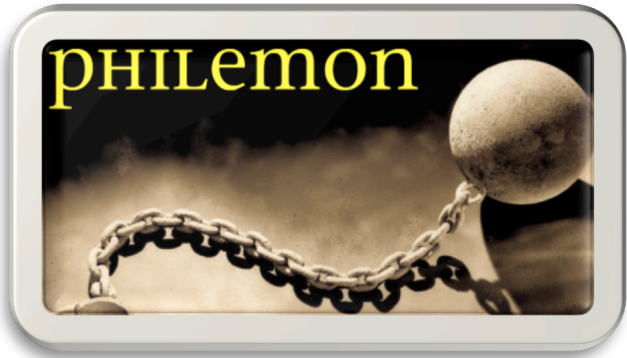


Paul's Letter to

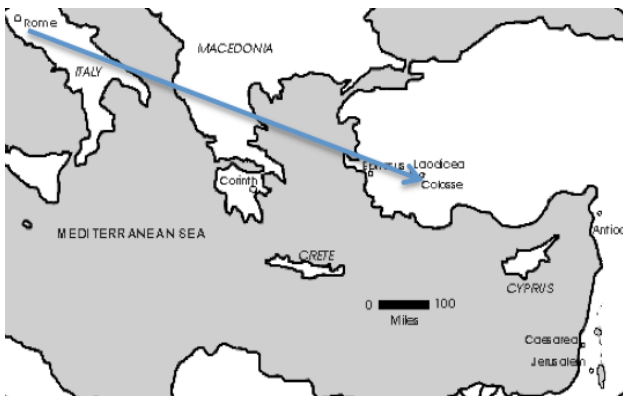
Comments by Dave DeWitt

Author: The Apostle Paul
Date: AD 61-63, "Probably
in the summer of 62
(Edwin C. Deibler)"



Historical Setting

A Background Comment From Charles Ryrie,



“Like Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, Philemon is one of the Prison Epistles, written during Paul’s first confinement in Rome. Onesimus, one of the millions of slaves in the Roman Empire, had stolen from his master, Philemon, and had run away. Eventually, he made his way to Rome, where he crossed the path of the apostle Paul, who led him to faith in Christ (v. 10). Now Onesimus was faced with doing His Christian duty toward his master by returning to him. Since death would normally have been his punishment, Paul wrote this wonderful letter of intercession on Onesimus’s behalf.”

In a sense this, the most personal of all Paul’s letters, is an application of Ephesians 6:9 and Colossians 4:1. *Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.* In another sense it goes beyond that instruction since Paul is asking Philemon to, not only be just and fair, but to be merciful.

Apparently Philemon was not the only slaveholder in the church or we would not have the statements of Ephesians 6:8; Colossians 4:1; 1 Timothy 6:1-2; Titus 2:9 and 1 Peter 2:18. Paul did not deny that Philemon was a master over his slaves, or that slaves should submit to their masters. The important principle here is that **Christian brotherhood trumps social relationships**. This letter is not an attack on slavery, it’s a formula for how Christian masters and slaves should live their faith within that social system. Some suggest that Philemon freed Onesimus and sent him back to Paul (from verse 14). Ignatius letter *To the Ephesians* (chapter 1) suggests that Onesimus may have later become the bishop of the church at Ephesus. The only thing we know about Philemon comes from this letter.

Authorship

John Knox said, “The genuineness of the letter is so well established as to require little discussion” (*Philemon among the Letters of Paul*, p. 32). The early church fathers, Ignatius, Tertullian, Origen, and Eusebius give testimony to the canonicity of this letter. Also, three times in the Philemon, the author refers to himself as Paul (verses 1, 9 and 19).

Outline

- I. A personal introduction, 1–3
- II. The love and faith of Philemon, 4–7
- III. The plea to Philemon, 8–17
- IV. The pledge to Philemon, 18–21
- V. Personal plans and personal greetings, 22–25

Purpose and Theme

Purpose

Paul wrote this letter as an intercession on behalf of the runaway slave Onesimus, so that his master Philemon would accept him as a brother in Christ.

Theme

The theme of any piece of literature is in two parts,

A **subject**, what the author is talking about and

A **complement**, what the author is saying about what he is talking about.

