

Philemon

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For a further examination of Philippians see also the following books in this library.

[Titus, Philemon and Hebrews](#)

Introduction

This is a personal letter to a wealthy believer in Colossae named Philemon. It appears that one of Philemon's slave, Onesimus, had run away and ended up meeting Paul, who was in prison at the time.

Onesimus came to know the Lord and proved to be a tremendous blessing to the apostle in his imprisonment. Paul determined to send Onesimus back to his master but wrote this letter to his master in the hope that he would graciously receive him, not just as a runaway slave, but as a new brother in Christ. Paul conveys to Philemon that he would pay any debt he had incurred as a result of his servant's unfaithfulness.

Verse 1

This is a personal letter written to a man by the name of Philemon. Paul describes him as "*our beloved fellow worker*." From this we understand that he was a believer and faithful servant of the Lord Jesus.

At the time of writing Paul was in prison. Timothy was with Paul, so the letter is from both Paul and Timothy.

Verse 2

The letter is also addressed to two other individuals.

The first is a woman by the name of Apphia. Seeing that the letter was written personally to Philemon, it appears that Apphia was closely connected to him. This has led many commentators to assume that she was Philemon's wife. While this is possible, it is merely an assumption, as we have no further evidence of this. Apphia is described as "our sister," indicating that she was a believer.

The second individual mentioned is Archippus. Paul speaks of him as a "fellow soldier." The assumption is that he was a Christian worker serving the Lord in that region. Paul speaks of Archippus in his letter to the Colossians:

17 And say to Archippus, "See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord." - Col 4:17

This reveals two details to us. First, that Archippus had a ministry calling on his life. Second, that he lived in the region of Colossae. It is likely then that Philemon and Apphia also lived in Colossae.

There is one final detail here in the verse. Philemon had opened his home to the church in the region. Believers would gather there to worship. It may be that Archippus had a role to play in this house church that meet in Philemon's home.

Verse 3

Paul offers his usual blessing to Philemon, Apphia and Archippus. He prays for grace and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus.

Grace is the unmerited favour of the Lord. Peace relates to their harmonious relationship with God resulting from the work of Jesus Christ on their behalf.

Verse 4

Paul tells Philemon that he always thanked God when he remembered him in his prayers.

The King James Version translates this slightly different:

4 I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers,- Phlm 4

The English Standard Version tells us that Paul always thanked God when he remembered Philemon in his prayers. The King James Version tells us that Paul thanked God and always mentioned Philemon in his prayers. The question here is whether Paul prayed for Philemon when he remembered him or whether he always prayed for him.

The Greek text reads Εὐχαριστῶ τῷ θεῷ μου, πάντοτε μνησάν σου ποιούμενος ἐπὶ τῶν προσευχῶν μου and is literally translated "Thank the God of me always remembrance (or mention) of you do on the prayer."

What is important for us to understand is that Paul had reason to thank the Lord for Philemon. He was clearly walking with the Lord and being an encouragement and support to the believers in the region of Colossae.

If the English Standard Version is correct, we catch a glimpse of how Paul prayed. He prayed for people as the Lord put them on his mind.

Verse 5

Notice the reason Paul thanked the Lord when he prayed for Philemon.

First, because of his love for the Lord Jesus and “*all the saints.*” We have already seen how this was demonstrated by opening his home for them to have a place of worship.

Second, because Philemon’s faith in Jesus Christ was being demonstrated by his actions. This is evident in the words of Paul in verse 1 where he calls him a “*dear fellow worker.*”

Philemon was an important figure in Colossae for the advancement of the church. Paul was grateful for the love and practical demonstration of his faith in Jesus Christ.

Verse 6

Notice Paul’s prayer for Philemon. He prayed that Philemon would become effective in sharing his faith. The word for effective is ἐνεργής (energēs) can be translated by energy, power or capability. Paul is praying, therefore that Philemon would become powerful, energetic and capable in the sharing of his faith.

Beyond this, however, the word ἐνεργής was used in medical terms to describe the effect of medicine on a patient. That is to say, it healed and restored a sick patient to health. Paul prayer is also that as Philemon shared his faith, it would have an impact on many lives.

