

# Philemon

## *Charge It To My Account*

(A Verse-by-Verse Study of Paul's Letter to Philemon)

### I. Introduction

#### A. Authorship & Date

1. This letter to Philemon was written by the apostle Paul. This fact is obvious from the text and has been acknowledged throughout church history. Philemon 1:1
2. Based on different events related to the writing and delivery of this letter, it was most likely written around 59-61 A.D. (less than 30 years after Christ's resurrection and ascension), during the time of Paul's imprisonment in Rome.
3. By this time Paul had completed all of his missionary journeys recorded in the book of Acts and he had been arrested and transported under guard to Rome where he was awaiting trial before Caesar.
4. By the time Paul wrote this letter, a church had been established in Colossae and was meeting in Philemon's house. Philemon 1:1

#### B. Occasion & Purpose for Writing

1. The providence of God is amazingly clear in this epistle. Not only had Paul led Philemon to the Lord years before this letter was written, but, in what seems to be a strange and ironic turn of events, Paul also leads one of Philemon's slaves to the Lord under entirely different circumstances.
2. The story centers around a slave named Onesimus, who under Roman law was owned by and was the legal property of Philemon, a slave owner. Sometime before the writing of this letter, Onesimus had escaped from Philemon and had fled to Rome as a runaway slave.

3. Since, by law, slaves were considered the personal property of their masters, Onesimus was in essence stealing (stealing himself) from Philemon which was a crime punishable by death.
4. Of course, by the time this letter was written, he had also robbed Philemon of a substantial amount of work time and daily productivity by his absence. In addition, it is likely that Onesimus stole money and/or personal property belonging to Philemon at the time of his escape. Philemon 1:18
5. Of all the places Onesimus could have gone in the Roman Empire, Onesimus ends up in Rome, and somehow - by divine direction and grace - he meets Paul, who in turn, leads him to Christ.
6. As they begin to share their personal stories, it becomes obvious that Paul and Onesimus have mutual acquaintances living in the city of Colossae, including, of all people, Philemon himself!
7. At some point, Onesimus must have confessed to Paul how he had wronged Philemon and broke the law as a runaway slave.
8. Because it was clearly the right thing to do, they realized that Onesimus would have to be sent back to Philemon which, of course, based on the culture at the time, could have had dangerous legal ramifications for Onesimus.
9. This letter is an impassioned appeal by Paul to Philemon, for Onesimus' life and well-being. Paul writes his appeal recognizing and knowing full well that it could go unheeded, which would likely mean that he would never see his dear friend Onesimus again.

### C. Geographical Considerations

1. Although the epistle does not identify any specific geographical locale for its destination, certain facts found in the the letter to the Colossians lead us to conclude that the mailing address was somewhere in the city of Colossae.
  - a. Paul in writing to the Colossians describes Onesimus as “one of you”. In other words, he was a Colossian (someone living in Colossae). Colossians 4:9

- b. Paul also indicates that he is sending Onesimus “back” to Philemon. In other words back to where he was from, meaning Colossae. Philemon 1:12
- c. Archippus, who is mentioned by name in the greetings of this letter, is also mentioned as one of those who are a part of the church in Colossae. Philemon 1:2; Colossians 4:17

#### **D. Main Characters**

1. Paul - Paul was an established apostle at this time, who was being held in prison in Rome for his faith. Paul had never been to the church at Colossae, but at some point he had met Philemon and led him to the Lord. Colossians 2:1. Philemon 1:19
2. Philemon - This letter is the only place that Philemon is mentioned in the entire Bible. We learn from this letter that he was a slave owner and that the church in Colosse was meeting in his house. These two facts may lead us to conclude that he had a large house and may have had considerable wealth, but we can only speculate about this.
3. Based on what Paul says about Philemon, he was a model Christian who was a great example and encouragement to Paul. In turn, Paul was thankful for him and prayed for him continually. Philemon 1:4-7
4. Onesimus - As mentioned previously, Onesimus was a slave owned by Philemon. Perhaps Onesimus was very strong physically (as most working slaves were). Somehow he managed to escape and, as previously indicated, he met Paul in Rome. This, in essence, is where our story will begin as we examine the letter.
5. As we will see, Onesimus had become Paul’s son in the faith and subsequently was very near and dear to Paul. Philemon 1:18-19, 1:10, 1:12-13

#### **E. Historical Background & Perspective**

1. On Paul’s third missionary journey he went to Ephesus, and because of the initial reception he received, he spoke in the synagogue for three months. He also reasoned daily in the school of Tyrannus for a period of two years. As a result, we