In Philemon,

Subject: Christian brotherhood

Complement: Trumps social relationships

Verse 1

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker

Like Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, Philemon is one of the letters Paul wrote while in prison at Rome, accompanied by Timothy. He initially addressed Philemon as *beloved* and *fellow worker* (one word). The word “brother” added in both the NASB and KJV are not in the Greek text. *Fellow worker* does not imply Paul and Philemon worked together, but that they were both workers in the body of Christ, the church.

Verse 2

And to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house

Apphia was most likely the wife of Philemon and Archippus was most likely his son.

Archippus also had a ministry, which Paul understood as something he received from Christ. In Colossians 4:17 he wrote, *Say to Archippus, “Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it.* Philemon was apparently a wealthy, or at least well-to-do, believer who owned slaves and hosted regular gatherings of the church in his house. For other examples of house church gatherings see 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; and Romans 16:5.



Verse 3

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is Paul’s signature greeting and confirms him as the author of this epistle.

Verse 4

I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers,

Every letter of Paul's except Galatians opens with an expression of thanksgiving. The words *I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers* are almost the same ones Paul used in his other prison epistles (Ephesians 1:15-16; Philippians 1:3-4; Colossians 1:3-4).

Verse 5

Because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints

Paul mentioned faith in Christ and a love for all the saint in: Ephesians (1:15), Colossians (1:4), and his letters to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 1:3; 2 Thessalonians 1:3). The love for all the saints meant they saw the universal body of Christ as the church, but that means it should also include Philemon's run away slave, Onesimus.

Verse 6

[And I pray] that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in [you] (literally us) for Christ's sake.

A literal translation would be, *in order that the fellowship of your faith might become a work in the knowledge of every good thing in us in Christ.* The knowledge ἐπίγνωσις (epignosis), is like super-knowledge, a word Paul used for the believer's knowledge of Christ in the other prison epistles (Ephesians 1:18; Philippians 1:9; Colossians 1:9). The point is Paul wants Philemon to apply his knowledge of Christ and fellowship with the saints to his run away slave Onesimus.

Verse 7

For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.

The word *hearts* is not the usual Greek word καρδία (kardia). The word is σπλάγχνα (splanchna) for *inner parts of the body* as in *bowels* or *belly*. καρδία (kardia) *heart*, is usually used metaphorically of a connection between our personality and our spirit. σπλάγχνα (splanchna) has more to do with deep seated emotions.. *Paul used σπλάγχνα (splanchna) again in Philemon 12 and 20.*

Both NASV and KJV use *Refreshed* to translate ἀναπέπαιται (anapepautai) also used in verse 20. It is a combination of ἀνα (ana) the word for *upon* or *each one* and παύω (pauo) to *stop* or *finish*, from which English gets the word "pause) This is the word the Lord used in Matthew 11:28, *Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest [ἀναπέπαιται (anapepautai) or I will refresh you.]*

Verse 8

Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper,

The NASV *confidence*, is παρρησία (parresia) usually translated *boldness*. Most likely Paul is referring to his boldness as an apostle.

Verse 9

Yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you — since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus

Rather than give an *order* to Philemon, which Paul could do (apparently referring to his apostleship) he chooses to make an *appeal* παρακαλέω (parakaleo), usually translated *beseech*, *exhort*, or *entreat*. Paul repeats this word in verse 10. This is the word he used in Romans 12:1

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice ... (KJV).

Verse 10

I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment,

Paul also used the phrase *my child* of Timothy and Titus (1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; Titus 1:4). But Paul thought of himself as a father of all those he won to the Lord (1 Cor. 4:15). This seems to be common among the apostles. The Apostle John told Gaius, *I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.*

Onesimus, (also mentioned in Colossians 4:9) was apparently a common name for a slave (Bible Knowledge commentary). The word means “useful,” and Paul expands on the meaning of the name to make his point. Here we learn that Onesimus became a believer, being converted by Paul during his prison time in Rome. How that came about is only a matter of speculation. At any rate Onesimus, a run away slave, has received Christ through Paul’s prison ministry in Rome.

Verse 11

Who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me.

Formerly or *before* his conversion, Onesimus was ἄχρηστος (achrestos) *useless*, *unprofitable* or *worthless*. It sounds like the problems between Philemon and Onesimus started before Onesimus ran away. He was apparently a worthless slave before he left. But now, because of his salvation he has become εὐχρηστος (euchrestos). Notice the root word χρηστος (chrestos) is used in both cases. The first one adds the “a” for negation, the second adds “eu” which usually mean *happy* or *good*.

Verse 12

I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart,

Three things are interesting here.

