

Paul's Letter to Philemon

1:1-25 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved *brother* and fellow worker,

Paul introduces himself as a prisoner of Jesus Christ. It is interesting that he uses the word "prisoner" because it is not normally used in the New Testament. It literally means to bind or be in bonds. At the time of this writing Paul was most likely under house arrest. For this reason the word "prisoner" is used to provide an effective picture for the purpose of this letter.

Paul is accompanied by Timothy. It is quite possible that Timothy is acting as scribe while Paul dictates this letter. Paul, however, will pick up the pen to write one line at the end. It will be the words found in verse 19, "*I, Paul, write this in my own hand: I will repay it.*" Timothy is one of Paul's sons in the faith and, as such, we find him were ever Paul is or everywhere Paul has sent him. Paul will address two letters to Timothy shortly as a son in the faith, but also a new pastor of a local church.

The letter is directed to Philemon. Philemon probably lived in Colossae and at sometime in his life came to trust in the Lord under Paul's ministry. In addition, this letter is to the person who owns the home where the church meets as we will see in the next verse. With that in mind, it is possible that this is the same church that Paul addressed in his letter to the Colossians.

2and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

The letter is also addressed to Apphia and Archippus. Apphia is probably a faithful woman in the church. Archippus is also a faithful and prominent member of the church in Colossae. But since Paul calls Archippus "our fellow-soldier," it is reasonable to assume that he might be the pastor of that local church.

The letter is further addressed to "the church at your house." Philemon had opened his home. This was not just a member; he was one who loved Christ enough to open his home weekly to the worship and praise of the Almighty.

3Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace and peace! These words are in the introduction or closing of each letter that Paul writes. It is a hallmark trait of his writing. Grace is the gift that is given through the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ. However, it would not have been possible had the Father not sent Him. God the Father acted to provide a way by which a lost and sinful man might approach the Holy and sinless God.

It is interesting to note that "peace" always follows "grace" in Paul's writings. That is important because true peace comes when true grace has been experienced. Turmoil will cease when grace is present and God's control ushers in a peace that cannot be explained.

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

Paul has a deep gratitude to God for Philemon and those with him. It is a ritual for Paul to pray for Philemon and the church in his home. He says he is “always, remembering you in my prayers.” What a thrill to have someone praying for you “always.” But the word “prayers” used here is actually more than just praying or communicating with God. It carries along with it the thought of a continual state of true and actual worship. Every time Paul is in worship, Paul remembers them in his prayers.

5 because I hear of your love, and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all the saints;

Why does Paul remember the members of the church in Philemon’s home? The very things that cause Paul to remember the church in Philemon’s home is their love and faith. Of course, this love involves the benevolent love that can only come from those who know God because it is God’s love manifested through them. Their faith was also based on their reliance upon Christ for salvation. This faith was not only expressed to Christ but also to all the “saints,” those who have put their faith and trust in the Lord Jesus.

6 and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ’s sake.

Their faith involved a partnership with “knowledge of every good thing for the sake of Christ.” It’s a joining together, a sharing between the holy ones, the saints. The word “effective” in this translation carries the idea of a “mill in working order.” Just as a mill churns out a product in an efficient manner, so too the faith of these saints works effectively in discerning the knowledge of those things that lead a person to Christ and causes a person to stay in Christ.

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.

Paul’s great joy stems from hearing the news of Philemon’s activities. The effect of Philemon’s love has made its way to the ears of Paul in his prison cell. Paul’s heart or emotional nature has been stirred because when the children of God come in contact with Philemon, they are refreshed. That is, they have found a place of safety, comfort, and relief, both temporary and, in this great picture, eternally.

8 Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you *to do* that which is proper,

What is Paul really saying when he says “although I have the full right in Christ to order you?” Is he meaning that based on his position and present authority, it is within his power to demand that Philemon do as he asks? Yes that is what he is saying. But Paul was quick to state that he would rather “appeal” to Philemon to do what “is proper.” Paul wants Philemon to come up to the requirements and do what would be fitting in this circumstance.

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—

Paul appeal's to Philemon for "love's sake." This is God's love. It is an unselfish love that only God possesses. But because of the divine presence of the Holy Spirit; we are partakers in this Godly unselfish love. Here Paul is appealing to Philemon for the sake of God's love that is manifested through each individual Christian.