- read that “all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.” Acts 19:8-10
- a. It was most likely during this time that Philemon heard the gospel from the Apostle Paul and believed in Jesus Christ. Epaphras, who first brought the gospel to the Colossians, probably became a believer in the same way.
  - b. Epaphras, who traveled to various areas preaching the gospel (like an evangelist or missionary) lived in Colosse and it is possible that he also pastored the church that formed there after a small group of people believed his message. Colossians 1:6-7, Colossians 4:12, Philemon 1:23
3. Approximately one-fifth of the Roman empire’s population were slaves— totaling as many as twelve million at the outset of the first century A.D. Not surprisingly, the entire Roman economy was highly dependent on this sizable pool of both skilled and unskilled laborers .
- a. In the larger cities, such as Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, and Antioch, as many as one third of the population were legally serving as slaves and another one third had been slaves at some other time during their lives.
  - b. Depending on their training and on their masters’ needs, slaves functioned in numerous capacities—both inside and outside the home. From teachers to cooks and from shopkeepers to doctors, slaves were involved in a wide variety of occupations. Some were highly educated and many were highly skilled.
  - c. From a glance on the street, it would have been difficult to distinguish between a slave and a free man. There was essentially no difference in their appearance or dress, and often there were very few differences in their responsibilities.
  - d. Any line of work a free person might do, a slave might also do. This could explain why Onesimus was able to travel to Rome without being noticed or recognized as a slave.

- e. If a master was displeased with a slave, the slave could expect severe punishment. Depending on the disposition of the slave owner, this could include loss of privileges, isolation, beatings, floggings, being chained, placed in stocks, or forced to wear restraining collars.
- f. Some slaveowners were notorious for their cruelty and historians have recorded several incidences of slaves being tortured or sadistically abused because of making simple mistakes or over the slightest provocations.
- g. Under Roman law, slaves who were disloyal, rebellious or who tried to escape were sometimes put to death (this included death by crucifixion in several cases).
- h. On the other hand, slaves who worked hard, demonstrated integrity or proved themselves loyal to their masters, were often rewarded with special privileges and leadership responsibilities. Trusted slaves even managed households, cared for children and took care of the family finances.
- i. In rare cases, slaves were treated like family members and some were even adopted into the master's family. In a very few cases, slaveowners left their entire estate or inheritance to a faithful or adopted slave.
- j. Such a weighty system of rewards and punishments provided powerful motivation for slaves to work hard and to perform well for their master.
- k. These facts about slavery shed light on the emotions that Paul and Onesimus must have been feeling, considering their decision that Onesimus would go back to his master.
- l. They also provide insight regarding the overall tone and content of the letter, especially Paul's passionate appeals for Philemon to act with compassion toward Onesimus.
- m. In sending Onesimus back, Paul would have been very aware of, and concerned for, his well-being and safety. Paul certainly knew that it was right to send him back, but he would have also recognized that Philemon (by Roman law)

had every right to put Onesimus to death or subject him to severe punishment.

## F. Main Theme

1. In this letter, Paul is asking Philemon to model Christ's forgiveness in a real-life social and cultural context, where justice and legal precedence allowed for and even called for, an altogether different response.
2. Paul's request may be best summarized by the words, "And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you." Ephesians 4:32

## II. Philemon 1:1-2 - Authorship, Readers & Greetings

*"1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer, 2 to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."*

### G. Philemon 1:1a - The Author of the Letter

1. Jude 1:1a - *"Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ and Timothy our brother"* - The apostle Paul is the writer.
  - a. As is his custom in 13 of his New Testament letters, Paul identifies himself at the outset as the author of the letter.
  - b. Paul also includes Timothy, his faithful fellow-servant in the gospel, in his introduction, but as we will see this is a very personal letter written from Paul to Philemon. Philippians 2:19-22
  - c. Paul describes himself as a "prisoner of Jesus Christ."
    - 1) Paul wrote this letter from a Roman prison where he was being held captive while awaiting his trial before the emperor.
    - 2) Notice, however, that Paul does not describe himself as a prisoner of Rome, but rather "a prisoner of Jesus Christ".

- a) What a wonderful and divine perspective Paul had on His circumstances. Instead of regretting his imprisonment or complaining about it, he considered himself a prisoner of Christ by the will of God, as part of God's perfect plan and purpose for his life. Ephesians 1:1, 4:1; 2 Timothy 2:8-9
- b. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul makes it clear that his imprisonment in Rome had served "to advance the gospel." He says, "because of my chains" other believers have become confident in the Lord and are proclaiming God's Word without fear. Philippians 1:12-14
- c. While sitting for long hours every day in his prison cell, it's likely that Paul would have recalled the story of Joseph's imprisonment in Egypt. Perhaps he even formed his perspective about his own circumstances by considering how God used all of Joseph's hardships to carry out His divine purpose of providing for the needs of His people. Genesis 50:18-21, Romans 8:28

## B. Philemon 1:1b-2 - The Readers

1. Philemon 1:1 - *"To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer"* - Paul wrote this letter to Philemon.
  - a. Although he mentions a few other believers by name in his introduction, Paul is writing personally and specifically to Philemon.
  - b. As previously mentioned, this letter is the only place where the name Philemon appears in the Bible. What we know about him, we learn from what we read here and what we can deduce from the letter to the Colossians which briefly mentions a few of his associates. Colossians 1:7, 4:7-9
  - c. Based on what we read at the end of verse 2, and what we understand from Colossians, the church in the city of Colossae was meeting in Philemon's house.