1. Paul has made the decision that slavery was not to be prohibited
2. Disobedience committed as an unbeliever had to be dealt with by this new convert. In other words, becoming a believer does not erase the consequence of former sin. Actually it enhances the need to do something about it. Moral obligations can no longer be avoided.
3. Paul forced Philemon to make a relatively quick decision about this matter, since it seems he would receive no previous warning before Onesimus returned with the letter. Just as Onesimus was called upon to repent and return (to slavery) Philemon was called upon to forgive and place Christian brotherhood over being wronged.



Verse 13

Whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel

Paul said he wished (or *wanted*) to keep (*hold* or *with hold*) Onesimus with him in Rome. The next word, here translated *on your behalf* is the Greek preposition ὑπὲρ (*huper*) which means

“substitution,” as it also does in passages speaking of Christ’s death as a substitutionary atonement (2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Peter 3:18). The reason Paul wanted to keep him was to *minister* to Paul during his imprisonment. The word for *minister* is διακονέω (diakoneo), to be a deacon or servant. Paul’s desire is that Onesimus be a servant to him as he should have been to Philemon.

Verse 14

But without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will.

The word *consent* is γνώμη (gnome) *purpose, opinion, consent, or decision* (Strong). There is an interesting moral principle here. Paul could just have kept Onesimus with him and sent thanks to Philemon. But that would eliminate any possibility of goodness on Philemon’s part. **Morality requires a personal unhindered free will choice.** *Compulsion* giving, such as taxes, or a requirement to tithe, removes morality. The word the NASV correctly translates *free will* is ἐκούσιον, (hekousion) *voluntary* indicates an unhindered free will choice. Some suggest, but no one knows, if Philemon freed Onesimus and sent him back to minister to Paul in Rome,

Verse 15

For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever,

The word τάχα (tacha) could be translated *quickly* or *presently* as well as the NASV *perhaps*. Paul is suggesting that the sovereign plan of God included Onesimus running away, so that he would become a believer and return. Therefore, Onesimus’s escape, salvation and return were all personal choice and those choices were all in the sovereign plan of God.

Verse 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.

The first phrase suggests emancipation for Onesimus, but the second clarifies this as not a legal emancipation, but a practical one based on his salvation. This is the key verse, or theme verse in the letter. **Christian brotherhood trumps social relationships.** Socially, Onesimus was still a slave but that was overshadowed by the fact that he was now a brother in Christ. Christian brotherhood not only trumps social relationships, it makes it unnecessary to pursue changing social positions. Social positions are just not very important anymore.

Verse 17

If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me.

The bond between Paul and Philemon was the unity that draws the true church together. *Partner* is κοινωνόν (koinonon) from κοινωνία (koinonia) *fellowship* or *partnership*, a word which Paul used in verse 6. If Philemon rejected Onesimus, it would be like rejecting the apostle, his friend (verse 1), fellow worker (verse 1), brother (verses 7 & 20), and *fellowship partner* (verse 17).

Verse 18

But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account

Possibly, Onesimus stole something from Philemon in addition to running away. In the phrase, *charge that to my account*, the word *charge* ἐλλογέω (ellogeo) is the word *imputed* in Romans 5:13, *For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law.*

Paul asked Philemon to impute or reckon Onesimus's debt against Paul's account and to *accept him as you would me* (verse 17), an illustration of our sin imputed to Christ.

For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him (2 Cor. 5:21).

Verse 19

I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well).

Paul stated that he was writing these words *with my own hand*. As in Galatians 6:11 and Colossians 4:8, Paul is not using a stenographer. Here the purpose seems to be to assure Philemon that he is personally pledging to pay the debt of Onesimus. Paul then, not too subtly, reminds Philemon that he owe something to Paul, most likely the knowledge of salvation.



Verse 20

Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.

The Greek word ὀναίμην (onaimen) *let [me] benefit* is very similar to the name “Onesimus.” Paul was asking to find a true Onesimus in Philemon. *Refresh* ἀνάπαυσόν (anapepautai) literally *upon rest*, and *heart*, σπλάγχνα (splanchna), literally *belly* or *bowels*, are the same as in verse 7.

Verse 21

Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say.

Some have suggested that Paul's statement *I know that you will do even more*, refers to (1) Onesimus being freed, or (2) Onesimus being allowed to return to Paul. Neither is stated, nor should they be assumed. Paul is not hinting at any specific action for Philemon to do, only that Paul has confidence that Philemon is a good man who will do more than requested.