Before Paul actually states the context of his appeal, he qualifies his reasons. In using the phrase "Since I am such a person as Paul," Paul is directing his attention to his own character. Paul was a zealot persecutor of the Christian, gloriously saved and placed under the meekness of God. Paul has placed himself under the direction of God and therefore has been used mightily of God. "The aged," let us know that Paul is well into the later part of life. In order for Paul to be a rabbi he began his training at 25 years of age. At age 30 he assumed a rabbi position. Since Paul was at least 30 years of age in 30 AD, he is now at least 62 and significantly older. When Paul states "Now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus," it shows not only Paul's actual imprisonment but also his place in Christ. Paul had been captured by Christ's influence and will. "I'm an aged person captured and directed by Christ." This is the thought Paul wants Philemon to remember before he states the appeal.

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

Paul's appeal is for a "child". Philemon is not his physical child, but a spiritual child "begotten in my imprisonment". The child's name is Onesimus and he was led to the Lord by Paul while they were in prison. By chance Onesimus had ended up in the same Roman jail as Paul or perhaps it was in one of the prisons where Paul was kept during his transmittal to Rome. In any case, it was in prison that Paul persuades Onesimus to come to the faith in Christ Jesus.

The name "Onesimus" means "useful". In the following verses Paul will use a play on his name to prove his point. This is no coincidence. It was a divine encounter (1:15).

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

Onesimus was "formerly useless" to Philemon. The word picture for the word "useless" is "spoiled milk". Formerly Onesimus was like spoiled milk to Philemon, but now he is "useful both to you and to me". What was once like "spoiled milk" is now sweet, wholesome, and useful again. Onesimus is useful not only to his owner, Philemon, but also his father in the faith, Paul.

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

Paul has sent Onesimus back to Philemon. The slave is sent back to the owner. How Onesimus ended up in Rome is not known. He could have been a runaway slave. He could have stolen from Philemon and fled to some supposed heap of freedom. Perhaps Philemon sold him to dispose of him in a way that would have caused the faithful meeting with Paul. Whatever the case, Onesimus is now returning to Philemon at Paul's instruction with a specific purpose. Paul's sending of Onesimus is like "sending my very heart". This was painful to Paul. All of Paul's emotions go with Onesimus. In a way this is not only Onesimus that is returning, but it is Paul also.

13whom I wished to keep with me, that in your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel;

Paul did not want to lose Onesimus. He wanted to keep him as minister, ministering to Paul himself. As a slave Onesimus belonged to Philemon, but as a Christian brother, he could attend to the needs of Paul.

14but without your consent I did not want to do anything, that your goodness should not be as it were by compulsion, but of your own free will.

Paul desires Philemon's approval. As carefully as possible, Paul appeals to Philemon's goodness. The word "goodness" is the word "usefulness". Paul is appealing to Philemon's usefulness. Remember in 1:4-7 how Paul thanks God in prayer for the things Philemon has done. This is Philemon's "usefulness". Paul wants Philemon to respond not out of compulsion or duty, but out of his "own free will". In this sentence Paul is appealing to the very character of Philemon. Paul does not expect Philemon to change character now. Paul expects Philemon's "free will" to be consistent with past actions.

15For perhaps he was for this reason parted *from you* for a while, that you should have him back forever

There must have been a reason for the separation of Onesimus from Philemon. Whatever caused the separation was for a divine purpose. Here the purpose was Onesimus' personal salvation, becoming a brother in Christ. Onesimus had been away from Philemon for a while but now he is back. Philemon not only has Onesimus while on earth, but forever and ever in eternity as a member of God's family.

16no 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.

Onesimus is no longer a slave, and he is to be more to Philemon than a slave. He is a beloved brother. "Beloved" carries along the idea of being loved of God, with God's unselfish love. He is now a loved brother in Christ. He's now useful not only in the flesh that is here on earth, but "in the Lord", eternally.

17If then you regard me a partner, accept him as *you would me*.

Paul at this point presents a direct request based on his own relationship with Philemon. He says, "If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me". Can you imagine the implications of this statement? If you accept me—accept him. If you do not accept him, then you do not accept me. Paul based everything on his personal relationship with Philemon for Onesimus' sake. If Philemon will open his heart to Paul, Paul now wants Philemon to open his heart to Onesimus, as if Onesimus' heart was Paul's own heart.

