

Philemon

- (a) **Philemon (fi-LEE-muhn) means “affectionate” or “loving” - - Name origin (Greek) comes from “phil” or “phile” meaning “one that has a strong affinity or preference for” (affectionate) or “one that loves” (loving). Related words: Philadelphia (city of Brotherly Love), philanthropy (charitable assistance to humanity), Philippians (demonstrated love toward Paul by providing financial support).**
- (b) **The epistle Philemon is categorized as one of Paul’s four “Prison Epistles” (Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, & Philemon). Philemon was written in approximately A.D. 60 - 62 during Paul’s first Roman imprisonment - - This epistle was sent simultaneously with the epistle to the Colossian church, with Tychius and Onesimus as his “epistle carriers” (Colossians 4: 7-9). Tychius was a fellow-laborer in the Gospel with Paul who he considered as a “beloved brother and faithful minister” (Ephesians 6:21). Philemon is also known as “the polite epistle.”**
- (c) **Philemon was a Christian church leader in the city of Colossae (located in the Roman province of Asia Minor / present-day Turkey). Services for the “Colossae Congregation” were held at Philemon’s home (v.2). Philemon was converted to Christianity through Paul’s ministry (possibly during his visit in Ephesus - Acts 19).**

Background

Philemon was a slave owner (possibly wealthy) and one of his slaves, Onesimus (oh-NESS-uh-muhs), became a fugitive. Onesimus (whose name meant “Useful” or “Profitable”) “went on the run” because he committed a serious crime. It is believed Onesimus robbed his master Philemon (At this time Onesimus was demonstrating “uselessness” and “unprofitability”) and once Philemon regained possession of Onesimus, he could have Onesimus put to death! Onesimus fled to Rome (approximately 1,000 miles from Colossae) and by Divine Orchestration, he met Paul (during his imprisonment - - house arrest).

Through Paul, Onesimus accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Saviour - - he continued to reside with Paul and greatly ministered to Paul to Paul’s benefit (Onesimus became “Useful” and “Profitable” to Paul). They developed a very strong bond of love for one another and Paul desired Onesimus’ presence for the duration of his imprisonment. However, it was agreed that the appropriate action would be to respect the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, and send Onesimus back to Colossae to correct the offenses committed (restitution).

Paul knew that Onesimus' life could be jeopardized in returning him to Philemon - - (slave owners in ancient times were not required to forgive and restore regarding slave offenses) Philemon could have him punished and in the greatest extreme have the death penalty executed. Therefore, Paul wrote this eloquent and excellently crafted letter to his "brother in Christ" and friend Philemon to appeal / intercede on behalf of Onesimus. Paul's purpose was to be an "intercessor" for Onesimus and present a case to cause Philemon's heart to be filled with forgiveness, grace, reconciliation, and restoration, instead of being determined to use his power and authority as Onesimus' master, to execute punitive measures that could result in death.

(Note: Slavery was a basic, accepted element of 1st century society. Ancient Greco-Roman slavery differed from American slavery in that: (1) Determination was not based on ethnicity (2) It was rarely permanent in that many gained freedom within ten years - - slaves saved and purchased their freedom (3) One would "sell" themselves to erase obligations to creditors (4) Many slaves whether owned by the government or the wealthy, lived more comfortably than poor freemen).**

Themes:

- (A) The Approach of Intercession (Mediate on another's behalf) and Imputation (Charge the innocent for the crime instead of the guilty) The Lord Jesus Christ is our Intercessor and He took the "Charge" on His "Account" for our sins -- our sins were Imputed upon Him! For God required blood (death) for the penalty of sin! ("For God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by His Blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him -- Romans 5:8,9)**
- (B) The Requirement of Forgiveness, Reconciliation, Favor, & Restoration For the Christian and "Household of Faith" these characteristics of Jesus Christ are not "optional" but are "required" (Matthew 18: 23 -35) Parable of the Unforgiving, Unmerciful Servant**
- (C) The Positive, Productive, & Humble Use of Power / Authority & Influence Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ NEVER abused his Power / Authority as the Only Begotten Son of God - - He humbly submitted Himself to the Will of The Father and gave His Blood and Life for the sins of all Mankind! The Apostle Paul did not use his power / authority abusively in appealing on Onesimus' behalf - - Paul was respectful, considerate, "polite", demonstrated maturity and a spirit of excellence. (Abuse results in loss: Remember Nebuchadnezzar -- Daniel 4)**

(D) The Value Of Men's Souls Exclusively Belongs To God

Because Onesimus robbed Philemon and fled, his value in the eyes of men could be considered "useless", "worthless" (unprofitable) - - The Lord has the Divine Vision to "see" men as who they will be as transformed "new creatures."

(E) Spiritual Siblingships "Ascend" Earthly Relationships

It was of colossal significance that Philemon ceased from viewing Onesimus first as his slave, but to view Onesimus first as his brother in the family of Jesus of Christ - - The relationship has transformed from one of master / slave to "spiritual brothers" through the Blood of Jesus Christ. Christian brotherhood obliterates all social and class distinctions!

