

Notes on Philemon

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Introduction

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Philemon appears to have been a comparatively wealthy Colossian who owned slaves, as did most of the rich in his day.¹ He evidently came to faith in Christ as a result of Paul's influence (v. 19), perhaps when Paul was residing at Ephesus. Onesimus was one of Philemon's slaves and was probably a native Phrygian. He ran away from his master probably not because Philemon treated him cruelly but perhaps because he dealt with him graciously. Onesimus may have been a runaway slave, or he may simply have been involved in some domestic trouble with Philemon.² He eventually made his way to Rome where he could have lost himself in the crowd. There, as a result of divine providence, he came into contact with Paul and became a Christian (v. 10).

Following his conversion Onesimus became a valuable helper to the apostle (v. 11). Paul desired to keep Onesimus with him but felt a greater responsibility to return the slave to his Christian master (vv. 13-14). Onesimus had to make things right with Philemon whom he had wronged. Paul and Onesimus both knew the danger the slave faced in returning since slave owners had absolute authority over their slaves and often treated them as property rather than as people.³



Paul wrote this brief appeal to pacify Philemon and to affect a reconciliation between the slave and his master. His other purposes were to commend Philemon for showing compassion to other believers (vv. 1-7), to announce his plans to visit Philemon following his anticipated release (vv. 8-22), and to send greetings from his associates (vv. 23-25).

¹James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, pp. 252 and 302, likened slaves in the Roman Empire to household servants in Victorian Britain and estimated that as many as a third of the inhabitants of most large urban centers would have been slaves. G. W. Barker, W. L. Lane, and J. R. Michaels, *The New Testament Speaks*, p. 211, believed this figure was true of the population of Rome. See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, pp. 25-33, for an excursus on slavery in antiquity. He estimated that about one third of the populations of Greece and Italy were slaves.

²Ibid., pp. 17-19.

³See Arthur A. Rupprecht, "Philemon," in *Ephesians-Philemon*, vol. 11 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 460.

". . . Philemon provides insight both into the social realities of ancient society, in this case the relations between master and slave, which is surpassed only by 1 Corinthians, and into the way in which influence was brought to bear within the earliest churches between parties of differing social status."⁴

Paul probably addressed the epistle to Apphia, Archippus, and the church meeting in Philemon's house to rally the support of other Christians to encourage Philemon in his Christian responsibility.

When Paul sent Tychicus with epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians, Onesimus probably went with him. Paul intended that this letter, along with Tychicus' personal entreaty for Onesimus, would secure the slave's forgiveness and acceptance. Since Paul evidently sent this letter with the Epistle to the Colossians, as comparison of the two documents suggests, he probably wrote them in Rome at the same time (60-62 A.D.).⁵

OUTLINE

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⁴Dunn, p. 299.

⁵E. J. Goodspeed, *The Key to Ephesians*, pp. xiv-xvi, suggested that Philemon is the lost letter to the Loadiceans that Paul mentioned in Col. 4:16. John Knox, *Philemon among the Letters of Paul*, pp. 91-108, agreed with Goodspeed but believed Archippus lived in Colosse, owned Onesimus, and received this epistle. The views of neither of these influential commentators have overthrown the majority opinion that I have expressed above. Some commentators, e.g., Fitzmyer, p. 11, believed Paul wrote this epistle from Ephesus, but this is a minority view.

Exposition

I. GREETING 1-3

Paul began this letter by introducing himself and Timothy, by naming the recipients, and by wishing them God's grace and peace. He did so to clarify these essential matters and to set the tone for his following remarks.

- v. 1 Paul described himself simply as a prisoner of Jesus Christ's. He was in prison because he served Christ.