Notice also that Paul prayed that Philemon would come to a full knowledge of what was in him “for the sake of Christ.” This is a very important prayer and one we all need to pray.

All too often we do not reach our potential for the Lord. Many have never come to understand the power that is available through Christ in us. I have watched all too many believers be content to live defeated Christian lives. We have been content to do only what we can do on the flesh, but are not walking into the power of God in our lives. Paul prayed that Philemon would come to a full knowledge of what he had in the person of Jesus Christ living in Him.

We gather from this that while Philemon loved the Lord and demonstrated his faith in practical ways, Paul knew that in Christ, he was capable of much greater things.

Verse 7

While Paul encouraged Philemon to a greater knowledge of what he had in Christ, he tells him that he had received much joy and comfort through hearing about his love for the saints.

Paul had heard how Philemon had refreshed the hearts of the saints in his region. We are not told in the verse how he did this. Philemon’s presence and ministry, however, was much appreciated. He was a blessing and encouragement to the Christian church in Colossae and beyond.

Verse 8

Paul gets down to the main subject of his letter here. Notice how he begins – *“though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required.”* Let’s break this down.

First, notice what Paul says about himself – *“I am bold enough in Christ.”* The word translated, bold is παρρησία (parrēsía). The word comes from two root words. The first is “pás” meaning, all. The second is “rhêsis” meaning, speaking. Together they describe a person who speaks frankly what is on their mind.

Second, notice that Paul had the authority, in the capacity of apostle and representative of Christ, to *command* Philemon to take a certain course of action.

Thirdly, Paul tells Philemon that from a Christian point of view, there was only one legitimate response. He reminds Philemon that he could command him, as apostle, to do what was “required” of him as a believer.

Verse 9

Just because Paul had the authority to do something, did not mean that he used that authority on every occasion. There are times when it is better not to take an authoritative position. This is what Paul chose to do here.

Paul felt that the more loving thing to do in this situation was to appeal to Philemon as an old man and prisoner. The word appeal (παρακαλέω parakaléō) literally means to call to one’s side for the purpose of aid or support. Paul is asking Philemon to stand with him in a very particular matter.

Paul could have legitimately taken the high ground as an apostle and commanded Philemon to obey him, but instead he humbled himself and gave Philemon the high ground and asked him to come to his aid.

All too many problems in the church are the result of those in authority not being able to humble themselves. Instead of taking the most loving and compassionate action, they choose a position of authority and demand obedience and submission. This often creates division. Paul’s example here is one we ought to consider as leaders.

Verse 10

Paul now makes his appeal to Philemon. It relates to a young man by the name of Onesimus. His name means, useful or beneficial. Paul has two things to say about Onesimus here.

First, notice how he calls him, “my child Onesimus.” We learn from verse 16 that Onesimus was a runaway “bondservant” or slave belonging to Philemon. The fact that Paul calls him his child is significant. It shows us that the apostle treated all people equally. He had a special relationship with Onesimus the runaway slave.

Second, notice that Paul tells Philemon that he became a father to Onesimus in his imprisonment. While the apostle was in prison, God continued to bring people to him. It is uncertain how Onesimus came into contact with Paul but certainly the Lord worked out these details.

The fact that Paul became a father to Onesimus, leads us to believe that Paul had something to do with the conversion of this runaway slave to Christ, or at least his spiritual growth. It is clear that Onesimus did come to Christ from the words of Paul in Colossians 4:

9 and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here. – Col 4:9

Paul told the Colossians that Onesimus was a “*faithful and beloved brother*.”

Verse 11

Paul makes a play on words here. The name Onesimus means, useful or beneficial. Paul tells Philemon that while Onesimus was at one time, useless to him, he had become useful both to his master Philemon and to Paul. This usefulness was likely the result of Onesimus coming to Christ and his life being changed.

The fact that Paul tells us here that Onesimus was at one time useless to Philemon, may be an indication of just how much he had changed. Onesimus was a slave who was discontent with his position and determined that he would abandon his responsibilities by running away. While Onesimus abandoned his obligations, God pursued him and made him His child. This changed everything for Onesimus.

Verse 12

Notice what Paul does to this runaway slave – “*I am sending him back to you.*” We should not see Paul’s endorsement of slavery here. Legally, however, Onesimus was the property of Philemon and Paul had an obligation to return him to his owner.

