# Theology  

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## Introduction to Philemon

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## Background

None of Paul's letters receives less attention than Philemon. Yet none more clearly illustrates the gospel.

Philemon was penned to an individual, unlike Romans through Thessalonians. It concerns personal rather than church matters, unlike Timothy and Titus. It is the shortest of Paul's extant letters. It thus stands unique.

Philemon is one of Paul's prison epistles, along with Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. ${ }^{1}$ Among these four, Colossians and Philemon stand in particularly close relation. ${ }^{2}$ The imprisonment is probably Paul's house arrest described in Acts 28, thus dating these letters around $\mathrm{AD} 60-61$. This is an earlier imprisonment from the one alluded to six years later in 2 Timothy. ${ }^{3}$ In the earlier letters Paul expected-and was apparently grantedrelease, but in 2 Timothy the apostle knew that his martyrdom drew near (4:6). This time he was not under relatively comfortable house arrest but chained (2:9) in a cold dungeon (4:13).

[^0]Paul's imprisonment alluded to in 2 Timothy, however, does not concern us here. During his earlier Acts 28 house arrest, the apostle apparently met a runaway slave named Onesimus and led him to faith in Christ (see Phm 10). Possibly Onesimus had stolen from his owner as well as running away (Phm 18). But even if he had not, he still owed his master Philemon the labor he would have rendered all the time he was AWOL. In first-century Rome slaves were considered the property of their masters, who could execute them with impunity for such crimes. Nevertheless, the right thing for the new Christian Onesimus to do was return to his owner, despite this death threat which hung over his head. So Paul wrote the short letter in our Bible to Philemon to urge him to receive and forgive his slave.

## Brief Commentary

Paul Greets his Readers (1-3). Paul is going to make an entreaty in this letter, so he does not begin by using his authoritative title "apostle." He is of course an apostle. And he has no qualms about calling himself such and asserting his Christ-given authority where necessary. ${ }^{4}$ But because in the present case he will appeal to Philemon's heart, he lays his authority aside. He refers to himself as a "prisoner," a title more likely to elicit Philemon's sympathetic attention to his request.

The letter is addressed to Philemon (a believing Colossian slave-owner), to Apphia (possibly Philemon's wife), to Archippus (whom Paul calls his "fellow soldier"), ${ }^{5}$ and to the church which met in his house.

Paul Expresses Thanks and Prayers for his Readers (4-7). The seasoned apostle knows the difference between genuine praise and

[^1]flattery. He eschews the latter ${ }^{6}$ but is never embarrassed to offer the former. ${ }^{7}$ How encouraging to have a mentor genuinely thank God for one's fellowship, faith, and service! And how it prepares the heart to receive further counsel and consider new opportunities. Paul's praise in these verses is substantive enough to be warm and personal, but not so effusive that it appears contrived or manipulative.

Philemon is in Paul's prayers: first, the apostle hears of Philemon's faith in Christ and love for the saints ${ }^{8}$ and so gives thanks; second, he asks that Philemon thoroughly grasp ${ }^{9}$ every good thing we have in Christ, so that the sharing ( $\kappa$ olv $\omega v i \alpha$ ) of his faith may come to be ( $\gamma \varepsilon \nu \eta \tau \alpha \downarrow$ ) effective ( $\varepsilon v \varepsilon \rho \gamma \eta)$ ). I

[^2]suggest that this is the preferable understanding of this verse. Paul prays that Philemon's increased understanding cause the sharing of his faith to be more fruitful. The NIV inverts this sequence, so that Philemon's sharing of his faith increases his understanding. While both are true-witness increases our knowledge, and greater knowledge makes our witness more effective-it is the latter interpretation that better fits both the grammar of this verse ${ }^{10}$ as well as the general Pauline sequence that knowledge precedes fruitfulness. ${ }^{11}$

Paul concludes his praise of Philemon by telling him how much joy and encouragement he has brought his old friend, by calling him "brother," and by noting how he has refreshed other believers.

Paul Requests that Philemon Receive and Forgive Onesimus (8-22). The apostle will not use his authority to force Philemon's hand. Rather, he appeals to the slave owner on the basis of (1) love, (2) his own advanced age, (3) his pitiable status as a prisoner of Christ, (4) his relationship to Onesimus as "father," and (5) his warm attachment to Onesimus ("my very heart," v. 12). His request is bold. Runaway slaves enjoyed no legal protection. When found they were often beaten unmercifully or assigned to tasks which would greatly reduce their life expectancy. By asking that Onesimus be restored without punishment Paul is asking Philemon to contravene Roman culture. Such a step would grant unaccustomed human dignity to slaves, and would challenge prevailing economic and social views. Nevertheless, this is precisely what Paul asks.

