

A Study of Philemon

I. Outline.

1. The salutation (Philemon 1.1-3).
2. The gracious thanksgiving (Philemon 1.4-7).
3. The request and intercession (Philemon 1.8-21).
4. Paul proposes a return visit to Philemon (Philemon 1.22).
5. Paul's closing remembrance (Philemon 1.23-25)

II. Summary.

If every member of the church would study Philemon before writing to another brother, the church would benefit greatly. This letter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, is a gem to be treasured as a MODEL in the matter of courteous discourse. Paul had a specific object in mind and that was for Onesimus, a runaway slave, to be received warmly by Philemon. Who could doubt that, Philemon, having read this letter, would do anything but submit to Paul's request?

III. Chronology.

BIBLE PERIOD: The Period of the Church.

If you are not familiar with the 15 Bible Periods, please click here:

<https://maplehillchurchofchrist.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/15bibleperiods.pdf>

“Written around AD. 61 or 62, Philemon is another of Paul's prison epistles, written from Rome. ... Philemon, a personal friend of Paul, was a faithful Christian. Obviously a man of considerable means, he was the owner of the runaway slave Onesimus. Onesimus was the primary purpose for Paul's writing the letter. A slave to Philemon, Onesimus had abandoned his master and traveled to Rome. There his path crossed with Paul's and he was converted by the imprisoned apostle. Onesimus became a faithful Christian and a devoted friend, and helper to Paul. The apostle knew that truth and right demanded that Onesimus go back to Philemon. Paul wrote a letter designed to create a bond of brotherhood between the returning Onesimus and the receiving Philemon. Slavery was a burning issue in first-century society. The population of the Roman Empire was about 125 million, of whom half were slaves. How did the newly begun religion handle the moral and economic evil? An immediate head-on confrontation could have been disastrous. Had Christianity promptly demanded an end to slavery upon conversion to Christ, slaves would have gone through a formal acceptance of the Gospel to drop their chains from their hands or feet. Masters would have fought the Gospel and been prejudiced toward its interference with what they deemed personal property. Christianity chose a slower, surer way. Principles permeated human hearts, which in turn softened the bonds of slavery and eradicated it from human society. Till such became a reality, inspired men counseled masters and slaves to respect each other in these economic bonds” [Robert R. Taylor, Jr., *Companion*, 1992-1993, p. 162].

IV. Words/Phrases to Study

Book... “Under Roman law, a slave who ran away from his master could face the death penalty. In spite of this possibility, the apostle Paul sent Onesimus, a runaway slave and a recent convert to Christianity, back to his owner Philemon to make restitution. The Epistle to Philemon is

Paul's plea that Onesimus no longer be viewed as a runaway slave, but rather as a 'beloved brother' (see vv. 16, 17; Col 4:9). Obedience to these requests would require forgiveness and restoration, actions which no other slave owner would have to contemplate in the ancient world. But Christians were called to a higher calling, one that contradicted the expectations of the culture at large. While the world pursued power and glory, Christians were to pursue the way of the Cross—the way of forgiveness, servanthood, suffering, and love" [*Nelson's NKJV Study Bible*, p. 2068]. ||||| "The letter to Philemon is extraordinary, for in it we see the extraordinary sight of Paul asking a favour. No man ever asked fewer favours than he did, but in this letter he is asking a favour, not so much for himself, as for Onesimus, who had taken the wrong turn and whom Paul was helping to find the way back. Philemon was clearly a man from whom it was easy to ask a favour. He was a man whose faith in Christ and love to the brethren all men knew, and the story of them had reached even Rome, where Paul was in prison. His house must have been like an oasis in a desert, for, as Paul puts it, he had refreshed the hearts of God's people. It is a lovely thing to go down to history as a man in whose house God's people were rested and refreshed" [William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible*].

Phm 1:1... PAUL, A PRISONER OF JESUS CHRIST—"Although technically a prisoner of Rome, Paul always considered that he was actually imprisoned for the gospel, and therefore the prisoner of the Lord" [Coffman]. ||||| "Literally, Paul calls himself Jesus Christ's prisoner. Even more literally, it is Jesus Christ's bound-with-a-chain one. We know that Paul is imprisoned because he preached the gospel, which offended the Jews to no end (see Acts 22-28). He belongs to Jesus, and is in prison because he preached Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Paul was very good at setting up his arguments from the very beginning of his letters (see 2 Cor 1:1 which establishes his claim of apostleship, and then chapter 11 where he defends his apostleship). It is possible that Paul is starting off the letter to Philemon in this way to show that he knows what it is like to be under someone else's control (in Paul's case, he was under the physical control of the Roman government). He begins by identifying with Onesimus" [Bradley Cobb, *The Prodigal Slave: A Study of the Letter to Philemon*, an e-Sword Module].