The returning of Onesimus, however, was not just a legal matter. Onesimus had not been faithful to his master. As a believer in Jesus Christ now, he needed to address this wrong he had done. He had been “useless” as Philemon’s servant and now needed to make it right. The lesson here for us is that while God forgives our sins when we come to Him, this does not mean that we do not have to seek the forgiveness of those we have hurt when we were in our sins. As new creatures in Christ we must face our past, make right the wrongs we have done, and mend relationships where possible. Only by facing his past, could Onesimus move forward in his relationship with Christ.

Notice in this verse what Paul tells Philemon about sending Onesimus back. He told him that he was “*sending my very heart.*” Onesimus was very dear to Paul. He lets Philemon know just how much he loved this young man and what God was doing in him.

There is one more detail I want to point out here. Colossians 4:7-9 tells us how Paul sent Onesimus back to Colossae:

7 Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. 8 I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, 9 and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here. – Col 4:7-9

The apostle sent him back with Tychicus to report to the Colossians on Paul's condition. Onesimus did not return under armed guard, but of his own free will, with a well-respected and mature servant of God. We can only imagine the support Tychicus would have been to Onesimus as he returned to make things right. Paul entrusted Onesimus to a mature believer who would stand with him in this difficult time.

Verse 13

As Paul prepares to send Onesimus back to Colossae, he writes in his letter to Philemon that he would have liked to keep him. This reveals just how useful Onesimus had become to the apostle and the change that the gospel brought to his life.

Notice that the role Onesimus carried out for Paul was one of service during the apostle's imprisonment. Onesimus was not a preacher or evangelist but his role in serving Paul was vital and very much appreciated.

The word Paul uses here for "serve" is διακονέω (diakonēō) from which we get the word deacon. The word speaks of one who waits on another. Onesimus waited on Paul and likely carried out a variety of tasks that made Paul's life easier.

Paul tells Philemon that he would have liked to keep Onesimus, *"in order that he might serve me on your behalf."*

Remember that Paul expressed his joy that Philemon had refreshed the hearts of the saints:

7 For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.- Phlm 7

Philemon ministered to the saints in Colossae. He opened his home for them to meet. He was known by the saints as one who refreshed those who were struggling and needing support.

What Paul appears to be saying is that Onesimus was doing exactly what Philemon was doing. As Philemon's slave, he was ministering and refreshing Paul's heart. It was as if Philemon had sent his slave to care for Paul. Paul received the ministry of Onesimus as if it were from Philemon.

Verse 14

While the apostle would have liked to keep Onesimus in his service, he tells Philemon that he preferred to do nothing without his consent. The insinuation seems to be that Paul really did want Onesimus to work with him and he was making this request of Philemon.

Notice, however, that Paul did not want to force Philemon into this decision, but preferred that he make it out of the generosity of his heart. This may have been the reason for sending Onesimus back. If Philemon returned Onesimus to Paul for his service, the apostle knew it would be from his heart.

Paul wanted every gift to be from the Lord, given with a joyful heart. Here he chooses to do without Onesimus and his service rather than compel Philemon to give if he was not ready to do so from his heart.

Verse 15

Paul reminds Philemon of the sovereign working of God in the circumstances of life. We sometimes make bad decisions that the Lord uses for good. Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery but God used it to save the nation of Israel from a great famine. Evil men choose to kill the Lord Jesus but God used it to pay the penalty for our sin. God works often in ways strange to us. He uses our failures to teach us and our shortcomings to redirect us.

Paul tells Philemon that while Onesimus ran away from him, God used this to bring him to Christ. He was returning now a changed man, better servant, and brother in Christ. Paul reminds Philemon that Onesimus would be connected to him now forever as a brother in Christ.

Philemon had every legal right to punish Onesimus for running away. He could make his life miserable and mistreat him and still be within his legal right as a slave owner. When Paul reminds Philemon of how God used Onesimus' act of defiance to accomplish His purpose, he was showing him how God was in this act and used it for Philemon's good. Understanding this would have pacified any anger Philemon may have had toward his slave.

Verse 16

Notice that Paul was returning Onesimus to Philemon "*no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother.*" There are a couple of details we need to see here in these words of Paul.