He appeals "for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains." "Onesimus" ('O $\nu \dot{\eta} \sigma \iota \mu \circ \varsigma$ )-meaning "useful" or "profitable"-was a common name for slaves.

[^3]"Useful" was formerly "useless" ( $\propto \chi \rho \eta \sigma \tau \circ \nu)$ but now that he is a Christian has become "useful" ( $\varepsilon \cup v \chi \rho \eta \sigma \tau 0 \nu$ ). The mild humor of this play on words was designed to further incline the offended Philemon to hear Paul's request.

The prisoner would like to keep the now useful Onesimus as his aide, but prefers that any good Philemon might do should be done freely rather than under coercion. So he sends him back. Verses 15 and 16 draw together pairs of opposites-separated but now have him back; for a little time but now for good; not as a slave but now as a dear brother. These opposites illustrate the good changes brought about when people believe the gospel.

After thus carefully preparing the soil of Philemon's heart, Paul finally voices his request in verse 17. All that has gone before has merely set the stage for this climactic appeal. If you consider me a partner, ${ }^{12}$ Paul says, welcome him as you would welcome me. Because of the vast difference in status between slaves and their masters, and thus how the culture assumed an aggrieved slaveholder would treat his runaway, Paul's is an astounding request. By granting such humanity and dignity to a repentant slave, it flies in the face of and condemns the inhumane values of the day. Christian faith often does that.

But what about Onesimus' debt? That is settled as well-it is to be charged to Paul's account. Then as now a signed debtor statement carried great legal weight, and the apostle personally pens that he will repay it: But of course, since Paul had led him to faith in Christ, Philemon owed the apostle his very self. Through the gospel brought by Paul Philemon's debt of sin and damnation has been paid; how then can he extract from the apostle this

[^4]assumed monetary debt? Clearly, Paul is asking Philemon to bear the brunt of Onesimus' wrong and forego any compensation.

The difficult request has been made. Philemon weighs Paul's words. As he stands, letter in hand, returned runaway at his feet, Paul urges him to step over the line: "Yes, brother, may I enjoy benefit from you in the Lord." The word translated "may enjoy benefit" comes from the same root as the name Onesimus, ${ }^{13}$ and continues the apostle's playful use of the slave's name. Further, Philemon has refreshed the hearts of the saints (v. 7); how can he fail to do the same for the one who introduced him to Christ (v. 20)? Nudging him further, Paul expresses his confidence that Philemon will do not only what he asked, but even more. ${ }^{14}$ If Philemon still hesitated to comply, he soon knew that he would have to personally explain to Paul why he did not, since the prisoner hoped to soon visit him.

Did Philemon forgive Onesimus as Paul requested? We don't know. But the fact that this letter was included in the Bible suggests that he did. Interestingly, a few decades later Ignatius warmly refers to the bishop of nearby ${ }^{15}$ Ephesus: ". . . Onesimus, a man of inexpressible love, and who is your bishop, whom I pray you by Jesus Christ to love, and that you would all seek to be like him. Blessed be God, who has granted unto you, who are yourselves so excellent, to obtain such an excellent bishop." ${ }^{16}$ It is interesting to speculate that the forgiven slave went on to serve the church in a worthy and significant way.

[^5]Paul Passes on the Greetings of Others (23-25). Paul closes his letter by passing on the greetings of other believers. Epaphras had evangelized Colossae and continued to pray for the church's maturity. ${ }^{17}$ Mark, whom Paul earlier had rejected as a member of the second missionary journey, ${ }^{18}$ is once again considered one of the apostle's "fellow workers." Aristarchus was a Thessalonian who was arrested in the riot at Ephesus, and who accompanied Paul in his journeys to Jerusalem and Rome. ${ }^{19}$ Demas, though called here Paul's fellow worker, later deserted him because of his love for the present world. ${ }^{20}$ Luke was the Gentile physician who authored Luke and Acts.

## Theological and Practical Counsel

## Illustrating the Gospel.



As the diagram above illustrates, the relationship between Paul and Philemon was one of mutual partnership and respect. On the other hand Philemon was Onesimus' owner and master; Onesimus had wronged his master, making him liable to death at his hand.

[^6]
## Offers to intercede and pay debt.



Exercises faith in the acceptability of the payment and intercession.

However, Paul offered Onesimus to intercede with Philemon on his behalf and pay his debt. Onesimus then took his life in his hands and trusted in Paul-that his intercession would prove acceptable to Philemon and his life would be-spared-and returned to his master.


