

Philemon Chapter 1

Verses 1-2: Following first century custom, the salutation contains the names of the letter's author and its recipient. This is a very personal letter and Philemon was one of only 3 individuals (Timothy and Titus are the others), to receive a divinely inspired letter from Paul.

We will now begin in Philemon 1:1 "Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy [our] brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellow laborer,"

At the time of writing, Paul was a prisoner in Rome. Paul was imprisoned for the sake of and by the sovereign will of Christ (Eph. 3:1; 4:1; 6:19-20; Phil. 1:13; Col. 4:3). By beginning with his imprisonment and not his apostolic authority, Paul made this letter a gentle and singular appeal to a friend. A reminder of Paul's severe hardships was bound to influence Philemon's willingness to do the comparatively easy task Paul was about to request.

"Timothy" was not the coauthor of this letter, but probably had met Philemon at Ephesus and was with Paul when the apostle wrote the letter. Paul mentions Timothy here and in the other epistles because he wanted him recognized as a leader and the non-apostolic heir apparent to Paul.

"Philemon" was a wealthy member of the Colossian church which met in his house.

"A prisoner of Jesus Christ", a phrase found nowhere else, shows that Paul did not look on himself merely as a prisoner of the Roman Empire. His witness for Christ in prison made him a prisoner. His "our dearly beloved, and fellow laborer" tells us all we know about Philemon: he was dear to Paul, who considered him a valued coworker in the ministry.

Philemon was a Greek Christian. He was thought to be from Colossae. Paul calls himself, prisoner of Jesus, perhaps to remind Philemon that he is a prisoner of Jesus, as well. He is about to make a plea for a servant of Philemon's.

We are all a prisoner of someone. Perhaps, this is the point Paul is making in the opening of this very personal letter to his friend. Paul calls him fellow laborer, which means that Philemon is a minister, as well.

Philemon 1:2 "And to [our] beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in thy house:"

"Apphia" was probably Philemon's wife. "Archippus" may have been Philemon's son, but was more likely the minister in the church (Col. 4:17). "The church in thy house:" The earliest churches met in homes; Christian church buildings were unknown until the third century. Philemon was probably one of the wealthier church members, since it met at his house, and since he was a slave-owner.

First century churches met in homes and Paul wanted this personal letter read in the church that met at Philemon's. This reading would hold Philemon accountable, as well as instruct the church on the matter of forgiveness.

This verse leaves no doubt that the church was meeting in Philemon's house. Apphia was either Philemon's wife, or sister, who was living in the house with Philemon. Archippus denotes service of some kind. Perhaps, the soldiering was in the warfare that all Christians are involved in.

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

The salutation, almost identical to other Pauline greetings (Romans 1 and 2 Cor., Gal., Eph., and Phil.), expresses a beautiful connection between two great works of God: "Grace," or His undeserved favor, which is intimately associated with "peace," the settled confidence that comes from being right with God.

This is a typical greeting from Paul. Grace, mercy, and peace are all gifts from God to the believer.

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

Paul always opens his letters with a word of thanksgiving (Galatians is the exception).

Paul prayed for the people who were saved under his ministry, and for the churches he had started regularly.

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

Philemon was spoken of highly by the other believers. It seems that he was a very unselfish man, in the fact that the church met in his home. When you love the believers, you are loving the Lord. Inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it unto me, was His statement.

In the Greek text, this verse is arranged in what is called a chiasmic construction. "Love" relates to the final phrase "toward all the saints." This love of will, choice, self-sacrifice, and humility (Gal. 5:22), was a manifestation of Philemon's genuine faith "toward the Lord Jesus" (Rom. 5:5; Gal. 5:6; 1 John 3:14).

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

If I understand this correctly, this is the world looking toward Philemon and seeing Christ Jesus in the things Philemon does.

Matthew 5:16 "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

"Communication or Fellowship": The Greek word here means much more than simply enjoying one another's company. It refers to a mutual sharing of all life, which believers do because of their common life in Christ and mutual partnership or "belonging to each other": in the "faith."

"Effectual", literally "powerful". Paul wanted Philemon's actions to send a powerful message to the church about the importance of forgiveness.

“Acknowledging”. The deep, rich, full, experiential knowledge of the truth.

It appears the life Philemon lived, was communicating to the world the love that Philemon had for Christ Jesus. It also means, that Philemon was not taking the credit for the good things he did, but was giving the Lord Jesus all of the credit for his life.

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

“Bowels”: This Greek word denotes the seat of human feelings where the same Greek word is translated “compassion”. “Refreshed”, a word that comes from the Greek military term that describes an army at rest from a march.