Phm 1.2... APPHIA—"Apphia is a female name, and most people who are willing to guess assume that this is Philemon's wife. This seems to be the most likely solution. Why else would Paul write expressly to Philemon throughout the letter, but overall address it to Philemon and some woman? Could you see writing a letter and addressing it to a man and a woman who is not his wife? Apphia, being the wife of Philemon, would have had a vested interest in the situation of the slave. Paul would not have addressed this letter to any other woman except one in the household of Philemon. If it is not his wife, then perhaps his sister lived with him (as did Lazarus with Mary and Martha). Notice that she is also beloved (Mrs. Beloved is beloved as well)" [Bradley Cobb].

Phm 1:6... COMMUNICATION—"The Greek word is *koinonia*, and the prayer is that the fellowship of faith between Philemon and Onesimus may become effectual in showing forth forgiveness, which would of course be comprehended in every good thing. Here, however, the statement is general" [B.W. Johnson, *The People's New Testament*]. ||||| "If we look back to the beginning of the sentence (v4), we see that Paul is describing why he is praying for Philemon. This thought is continued into this verse. Paul prays for him so that the sharing (communication) of his faith might become even more effective. The word "communication" comes from the word *KOINONIA*, which means something in common. It is translated in various places as "sharing,"

“communication,” “fellowship” and others. In this verse, it means sharing his faith so that others can have the faith as well, making it common between them. The sharing of our faith will become more effective as we realize and acknowledge all the good things which God has given to us who are IN CHRIST. All spiritual blessings are IN CHRIST (Eph 1.3). Forgiveness of sins. Salvation. Sanctification. Eternal life. Grace. Peace. These are all spiritual blessings that are only available to those IN CHRIST. This fact should motivate us to go out and spread our faith even more! Do you want others to have the grace of God? Peace? Eternal life? What are you doing to show that? Hugo McCord’s translation says it this way: **I pray, that as you realize the good things that are ours in Christ, you may be active in sharing your faith** [Bradley Cobb].

Phm 1:7... THE BOWELS OF THE SAINTS ARE REFRESHED BY THEE, BROTHER—“Fundamentally, Paul’s only hope for Onesimus had its fountain in the kind of man Paul knew Philemon to be; therefore, he dwells upon that before making his request. In the last analysis, he will ground his appeal on the fact that Philemon is ‘a brother.’ No higher compliment can be accorded to any Christian” [Coffman]. |||| **BOWELS OF THE SAINTS**--“*σπλάγγνα, ὡν ἡ* one for whom there is deep affection or compassion—‘object of affection.’ ὃν ἀπέπεμψά σοι, αὐτόν, τοῦτ’ ἔστιν τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγγνα ‘whom I am sending back to you, this one for whom I have such deep affection’ Philemon 12” [Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 293). New York: United Bible Societies]. |||| **REFRESHED**, “This comes from the Greek military term that describes an army at rest from a march” [John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, p. 1892].

Phm 1.8... THOUGH I MIGHT BE BOLD IN CHRIST TO ENJOIN THEE—“Paul has the authority as an apostle to tell other Christians what they should do in their Christian walk. He has the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, so all of his messages for Christians come from God Himself. Paul could have *commanded* Philemon to accept Onesimus back as a slave and as a brother in Christ. Doing that, though, could cause animosity. Often, a person has decided to get something done, but then someone else *tells* them to do it. The desire the person had in the first place to accomplish the task has disappeared because it no longer seems like their own choice, but something they are being forced to do” [Bradley Cobb].

Phm 1.10... WHOM I HAVE BEGOTTEN IN MY BONDS--“Continues Paul: **I appeal to you in the interest of my child, whom I have begotten in my bonds, Onesimus.** That is the order of the sentence in the original. It should be preserved in the translation (cf. ARV). This is not the case in AV and in RSV The reason why this point must be stressed is that the apostle obviously has planned this statement with great care. Hence, before he ever mentions the name of the person in whose interest he is writing, he first of all seeks to create in the mind of Philemon a favorable impression of him and also sympathy for the one who is writing” [William Hendriksen, *Baker New Testament Commentary*, an e-Sword Module].