Paul requested that Philemon make two simultaneous transfers. First, Philemon charges Onesimus' debt to Paul's account: "If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back. . . ." Second, the slave owner takes Paul's status and grants it to Onesimus: "Welcome him as you would me." Although in the letter this status request precedes the one regarding debt, logically it follows the settlement of the debt question.

This exchange mirrors the redemption sinners find in Christ.


The relationship between God and Christ is one of profound oneness and partnership. Jesus himself spoke of this when he asserted, "I and the Father are one (John 10:30)." The two are not identical, but intimately and inseparably united. The underlying relationship between God and each human is that of creator and hence master. But since all in Adam are sinners by nature and by choice, they stand before him as debtors threatened with eternal death.

Offers to intercede and pay debt.


Exercises faith in the acceptability of the payment and intercession.

Out of mercy, Christ intercedes for each sinner. He first offers to pay the sin-debt of each: Christ came "to give his life as a ransom for many"; ${ }^{21}$ "God made him who had no $\sin$ to be $\sin$ for

[^7]us" (2 Cor 5:21); "Jesus . . . suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone" (Heb 2:9); "he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed . . . Yahweh has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa 53:5-6). Jesus likened salvation to release from debt. ${ }^{22}$ Having paid the sinner's debt, he further offers to confer on him his own status before the Father: "so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" ( 2 Cor 5:21); "It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God-that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption" (1 Cor $1: 30$ ); we are "in Christ" and authorized to pray "in Jesus' name." What is required of the sinner is that he or she exercise faith in the relationship between Christ and the Father, and in the acceptability of the payment Christ has made, and approach the Father in Jesus' name for the promised forgiveness and new relationship as son or daughter.

release is made possible. 1 Tim 2:6 uses the term $\alpha v \tau i \lambda u \tau \rho o v . ~ B o t h ~$ imply payment. See also 1 Cor 6:20; 1 Pet 1:18f.
${ }^{22}$ Matt 18:21-27; Luke 7:40-50; Matt 6:12.

When such faith is exercised, God judicially transfers the sinner's debt to Christ and Christ's righteousness and acceptability to the sinner.

If Philemon obeyed Paul's request, his forgiveness and acceptance of Onesimus would illustrate the gospel to all who came to know about it. It would cost Philemon to forgo his "rights"-both in lost finances and in lost opportunity for personal revenge. But his life would forever after provide a living example of how Jesus heals relationships. The New Testament frequently urges Christians to similarly "act out" the gospel in their relations with others. ${ }^{23}$

Diplomacy. There are those who believe that power and position give those who possess them the right to run roughshod over all "beneath" them. That it is theirs to command and others' to obey. That the higher one rises in rank the more one impresses others by ruling through decree. Philemon negates such assumptions.

Paul was an apostle commissioned by the risen Christ. Yet here he lays aside that authority to entreat an old friend. He will not force Philemon's hand; he declines to command him. He will appeal based on the nature of the gospel and on the relationship they enjoy. In this way, any good that Philemon does will be his own choice and therefore commendable. Philemon will get the credit, not Paul. At the same time Paul has left himself vulnerable: Philemon could ignore his request and leave him no further leverage to force the issue. Paul's "leadership" could then be discredited. But he was willing to make himself appear weak so that Philemon by his free magnanimous deed could appear strong.

Thus the letter is valuable for not only teaching what is the right thing to do, but also how to approach people to do it. Because Paul's praise of Philemon was deserved and sincere, it is not toady ingratiation. A strong leader feels free to praise his people when it is proper and build them up; he does not exalt himself over them and push them down. How much more smoothly many churches

[^8]would function if its leaders would employ the statesmanship and diplomacy evidenced in Paul's letter to Philemon.

Affirming a substitutionary sense to hyper. The Greek New Testament often uses the preposition hyper ( $0 \pi \varepsilon \rho$ ) to speak of Christ's dying for the world. ${ }^{24}$ It is sometimes alleged that this preposition means only "for the benefit of, on behalf of," and never bears the substitutionary sense "in place of, instead of." Thus Christ's death would somehow benefit the world without having been made in its place. However, Paul uses hyper in Philemon 13 when he says, "I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me. . . ." Clearly hyper is used here in a substitutionary sense. Onesimus's serving Paul would in no way benefit Philemon; it would, in fact, inconvenience him by depriving him of the services of his slave. Paul is implying that, had he had the chance, Philemon would have personally served Paul in prison. But since he is not there, Onesimus can serve in his place.