It seems that Philemon was a wealthy man, and had used that wealth to help the other workers for Christ. Paul is filled with joy, when he hears of the nice things Philemon is doing for the other saints who are in need. It seems he is a very generous man when it comes to other's needs.

Paul speaks to Philemon as a brother. You remember, he spoke of Titus and Timothy as his sons. Philemon could have been older, or he could have been more mature.

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

Paul's request that Philemon take back Onesimus has a connotation of brotherly persuasion, rather than a formal appeal to apostolic authority. Onesimus is now both a “son” to Paul (verse 10), and a “brother” to Philemon (verse 16). Though he possessed no legal rights in the Roman world, Onesimus the slave was now on an equal spiritual plane with both his owner and the apostle Paul.

Because of his apostolic authority, Paul could have ordered Philemon to accept Onesimus. He is saying, knowing that you are a caring man, so then I will ask you boldly as an apostle of Christ to do something that is not the usual thing to do.

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

“I rather beseech”: In this situation, Paul did not rely on his authority but called for a response based on the bond of love between himself and Philemon (verse 7; 2 Cor. 10:1).

“The aged”: More than a reference to his chronological age (which at the time of this letter was about 60), this description includes the toll that all the years of persecution, illnesses, imprisonments, difficult journeys and constant concern for the churches had taken on Paul; making him feel and appear even older than he actually was.

Paul reminds him that he loves him, and that he is speaking to him from prison himself. Paul is feeling old at this point. He loves both men and feels that he can be a peacemaker.

Paul has suffered much for the gospel and Philemon had great respect for him.

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

Onesimus was not Paul's son in the flesh. It seems that Onesimus had been saved while Paul was in prison. This Onesimus, of course, was the servant, or slave, belonging to Philemon. He had run away, and we know that Philemon must be a little disturbed by that.

Philemon would probably not have listened to this from anyone else, but Paul.

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

Onesimus means "useful." Through a clever word-play Paul is saying: "Onesimus was useless to you in the past, but in the future, he will live up to his name!"

This play on words carries the same root meaning as the Greek word from which the name Onesimus comes. Paul was basically saying, "Useful formerly was useless, but now is useful". Paul's point is the Onesimus had been radically transformed by God's grace.

Notice, that Paul was not taking sides with Onesimus. In fact, he says what Onesimus did was wrong. Onesimus had become a Christian since he left Philemon's house. Paul wants Philemon to realize the value of a soul won to Christ.

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

Paul is going to send Onesimus back to Philemon, but not in bonds. He is sending him back as a brother in Christ. Paul reminds Philemon again, that Onesimus has been saved.

Verses 13-14: Paul might have exploited his brotherly relationship with Philemon to request that Onesimus remain with him as a helper, but he could not take advantage of Philemon in this way.

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

Paul wanted Onesimus to minister alongside him, but only if Philemon openly and gladly agreed to release him.

Paul was saying to Philemon, that he could not be with him so, Onesimus could have stayed and ministered to Paul in the place of Philemon.

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

Paul sent him back to Philemon to give him the opportunity to decide the fate of Onesimus himself. If Onesimus came back to minister to Paul, it would be at the blessings of Philemon.

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

Paul is saying that perhaps, it was God's will for Onesimus to leave. He had been unsaved when he left and now was a believer. Now he would be Philemon's Christian brother forever.

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

Paul's appeal that Philemon receive the runaway slave is well stated here: Onesimus has a new relationship to Philemon as a brother in the Lord. Paul did not call for Onesimus' freedom (1 Cor. 7:20-22), but that Philemon would receive his slave now as a fellow-believer in Christ. Christianity never sought to abolish slavery, but rather to make the relationships within it just and kind.

Whether Philemon subsequently freed Onesimus is not known, but certainly Paul's statements imply that slavery is incompatible with Christian teaching. In the bible, slavery is usually viewed as an existing social and economic practice. Like divorce, it is tolerated, but consistent application of Christian theology leads to the abolition or discouragement of both.

Perhaps, Onesimus had left with anger in his heart toward Philemon. Now the forgiveness from Onesimus to Philemon would be obvious. He would not have been willing to go back, if there had not been a change in Onesimus.

"In the flesh": In this physical life, as they worked together. "In the Lord": The master and slave were to enjoy spiritual oneness and fellowship as they worshiped and ministered together.

Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus back not as a servant, but as a Christian brother. It seems he was very dear to Paul.