First, notice that Paul tells Philemon that he was not returning Onesimus as a bondservant but more than a bondservant. Paul is not releasing Onesimus from his obligations as a slave here. Onesimus would continue as a bondservant to Philemon, but he was returning a different man. There would be a whole new dimension to his relationship with his master, for Onesimus was now a believer in Jesus Christ and brother to Philemon.

Second, Paul refers to Onesimus as a “*beloved brother—especially to me.*” The apostle had come to love this young man as a dear brother. In fact, he told Philemon that he would have liked to have him stay with him for he had been a tremendous support to him in his imprisonment. Paul tells Philemon that Onesimus was a useful servant of the Gospel.

The apostle goes on here to tell Philemon, that he expected that he would soon discover that Onesimus would prove to be a faithful servant but also a dear brother to him.

Paul tells Philemon that Onesimus was a servant and brother not only in flesh but also in the Lord. He was a brother in the flesh in that he lived with Philemon and was part of his family. He was a brother in the Lord in that he had accepted Christ and was part of the family of God.

Verse 17

Paul comes to the main point of his letter here. He wants Philemon to receive his servant Onesimus. Notice how Paul phrases this request in the verse.

First, Paul speaks to Philemon on the basis of his relationship with him as a partner in the Gospel – “*So if you consider me your partner.*” Paul is saying something like this: If you consider me a brother in the Lord and share the same faith as I do.

Second, the demonstration of Philemon’s connection to Paul and the faith he proclaimed would be seen in how he received Onesimus.

Third, Paul describes how he expected Philemon to receive his slave Onesimus — “*as you would receive me.*” Paul considered Onesimus a son. He had become very dear to him in his imprisonment. Any mistreatment of Onesimus would be taken personally and would deeply grieve the apostle.

Verse 18

Paul took his relationship with Onesimus so seriously that he committed to pay for any wrong he had done to Philemon or for anything Philemon deemed he owed him.

Notice the phrase “*if he has wrong you at all.*” The words “at all” covers any wrong Onesimus had done to Philemon as a slave.

Paul also offers to pay for any loss Philemon incurred through Onesimus’ unfaithfulness – “*or owes you anything,*” Philemon was to charge whatever he deemed Onesimus owed him to Paul’s account.

It was important to Paul the Onesimus be free from any debt to Philemon. If the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus was to move forward, than this matter needed to be addressed. Either Onesimus paid his debt in full so that he owed nothing to Philemon, or

Philemon forgave the debt completely. Either way, the relationship between these two men could only flourish if this matter between them was settled.

The lesson here is clear. There are many issues between believers that must be addressed if they are going to grow in their relationships. Past hurts must be addressed and reconciled. Forgiveness must be offered, debts must be paid. All obstacles to fellowship need be removed if we are to experience the relationship God intends for us as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Verse 19

Paul promised to pay Philemon for any loss he had incurred due to Onesimus running away. To show how serious he was about this matter Paul writes – “I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it.”

In essence Paul is giving Philemon a legally binding promissory note. In the note he identifies himself and, writing in his own handwriting, engages himself to pay whatever Onesimus owed Philemon.

Notice, however, that Paul reminds Philemon of his debt to him. Paul tells Philemon that he owed him his life. The Apostle does not go into detail here but some commentators believe that Philemon came to Christ through the ministry of Paul.

In reminding Philemon of his debt to Paul, the apostle is asking him to take this into consideration when he thought about how much he felt Paul should pay him for his losses through Onesimus. The assumption is that Philemon owed Paul more than Onesimus would owe him, especially since the apostle was sending him back as a changed man and faithful Christian servant.

Verse 20

Paul asks Philemon for “some benefit in the Lord.” The word benefit here is *ὀνίνημι* (*onínēmi*) which refers to a favour or profit from someone.

Notice that this benefit is “in the Lord.” That is to say it was not financial in nature but spiritual.

The apostle describes the nature of this benefit he was asking from Philemon when he says: *“Refresh my heart in Christ.”*

Philemon owed Paul his life. In return, Paul was simply asking that Philemon would refresh his heart in the Lord. How was Philemon to do this? By receiving his runaway slave as he would receive Paul to whom he owed his life. He was to forgive Onesimus and recognize him now as a brother in Christ. That act alone would refresh the heart of Paul.