- d. Beginning in verse 1, Paul describes Philemon as “our beloved friend and fellow laborer.” Paul considers Philemon dear to himself both as a friend and as a co-worker in the gospel.
  - e. In verse 4, Paul says that he constantly thanks God for Philemon in his prayers and in verse 5 he says that he has been hearing about Philemon’s “love and faith...toward the Lord and toward all the saints.”
  - f. In verse 7, referring to Philemon as “brother”, Paul says, “we have great joy and consolation in your love” and “the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you.”
  - g. From Paul’s statements about Philemon (above), and considering the overall tone of the letter, we can conclude that Paul highly valued his personal relationship with Philemon and considered him to be a faithful and fruitful co-minister in the grace of God.
2. Philemon 1:1b-2 - “...to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house.” - Paul refers to two other believers and then mentions the church as a whole.
- a. Like Philemon, Apphia is not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible. Because her name is feminine in the Greek, and because it occurs immediately after Philemon’s name in the order of the text, it is very possible that she was Philemon’s wife.
    - 1) Paul refers to Apphia as “beloved” which is a personal term of endearment and indicates that Paul was close to both Philemon and Apphia.
    - 2) How wonderful it is when partners in marriage are also partners in the grace of God. This was apparently the case with Philemon and Apphia.
  - b. The second person that Paul mentions is Archippus whose name also appears in the letter to the Colossians.
    - 1) Archippus (who some have speculated was Philemon and Apphia’s son), is referred to by Paul as “our fellow soldier”. This expression suggests that Archippus had been



faithfully contending with Paul in the defense of the gospel and staying true to the teaching of the apostles. Jude 1:3, 1:17

2) In Colossians 4:17, Paul tells Archippus to “take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may *continually* fulfill it.” This challenge from Paul seems to indicate that Archippus (like all of us) needed to be exhorted from time to time, so as not to give up, “lose heart” or “become weary in well doing”. 2 Corinthians 4:1, 16-18; Galatians 6:9

c. As previously mentioned, Paul refers to the church (i.e., the local group of believers) that was meeting in Philemon’s house.

1) In the first and second centuries A.D, most of the Gentile churches were made up of small groups of believers who met together in informal settings to listen to the teaching of God’s Word, to sing songs and Psalms to the Lord, to enjoy a meal together, and to celebrate the Lord’s supper.

2) It was not until the third century A.D. with the influx of financial and political support from the Roman emperor Constantine and the introduction of a religious hierarchy (bishops, priests and ‘professional’ clergy, etc.) that congregations began to build large and ornate edifices and cathedrals. At the same time, their meetings became less personal and more and more formal, liturgical and legalistic.

3. Philemon 1:3 - “*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*” - Paul’s extends divine grace and peace to Philemon and the others in His greetings.

a. During the time Paul lived, letter writers would typically include a short phrase at the beginning of their letters in which they would wish or desire something good for their readers, like health, prosperity, or success (etc).

b. Paul takes this practice to a higher and more meaningful level by including His desire (and prayer) that they experience

“grace and peace from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

### III. Philemon 1:4-7 - Philemon’s Refreshing Love & Faith

*“4 I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, 5 hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, 6 that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. 7 For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.”*

#### A. Philemon 1:4 - Paul’s Thankfulness for Philemon

1. Philemon 1:4 - *“I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers”* - Paul thanked God for Philemon, praying for him often.
  - b. In many of Paul’s letters, he refers to the fact that he constantly prays for those to whom he is writing. In some cases, he even records the words of his prayers as he prays with and for them. Ephesians 3:14-17
  - c. As we study the Scriptures, it is often beneficial to ask questions about what we see in the text. Based on what we read in verse 4, and in the verses that follow, we can ask, and answer, a number of different questions.
    - 1) How did Paul express the fact that he was thankful for Philemon?
      - b) He expressed his thanks directly to God Himself.
      - c) This way of simply communicating thanksgiving to God for someone, brings Him glory and is one form of true worship.
    - 2) How often did Paul pray for, and thank God for, Philemon?
      - a) Paul says, “I thank God, making mention of you always in my prayers.” 1 Thessalonians 5:17

- b) The greek word translated “always”, can also be translated “at all times”. The idea being conveyed is not that Paul was praying for Philemon *every second of every day*, but that he was praying and thanking God for him continually or on a regular basis.

## B. Philemon 1:5 - Philemon’s Love & Faith

1. Philemon 1:5 - *“hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints”* - Paul gave thanks to God for Philemon’s love and faith toward Christ and other believers.

a. Here we have the opportunity to ask and answer another question.

1) What was it that Paul was thankful for as he talked to God about Philemon?

a) He was thankful to God, because, as he tells Philemon, I have been “hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints.”

b) Notice that Paul refers to both Philemon’s “love” (Greek: *agapēn*) and “faith” (Greek: *pistin*).

c. Notice also that Philemon’s love and faith were “toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints”. Philemon’s love and faith were directed to both Jesus and other believers in Christ.

2. Philemon 1:6 - *“that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.”* - Paul prayed that the sharing of Philemon’s faith would become even more effective.

a. After thanking God for Philemon’s love and faith, Paul now brings a specific prayer request to God. This leads us to ask another question.

1) What is it that Paul is asking God to do in Philemon’s life?

