

PHILEMON 1-21

[HOME](#)

HISTORY:

The apostle Paul wrote Philemon while in his first imprisonment. Paul's location is overwhelmingly deduced by scholars to have been in Rome. Paul had appealed his case to Caesar in Rome after being accused by the Jews in Jerusalem and Caesarea (Acts 25:11). Timothy is with Paul at Rome when Paul writes this and the other letters from prison. The letter of Philemon was sent to a wealthy Christian man (Philemon) whose estate was around the Colossian area, in Asia Minor. Tychicus, who was also part of the apostolic team, is the one who personally delivered the epistle to Philemon.

V1 As was customary, Paul first identifies himself to his readers. But here, instead of calling himself an apostle, he reminds Philemon that he is a prisoner for Christ's sake. Timothy was no doubt visiting Paul in Rome and was not being detained. He's writing to Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and their church. Philemon (beloved and a fellow worker) was apparently a well-to-do model Christian whom Paul had been the principal human agent responsible for his salvation. This word for "*dearly beloved*" is "*agapetos*". Paul is saying that Philemon is our "*loved one*"—a brother in the Lord who was held ever so close to the heart of Paul. He was an active fellow-worker for Christ.

V2 Apphia (a fellow sister) was no doubt Philemon's wife, and is thus warmly greeted, along with Archippus (a fellow soldier), who may be their son, and also apparently has certain responsibilities in the local congregation of believers a Colosse. Philemon rooted his family in Christ and opened his home to the church. The "*church*" (*ekklesia*) refers to a local group of immersed believers who would gather together for worship, prayer, edification, exhortation, fellowship, and the commemoration of Christ's death (the Lord's Supper), and then go forth to serve Christ and to tell others about Him. Since believers did not build meeting houses, they frequently met in homes (Acts 2:4-6; Rom. 16:5).

V3 "**Grace**" (*charis*) was the common Greek greeting, just as "*peace*" (*shalom*) was the ordinary Hebrew salutation. Paul combines both of these terms, heightened with the full Christian meaning of all the blessings of salvation that freely come to us through Christ, and the peace of God that we have because Christ has made peace with God on our behalf. **Grace:** favor that is unmerited. **Peace:** harmony (e.g., with God, self, and others), the result of God's grace. The fact that God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ together send this grace and peace illustrates their equality in the Godhead and the two basic needs for Philemon.

V4-5 We should be thankful for other believers and bear them up before the Lord. Imagine having a testimony so strong in the Lord that Paul would thank God for you! That was Philemon!

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PITWM VERSE BY VERSE

- His testimony was so strong that it stirred Paul to pray for him, not just every now and then, but always.
- His testimony was steeped in love.
- His testimony was steeped in faith.

If we are serving God seriously and if we love souls, we keep a prayer list and cover it often as we go before the Lord. Paul had a long prayer list which he remembered daily. Paul continually heard of Philemon's love and faith. How could Paul have heard about Philemon? - From Epaphras, who was a member of the church at Colosse (Col 4:12-13); and - from Onesimus himself.

1) The love that God gave Philemon is for Christian people; 2) The faithfulness that God gave Philemon is for Christ.

Philemon was a model believer, both before the Lord, and with regard of other believers. People may worship false gods; however, Paul's God is the One and only true living God. Paul is expressing a personal relationship of dependency upon the work of God in Paul's saved life as someone who was in opposition to God at one time, but no longer is. God sovereignly intervened and miraculously changed Paul while Paul was persecuting Christians. **The point is that:** Paul thanks His sovereign God that He now knows personally.

And Paul thanks His God because God has done something else. What has God done here that moved Paul to thank Him? It has to do with the faith and love that God has filled Philemon with by God's own sovereign determination. If Paul was to thank Philemon for Philemon's love and faithfulness, then Paul would be making a huge humanistic mistake. Paul is someone who recognizes the sovereignty of his God --especially in God's special process of saving the elect. **The point is that:** when we serve one another, we are expressing the love that God has shed abroad in our hearts. We are being kind, and good, to others. This also means you are going to have to be faithful to the other members of the body. Faithfulness to Christ produces our faithfulness to others, and so faithfulness is manifested.

