imprisonment, joining Paul in sending greetings to Philemon. Most importantly, Epaphras was the missionary through whom the believers in Colossae first came to faith in Christ, and he was likely instrumental in the founding of the other churches in the Lycus Valley as well (Col 1:7). His mention reminds us that while Paul often receives the attention, God used faithful men like Epaphras to establish and nurture entire Christian communities.



One of these men is John Mark (*Markus*). This is especially striking because about eleven years earlier, Mark had abandoned Paul during a missionary journey, causing a serious rift (Acts 15). Yet here he is again, restored and serving alongside Paul. Just two years after this letter, Paul will even tell Timothy to bring Mark with him because he is “useful” for ministry, an encouraging picture of failure followed by restoration.

Another is “*Aristarchus*”, a believer from Thessalonica who had traveled with Paul during his third missionary journey and even shared in his imprisonment. “*Luke*”, the faithful physician, also remained with Paul to the end. Luke later wrote the two historical books that give us the background to Paul’s appeal to Rome—the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts.

Not all stories end as well. “*Demas*”, who is mentioned here as a fellow worker, later deserted Paul because he loved “this present world.” Reflecting on Demas, John Calvin reminds us to be humble. We are not told whether Demas left the faith or simply grew tired of the hardships of ministry and returned to ordinary life. Either way, the lesson is clear: spiritual enthusiasm is good, but it is not enough by itself to carry us through life’s ups and downs. What truly matters is steadfastness and persistence, qualities Paul often emphasized, and a daily dependence on God for strength to keep going.



Philemon 1:25] *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.* [Written from Rome to Philemon, by Onesimus, a servant.]

After addressing Philemon in the singular from v.4, Paul reverts to the plural “your” as he prays that Christ’s grace may rest on the entire community who will hear the letter read as they meet for worship (v.2). Paul’s word “grace” is the fitting conclusion as his trademark in every epistle.

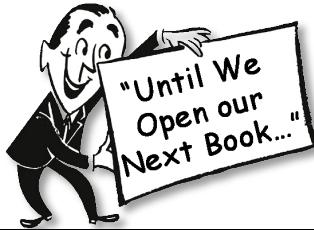
Summary of Values We Can Learn From Philemon

- **Personal value:** light on the character of Paul's character.
- **Ethical value:** focus on what is right.
- **Providential value:** God is behind and above all events.
- **Practical value:** application of the highest principles to the most everyday affairs.
- **Evangelical value:** encouragement to seek and to save the lowest.
- **Social value:** presentation of the relation of Christianity to slavery and all unchristian institutions.
- **Spiritual value:** the analogy between it and the Gospel.

Conclusions

Martin Luther says that "We are all Onesimus!" We are slaves to sin; we've tried to run away, but we can't; however, we are free in Christ. This is a beautiful picture of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ!

It was Christ who said, on our behalf, "*Charge that to My account! Receive them as you would receive Me!*"



PHILEMON

I	H	S	E	L	F	G	N	I	K	A	M	E	T	E	R	AGAIN	FATHER
T	L	Q	U	A	D	O	D	O	K	L	I	S	T	R	S	ALBEIT	FLESH
H	E	A	I	S	I	L	E	G	O	N	I	K	E	A	L	ALWAYS	GRACE
G	A	T	H	T	E	T	V	E	R	R	O	H	I	D	E	APPHIA	GREAT
I	H	V	N	T	N	J	O	N	H	E	T	W	H	E	W	BELOVED	HAVING
M	T	E	I	U	I	O	L	C	H	A	A	P	I	N	O	BENEFIT	HEARING
I	M	P	O	N	G	W	E	T	F	A	S	T	S	N	B	BESEECH	JESUS
S	A	C	U	L	G	I	B	H	C	E	E	S	E	B	G	BONDS	KNOWING
G	R	E	H	T	O	R	B	T	O	G	S	D	N	O	B	BOWELS	LUCAS
Y	N	Q	U	I	S	P	S	I	E	R	R	O	G	I		BROTHER	MAKING
L	I	I	N	S	E	T	U	F	I	N	D	A	N	D	S	COUNT	MARCUS
R	A	S	H	R	E	W	C	E	S	O	J	I	C	K	Y	CHRIST	MENTION
A	G	O	H	T	E	A	R	N	A	P	R	O	N	E	A	DEARLY	MIGHT
E	A	A	P	R	O	N	A	E	M	A	R	T	I	N	W	DEMAS	NOTHING
D	P	E	R	S	O	N	M	B	E	N	I	G	N	N	L	ENJOIN	PERHAPS
S	T	I	E	B	L	A	S	H	D	A	I	H	P	P	A	FAITH	WITHAL