Therefore, although we neither can nor should compel hyper to be understood substitutionally every time it speaks of the death of Christ, that meaning must be entertained as at least lexically possible and contributory.

Christian Holism and Social Issues. An individual's Christian faith should influence every area of his or her life. The Bible does not encourage us to "believe" our faith only in some isolated compartment of our minds, but rather to allow it to shape how we think and act toward every issue. Thus Philemon's faith, not current Roman practice, should determine how he treats his returned runaway slave Onesimus. Christian faith is holistic in the sense that it should influence or direct every aspect of a believer's life. This short letter illustrates that truth.

But Philemon also illustrates the New Testament pattern toward confronting social ills in the larger society. Slavery-

[^9]etc.
especially as practiced in pagan societies unregulated by the Mosaic Law-is demeaning to humans made in the image of God, exploitative, violent, and brutal. It has been for centuries a scourge crying for eradication.

Nevertheless, the New Testament as a whole and Philemon in particular says nothing about Christian responsibility to overthrow the system of slavery. No protests are organized, no letters written, no committees formed, no protest made to the government. Paul simply says, "Philemon, treat your slave as aChristian brother." Elsewhere he urges slaves to serve faithfully, and slave owners to treat their slaves fairly. ${ }^{25}$ Christians are to act in every area of their lives as Christians, and the church is to conduct itself in every way as Christians, but society at large is never the focus of New Testament admonition. Jesus did not himself attempt or direct others to correct pagan society, nor did the apostles. We are salt and light which show by example and create thirst, not whips and scourges to compel the unconvinced. Paul makes it clear that the church's business is the church, not civil government: "What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside" (1 Cor 5:12-13).

Had Christians campaigned against slavery-or any other ill in Roman society-it would have confused the gospel. Apart from God's grace, it may have proved suicidal if slaves were thereby encouraged to revolt. The Christian method is to change people's hearts and then teach the converted (individual and church) how that change should manifest itself in every relationship. The New Testament teaches discipling individuals and churches, and knows nothing of discipling nations as nations. Although Christians can and should work for social good, Philemon reminds us of our primary method and mandate.

[^10]
## Appendix: Chiastic Arrangement of Philemon ${ }^{26}$

A 1-3 Epistolary. $\left\{\begin{array}{c}\text { a } 1,2 \text { Names of those with Philemon. } \\ \text { b } 3 \text { Benediction. }\end{array}\right.$
B 4-7 Prayers of Paul for Philemon. Philemon's hospitality. C 8 Authority.

D 9, 10- Supplication.
E-10 Onesimus, a convert of Paul's.

> F 11, 12- Wrong done by Onesimus. Amends made by Paul.

G-12 To receive Onesimus the same as receiving Paul.

H 13, 14 Paul and Philemon.
I 15 Onesimus.
I 16- Onesimus.
H - 16 Paul and Philemon.
G 17 To receive Onesimus the same as receiving Paul.

F 18, 19- Wrong done by Onesimus. Amends made by Paul.

E-19 Philemon a convert of Paul's.
D 20 Supplication.
$C 21$ Authority.
B 22 Philemon's hospitality. Prayers of Philemon for Paul.
A 23-25 Epistolary. $\left\{\begin{array}{c}a \\ \text { 23, } 24 \\ b 25\end{array}\right.$ Names of those with Paul.

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[^17]
[^0]:    ${ }^{1}$ See Eph 3:1; 4:1; 6:20; Phil 1:13-14; Col 4:10; Phm 1, 23.
    ${ }^{2}$ See references to Epaphras in Col 1:7; 4:12; and Phm 23; to Archippus in Col 4:17 and Phm 2; to Luke and Demas in Col 4:14 and Phm 24; and to .Mark and Aristarchus in Col 4:10 and Phm 24. Onesimus-the slave who is the subject of the letter to Philemon-is one of the bearers of both Colossians (4:9) and Philemon (12). These two letters were apparently written and sent at the same time.
    ${ }^{3}$ See 1:16-17; 2:9; 4:6-8, 13.

[^1]:    ${ }^{4}$ Paul employs the title "apostle" in the greetings of all his NT epistles except Philippians, Thessalonians, and Philemon. His tone is unapologetically strident throughout the letter to the Galatians, and he threatens to use authority in 2 Cor 13:10.
    ${ }^{5}$ In Col 4:17 Paul urges Archippus to "complete the work [he has] received in the Lord."