In **Verse 6**, Paul prays that Philemon might generally share with others, the results of which would glorify God. The word "*fellowship*," is from "*koinonia*" ("*communication*" KJV). This word means to "*share in commonality*." And in the ESV translates *koinonia* here, in verse 6, as "*sharing*." Keeping this in mind, Paul continues with his prayer for Philemon's faith/faithfulness that has just been mentioned in the flow of thought. Every good thing that God has put in us (love and faithfulness are in us; the fruit of the Spirit...) and yet they come from the Holy Spirit who helps us to understand how to treat others. God wants all of us to become effective in sharing our faith/faithfulness with one another in practical Christianity through "*the acknowledgement of every good thing that is in us for Christ's sake*." It is in us to be builders; so we need to build one another up for Christ's sake not tear down. This is how it was with the example in Philemon ^{v1}giving his house for the meeting of a church, and in his ongoing, relentless ^{v5}love for other Christians through his ^{v7}refreshing them, and him ^{v22}preparing guest rooms. Paul says that his desire is to see Philemon's faithfulness become effectively active (as applying it to someone else) fits well here.

V7 For we have have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee. We want to be manifesting the Spirit of our Christian love. We want to be faithful to our brothers and sisters to the point that we are known for it. Paul with great joy and comfort describes Philemon,

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PITWM VERSE BY VERSE

now, as a refresher of the hearts of the saints, (verse 7). "Refresh" here means to have an encouraging effect. This word was a term that was used by the Roman military. After they would march on foot for miles and miles they would stop to be refreshed. Philemon was someone who brought Christians into refreshing peace, and rest, by ministering to them in love and faithfulness to their needs. When people like Philemon responded with all their heart to the gospel and then received and loved and upheld workers like Paul, it gave the workers new heart. This is what Philemon was to continue doing, even through hurt because of his slave Onesimus running away. Paul does not want the opposite to happen:

There is nothing worse than someone who claims to be in Christ, but, is marked with bad attitudes; unforgiveness; lack of care; or pride. They are the ones who claim to manifest the Spirit, yet the irony is that they are the ones who are not really doing so. Then also, there are the other kind of fault finders. They look for faults in other Christians like this is their calling in life. They set up a standard of perfection that they can not attain themselves, and then they tear others down for not holding up to their standard bearing. They fail to acknowledge every good thing that is in the true body. They are not shining as refreshers who heal, and love, in real faithfulness.

There is nothing more encouraging than godly love. This refreshing love is love that you choose to apply out of your heart in obedience to the actual Spirit of God. It is love that you decide to do, and then you do it. We also are to bring comfort to others as refreshers who refresh one another in the Spirit. Paul re-emphasizes his close feelings toward Philemon by calling him brother.

V8 Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient,

V9 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.

Paul had the authority to command what is fitting, since he was an elder and an apostle, but he chose instead to make an appeal based upon Philemon's Christian commitment. Paul could have used his authority with Philemon, commanding him to deal kindly with his runaway slave. Paul wanted his heartfelt, not grudging obedience. Philemon's heart was so gracious, kind, and loving, therefore, Paul requested but did not demand. Instead he "beseeched", that is appealed, urged, and pleaded with Philemon because he loved Philemon. Paul based his plea upon three things that should appeal to the heart of any believer:

- Love—this should mean that Philemon loved Paul as a brother in Christ, loved him enough to grant the request.
- Age—because of the wear and tear upon his body from the sufferings that had been inflicted upon him through the years.
- Prisoner for Christ—he had suffered so much in order to carry the gospel to the lost of the world, to people who were hopeless and lost just as Philemon and his family had been.