"As himself the Lord's bondsman he will plead for another bondsman whose story is the burden of this letter. In begging mercy for this bondsman he points to his own bonds. No less than six times in this brief letter does Paul make reference to his imprisonment (vv. 1, 9, 10, 13, 22, 23)."⁶

"He is not asking for a measure of sacrifice from Philemon, as one who knows nothing of sacrifice. He has forfeited his freedom for Christ's sake and so has a ground for appealing. This is a principle involved in any true pastoral work. The pastor can only appeal to his people for self-sacrifice and discipline if he himself knows the meaning of discipline in his own life. Otherwise his call is empty and lifeless."⁷

Paul probably did not refer to his apostleship because of the personal nature of the appeal contained in this epistle. Philemon undoubtedly knew Timothy by reputation if not personally. The mention of his name implies that Timothy agreed with Paul concerning what follows in the letter. Philemon's name does not appear elsewhere in Scripture.

- v. 2 Apphia was evidently a family member, probably Philemon's wife. Paul may have addressed her specifically because normally the wife had day-to-day responsibility for the household slaves.⁸

Archippus may have been their son, or perhaps Philemon's physical brother, or his friend. He seems to have been old enough to be responsible for some kind of ministry (Col. 4:17). He may very well have been the leading man in the church that met in Philemon's house. Paul also

⁶D. Edmond Hiebert, *Titus and Philemon*, p. 88.

⁷Herbert M. Carson, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon*, p. 104.

⁸Rupprecht, p. 458.

addressed the letter to the other Christians meeting with Philemon's family in their Colossian home (Col. 4:17).

"Christian congregations were dependent upon the hospitality of wealthy members who could furnish their own houses for this purpose. This note then contains an indication of the social status of Philemon. In a large city there would be several such assemblies. (Cf. Rom. 16:5, 10, 11, 14, 15.) Whether the church at Colossae had more than one place of assembly is not known. Probably they did."⁹

- v. 3 Paul's benediction is the same as the one in the Colossian epistle except that he added the name of the Lord Jesus Christ here (cf. Col. 1:2). Perhaps Paul intended that this addition would remind the recipients (plural "you" in Greek) of their union in Christ and God's grace to them in Christ.

II. THANKSGIVING AND PRAYER FOR PHILEMON 4-7

Paul commended Philemon for the fruit of the Spirit that Philemon permitted the Spirit to manifest in his life. He also prayed that it would continue to abound to encourage Philemon to respond to the request that follows in a manner consistent with God's will.

- vv. 4-5 "When Paul states he gave thanks 'continually' he means that he did not forget Philemon in his regular prayers . . ."¹⁰

"Again we should not regard this as mere literary flourish Paul must have had an extensive prayer list and presumably spent some time each day naming before God all his churches, colleagues, and supporters. This would help maintain and strengthen the sense of a faith shared with 'all the saints' (5-6)."¹¹

Whenever Paul remembered Philemon in prayer he gave thanks for him. Evidently his testimony had been consistently honoring to the Lord. The basis of this thanksgiving was Philemon's love and faith. Reports of these qualities had undoubtedly reached Paul through Epaphras (Col. 1:7-8) and probably others as well. The objects of Philemon's love and faith were "all the saints" and "the Lord Jesus" (v. 5) respectively. The Greek construction is chiasmic (cf. Eph. 1:15; Col. 1:4). That is, the first and fourth elements in verse 5 go together as do the second and third. This construction emphasizes the unity of the entire thought: love for the saints grows out of faith in Christ.

⁹Hiebert, p. 94.

¹⁰Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, p. 277.

¹¹Dunn, p. 316.

- v. 6 We should probably understand Paul's prayer request for Philemon to be that his sharing with others, which was an outgrowth of his faith, would become even more energetic (cf. Phil. 1:5; 2 Cor. 8:4). Paul would give him an opportunity shortly. This interpretation includes another possible interpretation, namely, that Christ might be increasingly visible through his life. As Philemon's appreciation of God's grace toward him grew he should have wanted to demonstrate more grace toward others in his interpersonal relationships.¹² Paul had in mind Onesimus particularly.

