

Philemon

“From Bondage to Brotherhood”

Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Restitution

Focus	Prayer of Thanksgiving	Petition for Onesimus	Promise to Philemon
Divisions	Commendation of Philemon’s Love	Intercession for Onesimus	Confidence in Philemon’s Obedience
Topics	Character of Philemon	Conversion of Onesimus	Confidence of Paul
Key Phrase	“You . . . have refreshed the hearts of the saints”	“Refresh my heart in Christ”	
	“I hear about your faith . . . and love”	“I appeal to you on the basis of love”	“Charge it to me”
Place	ROME (prison)		
Time	A.D. 60-63		

The book of Philemon is about a slave (Onesimus) who ran away from his master (Philemon). Onesimus fled to Rome where he came in contact with Paul and was saved. Paul now sends Onesimus back to Philemon with a letter which asks the master to forgive his former slave who is now his brother in Christ.

Introduction to Philemon

This brief 25-verse letter is unique in the writings of Paul. Though addressed to Philemon of Colosse, it is not, strictly speaking, a private letter as its content reveals. Yet it is occasioned by a personal problem that the Apostle hopes to resolve. The letter provides an interesting glimpse into the Apostle Paul's strategy in handling personal issues as they impact the lives of his converts. Philemon is one of the five one-chapter books of the Bible, the other four being Obadiah, 2 and 3 John, and Jude.

I. Authorship

Paul is the author of this letter (v. 1). Only the most radical and skeptical scholars have questioned its genuineness. Such critics are usually motivated by the fact that the book strongly supports the authenticity of Colossians, which they question or reject. The book, however, was unanimously affirmed by the early church. In spite of its brevity, the authenticity (that it is Pauline) and canonicity (that it belonged in our N.T. as an inspired writing) of it was never seriously questioned. Style, vocabulary, and other internal considerations are consistent with what we know of Paul.

II. Date and Location of Writing

Philemon is a prison epistle and its date and location of writing is tied to this issue. The traditional view is that the epistle was written from Rome between A.D. 60-63, and the imprisonment is that of Paul's first Roman incarceration as recorded in Acts 28:30-31. Altogether Paul penned four epistles during his first Roman imprisonment—Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Ephesians and Colossians are sometimes called twin epistles because of their similar content. Colossians and Philemon are often called sister epistles because of their common recipient and destination.

An alternate theory is that the epistle of Philemon was written either from Caesarea or Ephesus in the mid-50s. The Ephesian hypothesis has especially been attractive to some recent scholars because of its nearer proximity and therefore more convenient location to Colosse (about 100

miles). This theory also makes the return trip by Onesimus and Tychicus to Colosse easier, as well as Paul's intended forthcoming visit (v. 22). It is further argued that this scenario clears up two previously obscure appeals the Apostle made in Col. 4:16-17. Paul requested there that Colossians be read by the church at Laodicea, and of the church at Colosse he asked that "you likewise read the epistle from Laodicea" (v. 16). If this theory is correct, Philemon is the "lost" letter to the Laodiceans. Then Paul told the church at Colosse to remind Archippus to fulfill the service he received from the Lord (Col. 4:17), i.e., the freeing of Onesimus. Through both appeals Paul invited the church to intercede with the slave master to release Onesimus and return him to Paul's service.

Though an attractive alternative, this latter theory is not sufficiently strong to overturn the virtually unanimous testimony of the early church. In addition, though the Roman hypothesis makes correspondence and travel more difficult, it does not make it impossible. It is also questionable whether the Ephesian imprisonment allowed enough time for correspondence. When all things are considered, a date of A.D. 60-63 from Rome is still the most likely scenario.

III. Occasion of the Epistle

This letter is a semi-private and personal appeal by Paul to Philemon asking him to unconditionally forgive and receive back his slave Onesimus without penalty (v. 17). Before he was a slave, but now he is a beloved brother (v. 16). Paul will personally be responsible for any debts Onesimus has incurred (v. 18). We do not know why Onesimus ran away or if he took anything from his master. All we know is the conversion of Onesimus and Paul's appeal. Since a slave was subject to severe discipline for running away, even death, Paul's appeal is a kind and gracious act on behalf of Onesimus.

This epistle is also an insightful guide as to how believers might go about the task of mediating conflicts within the family of God. As an instruction manual in resolving personal difficulties between Christians, this short epistle is of great value. Tychicus probably accompanied Onesimus back to Philemon as he returned from Paul with the letter of Colossians (cf. Col. 4:7-9).

IV. Key Personalities in the Epistle

Philemon means “affectionate.” He was a citizen of Colosse. This point seems to emerge from the fact that Onesimus (Col. 4:9) and Archippus (Col. 4:17) are from Colosse. He was wealthy enough to have slaves and was converted to Christianity by Paul (v. 19). The church in Colosse met in his home (v. 2).