18But if he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account;

"Has Onesimus wronged you Philemon? Look at it as if it was I who wronged you, and accept him". Paul is saying "Blame me for his wrong. Let me be the scapegoat if he has

offended you". Paul goes on to say, "If he owes you anything, charge that to my account, I'll pay his debt", Paul cares for Onesimus so much that he will pay "whatever he owes!" This is true love! A love so unselfish, a love that only God can truly show, but because of the divine presence of the Holy Spirit in his life, Paul can show this great love to Onesimus. Jesus is the example, dying to pay the debt He did not owe. All our debt was charged to our Lord's account at the point of our salvation. So here, because of the new change in Onesimus' life, Paul says "charge his past to my account".

19I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (lest I should mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well).

Paul is so serious about this letter and his appeal to Philemon that he takes the pen from Timothy's hand to write a sentence himself. He says, "I will repay" it lest I should mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well. Think of it like this: "I'll pay for Onesimus' infractions, but remember also what you owe me before you tally the bill". It is Paul's letter of guarantee, written in Paul's own handwriting.

20Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.

Paul described in 1:4-7 how Philemon had faithfully and lovingly refreshed the saints. Now Philemon is asked to also refresh Paul's heart by sending back Onesimus. Paul would benefit greatly from Onesimus' ministry and Philemon has the authority to make it happen. Perhaps on this sentence we might draw the conclusion that Onesimus was a runaway slave. That might be true. But perhaps since Onesimus once belonged to Philemon, Paul, out of integrity, is returning the changed slave to his friend who once owned him, to allow his friend to send him back to Paul who needs him in his prison cell.

21Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say.

Based on Philemon's character, his love, and faith, Paul had every confidence that his request would be fulfilled. The NASB uses the word "obedience". The use of this word in this type of context is unknown in classical Greek. However, in the New Testament Greek, it generally refers to "willingly subjection" to God's will. Specifically it is referring to and appealing to one general characteristic of the Christian faith. Paul knew with confidence that this request was God's will. Paul also knew that Philemon would recognize that it was God's will and would readily subject himself to the full and complete appeal. Philemon would go the second mile. Onesimus would be warmly received and sent back to Paul.

22And at the same time also prepare me a lodging; for I hope that through your prayers I shall be given to you.

Paul ends the formal part of the letter with another request. He says, "Prepare me a lodging". Paul is in prison, but he plans to go to Colossae to be with his friend Philemon. He also asks Philemon to pray. It is Paul's "hope that through your prayers I shall be given to you". Could Paul's release be predicated on Philemon's prayers? This is another important characteristic of the Christian faith. Prayering constantly and consistently, produces changing results. Paul is counting on Philemon's prayer.

23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you,

In Paul's hallmark style, he tells the reader who is gathered around him in his prison. First there is Epaphras, his "fellow prisoner." In Colossians 4 we learn that it was Epaphras who brought the news of Philemon's love and faith for the saints to Paul first. His testimony caused the writing of the book of Colossians and probably this letter too.

24 *as do* Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers.

Next there is Mark, Aristarches, Demas and Luke, all fellow workers. Mark of course is John Mark who will write the Gospel, and Luke is the Dr. Luke who will write the largest bulk of the New Testament in two books, (The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles.) Luke is the silent companion of Paul throughout his travels. Luke first traveled with Peter and then with Paul. The Book of Acts compares the ministry of Peter with the ministry of Paul. A careful reading will reveal that every act by Peter is accompanied by a similar act in Paul's ministry. At the time of the writing of this letter, Demas is a faithful fellow laborer of Paul. Several years later, Paul will write a second letter to Timothy in which he will painfully state, "*For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica.*" 2 Tim. 4:10

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

Here, in the characteristic style of Paul's writing he says "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit". This grace is a gift from God. The down payment or earnest payment of this gift is the Holy Spirit who indwells every believer. It is Paul's logo which can be found in some form at the end of every letter written by Paul. It was the seal that let everyone know that despite in whose handwriting the letter was penned down, the logo stamped the fact that it was from Paul.