Paul mentions that he is aged, but not an inexperienced preacher, and he is also a prisoner who knew the mind of Christ. This appeal made it all the more weightier upon Philemon—appealing to Philemon's sympathy. Paul was trusting God to speak to Philemon concerning his plea. The best obedience is that which comes freely without compulsion. If Paul can sacrifice to this point, surely Philemon can lay down, as a sacrifice, his anger at Onesimus. We've got to also see: How can any believer demand another believer to do anything, especially if the believer differs or does not wish to do what is requested? Now, however, a believer, no matter who he is, should do the right thing; he should do his duty. This is what Paul is anticipating. There standing before him was a former slave

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PITWM VERSE BY VERSE

who had broken the law by running away, broken one of the major laws upon which the Roman empire was built.

Rome kept the peace by enslaving and scattering the people of conquered nations all over the world, breaking their loyalty to their homeland. Death was the punishment for runaway slaves.

V10 I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:— Now Onesimus' name occurs. ONESIMUS [oh NESS ih muss] (useful) -a slave of Philemon and an inhabitant of Colosse run away, making his way to Rome, and somehow comes in contact with Paul, who leads him to a saving knowledge of Christ. This is why Paul refers to Onesimus as his son whom he had begotten in the faith. A master had the legal right to kill a runaway slave. Onesimus feared for his life. So Paul wrote this letter to Philemon to help him understand his new relationship with Onesimus. Onesimus was now a Christian brother, not a mere possession. Paul asked Philemon to forgive his runaway slave who had become a Christian and not only to forgive, but to accept him as a brother. True forgiveness means we treat the one we've forgiven as we would want to be treated. So Paul makes this plea to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus. Will you treat the other how you want to be treated?

V11 Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:— The name Onesimus (omēsimos) means "*useful*" or "*profitable*". Paul pulled no punches by saying that Onesimus had not previously lived up to his name, but now, since his salvation, he will not only be useful to Philemon, but already has proven himself such to Paul. Here is a Christian man who has been greatly wronged and is called upon to put it all behind him and forgive. There are some lessons here for every believer:

QUESTIONS:

- Do you have the capacity to forgive?
- Have you ever been wronged?
- Do you have the capacity to accept others?
- Do you have the capacity to love like Jesus?

LESSONS:

- Being wronged by our fellow man is an unfortunate fact of life! True salvation changes one's attitude and his actions.
- When we are wronged, we must know how to react. If we react as the world teaches, then we jeopardize our testimony. If we react as the Bible teaches, we glorify God and point men to a Savior who can make a difference in the lives of men.
- Receive—"*take to oneself; take by the hand, grant access to one's heart.*" Literally to totally forgive and be reconciled to another. We are commanded to forgive the offender when wronged. Do we have the capacity within us to? (Matt. 18:20-35; Luke 17:1-5). We have a good example to follow - ill. Jesus - Eph. 4:31-33; Col. 3:12-13.
- The test of our faith is our ability to love others as Jesus loves them. Unconditionally, unreservedly, wholeheartedly! When we are able to love others, in spite of what they have done to us, then, and only then are we living out the Gospel.

Onesimus had been rebellious, untrustworthy, probably dishonest, the kind of slave who was almost more trouble than he was worth. In those days Philemon could hardly turn his back on Onesimus. Now they would be on the same team, both of them living to glorify God and helping each other. Once, Onesimus had thought only of

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PITWM VERSE BY VERSE

himself. Now he was transformed by the love of Christ. Now, Onesimus had also become a help to the imprisoned Paul, running errands and just being there for him. In time past you didn't see a need to forgive, but now it's necessary for you and the other person to forgive and be reconciled to one another.

V12 Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels: Paul did not think it right to keep Onesimus with him in Rome, and was therefore sending him back to Philemon. **a)** To receive Onesimus back, now as a brother in Christ. **b)** To forgive him if he had done any wrong. Philemon owed Onesimus and he had to pay his debt to him. Justice, therefore, required Paul to send back Onesimus to his master, and conscience obliged Onesimus to agree in the propriety of the measure; but love to the servant induced the apostle to write this conciliating letter to the master. This is also clear that the heart of Onesimus had been truly converted and he wanted to return to right the wrong. Paul's deep affection and admiration for Onesimus must have been evident to Philemon, as he refers to Onesimus as his own heart ("*mine own bowels*"). Paul multiplies the terms in calling Onesimus:

a) his son V10 **b)** his own heart V12 **c)** his brother V16,

And Paul even exhorts Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would Paul himself V17.