Onesimus means “useful” or “profitable.” There is a play on his name in verse 11. He was Philemon’s slave, who had run away only to come into contact with Paul and become a Christian (vv. 11, 16). He became close to Paul and was regarded as a valuable assistant by him (vv. 13-15).

Apphia means “endearment.” Chrysostom and Theodoret believed she was Philemon’s wife. According to tradition, she died as a martyr.

Archippus means “master of the horse” or perhaps “chief groom.” Many think he was possibly the son of Philemon and Apphia. He may have even been the pastor of the church meeting in their home (note his description in v. 2 as a “fellow soldier,” also cf. Col. 4:17).

Others mentioned in the epistle are Timothy (v. 1), Epaphras (v. 23), Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke (v. 24, cf. also 2 Tim. 4:9-11). There are a total of 11 names that appear in this short letter.

V. Social Impact

Dealing with a problem arising out of the institution of slavery, this epistle has figured prominently in debates surrounding that issue. It has been confidently appealed to both by those who sanctioned slavery as well as those who advocated its abolition. While it is true that the words of the Apostle here cannot be construed to advocate the abolition of slavery, the spirit of the epistle has definitely supported that position. The manner in which Paul treats the problem of Onesimus indicates the way in which Christianity confronted the evils of human society. To have directly denounced the institution of human slavery would have precipitated an immediate conflict between Rome and Christianity. It would have marked Christianity as being anti-social, and would have turned all the powers of the Empire against it. Instead of making a frontal attack upon the institution of slavery, Christianity inculcated a spirit of love, grace, compassion, and consideration, which ultimately

meant the death-knell of that institution. That anyone claiming the name of Jesus Christ could advocate slavery is simply another indictment of our depravity and wickedness.

VI. Structure and Key Verse

Philemon is a marvelous example of the use of “mitigated exhortation.” Indeed, as a type of hortatory (exhortation) discourse, it contains the three salient components of: (1) problem, (2) command, and (3) motivation. However, Paul mitigates the command to the final position of the text. This is borne out by the fact that there is not a single imperative in vv. 1-16, but in verses 17-20 there are three imperatives that rapidly follow one another (a fourth is in v. 22). Verse 17, therefore, is the key to the book where Paul says to Philemon, “Receive him (Onesimus) as you would receive me.” Paul employs psychological tact, while at the same time not sacrificing his apostle’s authority.

VII. Points of Interest Concerning Philemon

1. Paul’s shortest epistle (25 verses)
2. Only 335 words in the Greek text
3. Most private of all of Paul’s epistles
4. Presents a beautiful picture of the gospel by way of analogy:
 - i. All of us were once like Onesimus, runaways (sinners) from our rightful owner (God).
 - ii. Someone on our behalf has pleaded our case, even to the paying of our debt (Jesus Christ) 1 Tim. 2:5
 - iii. Through our advocate we can be restored, even to the adoption of sons!

VIII. Exegetical Insights in Philemon

1. Key Words and Their Occurrence
 - A. *Lord* (6 times: vs. 3, 5, 16, 20, 20, 25)
 - B. *Jesus* (5 times: vs. 1, 3, 5, 6, 25)
 - C. *Christ* (7 times: vs. 1, 3, 6, 8, 9, 23, 25)
 - D. *Love* (agape in some form; 5 times: vs. 1, 5, 7, 9, 16)
 - E. *Heart* (bowels, innermost being; 3 times: vs. 7, 12, 20)

F. *Prisoner* (sometimes translated “chains;” 5 times: vs. 1, 9, 10, 13; also “fellow prisoner” in vs. 23, but there it is a different Greek word.)

- In Greek there are three (possibly four) key words for love:
 - (1) *Eros*—from which we derive our word “erotic.” It speaks of sensual, physical desire for something.
 - (2) *Phileo*—which speaks of brotherly (or friendship) love one for another.
 - (3) *Agape*—a word uniquely developed in the N.T. It speaks of a sacrificial giving for the ultimate good of another. This love is not emotional or sensual; it is volitional.
 - (4) *Storge*—familial or family love.

It has been said by one that:

Eros is the *take* kind of love.

Phileo is the *give and take* kind of love.

Agape is the *give* kind of love.

2. A Key Idea

The house church—There is no evidence for church buildings of any magnitude until the third century. Interestingly, without elaborate buildings, budgets, or programs, the early church took the gospel message literally across the world with tremendous success via the hand of God. There are numerous references in the N.T. to house churches and their hosts:

Gaius at Rome (Rom. 16:23)

Nympha at Laodicea (Col. 4:15)

Aquila and Priscilla at Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:19)

Aquila and Priscilla at Rome (Rom. 16:3, 5)

Lydia at Philippi (Acts 16:15, 40)

Philemon at Colosse (Philemon 2)

Mary at Jerusalem (Acts 12:12)

Jason at Thessalonica (Acts 17:5-6)