"In the present context *epignosis* ["knowledge"] conveys both the ideas of understanding and experience. The apostle's prayer was not simply that Philemon might understand or appreciate the treasures that belonged to him, but that he might also experience them."¹³

- v. 7 Paul experienced much joy and comfort as he heard of Philemon's love. The Greek word translated "hearts" (*splagchna*) designates total personality at the deepest level.¹⁴ Philemon had already demonstrated the kind of behavior that Paul was going to call on him to manifest again. Paul's request would test his response. However, Paul was confident of Philemon's cooperation. He appealed to him from the same authority level, as a "brother" (cf. v. 2 where Paul called Apphia a "sister").

"Paul must have put Philemon in a precarious position indeed. In pleading for forgiveness and restitution for Onesimus without a punishment that was obvious to all, he was confronting the social and economic order head on. While he does not ask for manumission, even his request for clemency for Onesimus and hint of his assignment to Paul defied Roman tradition. By this plea Paul is also giving new dignity to the slave class."¹⁵

III. PLEA FOR ONESIMUS 8-21

Paul appealed to Philemon to receive Onesimus back and to forgive him. He did this to enable Onesimus to fulfill his obligations to Philemon and to encourage Philemon to benefit from Onesimus' conversion rather than to be stumbled by it.

A. PAUL'S APPEAL 8-11

¹²See Homer A. Kent Jr., *Treasures of Wisdom: Studies in Colossians & Philemon*, pp. 163-64.

¹³O'Brien, pp. 280-81.

¹⁴*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. *splagchnon*, by H. Köster, 7 (1971):555.

¹⁵Rupperecht, p. 460.

v. 8 Paul's confidence (Gr. *parresia*) was his assurance that if he commanded Philemon to do as he requested because Paul was an apostle, Philemon would do it.¹⁶ Nevertheless he declined to appeal on that basis. Rather he appealed on the basis of love, the love of Christ that bound all the parties involved in this situation together.

"If a slave ran away, the master would register the name and description with the officials, and the slave would be on the 'wanted' list. Any free citizen who found a runaway slave could assume custody and even intercede with the owner. The slave was not automatically returned to the owner, nor was he automatically sentenced to death. While it is true that some masters were cruel (one man threw his slave into a pool of man-eating fish!), many of them were reasonable and humane. After all, a slave was an expensive and useful piece of personal property, and it would cost the owner to lose him."¹⁷

v. 9 Paul perhaps referred to his aged condition to remind Philemon of the affliction he had undergone for the gospel that may have aged him prematurely.¹⁸ At this time Paul would have been about 55 years old which in his day was older than it is in ours because life expectancies were shorter then. He appealed as a father for his son in the faith. His reference to his present imprisonment also would have encouraged Philemon to accede to his appeal.

". . . Paul knew Philemon as modern commentators cannot and no doubt had a good idea of how Philemon was likely to react to such sentiments being read in public in the church of which he was a member as well as leader."¹⁹

vv. 10-11 "Onesimus" means "useful." Paul mentioned his name here (v. 10) for the first time having prepared Philemon for the unpleasant memories associated with his formerly unfaithful servant by the foregoing comments. He called Onesimus his child. The figurative parent-child relationship was common in both Judaism and the pagan mystery religions as an illustration of the teacher-pupil relationship or the leader-convert relationship.²⁰

¹⁶"The term *parresia* which literally means 'all speech' was used originally in the sphere of politics to signify the democratic right of a full citizen of a Greek city-state to speak out one's opinion freely. Later it was found as a characteristic of the relations between true friends in opposition to the feigned compliments of flatterers . . ." O'Brien, p. 287.

¹⁷Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 2:270-71.

¹⁸Several commentators pointed out that "aged" or "old man" (Gr. *presbyteres*) may have originally read "ambassador" (*presbeutes*, cf. Eph. 6:20), but there does not seem to be sufficient reason to amend the text.

¹⁹Dunn, p. 328.

²⁰Eduard Lohse, "Colossians and Philemon," in *Hermeneia*, p. 200.