Verses 17-19: Paul offered to pay whatever restitution was necessary for Onesimus to be reconciled to Philemon, following the example of Jesus in reconciling sinners to God.

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

Paul is really asking a favor of Philemon here. Paul is saying, if you love me, think of him as my friend, instead of your servant.

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

Onesimus's crime is not mentioned, but probably it was stealing from his master. Paul writes, "Put that on mine account," using a current bookkeeping term in Greek.

Paul does not go into the offence that Onesimus had committed. Since he was like a slave to Philemon, just the fact that he ran off would have been a loss to Philemon. It appears, however, that he had possibly stolen something.

We must remember that Onesimus was not a Christian when this happened. Whatever the offence was, Paul says to put it to his account.

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

Philemon owed Paul something far greater than the material debt Paul was offering to repay, since Paul had led him to saving faith, a debt Philemon could never repay.

Paul reminds Philemon that he would have died and gone to hell, if Paul had not ministered to him. He, in that sense, owes his life to Paul.

Philemon 1:20 "Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord."

Paul, in so many words, is saying don't disappoint me. I would be very happy, if you forgive Onesimus.

By forgiving Onesimus, Philemon would keep the unity in the church at Colossae and bring joy to the chained apostle (verse 7).

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

Paul is mentioning the fact of his authority over Philemon in this sentence. He is sure that Philemon will do just as he says, because of Paul's authority over the Christians.

“More than I say”: The more that forgiveness that Paul was urging upon Philemon was either:

1. To welcome Onesimus back enthusiastically, not grudgingly (Luke 5:22-24);
2. To permit Onesimus, in addition to his menial tasks, to minister spiritually with Philemon; or
3. To forgive any others who might have wronged Philemon.

Whichever Paul intended, he was not subtly urging Philemon to grant Onesimus freedom.

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

“Prepare me also a lodging” reflects both Philemon’s financial status, and Paul’s confidence that he would be released from prison. It may also be a subtle encouragement that Philemon should fulfill Paul’s request.

Paul stays in Philemon's house, when he is in the area it seems. Paul has confidence that he will return there to minister. Paul wants to come back here, and prays that he will be able to.

Verses 23-24: This list of people is almost identical with that (in Colossians 4:10-14; only one name is missing here). It is another proof of how closely related these two epistles are.

Philemon 1:23 "There salute thee Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus;"

Epaphras was mentioned in the book of Colossians. It seems that Paul was in prison with him. Nero was jailing as many Christians as he could locate.

Philemon 1:24 "Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellow laborers."

The story of the once severed but now mended relationship between Paul and Mark (Acts 15:38-40; 2 Tim. 4:11), would have been well known to the believers in Colossae (Col. 4:10). Listing Mark's name here would serve to remind Philemon that Paul himself had worked through the issues of forgiveness, and that the instructions he was passing on to his friend were ones the apostle himself had already implemented in his relationship with John Mark.

Marcus was the same person as Mark who had abandoned Paul at one time. Aristarchus had travelled to Rome with Paul. Demas was spoken of by Paul in another letter as having left the faith. Lucas has to be Luke the Physician who stayed with Paul in Rome.

Philemon 1:25 "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ [be] with your spirit. Amen."

Grace means a great deal in this letter, since that is what Paul is asking Philemon to have for Onesimus.

Philemon Chapter 1 Questions

1. What kind of letter did Paul write to Philemon?
2. Where was Paul when he wrote the letter?
3. Where was the church held?
4. What was the servant of Philemon's name?
5. What did Paul call himself in verse 1?
6. What nationality was Philemon?
7. What did Paul call Philemon?
8. What point is Paul making, when he called himself prisoner?
9. How do we know they had church in Philemon's house?

10. Who was Apphia?
11. What was the blessing Paul spoke?
12. What good things had Paul heard about Philemon?
13. Who did Philemon give all the credit to?
14. What was Philemon using his wealth for?
15. Why did Paul speak of Philemon as brother, and Timothy and Titus as son, when they were all saved by Paul's preaching?
16. Why does Paul mention his age here?
17. Why did Paul call Onesimus his son?
18. When had Onesimus been saved?
19. Was Paul taking Onesimus' side?
20. Why did Paul not keep Onesimus with him to minister to him?
21. What did Paul say was probably God's will?
22. Would Onesimus still be Philemon's servant?
23. Paul asked Philemon to receive him as whom?
24. In verse 19, Paul reminds Philemon of what?
25. What in verse 21, shows Paul's authority?
26. Where will Paul stay in this area?
27. Who was Paul's fellow prisoner?
28. Who were named as Paul's fellow laborers?