V13 Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel: Paul longed to keep Onesimus with him because he ministered to him in his difficult situation in Rome. Paul lovingly mentions that if Philemon were in Rome he would only be doing what Onesimus himself is doing. Paul who was in prison, desperately needed Onesimus; needed his companionship, his encouragement, and his assistance. Certainly, Philemon must have been in tears as he read these affectionate words of his beloved friend and apostle.

V14 But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly. However, Paul would not do anything without the consent of Philemon. Paul refused to keep Onesimus because he wanted his friend to make up his own mind and act willingly, without being manipulated or forced into a corner. For it could have forced Philemon to grudgingly approve of the situation. But Paul knows that if kindness or helpfulness in any way forced, it becomes insincere. Philemon's goodness always proceeded willingly from a heart of compassion. A Christian believer is to make restitution, to right whatever wrong he had done—in so far as it is humanly possible. We must constantly examine our own lives to insure that proper actions are produced by proper motives.

V15 For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever; The marvelous providence of God is in view in this verse. Onesimus was a changed man.

- He had been changed by the hand of God. God was overlooking and overruling the whole event for the sake of Onesimus' salvation.
- He had been changed from a slave to a brother.

The point is well made: when Christ changes a life, the life is changed eternally. Onesimus' departure happens as a result in his salvation. The gospel begins to change social structures by changing the people within those

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PITWM VERSE BY VERSE

structures. Now Onesimus returns to Philemon for the duration of this life, with the happy prospect of spending eternity in heaven with Philemon and all other believers.

V16 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? Though, Onesimus was still Philemon's slave, and as far as we know remained such, in Christ he was the Lord's freeman, and a brother to, and a joint heir with Paul and Philemon. The changed person becomes a "*beloved brother*." It does not matter what the relationship has been.

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| a) Master-slave relationship | b) friend-enemy relationship | c) victim-criminal relationship |
| d) Love-hate relationship | e) marriage-divorce relationship | f) abused-hurtful relationship |

If a person has been truly changed by Christ, then he is to be received as a "*beloved brother*." Why? Because God has put his hand upon the person and changed him forever. What a difference Onesimus status as a Christian made in his relationship to Philemon. He was no longer merely a servant, he was also a brother. Now both Onesimus and Philemon were members of God's family—equals in Christ. Christian bonds transcend human barriers and exceed mere earthly relationships. Once the two are together, Paul knows it will not be long until Philemon sees Christ in Onesimus and their relationship will be transformed.

V17 If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself. There is, of course, no question as to how Philemon would receive Paul, but how was he going to receive Onesimus? Paul had already asked Philemon to receive Onesimus back (v12), but now he put the request in terminology that could scarcely be ignored. The one thing that people need above all else is to be received. No matter how low or base, useless and unprofitable, sinful and ruined, crippled and diseased, ugly and unattractive, unapproachable and distasteful—a person needs to be received and brought into the fellowship of Christ and believers. Onesimus was to be received and trusted as much as Paul himself.

V18 If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account. Onesimus may well have stolen money or goods from Philemon to finance his getaway. Maybe he even injured someone. This was before he knew Christ. Paul genuinely loved Onesimus and he showed his love personally guaranteeing payment for any stolen goods or injuries for which Onesimus might be responsible; as if they were his. Paul wants all of Onesimus' wrongs placed on his own account, as if they were his. Paul's investment in the life of his new believer certainly encouraged and strengthened Onesimus' faith. The more we follow Christ, the less we worry about our own money or possessions and the more we care about the welfare of other people. Caring more for others is a perfect picture of how God receives sinners who trust Christ as Lord and Savior. How is that? God gave His only begotten... Christ takes **all** the believer's sins on Himself and pays for **all** completely by His shed blood. God sees what His Son Jesus, has done, and forgives completely. We must always remember; we are debtors to Christ and to the world—spiritual debtors to every man, woman, and child. Philemon should love his slave Onesimus with the love of Christ and with the faithfulness that he is well-known for.