"In addition to the tender love that is contained in this expression there lies in it the thought of immaturity: Onesimus is only a child as yet and in this condition needs much tender care lest his young spiritual life suffer or die."²¹

"This is the one-time self-righteous Pharisee, the heir of Jewish exclusiveness, and he is speaking of a Gentile, and a Gentile slave at that, from the very dregs of Roman society—yet he can refer to him as a *son*. So his statement (Col. iii. 11) that 'there is neither Greek nor Jew . . . bond or free' [Gal. 3:28] is no empty formula but reflects the attitude of heart to which he himself had been brought by God."²²

Paul had led Onesimus to Christ while Paul was in confinement. The apostle sweetened the unpleasantness that the mention of Onesimus' name would have produced by making a pun. "Useful" had been "useless" to Philemon, but now he was living up to his name. He had proved useful to Paul and he could be useful to Philemon. There was no need for Paul to identify exactly what sin Onesimus had committed against Philemon. Instead of magnifying it he minimized it (cf. 1 Pet. 4:8).

"*Achrestos* ["useless"] designates Onesimus with reference to his flight and the time before his conversion. Apparently he was useless even before he ran away. He was a Phrygian slave and as such 'had confirmed the popular estimate of his class and nation by his own conduct'²³ since Phrygian slaves were proverbial for being unreliable and unfaithful."²⁴

"(The name *Philemon* means 'affectionate' or 'one who is kind.' If the slave was expected to live up to his name, then what about the master?)"²⁵

B. PAUL'S MOTIVES 12-16

vv. 12-14 Onesimus had so endeared himself to Paul that his departure was an extremely painful prospect for the apostle. Paul could have justified

²¹Richard C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon*, p. 962. Cf. Gal. 4:19; 1 Thess. 2:7.

²²Carson, p. 108.

²³J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, p. 310.

²⁴O'Brien, p. 292.

²⁵Wiersbe, 2:271.

keeping the slave with him, but he judged that Onesimus' obligation to return to his owner was more important. Furthermore, Paul did not really have authority over the slave; that rested with his master. If Paul had kept Onesimus with him, Philemon would have felt obligated by his regard for Paul to let his slave stay with the apostle. The service Paul probably had in mind for Onesimus was to proclaim the gospel, not to perform menial prison duties for Paul.²⁶ Nevertheless, Paul wanted Philemon to respond to his slave freely.

"The principle of consideration for others here manifested by Paul is a factor of vital importance today for effective Christian leadership. Many are the difficulties which might be avoided if those in places of authority in Christian work would follow Paul's example in this."²⁷

"In the eastern part of the Roman Empire [including Asia Minor] during this period, fugitive slaves who sought sanctuary in a household were likely to be given temporary protection by the householder until either a reconciliation with the master had been effected or else the slave had been put up for sale in the market and the resulting price paid to the owner . . ."²⁸

vv. 15-16 Paul suggested that God may have permitted the events that had taken place to result in greater good (Rom. 8:28), and he urged Philemon to view them in that light. The master should now regard his slave not as a slave but as a brother in Christ, which he was.²⁹ This does not mean that he would necessarily give Onesimus his freedom, though he might, but that he would treat him lovingly at least.³⁰ In Onesimus Philemon would receive one with whom he could share the fellowship of Christ and one who would render him more conscientious service than he could expect from a non-Christian.

"The supreme work of Christianity is to transform men, so that out of their transformed lives shall come the transformation of all social conditions, and the victories of righteousness and of love."³¹

²⁶O'Brien, p. 294.

²⁷Hiebert, p. 113.

²⁸O'Brien, p. 292.

²⁹Cf. Lightfoot, p. 341.

³⁰C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon*, p. 147, noted that there is evidence that long before Christianity a slave who became an initiate into a mystery religion ceased to be regarded as a slave but lived with his former owner as a free man.

³¹G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 2:104.