Phm 1:11... UNPROFITABLE, BUT NOW PROFITABLE—In the original language, it is easy to see that Paul is using a “play on words” here. UNPROFITABLE, or USELESS is from the Greek word: *achrestos*; whereas, PROFITABLE, or USEFUL is from the Greek word: *euchrestos*. Surely the intended effect of this use of language by Paul would be to cause Philemon to see Onesimus in a different way than, perhaps, he would normally view a runaway slave. This verse actually could be considered a statement of the THEME of the letter—“The theme of Philemon is the power of the gospel to transform lives ... and to impact human relationships (... v., 16)” [ESV Study Bible,

p. 2353]. Yes, Onesimus had done wrong in running away; but now he was wanting to make correction for the wrongs he had done.

Phm 1:13... WHOM I WOULD HAVE RETAINED WITH ME—“Would gladly have kept him with me to render for thee the service you would be glad to give me while I am in chains, only (14) without thy mind would I do nothing. He wished, if such a service was rendered, it might be with Philemon's free consent” [B.W. Johnson, *The People's New Testament*].

Phm 1:15... FOR PERHAPS HE THEREFOE DEPARTED FOR A SEASON, THAT THOU SHOULDEST RECEIVE HIM FOR EVER—“In addition to appealing to Philemon's human side (sympathy) and his spiritual side, Paul now brings God's providence into the discussion. Many times things happen and we don't know why. Is there some greater purpose being served? Is God working things out in a specific way so that something else can happen later? Sometimes the answer is 'yes.' Sometimes the answer is 'no.' God does not send out emails letting us know that He is working out specific situations so that later on something good will come. We will not know, this side of eternity, how much on this earth is God's providence. What greater good comes from stubbing my toe? Did God use that providentially? Not likely” [Bradley Cobb].

Phm 1:18... IF HE HATH WRONGED THEE, OR OWETH THEE OUGHT, PUT THAT ON MINE ACCOUNT—“Many believe that Onesimus robbed his master before he ran off, 'but of this there is no evidence. Why then impute crimes to men where there is no proof?.' 'Had the apostle been sure that Onesimus had robbed his master, he certainly would not have spoken in this hypothetical way” [Coffman].

Phm 1:19... ALBEIT I DO NOT SAY TO THEE HOW THOU OWEST UNTO ME EVEN THINE OWN SELF BESIDES—“Here is a reminder that Philemon owed his salvation to Paul, a reminder which would certainly prevent him from putting in a claim against the apostle” [B.W. Johnson, *The People's New Testament*].

Phm 1:22... PREPARE ME ALSO A LODGING: FOR I TRUST THAT THROUGH YOUR PRAYERS I SHALL BE GIVEN UNTO YOU—“Paul has a great trust in the power of prayer. This verse does not speak solely to Philemon, but to the entire congregation meeting in his house (see verses 1-2). The word YOU in the King James Version is always plural. Paul fully expects faithful Christians to be praying for him. He also fully expects that their prayers will be granted so that he can be released and see them. ... We do not have record of when Paul was released or if he was ever able to come back to the area of Colossae/Laodicea. The book of Acts ends with Paul under house arrest in Rome. It is generally believed that Paul was released after a two-year imprisonment, but was again captured and then put to death around 68 AD. The reason for this is Paul's optimism that he will be released (see this verse), but in II Timothy, Paul expects to be executed (2 Tim 4:6-8). Also, Timothy was with Paul when Philemon was written, but obviously not with Paul when II Timothy was written” [Bradly Cobb].

V. Lessons & Applications.

Some of this content is from notes taken in the class on Prison Epistles under Wendell Winkler...

1. “The object of the letter was to intercede with Philemon to forgive the runaway slave, and to receive him as a Christian brother. Paul himself offering to repay the stolen money. The Letter is a perfect gem for its Courtesy, Tact, Delicacy, and Generosity, climaxing with its tender appeal to Philemon to receive Onesimus ‘as you would receive me’ (17)” [*Halley's Handbook*, p. 645].