[^2]:    ${ }^{6} 1$ Thess 2:5.
    ${ }^{7}$ Paul typically begins his letters with thanks for the recipients, or at least includes commendation somewhere within them. He does this even for churches he has not met (Romans, Colossians) and those beset by problems ( 1 Corinthians). This pattern causes the letter to the Galatianswho were in danger of deserting the gospel for the law-to stand out in contrast.
    ${ }^{8}$ Literally "your love and faith which you have in the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints" ( $\sigma 0 \cup \tau \eta \nu \dot{\alpha} \alpha \gamma \alpha \pi \eta \nu \kappa \alpha \lambda \tau \eta \nu \pi i \sigma \tau \iota \nu, \eta \nu \varepsilon \chi \varepsilon \iota \varsigma$
     and other translations view this verse as a chiasm, or an $a b: b a$ arrangement. Thus the "love" is shown toward "the saints," and the "faith" is placed in "the Lord Jesus." Chiasm is a frequent literary device in the scriptures. In fact, the whole letter to Philemon may be viewed chiastically. See Appendix.
    ${ }^{9}$ Although $\varepsilon \pi i \gamma \nu \omega \sigma_{l} \varsigma$ and $\varepsilon \pi i \gamma \imath \nu \omega \sigma \kappa \omega$ are sometimes synonymous with $\gamma \nu \omega \bar{\omega} t \varsigma$ and $\gamma \iota \nu \omega \sigma \kappa \omega$, the force of the root is on other occasions strengthened by the addition of the preposition $\varepsilon \pi^{\prime}$. In such cases, the verb signifies know exactly, completely, through and through [BAG] or to possess more or less definite information about, possibly with a degree of thoroughness or competence - 'to know about, to know definitely about' [Louw-Nida]. Such is the force here. Certainly Philemon knows something of the good things we have in Christ; Paul prays that he enjoy a fuller, deeper grasp of these.

[^3]:    ${ }^{10}$ The NRSV, for example, preserves this sequence by translating, "I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ." The perceiving precedes and is the basis for the effectiveness of witness.
    "See, e.g., Col 1:9-12.

[^4]:    ${ }^{12}$ The word is kolv$\omega v$ bs, "companion, partner, sharer; one who participates with another in some enterprise or matter of joint concern." The idea of a common enterprise in which people jointly invest and participate, and which lies at the root of this word and its cognates, goes far beyond the purely social connotation of "fellowship" ( $\kappa 0 \imath v \omega v^{\prime} \alpha$ ) which is often found in English. Paul and Philemon were partners in believing and promoting the gospel of Christ.

[^5]:    ${ }^{13}{ }^{3} v \alpha i \mu \eta \nu$ is a $2^{\text {nd }}$ aorist middle optative form from the verb ov'iv $\eta \mu$ l, meaning in the middle voice to be the recipient of help or favor, to have profit or advantage, derive benefit, have enjoyment or delight. The optative mood was often used to express a wish or prayer.
    ${ }^{14}$ Paul perhaps hoped that Philemon would emancipate Onesimus, but never openly asked him to do that.
    ${ }^{15}$ Ephesus was about 160 km . west-northwest of Colossae in the Roman province of Asia.
    ${ }^{16}$ Ignatius to the Ephesians, ch. 1.

[^6]:    ${ }^{17} \mathrm{Col} 1: 7$; 4:12-13.
    ${ }^{18}$ Acts 15:36-41.
    ${ }^{19}$ Acts 19:28-29; 20:4; 27:2.
    ${ }^{20} 2$ Tim 4:10.

[^7]:    ${ }^{21}$ Mark 10:45, often considered to be the theme verse for this gospel. The word ransom ( $\lambda$ út $\rho \circ \mathrm{v}$ ) means price or means by which

[^8]:    ${ }^{23}$ See, e.g., Eph 4:32; 5:22, 25.

[^9]:    ${ }^{24}$ E.g., Mk 14:24; Jn 10:11, 15, 50-52; 15:13; 18:14; Rom 5:6-8;

[^10]:    ${ }^{25}$ E.g., Eph 6:5-9; Col 3:22-4:1; 1 Tim 6:1-2; Tit 2:9; 1 Pet 2:18. If a slave comes to Christ he is not to make his primary aspiration escape from slavery, but rather serve Christ where he is (1 Cor 7:21-23). One reason for this is that slaves and free are equal in Christ ( 1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:28; Col 3:11).

[^11]:    ${ }^{26}$ Adapted from E. W. Bullinger, Figures of Speech Used in the Bible Explained and Illustrated (London: Messrs. Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1898; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), 379.

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[^17]:     Used in the Bible Explained and Illustrated (London: Messrs. Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1898; reprinted., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), 379.