- a) He asking God to make Philemon’s life of faith even more fruitful and productive. As he says to Philemon, “that the sharing of your faith may become effective.”
  - b) The phrase “the sharing of your faith” implies a *transfer of life*. In this case, it refers to a transfer (by both example and ministry) of one’s life in the faith to other believers for their growth and benefit.
  - c) In the The Living Bible, Paul’s request is paraphrased, “And I pray that as you share your faith with others [with other believers] it will grip their lives too, as they see the wealth of good things in you that come from Christ Jesus.”
  - d) The word translated “effective” (Greek: energēs) means *active, effectual or powerful* (and, by implication, *fruitful*).
  - e) By way of application, God not only wants Philemon’s *transfer of life* to be fruitful and effective, but he also desires the same for each one of us!
- 2) This leads us to ask, How will God make the sharing (the transfer) of Philemon’s life of faith effective?
- a) Paul says, it will be by the means of acknowledging “every good thing which is [already] in you in Christ Jesus.”
  - b) Notice that Paul does not say that Philemon’s faith will become effective, if he strives to do better and exerts more effort, or if he goes through the motions of *acting out* a life of faith before other believers.
  - c) Instead, he says Philemon’s life of faith will become effective as he acknowledges - as he recognizes and embraces - every good thing which belongs to Philemon (and us) “in Christ Jesus.” Ephesians 1:3-8
  - d) In other words, what Paul wants for Philemon will only come as Philemon focuses, not on *what he does for Christ* but on *who he is in Christ*. This is one of the key

differences between the *self life* (self effort and self-righteousness) and the *Christ life* (divine enablement and the fruit of the Spirit). Galatians 5:22-23

#### D. Philemon 1:7 - Paul Rejoices in Philemon's Love

1. Philemon 1:7 - *“For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother”* - Philemon's love for others was encouraging and pleasing to Paul.

- a. The word “joy” (Greek: charan) means to experience gladness or delight.
- b. The word “consolation” (Greek: paraklésis) means to bring comfort or encouragement.
- c. Philemon's love was a real source of comfort and encouragement to the apostle. Whenever Paul thought about Philemon's love for the saints, he was glad and even delighted. Philippians 4:1, Colossians 4:11

1) Why was Philemon's love so uplifting to Paul?

2) Once again, the answer is found in the text itself (in the context) - “because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.”

- a) The word translated “refreshed” (Greek: anapauó) means *to provide rest or to set at ease*.
- b) Paul was encouraged because Philemon's influence on other believers was refreshing and set them at ease.
- c) By way of application, it seems appropriate here to ask ourselves, ‘Am I loving other believers in such a way that it sets them at ease and causes them to feel refreshed?’ Philippians 1:27
- d) It is essential to understand that the “love” (Greek: agapē) that Philemon showed toward other believers is not something that can be conjured up or self-produced. Rather, it is the fruit of the Spirit which He alone produces in us. Galatians 5:22

- e) In other words, it is only as we walk in, and by, the power of the Holy Spirit, that we can demonstrate the love of Christ to others. Romans 5:8, Galatians 5:22-26

#### IV. Philemon 1:8-16 - Paul's Gracious Appeal to Philemon

*"8 Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, 9 yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you—being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ – 10 I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, 11 who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me. 12 I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, 13 whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. 14 But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary. 15 For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, 16 no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord."*

##### A. Philemon 1:8 - Paul's Right To Be Bold With Philemon

1. Philemon 1:8 *"Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting..."* - Paul has every right to insist, and even demand, that Philemon do what he is going to be asking him to do.
  - a. The word translated "fitting" (Greek: *anékó*) refers to that which is *appropriate* or *proper* - i.e., the right thing to do.
  - b. The word "bold" (Greek: *parrésia*) means to be *out-spoken*, *frank* or *blunt*. There are at least three reasons that Paul had the right to be bold with Philemon and command him to do "what is fitting".
    - 1) First, what Paul is asking Philemon to do, is exactly what Christ did for us and commanded us to do for others - forgive. As Paul says elsewhere, "forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you." Matthew 18:21-22, Ephesians 4:32

- 2) Second, because Paul was an apostle (an officially appointed representative of Jesus), he had the God-given authority to order Philemon to follow his instructions. 1 Corinthians 9:1, Galatians 1:1
- 3) Third, it is evident from verse 19 that Paul had been the one who first shared the gospel with Philemon, at which time Philemon believed and was saved. Therefore, as Philemon's spiritual *father*, Paul had the right to insist that his son in the faith obey him.

