

# *Philemon*

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# *Philemon*

## *Introduction*

- 1) Paul's letter to Philemon is his shortest preserved letter. It is referred to as one of the "prison epistles" for it was written from Rome where Paul was a prisoner.
- 2) It is unique in that it is addressed to a individual about a purely personal matter. Although light on doctrinal truths, it teaches and emphasizes the need to forgive especially between believers.
- 3) Philemon was a man known by Paul who resided in the city of Colosse'. He owned a slave named Onesimus who had defrauded him in some way and became a fugitive.
- 4) Onesimus, through the ministry of Paul, became a Christian. He is rederef to by Paul as a "faithful and beloved brother" in the book of Colossians. (Col. 4:9) Paul commended him to the Colossian church as "one of them".
- 5) This particular letter however, is far from Paul to Philemon in behalf of Onesimus. The christianity of Onesimus did not excuse him of his past duties and responsibilities. Paul acknowledges this by sending him back to Philemon.
- 6) The fate of Onesimus, who also recognized his duty and returned willingly, is in the hands of Philemon, his master in the flesh. This letter from Paul requests that Philemon would forgive Onesimus and accept him as a brother in Christ.
- 7) This letter was written at the same time as the letter to the Colossians. One letter addressed to the church, while the other was addressed to an individual of that church. The letters were delivered by Tychicus and Onesimus. (Col. 4:7-9)

# *Philemon*

## ***v.1 Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy [our] brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer,***

Peter identifies himself as “a prisoner of Jesus Christ”. His is an honorable imprisonment, for it is a direct result of the commission to him by Jesus Christ, namely, to preach the gospel message to all men. He therefore is truly a prisoner for the sake of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 4:16)

- a) This is one of the few letters in which Paul does not state his authority as an apostle in the opening lines. This probably is because this letter was written strictly to an individual as well as the fact that Paul does not want his request of Philemon to be understood as being a command.
- b) Timothy was a close associate and almost constant companion of Paul. He was with Paul in Rome when this letter was penned. His name appears with Paul’s in the beginning of five other letters. Philemon, no doubt, was personally acquainted with Timothy. (Col. 1:1)
- c) The recipient of this letter, namely Philemon, is identified as dearly beloved and a fellow laborer. Both are terms of endearment frequently used by Paul. Philemon was most likely personally acquainted with Paul and had ministered with him in the past. Philemon’s conversion and his ministry with Paul probably occurred during Paul’s lengthy ministry in nearby Ephesus.

## ***v.2 And to [our] beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house:***

Paul extends his greeting to include Apphia and Archippus. Apphia is a woman’s name and so she is probably the wife of Philemon. It follows that Archippus is probably their son.

- a) The three are mentioned followed by a general greeting to the church that meets in Philemon’s house, indicating that the three probably form a family unit.
- b) Archippus is called a fellow soldier, meaning that he was actively involved in the ministry. In the letter to the Colossians, which is addressed to the church, Paul instructs its members to exhort Archippus that he “take heed and fulfil” the ministry given to him. (Col. 4:17)
- c) Many think that Archippus was a young minister given charge over the church in the absence of Epaphras, who went to see Paul and whose visit prompted the letter to the Colossians. (Col. 1:7-8) This then was the ministry given to him which he was to fulfil. These verses simply do not provide enough information to prove the relationships and probabilities outlined above.

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## ***v.3 Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.***

Upon the three named individuals, as well as unto the entire church, Paul confers upon them in prayer and in his hope the grace and the peace of God.

- a) Grace is the unmerited favor of God. It is the love and kindness bestowed upon those who are of the Son. Peace is the result of grace. It is the calm that passes understanding belonging to a heart that is right with God.
- b) This grace and peace comes from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. The Father is representative of the 'source' and the Son representative of the 'instrument' by which it is bestowed. No one can partake of this grace except through the Son.

## ***v.4-5 I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers, Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints;***

Paul thanks God for Philemon. He is a man whose life had touched that of Paul's in a very significant way. Paul is thankful for such men of faith. It becomes apparent in this verse that the letter is personal, only the greeting being extended to Apphia, Archippus and the church.

- a) Specifically, Paul thanks God as well as commends Philemon for the love and faith that is present within him and which is being manifested toward all. Philemon is a lover of Jesus Christ and a lover of the people of God.
- b) His love for the brethren is proof to Paul of his genuine faith. (1 John 3:14) Paul had firsthand knowledge of Philemon's character and knew that virtue had continued to grow in him from such reliable witnesses as Epaphras and Onesimus.
- c) Paul knows that faithful men are in need of prayer and so Paul makes mention of Philemon always when he goes before their mutual Lord.

## ***v.6 That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.***

Specifically, Paul prays that Philemon's continued sharing or fellowship (communication) of his faith would lead him to discover the depths of the goodness of the Spirit of Jesus Christ within him, thus manifesting a powerful (effectual) example of the love of God to all.