2. The 3-Fold Message of the Epistle...
 - 1) A plea for reconciliation of two children of God.
 - 2) Forgiveness.
 - 3) Do what is right.
3. Philemon relates to the overall theme of the Bible in that it shows that the salvation of man is the salvation of ALL men (i.e., it is available to all men, EVEN the lowly slave).
4. "NOTE the Appeals used by Paul in the Epistle:
 - 1) I am a prisoner (1, 9).
 - 2) There is a love between us (1).
 - 3) I am thankful for you (4, 7).
 - 4) I pray for you (4).
 - 5) You have refreshed the hearts of saints (7).
 - 6) I don't order you, I rather appeal.
 - 7) I am an old man.
 - 8) I have won Onesimus to Christ (10).
 - 9) He is now profitable to us both (11).
 - 10) Sending him back is like sending my own heart.
 - 11) You may now have him forever (15).
 - 12) He is now your brother (16).
 - 13) Receive him as you would receive me (17).
 - 14) I will pay whatever he owes you (18-19a).
 - 15) Don't forget that you owe yourself to me (19b).
 - 16) I have great confidence in you (21).
 - 17) I'm coming to visit you (22)."

--[Field, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, p. 254].
5. A KEY WORD of the epistle is RECEIVE (12, 15, 17).
6. "Paul presents a picture of a Christian home in apostolic days—
 - 1) The father and mother well known for their hospitality.
 - 2) The son a man of position and importance in the church.
 - 3) The coming and going of Christian brethren.
 - 4) The life of the brotherhood centering about this household."

[ISBE, s.v., "Philemon, Epistle to"].
7. "We see Paul's use of LOGIC—He makes an argument on LOVE (5, 16)—
 - 1) Philemon loves the brethren (5).
 - 2) Onesimus is a brother (16).
 - 3) Therefore, Philemon must show love to Onesimus!"

[Tom Holland, *The Living Messages of the Books of the New Testament*, p. 254].
8. We should CONDESCEND TO MEN OF LOW ESTATE (Rom 12:16; Philemon 10-11). No one could have been lower than a runaway slave in the city of Rome. The economic level, occupational pursuit, geographical location, color of the skin, quality of clothing, social caste, are totally irrelevant to the preaching of the gospel. The ground is level at the foot of the cross (cf., Js 2:1-13).
9. Christ makes a man PROFITABLE (11). The name ONESIMUS means profitable. Onesimus had become Unprofitable to Philemon. After contacting Christ, he once again became profitable.

10. The CHRISTIAN is presented in Scripture as...
- 1) A FELLOW LABORER (Philemon 1, 24), emphasizing the need to work for the Lord.
 - 2) A FELLOWSOLDIER (Philemon 2), emphasizing the importance of fighting the good fight of faith (1 Tm 6:12).
 - 3) A FELLOWPRISONER (Philemon 23), emphasizing the need to be willing to endure suffering for Christ (1 Pet 2:19-20).
 - 4) A FELLOWCITIZEN (Eph 2:19), emphasizing the importance of being loyal to the kingdom of Christ.
 - 5) A FELLOWHEIR (Eph 3:6), emphasizing the blessings available in Christ (Eph 1:3), which must motivate us to greater service for the Lord.
 - 6) A FELLOWHELPER (3 John 8), emphasizing the need for cooperation among brethren.
 - 7) A FELLOWSERVANT (Col 1:7), emphasizing the place of ministry and service.
11. We can learn from Paul something about “PROSPECTS FOR CONVERSION.” Paul had looked upon Onesimus, **a runaway slave**, as a precious soul who needed to hear the gospel message.
12. **PAUL’S ATTITUDE:** “(a) Confidence in a brother. Paul expressed great confidence in Philemon’s willingness to do the right thing. This was a wise approach for one who expected to make a difficult request of the man to whom he was writing. If Paul had approached Philemon in the attitude of one who doubted Philemon’s willingness to do the right thing, he likely would not have succeeded in gaining that which he requested. But we must not think that this approach on the part of the apostle Paul was merely good policy. Undoubtedly Paul spoke the feelings of his heart when he said he was confident that Philemon would do what Paul was requesting and even more than that. Since Philemon lived at Colossae, some have wondered how Paul had such a knowledge of him as would permit him to exercise this much confidence in him, but we must remember that Paul stayed in Ephesus which was not far from Colossae for more than two years, and that during that time all Asia heard the word (Acts 19.10). So it is easy to conclude that while Paul was at Ephesus he visited in Colossae and had sufficient association with Philemon to know how this brother would respond to such a request as he was about to make. (b) Expecting the best of others. People who expect little or nothing of others and allow their expectations to be known usually get just about what they expect from them. If we expect good of others, they are more likely to do good than they would be if we suggest to them that we expect evil of them. An old commentator once said, ‘He that judgeth lewdly of another by mere suspicion or supposition is commonly lewd himself, for such as are wicked to think others as wicked as themselves; and such that are hypocrites themselves are most forward to tax others of hypocrisy. Seeing therefore to be charitably minded is both a property of love and a fruit of righteousness, it followeth that we ought to hope the best of all our brethren.’ (c) Flowers for the living. All of us prefer to have our flowers while we are living rather than get them after we are dead. And Paul gives Philemon flowers in this text while he lived. He expresses his confidence in Philemon’s willingness to do right and even beyond that which might justly be expected of him” [Roy H. Lanier, Sr., *Teacher’s Annual Lesson Commentary*, 1957, p. 65].