#### B. Philemon 1:9 - Paul Chooses to Make An Appeal Instead

1. Philemon 1:9 *“yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you—being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ” - Instead of commanding that Philemon do the right thing, Paul decides (on the basis of love) to plead with him instead.*
  - a. In this context, the word “appeal” (Greek: *parakaleó*) means to *plead, exhort, beseech, intreat or call for.*
  - b. The phrase “for love’s sake” (Greek: *dia tēn agapēn*) could be translated *“through love” or “because of love.”*
  - c. On the basis of love (*agapē*) which only comes from the Spirit, Paul had made the decision, not to invoke his authority and force Philemon to act appropriately, but rather to “appeal” to him to do so.
    - 1) By relying on the Holy Spirit, Paul provides a very practical example for those of us in positions of leadership.
    - 2) There may be times when we feel like exercising our authority by just telling people what to do (etc.). But if we are walking by the Spirit, He may lead us to be more tactful and to take a more indirect approach; an approach that may actually be more effective and beneficial for everyone involved, including ourselves.
  - d. By referring to himself as “aged” (an old man) and also as a “prisoner of the Lord Jesus Christ”, it would seem that Paul is also appealing to Philemon’s sense of empathy, encouraging

him to be understanding and compassionate. It's as if Paul is saying, 'Put yourself in my place and consider what it's like to be in my situation.'

C. Philemon 1:10-11 - Paul's Appeal On Behalf of Onesimus

1. Philemon 1:10-11 *"I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me."* - Paul makes an appeal for Onesimus, as a father making an appeal for his son.

a. As we have observed already, Paul's letter to Philemon is filled with a series of appeals and entreaties as opposed to demands and commands. This is one of the things that makes this letter so endearing, even as we read it today, nearly 2,000 years after it was written.

b. The name Onesimus means *useful* and by implication *beneficial* or *profitable*.

c. In verse 11, the word "unprofitable" (Greek: *achrēston*) means *useless* and the word "profitable" (Greek: *euchrēston*) means *useful*.

1) Paul is using a clever play on words. He is saying, '*The useful one* in name (Onesimus) used to be *useless* to you, but he has now become *useful* both to you and to me.'

2) By using this play on words, Paul is emphasizing that there has been a real change and transformation in Onesimus' life. The slave who had previously been useless and of no value to Philemon has now become useful and valuable - not just as a slave, but also as a brother in Christ.

Philemon 1:16

d. Onesimus is a runaway slave and under Roman law he is the legal property of Philemon. Most likely he escaped to Rome, the biggest city in the empire, so that he could blend in and not be discovered and captured.

e. While in Rome, Onesimus somehow (by God's divine appointment) meets Paul, while Paul was either in prison or under house arrest. Paul shares the gospel with him and



Onesimus believes and is born again (“begotten” vs.10), thereby becoming Paul’s son in the faith.

- f. In spite of the fact that Onesimus had run away from his owner (a crime punishable by death) and in spite of the fact that he thought he was now free and in complete control of his own life, God was tracking him all the time and setting him up for an appointment with His servant Paul.
- g. What a magnificent story! Paul who had been used by the Spirit of God to share the gospel with Philemon (the master), is now used to share the gospel with Onesimus (the slave).
- h. How wonderful to realize that God is no respecter of persons. He is not willing that “any should perish” and He wants “all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.” 2 Peter 3:9; 1 Timothy 2:3-4; cf., Ephesians 6:9
- i. Under Paul’s ministry, both Philemon and Onesimus believed the gospel and therefore are no longer *master and slave* per se, but Paul’s spiritual sons.
- j. They are also Paul’s brothers in Christ. Galatians 3:26-28
- k. By way of application we learn that God highly values each and every person in the world, regardless of their nationality or race and social or economic status. There are no *nobodies* in God’s mind. Each of us is dearly loved and highly valued in His sight. Matthew 15:21-28, John 4:7-9, 4:27, 4:42; 1 John 2:2

#### D. Philemon 1:12-13 - Paul Sends Onesimus Back to Philemon

- 1. Philemon 1:12-13 *“I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel.”* - Although Onesimus was very dear to Paul, Paul would not presume to keep him as a helper and servant on Philemon’s behalf.
  - a. In these verses and the verses that follow, Paul is saying, ‘I am sending Onesimus back to you Philemon and I want you to welcome him with open arms as a brother in Christ, instead of

punishing him for what he has done and demanding that he repay what he has stolen from you.’

- b. Paul refers to Onesimus as one who is “my own heart”. This expression demonstrates how near and dear he was to Paul. What was true of Philemon (Philemon 1:1 & 1:4-6) was also true of Onesimus (Philemon 1: 10-13 & 1:16). Both men were precious to, and highly valued by, Paul and Paul wants Philemon to understand this.
- c. This is also a practical real-life example of what Paul teaches in Galatians, where he says that within the body of Christ “there is neither slave nor free...for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Galatians 3:28
- d. Referring to Onesimus, Paul says “whom I wished to keep with me”. Clearly, Onesimus had become a real blessing and benefit to Paul and to his ministry.
- e. Paul is telling Philemon, ‘I would have preferred to keep Onesimus with me, so that *on your behalf* he could continue to help me and be of service to me while I am chained up for the sake of the gospel.’
  - 1) The words “on your behalf” could also be translated ‘for your sake.’ Again, Paul is not insisting or ordering Philemon to do the right thing. Rather, he is appealing to Philemon as his own son in the faith.
  - 2) In verse 19, Paul will make his appeal even stronger by telling Philemon “you owe me your own self.” Paul is building a very compelling argument for what he will be asking Philemon to do.
  - 3) Notice again how Paul looks on his own circumstances (his own imprisonment). Just like in verse 1, where he describes himself as “a prisoner of Jesus Christ”, here in verse 13, he says, ‘I am chained up for the gospel.’ Instead of feeling sorry for himself for being unjustly treated and imprisoned, he recognizes God’s greater purpose and direct hand in his immediate circumstances.