Remember here that Paul had already told Philemon that he had derived much joy in hearing that he had refreshed the heart of the saints:

7 For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.— Phlm 7

He is asking Philemon to do what he did all the time. He was asking to be part of that refreshing through Onesimus.

Verse 21

Paul expresses his confidence in Philemon's willingness to do what was right. Notice two details here.

First, the apostle was confident in Philemon's obedience. We need to understand Philemon's obedience here in the context of the rest of the letter. Consider Paul's words in verses eight and nine:

*8 Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required,
9 yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— Phlm 8-9*

The apostle chooses not to use his apostolic authority to command obedience from Philemon but instead appeals to him as a prisoner and old man.

Philemon's obedience, therefore, was not so much to Paul as to the Lord and the principles of His Word. Paul was confident that Philemon would do "what is required" (verse 8) by God.

Second, Paul expresses his confidence in the character of Philemon to "*do even more*" than Paul requested. Philemon was one who refreshed the hearts of the saints. Obviously, this required great sacrifice on his part. Paul was assured that Philemon would do the same when it came to Onesimus. That is to say, he would be generous, compassionate and forgiving.

Verse 22

Paul has another request for Philemon — "*prepare a guest room for me.*" It was Paul's hope that God would release him from prison through the prayers of the saints. Indications are that Paul would be released from this imprisonment before being taken a second time as a prisoner, at which time he would be executed.

Notice that it was Paul's desire to "*be graciously given to*" Philemon. Paul was dependant on the Lord to give him the privilege of visiting Philemon in Colossae. The words *graciously given* seem to indicate the Lord would send Paul to minister in His name to Philemon and the believers who met regularly in his home.

Verse 23

As Paul concludes his letter, he sends greetings from Epaphras. Epaphras was also a prisoner at this time. According to Paul in Colossians 1:7, Epaphras was a faithful minister on behalf of the Colossians:

7 just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf – Col 1:7

He worked hard and had a sincere burden for the churches of Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis.

12 Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.

13 For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. – Col 4:12-13

Epaphras was well known in Colossae and had likely ministered to the believers in that region.

Verse 24

Paul also sends greetings from four other workers here.

First, Paul sends greetings from Mark. In Colossians 4:10 Mark is described as the cousin of Barnabas. He was also known as John Mark (see Acts 15:37). John Mark had accompanied Paul and Barnabas on one of their missionary journeys but for some reason left them and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). This would become a source of conflict between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15 so that Paul and Barnabas parted company. John Mark would accompany Barnabas on his missionary journey while Paul and Silas went in another direction. Paul and John Mark would eventually mend their relationship. The apostle would speak of John Mark as being useful in ministry in 2 Timothy 4:11.

Second, Paul sends greetings from Aristarchus. Aristarchus was from Thessalonica (Acts 20:4; 27:2) and had accompanied Paul on his missionary journeys (see Acts 19:29). According to Colossians 4:10, he was a “fellow prisoner” with Paul.

Third, Demas sent his greetings to Philemon. We know little about Demas except that he would eventually desert Paul because of his love for the world:

10 For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. – 2Ti 4:10

Finally, Luke sends greetings. In his letter to the Colossians Paul describes Luke as a beloved physician (Colossians 4:14). Many see him as the author of the Gospel of Luke. What is clear is that Paul deeply loved him. He accompanied the apostle on his journeys. Writing to Timothy, Paul says: "Luke alone is with me"- [2Ti 4:11](#). It obviously meant much that Luke stood with Paul at this time in his ministry.

Paul describes all of these men as "*my fellow workers*." They served with him in good standing.

Verse 25

Paul's concluding prayer for Philemon was that the grace of the Lord be with his spirit.

Grace is the undeserved favour of the Lord. It is appropriate that Paul would conclude with this prayer. He was asking Philemon to show grace and mercy to a runaway slave who had wronged him. Paul is reminding him that he had received an even greater grace through the Lord Jesus.

The letter of Paul reminds us that those who have been forgiven much, must also forgive. Those who receive much grace must also extend that grace to those who have offended them.