- a) This is admittedly a very difficult verse simply because it directly refers to Paul's hope that Philemon would forgive and free Onesimus. Philemon himself could not understand the full meaning of this prayer until he read on.
- b) As Hendricksen puts it, "*It is a prayer that Philemon, who has already shown his unselfishness in so many ways, may take the next step also.*"

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

Paul goes on to tell Philemon that he was the source of great joy and comfort to him and his companions in Rome. His faith and love were manifested in the helping of others.

- a) The hearts of many saints were refreshed by his kindness. He was unselfish with his possessions and his blessings. The word “refreshed” is a military term which refers to an army coming to rest after a long march. No doubt the comfort he offered was spiritual as well as material.
- b) This verse is connected to that above in that it expresses Paul’s confidence, based on Philemon’s past history, that he will successfully take the next step, that is, coming to a greater knowledge of God’s love and forgiveness in forgiving and freeing Onesimus.
- c) The term “brother” at the end of this verse is a term of endearment which emphasizes the joy and comfort he brings to Paul by his actions and expresses the depth of the feeling of Paul for this man.

***v.8-9. Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient, 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.***

These verses are an introduction to Paul’s request. Philemon now knows Paul wants something, however, Paul deems it important to convey the spirit in which his request will be made.

- a) Paul was an apostle, an ambassador of the Lord Jesus Christ. In boldness he could rightly command Philemon to grant this particular request on scriptural grounds, but this is not the spirit in which he now wanted to come to his friend.
- b) Paul comes to Philemon in the spirit of love. He comes to him not with apostolic authority, but humbly, as an old man and as a prisoner of Jesus Christ. Philemon was a man who knew and understood the love of Jesus Christ and so Paul comes to him, asking him in the spirit of that love.
- c) Paul also knows that if his prayer for Philemon is to come true, Philemon must discover this greater love on his own. A command from Paul would do nothing in helping Philemon to take the next step as he had prayed. Paul masterfully leads him on, acting as a guide to lead him to a greater understanding.

***v.10 I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:***

Paul, after telling his dear friend Philemon that his request is made in love and in humility, makes the object of his request known, Onesimus, the runaway slave of Philemon.

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- a) Paul appeals to Philemon on the behalf of Onesimus and provides a piece of information that should make all the difference in the world to Philemon in evaluating the situation.
- b) Onesimus was now a believer. He was Paul's child in the faith, coming to know Christ through the agency of Paul. Paul refers to him as "the child of my imprisonment". Onesimus had found forgiveness in Jesus Christ and now stood repentant before the master of his flesh.
- c) The exact circumstances of the conversion of Onesimus are not given. No doubt Onesimus would relate the specifics to his master, but Onesimus, a fugitive in Rome, had met Paul and had accepted the message of the gospel.

### ***v.11 Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:***

Paul speaks of the transformation that had taken place in the life of Onesimus. He was unprofitable in his former state, but now is profitable. This, together with his repentant spirit, offered proof that the conversion of Onesimus was indeed genuine.

- a) Some believe there is a play on words in this verse that constitutes a pun on the part of Paul. The name "Onesimus" is an actual word in Greek that means 'profitable or useful'. In this verse he uses a synonym of the word "onesimus". Paul in effect tells Philemon that he will now find that the name Onesimus now fits him. Paul seems to be chiding Philemon that his runaway slave was named "profitable".
- b) Onesimus, after his conversion, had rendered great service to Paul, and so Paul is confident Philemon will soon see for himself the transformation that had taken place in this man.

### ***v.12 Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:***

Paul makes his request of Philemon. He asks him to receive Onesimus. "I have sent back to you one who is now a profitable brother in the faith", says Paul "therefore receive him".

- a) "Mine own bowels" means 'mine own heart'. Paul had grown so close to Onesimus that it was as if he had sent a part of his own heart to Philemon. The idea seems to be that Philemon should receive Onesimus as he would Paul. (v.17) This implies that he receive him not as a slave, but as a brother.

### ***v.13 Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel:***

## *Philemon*

Paul tells Philemon that Onesimus had become of great value to him, in fact, Paul would have liked to keep Onesimus with him, that is, to have retained his services.

- a) Paul seems to hint to Philemon that he might consider sending Onesimus back to him. Since Philemon could not be at Paul's side, Paul suggests that Onesimus would be an adequate substitute ministering to Paul in Philemon's name.
- b) Obviously this must have been the desire of Onesimus, for Paul was not asking Philemon to pass onto him his rights over Onesimus as a slave owner, or as his master to order Philemon to return him.

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

Paul makes it clear that he is not interested in imposing his will on anyone. He had no intention on presuming upon his friendship with Philemon in any way.

- a) Paul could not grant Onesimus his physical freedom, neither retain what amounted to another man's property. He did not want to force Philemon's hand or even make it appear as though he had forced Philemon's hand.
- b) Philemon's benefit or goodness, which amounted to his showing forgiveness and mercy toward Onesimus, must be a product of his own will and heart.
- c) It appears as though Paul believed that the two men must meet face to face for true repentance, forgiveness and closure on this matter to take place. He no doubt wants Philemon to observe first hand the transformation that had taken place in the life of Onesimus.