Verse 22

At the same time also prepare me a lodging, for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you.

It seems that Paul expected to be released from prison quite soon (Philippians 1:25-26). At any rate it shows the apostle's desire to see people face to face. This may also be an exhortation to Philemon to do as Paul had requested concerning Onesimus, because Paul would be coming to visit. It was apparently common for Christians who traveled to stay, *lodging* with, other believers.

Verse 23-24

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers.

Epaphras was someone treasured by Paul, not just because of his service to Paul and to the Colossians, but he also confirmed the message of the apostles being “fully assured” in it.

Mark, Barnabas' cousin John Mark, was the author of the second gospel. Though he had deserted Paul on his first missionary journey (Acts 15:36-39), Paul spoke well of him after that (Philemon 24,

2 Timothy 4:11).

Demas was a disappointing brother in Christ, who would later leave Paul (2 Timothy 4:10).

Luke. A Gentile, a doctor, and the author of the third gospel, Luke was a dear friend of Paul. Luke was a faithful and valuable companion.

Verse 25

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

All 13 of Paul's epistles end with a one-sentence benediction similar to this one. *Grace*, unmerited favor, offered to the individual believer is the unique characteristic of this (church) age. The *your* in *your spirit* is plural, probably referring to Philemon, Apphia and Archippus (verses 1-2). *Your spirit* is also used in the benedictions of Galatians 6:18 and 2 Timothy 4:22. This is not saving grace.

They already had that. This is prayer for the unmerited favor of Christ to be upon them as they live the Christian life.

Applications from Philemon

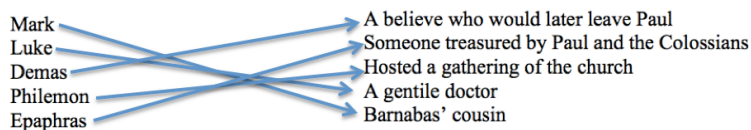
1. The apostolic model for a church gathering was in someone's house. We should model that as closely as possible (from verse 2).
2. *Love* (doing the best good expecting nothing in return for the gift) and *faith* (trusting verifiable evidence) should characterize our relationship, with both Christ and other believers (from verse 5).
3. Fellowship should be based on knowledge. We should not welcome into Christian fellowship people (such as "seekers") that we know nothing about (from verse 6).
4. One characteristic of a true believer is that their concept of the saints is never just local, they are known for refreshing (providing rest for) all the saints (from verse 7).
5. As believers we should appeal to one another based upon good sound arguments, not give orders to one another based upon our organizational or social positions (from verses 8-9).
6. Our position in Christ governs all other positions (verses 10-16).
7. Technology is valuable and it should be used, as Paul used the writing of letters, but it does not replace personal contact (verse 22).

Questions About Philemon

1. Believers owning slaves in the first century church was apparently,
 - A. Unheard of
 - B. Rare
 - C. Common
2. The purpose of this letter is,
 - A. To say that Philemon should receive Onesimus as a brother in Christ
 - B. To say that Christian brotherhood is more valuable than social relationships
 - C. To say that Christianity trumps slavery
3. Theme of this letter is,
 - A. To say that Philemon should receive Onesimus as a brother in Christ
 - B. To say that Christian brotherhood is more valuable than social relationships
 - C. To say that Christianity trumps slavery
4. Paul said he had heard about Philemon's,
 - A. Love and truth
 - B. Truth and compassion
 - C. Love and compassion
 - D. Love and faith
 - E. All of the above
5. Paul wanted Philemon to approach Onesimus with,
 - A. Knowledge
 - B. Compassion
 - C. Grace
6. Paul believed that the escape of Onesimus was,
 - A. His own choice
 - B. Predestined by God
 - C. Both A and B
7. When Paul said he sent Onesimus back *no longer as a slave*, Paul meant,
 - A. He should no longer be treated as a slave
 - B. He should no longer be treated just as a slave
 - C. He should no longer be a slave
8. Match the names on the left with the descriptions on the right

Mark	A believe who would later leave Paul
Luke	Someone treasured by Paul and the Colossians
Demas	Hosted a gathering of the church
Philemon	A gentile doctor
Epaphras	Barnabas' cousin

Answers: 1. C (because there are multiple instructions about it), 2. A, 3. B, 4. D, 5. A (verse 6), 6. C, 7. B, 8.



This concludes our study of Philemon