Philemon

Paul's Greeting to Philemon **vv. 1-3**

Paul's Thanksgiving and Prayer **vv. 4-7**

Paul is always thankful v. 4a

When is Paul thankful v. 4b

When he mentions them in prayer

Reason for thanksgiving v. 5

Because he heard of their:

- 1) faith in Christ
- 2) love for the saints

Content of the prayer v. 6

For an effective sharing from faith in the context of a full knowledge of God's will for us in Christ

Reason for Paul's joy and comfort v. 7

Because of Philemon's love that refreshed the saints

Paul's Approach to the Request **vv. 8-12**

A possible basis of the request v. 8

Paul could request the proper response on the ground of his authority (i.e., as an apostle)

The proper basis of Paul's request v. 9a

For love's sake he appeals; he does not command

The humble condition of the one who requests v. 9b

An aged man who is now a prisoner

The subject of the request v. 10-12

Onesimus

- 1) Paul's son
- 2) Converted while Paul was in chains
- 3) Formerly useless, but now useful to Paul and Philemon
- 4) The one sent to Philemon is to be received as if he were Paul

The Context of the Request

vv. 13-14

Paul's original desire	v. 13	To keep Onesimus as Philemon's minister to him
Why Paul refused his desire	v. 14a	He did not wish to act without Philemon's consent
The reason Paul wanted Philemon's input	v. 14b	So that Philemon would act voluntarily

Paul's View of the Situation

vv. 15-16

Paul's explanation of the separation and why he cannot keep Onesimus	v. 15	That Philemon might receive back in full Onesimus for eternity
Paul's view of Onesimus that Philemon should share	v. 16	Regard him as a brother, not as a slave; As he had been to Paul, may he be so much more to Philemon.

Paul's Request

vv. 17-20

Paul's request	v. 17	Receive Onesimus as you would me.
Paul's offer	v. 18-19a	Any obligation should be credited to Paul. He will pay it back.
Reminder about the offer of Paul	v. 19b	Paul could remind Philemon he owes Paul his life (spiritual).
Paul's request for himself	v. 20	Give Paul this benefit and refresh his affection in Christ.

Paul's Confidence

vv. 21-22

Paul's knowledge	v. 21	Paul writes knowing Philemon will do what Paul requests.
Paul's hope	v. 22	Philemon is to prepare a guest room, for Paul hopes to visit him because of answered prayer.

Paul's Final Greetings and Benediction

vv. 23-25

“The Grace of Gentle Arm-Twisting”

A Marvelous Model of Tact

(Philemon 17-25)

I. Choose the right words vv. 17-20

1. Receive Love him as you love me (substitution), v. 17
2. Reckon If a wrong needs to be corrected, lay it to my account (satisfaction), vv. 18-19
3. Refresh Do what you should for Christ’s sake (reconciliation), vs. 20. Note the 3 imperatives in vv. 17, 18, 20 and the way in which Paul softens their sting.

II. Communicate with reaffirming wisdom vv. 21-22

1. Express your confidence as to their action, v. 21
2. Express your confidence as to your reception, v. 22
(A fourth imperative is in v. 22. It also is conveyed in a gentle and gracious manner.

III. Covenant with respected witnesses vv. 22-25

1. There should be earthly confirmation, vv. 23-24
 2. There should be heavenly confirmation, v. 25
- **Remember: “Friends are not good unless you can use them.”
(Jim Parker)**
 - **Also Remember: “When you use a friend, use him good.”**

Concluding Observations

The book of Philemon is one that emphasizes the dual track of accountability and sensitivity. It is indeed a “model of tact.”

Proverbs tell us that the wise man will make a good choice of the words he uses when he speaks. The right word at the right time to the right person is an effective and beautiful thing. Note the following verses:

Prov. 10:32—“The lips of the righteous know what is fitting, but the mouth of the wicked only what is perverse.”

Prov. 12:18—“Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”

Prov. 15:1—“A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”

Prov. 15:23—“A man finds joy in giving an apt reply—and how good is a timely word!”

Prov. 15:28—“The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.”

Prov. 16:24—“Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.”

Prov. 25:11—“A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.”

Prov. 26:4-5—“Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes.”

Again, the right word at the right time to the right person is a wonderful thing, a beautiful thing, a sweet thing, a pleasant thing, even a joyful thing.

However, this doesn't mean that the facts are not considered. Tact is honest. It involves no sacrifice of honesty or candor. The tactful person does not shirk his duty even when he is convinced that he must admonish or rebuke. But he has learned the art of doing this without being rude. Paul told the truth about

Onesimus and set forth an honest case. He admitted that the runaway slave had been useless. But Paul notes that there had been a radical change in the man. He was honest, but he was kind. He was tactful. He leaves us a marvelous pattern to follow. Therefore, may all remember the following:

A careless word may kindle strife;
A cruel word may wreck a life;
A bitter word may smite and kill;
A brutal word will accomplish nil;
A gracious word may smooth the way;
A joyous word may light the way;
A timely word may lessen stress;
A loving word may heal and bless.