"The principles of the gospel worked into the conscience of a nation destroy slavery."³²

"Christianity is not out to help a man to escape his past and to run away from it; it is out to enable a man to face his past and to rise above it."³³

"It is quite clear that in this letter Paul is not really dealing with the question of slavery as such or the resolution of a particular instance of slavery. In this verse, at least, he treats the question of brotherly love. Although Onesimus' earthly freedom may be of positive value, in the last analysis it is of no ultimate significance to him as a Christian as to whether he is slave or free. Finally what matters is to have accepted God's call and to follow him . . ."³⁴

C. PAUL'S REQUEST 17

Finally Paul articulated his request. He based it on his relationship with Philemon as a Christian brother, a partner in union with Christ.

"Paul's term 'partner' must not be weakened to mean merely an intimate friend or companion. It suggests the fellowship or partnership of those who have common interests, common feelings, common work. It is a spiritual fellowship and has a double aspect, Godward as well as brotherward. It is the partnership of mutual Christian faith and life. It is upon Philemon's acceptance of this fellowship that Paul bases his appeal. The form of the conditional sentence assumes the reality of that fact. Philemon's refusal of Paul's request would be inconsistent with his acknowledgment of this partnership."³⁵

D. PAUL'S OFFER 18-20

- v. 18 Paul then hastened to remove a possible obstacle. Pilfering was common among slaves (cf. Titus 2:10). Paul seemed to be unaware of anything specific that Onesimus owed Philemon, but he offered to pay whatever might be indebted if such a condition existed. Onesimus may have stolen from Philemon,³⁶ or he may simply have run away and so caused his

³²Alexander Maclaren, *The Expositor's Bible*, 6:301.

³³William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, p. 321.

³⁴O'Brien, p. 298. Cf. 1 Cor. 7:20, 24.

³⁵Hiebert, p. 117. Darrell L. Bock, "A Theology of Paul's Prison Epistles," in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, p. 307, wrote that fellowship is the major concept in this epistle.

³⁶G. B. Caird, *Paul's Letters from Prison*, pp. 222-23; Lightfoot, p. 341.

master inconvenience.³⁷ "Charge that to my account" means the same as "impute it to me." Paul's offer is a beautiful illustration of biblical forgiveness based on imputation (cf. Rom. 5:13; 2 Cor. 5:21).³⁸

- v. 19 Evidently Paul wrote this whole epistle with his own hand rather than through a secretary as was his custom.³⁹ Alternatively Paul may have signed his name at this point and then personally wrote out his guarantee.⁴⁰ Paul reminded Philemon of his own debt to the apostle (v. 19). Apparently Philemon had become a Christian through Paul's ministry either directly or indirectly.

The phrase in parentheses in this verse is a rhetorical device called *paraleipsis*. In it a writer states that he is reluctant to say something that he does nevertheless say. It is a way of inserting information delicately.⁴¹

- v. 20 By receiving and forgiving Onesimus Philemon would be repaying Paul and encouraging him. Another play on words occurs in that the Greek word translated "benefit" is the root of the one translated "Onesimus." One writer rendered this clause, "Let me get help as well as you get Helpful."⁴²

E. PAUL'S CONFIDENCE 21

"Obedience" is a strong word to use to describe acquiescence to a request from a friend. Perhaps by using it Paul indirectly reminded Philemon of his apostolic authority. Doing more than Paul requested probably implied Philemon's wholehearted, enthusiastic acceptance of Onesimus rather than just compliance with the letter of Paul's request.

"Freedom of slaves, like all freedom, must come from the heart of Christ-inspired men. Under this compulsion, slavery must ultimately wilt and die. That it took so long for it to do so, that slavery was practiced by many Christians in America until the Civil War ended it, that it is still, in one form or another, in the world today—these humbling facts show the tenacity of socially entrenched sin and the failure of Christendom to deal with it. While all ethical behavior for Christians should arise out of love, rather than regulation or constraint, yet it takes fully committed disciples to put it into practice."⁴³

³⁷F. F. Bruce, *Paul. Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, p. 400; Ralph P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 167; Lohse, p. 204.