Verse 1

Paul does not present himself with his weighty title of "Apostle" of Jesus Christ, but humbly as a "prisoner of Jesus Christ" (prisoner for the sake of preaching the Gospel). Paul honors Philemon as a "deeply loved co-worker in the Gospel." Timothy was with Paul at the time of the writing.

Verse 2

Apphia is believed to be Philemon's wife and Archippus is believed to be Philemon's son. Paul demonstrates respect for "Sisters" by addressing Apphia as "beloved" and he honors Archippus as a "fellow soldier" - - a dedicated disciple of Christ and actively engaged in ministry and Christian warfare (Colossians 4:17). Philemon's home was where "church" services were held (worship, prayer, Bible study).

Verse 3

Paul desired the very best for his fellow-laborers in Christ: Grace (Undeserved Favor which God showers on His people) and Peace (Spiritual Serenity, Rest in God). This Blessing can ONLY come from God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Verses 4 & 5

Paul expresses his gratitude for Philemon in his prayers (for Philemon) to the Lord, and Paul is pleased to hear reports about Philemon's excellent integrity and character demonstrated by: (1) His love and faith for the Lord Jesus Christ and (2) His love for the saints. As a church leader, Philemon "walks in the spirit."

Verse 6

Paul prays that Philemon's "sharing of his faith in Christ" (generosity, benevolence) will continue to be active, effective, and powerful - - In that it would be recognized and understood that all good deeds of love originate from Jesus Christ. There is tremendous power and influence in a life where the love of God is evident - - Let's pursue in our daily living "effective communication of our faith"!

Verse 7

How rewarding it was for Paul to be experiencing joy and encouragement in his heart because of the soul he led to Jesus Christ. Philemon's great love for the Lord and love for the saints was strength to Paul even as he was living through imprisonment - - A Christian's joy in trying circumstances is a testament to the "Peace of God." Philemon's love refreshed, revived, and reinvigorated the saints.

Verses 8 & 9

Paul unveils the primary purpose of the epistle and this is the beginning of his intercession for Onesimus..."I am boldly petitioning you for a favor, I could demand it in the name of Christ (as an Apostle) because it would be the right action to take. But because of our love / friendship, this is a request and not an order from your friend Paul, an old man in prison for preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ." Paul could have used his Apostolic influence & power / authority to order Philemon to do what was right (forgive, reconcile, favor, & restore), however, he humbly appealed to Philemon's love for the Lord and love for the saints.

Verse 10

Paul articulates to Philemon that while imprisoned, he introduced Onesimus to the Lord Jesus Christ (just as he did with Philemon) and now Onesimus is a Christian brother. Paul is Onesimus' "spiritual father" and Onesimus is his "spiritual son" - - Onesimus has been Converted and he is now a fellow Believer!

Verses 11 & 12

Paul acknowledges that Philemon likely felt that Onesimus was "useless" and "unprofitable" (he stole from Philemon and then ran), however, Paul informs him that Onesimus has been converted by Jesus Christ and now his character / behavior is greatly reflective of the meaning of his name ("Useful" / "Profitable"). He should be viewed and treated first as a "brother in Christ", not a thieving, fugitive slave - - He is useful and profitable to me AND to you in ways you could not imagine! (Note: It is believed Christians, as slaves, were of higher value - - Christian employees should purpose to be greater employees than unbelievers).**

Paul loved Onesimus and it "broke his heart" (mine own bowels) to send him back to Colossae, he felt as if he was losing a part of himself. Nevertheless, it was the right action to take because Onesimus had to correct the injustice committed against his master (now brother in Christ) Philemon. Since master and slave were now BOTH Believers, it was Paul's expectation that in returning Onesimus, he would be treated with Christian love and Philemon would be served with Christian love.

Verses 13 & 14

Paul boldly articulates that it is his preference to keep Onesimus in Rome with him, for Onesimus was very Useful and Profitable to him in ministry and his assistance would have been embraced in place of Philemon's. However, Paul indicates that he would not make such a decision nor exert that level of influence, power, and authority without Philemon's approval. Paul did not wish to force Philemon's consent (compulsion) to keep Onesimus, he desired that it be performed with a kind, willing, and voluntary spirit. This demonstrated great maturity and respect with Christian spirit.

Verse 15

There is Purpose in everything the Lord does - - His Thoughts and Ways are Sovereign and Supercede our mere carnal thoughts and ways (Isaiah 55: 7-8). "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28) - - The Lord took an event that had the appearance of sinful ugliness and crafted it into something eternally beautiful! Onesimus left Colossae a renegade (traitor), sinner (unbeliever), and robber / thief, however, he returned as a Believer and a "new creature" in Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). Paul's point to Philemon was yes you are potentially bitter about Onesimus' robbery and fleeing, yet there is a rainbow within this storm...He departed temporarily (earthly) so that you could have him forever (heavenly / eternally). He left condemned to eternal separation from Jesus Christ, but he is returning with eternal life with Jesus Christ! (John 3:16) (We must ask the Lord to anoint our eyes and transform our heart to not "view" and "understand" events with limited and error susceptible carnal eyes and hearts, but to see and understand with Godly, Spiritual eyes and hearts! "To be spiritually minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace" - - Romans 8:6 (Spiritual maturity)**