***v.15-16 For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever; 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?***

Paul wants Philemon to consider the divine providence of God in the matter of Onesimus. With the word "perhaps", Paul admits that he does not know the specific reasoning of God, but considering the outcome it seems apparent that God had led Onesimus to Paul and to salvation.

- a) Paul in no way is trying to justify the actions of Onesimus or is suggesting that the ends justifies the means, but wants Philemon to see that God used an evil act and accomplished a great good. (Rom. 8:28)
- b) Notice the language of Paul. He does not want to remind Onesimus or Philemon of the evil committed. Instead of describing the act, which amounted to theft and desertion, Paul simply says, "departed and left you for a short while".

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- c) Paul begins to compare, for the sake of Philemon, the “old” Onesimus with the “new” Onesimus. He tells him that he lost the physical services of the “old” Onesimus for awhile, but to the “new” Onesimus he will be joined forever.
- d) Onesimus left a slave or a servant, but he has returned as a brother. He is a beloved brother of Paul, how much more should he now be beloved to Philemon? Onesimus has returned in a regenerated form. He is infinitely better having the Holy Spirit of God residing in him. He will be much more profitable to Philemon in the flesh as well as in the spirit.

***v.17-19 If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself. If he hath wronged thee, or oweth [thee] ought, put that on mine account; 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.***

Paul makes his final and his strongest plea to Philemon to forgive and to receive Onesimus. Paul makes it personal, implying that how he treats Onesimus will reflect on their relationship. Paul literally tells Philemon that if he is a sharer in spiritual fellowship with Paul then he will receive Onesimus just as he would Paul.

- a) Philemon, even if he forgave Onesimus, would be entitled to some form of restitution. Onesimus was probably not in any way in a position to pay his debt and so Paul comes to the aid of Onesimus to an even greater degree telling Philemon to put it to his account. “I write in my own hand that I will take care of his debt.”
- b) Paul then reminds Philemon that Philemon owes Paul his very life. Paul may be referring to Philemon’s spiritual life in Christ since he was his spiritual father or perhaps Paul literally saved Philemon’s life sometime in the past.
- c) John MacArthur sees Paul’s plan as follows; “*Paul’s plan is to put Onesimus’s debt on his account and then cancel it because Philemon owes Paul an even greater debt.*”

\*\* I am of the opinion that Onesimus caused great harm to Philemon. This was not a small matter as there was great animosity between the two men. Paul knew that it would not be easy for Philemon to forgive, restore and accept the conversion of Onesimus. To forget the past and accept him as a brother must have been to Philemon an insurmountable task. Paul has graciously “pulled out all the stops” to try to convince Philemon to do the right thing.

***v.20-21 Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord. Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.***

## *Philemon*

Paul knew these two men for what they were in Christ. They were both dear brothers and friends. Paul knows that if they could put the past behind them, they would greatly compliment each other. Reconciliation would be a benefit to all, especially to Paul.

- a) The ball is now in Philemon's court. Paul makes his final plea to Philemon in behalf of Onesimus by asking Philemon to allow Paul to rejoice in him. "Let me rejoice in the manifestation of the Lord in you."
- b) In verse 7 Paul recognized that Philemon constantly refreshed the hearts of the saints. Here, Paul in effect says, "it is now my turn, through this act of kindness and mercy refresh my heart, Philemon."
- c) Paul wrote this letter having the utmost confidence in his obedient nature. Not obedience to Paul as such, but in the call of the gospel to forgive, especially a brother in Christ.
- d) Paul knew this letter would bear witness with the spirit of Philemon and that he would enter into the grace made available to him and do what was right. Paul indirectly suggests that Philemon do more than what he had asked. Setting Onesimus free? Allowing him to minister in the church?

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

In hope, Paul instructs his friend to prepare for him a place to stay. In doing so he reminds Philemon that it is only through his prayers and those of all the church that his day of freedom would come.

- a) Once again, there seems to be a subtle hint directed to Philemon that he should accept Onesimus into his own home (prepare me also a lodging). Paul had earlier instructed Philemon to receive him as he would Paul himself. (v.17)
- b) Some, among them MacArthur, feel that Paul's "threat" of a visit in the near future will also influence Philemon's decision and treatment of Onesimus.

***v.23-24 There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus; Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers.***

In his closing, Paul extends the greetings of five fellow workers who are with him in Rome. They are his "men behind the scenes" to whom he owes much. All five are also mentioned in the letter to the Colossian church.

- a) It is interesting to note that Epaphras is singled out as being a fellow prisoner with Paul. Was he indeed a fellow prisoner of Paul in the literal sense? Is this the reason he himself did not deliver the letter to the Colossian church which he in all probability was the pastor?

## *Philemon*

*v.25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ [be] with your spirit. Amen.*

Paul wishes or prays upon Philemon the grace or unmerited favor of Jesus Christ. He will only find strength to forgive and to accept Onesimus as a brother with this grace of Christ working in his spirit.

Amen