³⁸See Robert G. Gromacki, *Stand Perfect in Wisdom: An Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*, pp. 200-201.

³⁹Cf. Hiebert, p. 119; Kent, p. 175.

⁴⁰Dunn, p. 339.

⁴¹Hiebert, p. 120. Cf. Marvin R. Vincent, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians and to Philemon*, p. 190.

⁴²Handley C. G. Moule, *Colossian and Philemon Studies*, p. 311.

⁴³Rupprecht, p. 457.

"As we read between the lines it seems best to interpret the 'more' as a desire of the apostle for Onesimus to be returned to him for the service of the gospel . . ."44

IV. CONCLUDING MATTERS 22-25

v. 22 Paul expected release from his house arrest in Rome soon (cf. Acts 23:29; 24:13; 25:25-27; 26:31-32; Phil. 2:24). This happened, but we have no record that Paul did or did not fulfill his desire to visit Philemon. The prospect of this visit would have motivated Philemon further to accept Onesimus. Paul believed the prayers of the Christians in Philemon's church could result in his being released.

"Paul held that prayer had an objective as well as a subjective value. He believed in prayer as a mighty working force in the spiritual universe. As such he sought and valued the prayers of others on his behalf, and he himself faithfully exercised such intercession for the saints."⁴⁵

vv. 23-24 Epaphras was the evangelist of the Lycus Valley and a leading man in the church at Colossae, probably the leading pastor (Col. 1:7). He was probably not in prison with Paul (Col. 1:8; cf. 4:10). "Fellow-prisoner" is more likely a figurative expression referring to the Christian's spiritual warfare. Paul mentioned his other four companions in Colossians 4:10 and 14.

v. 25 The final benediction is typical of Paul. The "your" is plural in the Greek text and refers to the whole church in Philemon's house. This is the only occurrence of *pneuma* ("spirit") in the epistle, and it clearly refers to the human spirit.

What happened as a result of this letter? Did Philemon forgive Onesimus? We have no direct record of his response to this letter. However the fact that Philemon preserved this epistle and allowed it to circulate among the churches strongly suggests that he did behave as Paul had requested. In Colossians 4:9 Paul referred to Onesimus as "our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of your number," which would have encouraged reception of him in Colossae. According to Christian tradition Onesimus later became bishop of Ephesus.⁴⁶ However, another Onesimus may have been this bishop.⁴⁷ Later church legends also identified Philemon as a bishop of Colossae.⁴⁸

⁴⁴O'Brien, p. 306. Cf. Bruce, p. 406.

⁴⁵Hiebert, pp. 123-24.

⁴⁶O'Brien, p. 265.

⁴⁷Fitzmyer, p. 15.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 86.

Paul's bringing pressures of various kinds to bear on Philemon to respond as he requested while verbally appealing in humble terms has created problems for some students of this epistle. Was Paul being manipulative? Was he guilty of emotional blackmail? I do not think so. It would have been obvious to Philemon, as it is to us, that Paul definitely wanted a certain response to this letter. Nevertheless it would have been equally clear that Paul was making his appeal on the basis of love rather than apostolic authority.

"Those who see in Paul's earlier appeal a form of emotional manipulation should also acknowledge here [in v. 14] that Paul in effect confesses his vulnerability and complete dependence on Philemon's goodwill. In the social relationships of a church existing in an unequal society there is a particular responsibility on the part of the powerful to act toward others in a spirit of goodness rather than standing on their rights."⁴⁹

It is not inconsistent with love to motivate by pointing out obligations, opportunities, and consequences.⁵⁰

⁴⁹Dunn, p. 333.

⁵⁰See the fine article by Charles L. Schenck Jr., "Paul's Epistle on Human Rights," *His* 26:8 (May 1966):1-4, which the author wrote during the civil rights movement in the United States. O'Brien also argued that Paul was not manipulating Philemon but giving him freedom to make up his own mind.

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