VI. Questions.

True or False

01. _____ Paul was a prisoner when he wrote to Philemon.

- 02. _____ Philemon was a runaway slave.
- 03. _____ Onesimus was once unprofitable to Philemon.
- 04. _____ Philemon owed Paul.
- 05. _____ Paul had no hope of being released from prison.

Multiple Choice (Select the BEST Answer)

- 06. _____ In this letter, Paul describes himself as: (a) free; (b) a debtor; (c) aged.
- 07. _____ How many of the 25 verses of this letter indicate that Paul was a prisoner: (a) 3; (b) 4; (c) 5; (d) none.
- 08. _____ What did Paul say may have been the reason Onesimus left Philemon: (a) Philemon mistreated him; (b) to earn some money; (c) just for a season so that he might be with Philemon forever.
- 09. _____ How did Paul ask Philemon to receive Onesimus: (a) as a slave; (b) as a man; (c) as he would receive Paul.
- 10. _____ What did Paul tell Philemon to do if Onesimus owed him anything: (a) forgive the debt; (b) make him pay it; (c) put it on Paul's account.

Fill in the Blanks

- 11. I beseech thee for my _____, whom I have _____ in my bonds.
- 12. Whom I have sent again: thou therefore _____ him, that is, _____.
- 13. The word RECEIVE is found in verses: _____, _____, _____.
- 14. If thou count me therefore a _____, _____ him as myself.
- 15. Paul had a lot of confidence in Philemon and felt sure that he would do _____ I _____.

Each Question is worth 7 Points

My Score is: _____

Answers will be found on next week's handout

ANSWERS to Philemon Questions... **01**—True (1); **02**—False (16); **03**—True (11); **04**—True (19); **05**—False (22); **06**—c (9); **07**—a (1, 9, 23); **08**—c (15); **09**—c (17); **10**—c (18); **11**—my, son, begotten (10); **12**—receive, mine, own, bowels, (12); **13**—12, 15, 17; **14**—partner, receive (17); **15**—more, than, say (21).

VII. Seek-A-Word Puzzle. The words may be backwards, diagonal, upside down, etc. See if you can find them all. The more you use the words of the Bible, the greater blessed you will be! You might be surprised at how much this little exercise will help you retain important truths. THANK YOU for the good effort you are putting forth in Bible study. –DRL

C L L D C H U R C H Y P P E
 L O V E G G B E S E E C H V
 W W F A W O A P P H I A I F
 T H E R E F O R E P A U L A
 F E L L O W L A B O U R E R
 A F L Y D M V Y E G E E M C
 I R O V B O W E L S G C O H
 T E W Y F R S R O P R E N I
 H F S S C E E S V P A I J P
 B R O T H E R L E V C V E P
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 D H I L S R N N V P A L S O
 S H E C T F T I M O T H Y H
 S P R I S O N E R M U C H T

ALSO	APPHIA	ARCHIPPUS	BELOVED	BESEECH
BONDS	BOWELS	BROTHER	CHRIST	CHURCH
DEARLY	FAITH	FELLOWLABOURER	FELLOWSOLDIER	GRACE
JESUS	LORD	LOVE	MORE	MUCH
PAUL	PHILEMON	PRAYERS	PRISONER	RECEIVE
REFRESH	SAINTS	SERVANT	THEREFORE	TIMOTHY

IX. EXTRA CREDIT FOR “SUPER” Bible Students...

Will you please consider answering these three SIMPLE questions based on the Bible text of this chapter? I will try to make use of your answers. Bring them with you next week. Tear out this last sheet from the Study Guide and be prepared to put it in a basket. I think it will be a great help to all of those in the class if you will do so. Thank you in advance for your marvelous cooperation!

W O R D: What word would you like to know more about in this chapter?

W O N D E R: I wonder what this phrase, verse, or series of verses means...

W I S H: I wish myself—or others whom I know or even don’t know—would understand this fact, principle, or concept from this chapter...