#### E. Philemon 1:14 - Philemon to Act Voluntarily

1. Philemon 1:14 - *“But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.” Paul wants Philemon to be free to act without pressure or compulsion.*

- a. The word “compulsion” is a compound word in the Greek (anankēn) that literally means *to twist the arm up*. This may very well be where we get the English expression ‘you don’t have to twist my arm’, which is a figurative way of saying, you don’t have to *force me* or *pressure me* against my will. This is exactly how Paul is using the word here.
- b. The word “voluntary” (Greek: hekousios) means to act freely or willingly.
- c. Clearly Paul did not want Philemon to feel pressured to do what he wanted him to do. Instead, He wanted him to be free to make his own choice. We can suggest at least four reasons for this.
  - 1) It would benefit Philemon in terms of spiritual growth, spiritual fruit bearing, and both temporary and eternal rewards.
  - 2) It would benefit Onesimus by strengthening his faith and confidence in God to work through even the most awkward and difficult of circumstances of life. Romans 8:28
  - 3) It would further “refresh” and encourage the other believers who were meeting in Philemon’s house, because they would see firsthand God’s grace in action when Philemon acted in kindness and not justice or anger toward Onesimus.
  - 4) God would receive the glory for the miracle of divine forgiveness displayed in the lives of these two believers.

F. Philemon 1:15-16 - The Temporal Versus The Eternal

1. Philemon 1:15-16 - *“Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever – no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as*

*a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.*” - Paul is pointing out a potential reason for the fact that Onesimus had become a runaway.

- a. In these two verses, Paul points out the real purpose behind the circumstances of Onesimus running away from Philemon in the first place. God had bigger and better plans in mind for both men! Genesis 50:19-21; Romans 8:28
- b. Paul tells Philemon, the reason Onesimus “was separated from you for a little while was that [in order that] you might have him back forever.”
- c. Notice the contrast between the temporal (“a little while”) and the eternal (“forever”). Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:17-18
- d. Paul also points out that Onesimus would be returning to Philemon not just as a slave, “but better than a slave, a dear brother [in the Lord].”
- e. How gracious and glorious is God's divine purpose that supersedes the rebellion of a runaway slave on one hand and a master's legal rights to bring punishment on the other.
- f. In many ways this letter presents a picture or illustration of God's grace displayed to us in our own salvation.
  - 1) Like runaway slaves (indeed, slaves to sin itself), we have all turned our backs on God in direct opposition and rebellion. Isaiah 53:6, Ephesians 2:1
  - 2) But God in His sovereign grace, has provided a means by which we can receive forgiveness of sins, escape His justice and wrath, and enter into His family - not merely as servants or slaves, but as brothers and sisters in Christ! Isaiah 53:12; Romans 5:6-10, Ephesians 2:4-5, 1 Peter 2:24, 1 Peter 3:18, cf. John 15:15
  - 3) Of course, the means that God provided for our salvation is the substitutionary sacrifice of His own dear Son on our behalf. Because Christ was punished without restraint for

our sins, we are welcome without restriction into God's household. John 1:12, 1 John 3:1-2, Ephesians 2:19

- 4) We receive God's grace and forgiveness (like Onesimus would have received Philemon's grace and forgiveness) through no merit or goodness in ourselves. To the contrary we come to God as rebellious sinners who deserve only His righteous judgment and wrath.
- 5) It is only through faith alone in the finished work of Christ alone that we are forgiven and declared perfectly righteous (justified) in God's sight. Acts 13:38-39; Romans 3:23-25, 4:5, 5:1

## V. Philemon 1:17-22 - Paul's Final Personal Appeal

*“17 If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me. 18 But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. 19 I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay—not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides. 20 Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord. 21 Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. 22 But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.”*

### A. Philemon 1:17 - Receive Him As You Would Receive Me

1. Philemon 1:17 - *“If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me.”* - Paul wants Philemon to welcome Onesimus, as if he were welcoming Paul himself.
  - a. The word “partner” (Greek: *koinónos*) means *to share together or companion together*.
  - b. The word “receive” (Greek: “*proslabou*”) means *to take someone to oneself and into one's own company*.
  - c. Paul is saying, ‘If you really consider me to be your partner and companion in the gospel, then welcome Onesimus into your heart and home, just like you would welcome me.’