Verse 16

Paul sincerely wants Philemon to understand what a great Blessing God has bestowed on them all by Onesimus' "change of status" as now a Believer and Christian brother. Paul makes a vivid contrast between the earthly relationship of master and slave (servant) and the spiritual relationship of "beloved brother." This relationship of Christian brotherhood is of greater value and privilege and supersedes that of a master / servant relationship. Paul honors Onesimus in highlighting to Philemon Onesimus' value (usefulness and profitability) to himself and that Philemon will witness Onesimus' usefulness and profitability to him also as a Believer / Christian brother and as a servant. Paul "loss" in Onesimus departing would be Philemon's "gain."

Verses 17 & 18

Based upon the relationship (partnership, co-laborers in the Gospel, Brotherhood) Paul has with Philemon, he appeals to him to receive Onesimus in the same way he would as if it were Paul himself arriving at his doorstep! (God the Father Accepts us and Justifies us as His Own Sons / Daughters, just as His Son the Lord Jesus Christ, because we have confessed, repented of our sins and declared the Lord Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour..."Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" -- Romans 5:1. We are "joint-heirs with Christ" -- Romans 8:17). Paul's exhortation to Philemon was to treat and consider Onesimus as a beloved, Christian brother first.

Onesimus committed a robbery against Philemon and Onesimus abandoned his responsibilities as a slave to Philemon - - Onesimus owed Philemon and it was correct for "restitution" to be made. Paul lovingly not only "interceded" for Onesimus but lovingly and willingly directed Philemon to charge or "impute" Onesimus' debts (actions, offenses, bills) to his "account." In recognition that restitution should be made, Paul was willing to accept responsibility for any loss that Philemon sustained. Paul was not guilty of any offense, yet he took upon Onesimus' guilt. How Paul's heart and actions parallels that of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ who Interceded for us and how our plethora of sins (past, present, future) have been Imputed upon Him! Our great sins were / are charged to "the Lord's Account" and He paid for them with His Blood and His Life on the Cross!

Verse 19

Paul reaffirms that he himself wrote this letter (it was not dictated) and he strongly assured Philemon that he would repay him for any losses (could be considered a legal document) created by Onesimus. However, Paul does remind Philemon that he incurred a "debt" also - - Philemon was "lost" (unsaved) but now has relationship with Christ and eternal life because of Paul's evangelism. Paul reminds Philemon that he owes Paul his very soul, but he is not attempting to "exchange" his "spiritual debt" to him for Onesimus' "earthly debt." However, he obviously wants Philemon to consider or weigh the magnitude and importance of forgiveness, favor, and restoration - - How does temporary money compare to your eternal soul????!!

Verse 20 & 21

Paul continues his appeal to Philemon by highlighting their Christian brotherhood (siblings by the Blood of Jesus) and pinpointing the fact that Philemon has the power / authority to bring great joy and encouragement to Paul's heart by gladly embracing, forgiving, favoring, reconciling, and restoring Onesimus to his home - - not with the status of "slave" but with the status of "beloved, useful, profitable Christian brother." (Again, Paul could have used his influence, and Apostolic power and authority to just keep Onesimus with him, yet in a great display of Christian respect, consideration, justice, and maturity, he "submits" to Philemon's authority regarding Onesimus). Paul further articulates his confidence that Philemon will not only be obedient in performing what Paul has requested, but that undoubtedly his "effective communication of faith" by demonstration of generosity (forgiveness) and great love for Christ and the saints, which brings encouragement, would be evident in that his actions would exceed even that which Paul has appealed for!

Paul wanted Philemon to forgive Onesimus for the sake of Jesus Christ, for his sake, and for the sake of the Christian brotherhood - - God forgave us for Christ's sake:

"And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" -- Ephesians 4:32

"A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" -- John 13: 34-35

"Recompense to no man evil for evil..." -- Romans 12:17

"...avenge not yourselves...Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (12:19)

Verse 22

Finally, Paul adds more "weight" regarding his appeal to Philemon by asking him to prepare a guest room for him for by their "power of prayer", he expects release from his imprisonment and have the liberty to visit Philemon. Paul anticipates Philemon to display the Christian virtue of "hospitality" (Romans 12:13; 1 Timothy 3:2)

Verses 23 - 25

Epaphras (ep' a-fras) - Minister in Colossian church (Col. 1:7 ; 4:12)

Marcus (Mark) - Writer of the second Gospel

Aristarchus - Believer from Thessalonica who accompanied Paul (Acts 19)

Demas - Paul's companion who eventually deserted him (2 Timothy 4:10)

Lucas (Luke) - Writer of the third synoptic Gospel and Acts of the Apostles

Paul concludes this "Powerful, Divinely-Inspired epistle by declaring upon Philemon the Lord's Blessings, by the "showering" of God's grace (unearned favor), upon his spirit.