V19 I, Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say it to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides. When Paul wrote his various epistles, he often used a

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PITWM VERSE BY VERSE

stenographer to do the writing, but here, perhaps of his great personal concern, he points out that he has written the letter in his own handwriting. Paul offering to pay all that Onesimus owed must have moved Philemon.

V20 Yes, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord. Paul even called Philemon brother. Paul lets him know that this would bring his heart abundant joy. So refresh his heart in the Lord.

SUMMARY:

The letter's main thrust is that Paul is trying to urge Philemon to receive back a man that Paul met in prison. The man's name is Onesimus. Onesimus was the slave of Philemon. The problem is that Onesimus had run away from his master and made his way to Rome where he met Paul who apparently led him to Christ. According to Colossians 4:9, Onesimus was originally from the Colossian area nearby Philemon's household. Paul wants to convince Philemon to lovingly receive back Onesimus now as a brother in Christ. It is interesting to note that Paul does not apologize for Philemon's actions which are unusual for this kind of intercessory letter. Philemon was a Greek landowner living in Colosse and the Colossian church met in his home.

The theme of this little book is forgiveness. ¹The slave owner in the days of the Roman Empire was judge, jury and executioner. The slave had no rights whatsoever. Paul apparently led this man Onesimus to the Lord while he was a prisoner. Paul wasn't just sitting in prison moping around because his life had been so terrible. God can use us even in our most difficult circumstances. ²Here's this slave, running from Colosse, running to the "big city", and he ends up running into Paul. Onesimus' own name said it all, but he didn't live up to his name. His name meant profitable, useful, but he had been an unprofitable servant. But after coming to Jesus, he had changed, and now was very useful. It must have been a great risk for Paul to send Onesimus back to Philemon. Paul appeals to Philemon to acknowledge in this instance the transformation (to be in Christ) that occurred in Onesimus. Then to see: master and slave are transformed into brothers.

Paul had the right to "command" Philemon to receive Onesimus but he chose to appeal to his character. Love is a much greater motivator than coercion. Paul appeals to Philemon's on the basis of love, his age, and as a prisoner of Christ. Respect for those mature in Christ is to the benefit of all who draw on their wisdom. Paul had fathered Onesimus in the faith while he was in prison and he calls Onesimus his "son." Jesus touched both of them equally. God uses awkward situations and individuals to lead others to Christ.

So much of this is a wonderful picture of how Jesus intercedes with the Father in heaven for us. You see Paul is following in the steps of Jesus, as Jesus would pray for us, Paul is therefore praying and interceding for Philemon and Onesimus. Before Jesus has begotten us as His children, we used to be unprofitable to God, but now we

¹ http://preceptaustin.org/philemon_commentaries_2.htm#spurgeon

² <http://www.calvaryfullerton.org/Bstudy/index.htm>

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PITWM VERSE BY VERSE

have become useful. Jesus wants us to live with the Father forever. We are no longer slaves to sin, but are now part of God's family. The Father receives us as He does Jesus. If we owe God anything because of our sin, Jesus paid for it with His own death on the cross for us.

In conclusion, **verse 21**, *"Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say."* Paul is now assured in Philemon's submission to do the right thing. The "*obedience*" refers to that which proceeds from a heart of love, not from the compulsion of Paul's authority as an apostle. Paul isn't just looking for making brownie points with Philemon by sending his slave back to him. He truly expects that Philemon will free this slave and allow him to serve the Lord; that is do the right thing. Therefore, the two of them would be able to serve the Lord together.

APPLICATION:

Are there young believers who need you to demonstrate such self-sacrifice towards them? Be grateful when you can invest in the lives of others.