- d. Paul wants Philemon to look at Onesimus in an entirely different light. Paul is saying, ‘When you think of Him, think of me, when you see Him, see me, and then treat Him as if he were me.’
- e. This is a beautiful picture or illustration of our identity *with* and *in* Christ.
  - 1) From the moment we first put our faith in Jesus Christ alone for our salvation, God sees us in a whole new light.
  - 2) Instead of seeing our unworthiness and sin, God views us as being *in Christ*. He identifies us *with Christ*, and accepts us in the perfect righteousness *of Christ* which He Has credited to us (imputed to us) *through Christ*.
  - 3) It’s as if Jesus said to the Father, ‘Receive them as you receive Me, welcome them as you welcome Me, and treat them just like you would treat Me - as if My righteousness was their righteousness.’
  - 4) Because the perfect righteousness of Christ has been credited to us (imputed to us), every believer enjoys perfect acceptance and unconditional approval from our heavenly Father at all times and forever. Romans 4:23-25; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 2:11-13

**B. Philemon 1:18-19a - Charge His Debt To My Account**

- 1. Philemon 1:18-19a - “*But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay*” - Paul tells Philemon, ‘whatever Onesimus owes you, charge it all to me.’
  - a. Based on the Greek grammar, Paul’s words could be paraphrased, ‘If he has wronged you (and I know that he has) and if he owes you anything (and I know that he does) charge all of these things to my account. You have my written word that I will personally pay back his entire debt to you.’
  - b. Because of His love for Onesimus the slave, Paul is willing to pay the full price of his accrued debt to Philemon the master.

- c. This again is a magnificent picture of God's grace given to us in the substitutionary and atoning death of Christ for our sins.
- 1) It's as if Jesus is saying, 'If they have wronged you Father (and I know how much they have) and if they owe you anything (and I know how much they do), put all this on my account. I have taken their immense sin debt upon myself and I have paid back absolutely everything they owed you.' 1 Peter 2:24, 3:18
  - 2) This is a useful and practical illustration of the concept of atonement. Atonement means *to satisfy a debt or to pay off what is owed, in order to turn away the righteous anger of the one to whom the debt is overdue.*
  - 3) This is exactly what Paul was willing to do for Onesimus and this is exactly what Jesus did do for us.
  - 4) On the cross, Christ paid our sin debt completely and forever! It was "paid in full." In this way, justice was fully served once and for all, and God's righteous wrath was fully appeased and turned away. As a result, God no longer holds our sins against us! John 19:30; Romans 4:7-8; 2 Corinthians 5:19&21.
  - 5) When we begin to realize the glorious realities of these truths for ourselves, it produces wonder and amazement at God's grace, and results in our true praise and worship. John 4:23-24; Ephesians 1:3-8, 1:17-21

### C. Philemon 1:19b - A Debt of Love

1. Philemon 1:19b - "*not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides*" - Paul entreats Philemon with a debt of love.
  - a. The phrase translated "not to mention" is a rhetorical device in the Greek (called a 'paralipsis') which was used to say something hesitantly or delicately. By using this kind of an expression, Paul is making it clear that he is reluctant to say what he is about to say, but says it anyway because it needs to be said.

- b. This is in essence a powerful appeal that Paul is making in a gentle or subtle way. He is saying something like, ‘I hesitate to bring this up Philemon, but in making my plea to you to spare Onesimus’s life, I need to remind you of the fact that you actually owe me your own life as well.’”
  - c. Paul is most likely referring to the fact that he was the one who first shared the gospel with Philemon and that it was through his ministry that Philemon had trusted in Christ for his salvation. In a very real sense, Philemon was Paul’s son in the faith and therefore owed Paul a great debt.
  - d. It’s almost as if Paul is telling Philemon, ‘Since God used me to save you from *spiritual* punishment and death, the very least you can do is to save Philemon from *physical* punishment and death!’
- D. Philemon 1:20 - Paul Desires A Useful Response From Philemon
1. Philemon 1:20 - “*Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.*” Paul ends his plea to Philemon by asking him to respond in a way that will be beneficial for everyone involved.
    - a. The word “joy’ (Greek: *onaimēn*) means *to be of use or to be useful*. It is the same root word that Paul used earlier when referring to Onesimus as being “profitable.” Philemon 1:11
    - b. The phrase, “let me have joy from you in the Lord” could, in fact, be translated ‘let me have some *usefulness* or *benefit* from you in the Lord.’
    - c. The fact that Paul ends this sentence with the words “in the Lord” shows that he has everyone’s best spiritual interest in mind and that ultimately, what he desires is the glory of God.
    - d. If Philemon takes Paul’s words to heart by forgiving Onesimus and welcoming him back as a brother and co-worker in Christ, it would serve as an incredible testimony of God’s grace.
    - e. Not only would the believers who were meeting in Philemon’s house be greatly encouraged by what they witnessed first hand, but no doubt the news of Philemon’s unprecedented



and unheard of act of compassion toward a runaway slave would have quickly spread to other slaves and to a large number of unbelievers living in Collosee.

**E. Philemon 1:21 - Paul's Confidence in Philemon**

1. Philemon 1:21 *"Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say."* Paul expresses his confidence that Philemon will do even more than he is asking of him.
  - a. As Paul ends his plea on behalf of Onesimus, he says to Philemon, 'I am confident in you. I know you will do what I am asking you to do and I know you will do it from the right motives and for the right reasons.'
  - b. Based on what Paul has seen in Philemon's life in the past, he has confidence that he will act in a gracious manner in this situation as well.
  - c. Not only that, but he is confident that Philemon "will do even more" than he is asking him to do. In other words, because of the grace of God that Philemon has experienced in his own life, Paul is certain that Philemon will go *above and beyond* what Paul is asking of him.

**F. Philemon 1:22 - Prepare A Room for Me**

1. Philemon 1:22 *"But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you."* Paul asks Philemon to prepare a room for him and to keep praying for his release.
  - a. By asking Philemon to prepare a guest room for him, Paul may be reassuring Philemon that their friendship has not changed and is soundly intact.
  - b. Although the main point of Paul's letter is dealing with a runaway slave, in this verse he seems to be saying, 'This issue, though serious, has not come between us or hurt our friendship in any way.'

- c. Paul may also be saying in effect, ‘prepare a guest room for me - and by the way, I expect to see Onesimus in good health, and on good terms with you, when I get there!’
- d. Clearly, Paul was also trusting that God would answer Philemon’s prayers on his behalf and that, as a result, he would be released from prison and would be able to come and visit Philemon in person.

## VI. Philemon 1:23-25 - Concluding Greetings & Blessings

*“23 There salute thee Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus; 24 Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellow laborers. 25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.”*

### A. Philemon 1:23 - Epaphras Sends His Greetings

1. Philemon 1:23 *“There salute thee Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus”* - Epaphras who was imprisoned with Paul sends his greetings to Philemon.
  - a. Epaphras, whom Paul describes as his “fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus”, was the first one to bring the message of the gospel to those living in Colossae. Those who had believed because of his message were now meeting in Philemon’s house. Colossians 1:5&7
  - b. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul also describes Epaphras as “our dear fellow servant who is for you a faithful minister of Christ.” Colossians 1:7
  - c. What wonderful words Paul uses to describe Epaphras. This man who is not nearly as well known as the apostle Paul, is nonetheless a fellow servant and a faithful minister of Christ.
  - d. Not all of us have the same spiritual gifts and not all of us have the same notoriety, but like Epaphras, we are all essential to the evangelization of unbelievers and to the building up of the body of Christ.

### B. Philemon 1:24 - Others Send Their Greetings

1. Philemon 1:24 *“There salute thee... Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellow laborers.” Paul sends greetings from more of his co-workers in the gospel.*

- a. Two names, Luke and Demas, stand out from the others, because of what we know about them from other passages in the Bible.
- b. Luke who was described by Paul as “the beloved physician” traveled extensively with him on his missionary journeys. Of course we also know that Luke wrote the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. Colossians 4:14; Luke 1:1; Colossians 1:1
- c. Demas, who was also a fellow laborer with Paul in the gospel, apparently started off well and was a great help to Paul in his ministry. Sadly, however, he eventually succumbed to a temptation to which all believers are vulnerable.
- d. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul writes, “Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world.” 2 Timothy 4:10, 1 John 2:15-17
- e. At his final trial in Rome, Paul was certainly very much in need of the help of other believers. But again writing to Timothy, he says “at my first defense [my first trial] no one stood with me, but everyone abandoned me.” Demas was one of those who abandoned Paul when he was needed most, choosing instead to enjoy the allurements of this world . 2 Timothy 4:16
- f. It would seem that Demas chose to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season, instead of suffering reproach with the people of God. Hebrews 11:24-26

### C. Philemon 1:25 - A Blessing of Grace

1. Philemon 1:24 *“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.” Paul concludes with a blessing of grace for Philemon.*

- a. Paul ends this short letter in very much the same way he started it. In verse 3 he said, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” While here in

verse 25 he says, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.”

- b. In this context, Paul is likely using the words “your spirit” to refer to Philemon’s inner man (or core being), clearly not referring to his physical body. Unlike many today who preach a message of *health, wealth and success*, Paul was well aware that Philemon’s greatest need was spiritual and not physical or material.
- c. As we finish this wonderful letter, may we be reminded that our spiritual well-being is of utmost importance to God. The allurements of the world, riches and acclaim, though real, leads only to a life of emptiness. “See to it brothers, that none of you miss the grace of God.” Hebrews 12:15

#### D. Concluding Thoughts Regarding This Letter

- 1. Some of us may be disappointed that Paul's letter ends before the story actually ends, because it leaves some of our questions (and curiosity) unanswered.
  - a. Did Philemon choose, by God’s grace, to forgive Onesimus? Did he simply take Onesimus back as a slave or did he welcome him back as a brother in Christ and co-worker in the gospel? And, how did their relationship impact the lives of the other believers who were meeting in Philemon’s house?
  - b. There is no followup letter from Paul to Philemon. There is no ‘Philemon II’ that provides the historical record as to how the story ended. However, the fact that the letter was kept, copied for the benefit of other believers and incorporated into the canon of Scripture, seems to be a strong indicator that Philemon received Onesimus with open arms and that the story indeed had a happy ending.
  - c. The grace of God demonstrated in the lives of both a slave and a master was no doubt a source of great refreshment and encouragement to Paul in the final hours of his life, as it also has been for countless believers throughout the centuries.
  - d. May this letter also continue to refresh our hearts with renewed wonder and appreciation for God’s grace, that was

not only given to Philemon and Onesimus, but also to each one of us in Christ.

- e. “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor that you through his poverty might be made rich.” 2 Corinthians 8:9

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