

Philemon

Greeting

1 Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker 2 and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

1–2 Although Paul writes together with Timothy and although he addresses the entire church in Colosse, in this very personal letter to Philemon he uses “I” rather than “we,” and “you” (singular except in vv. 22, 25). (CSB)

1 prisoner. Paul was under house arrest in Rome when he wrote this Letter. Ac 21–28 describes events that put Paul in prison; clearly, his allegiance to the Gospel led to his arrest. Paul used the time awaiting trial as an opportunity to share the Gospel with people in Rome (Ac 28:30–31). (TLSB)

desmios – Paul calls himself a prisoner rather than apostle. He does so also in Eph. 3:1; 4:1 and 2 Tim 1:8. This might be because he truly is a prisoner of the Roman Empire for his witness of Christ and it also might be an approach of humbleness as he writes Philemon.

Ancient salutations accomplished much more than the typical opening of a modern letter. Complex social relationships were indicated within the few opening words of a salutation, and a tone was established, so that it was immediately clear whether this was to be a letter between equals (“friendship”), a communication between a social superior to an inferior (patron to client), or vice versa. Even the placement of the names was significant. The convention for expressing deference to a social superior, for example, was for the writer to place the receiver’s name in front of his own. (CC)

Timothy. Recipient. (CSB)

Several other Christians (e.g., Silas, Barnabas) accompanied Paul at different times in his mission work, but in the latter years of his life Timothy became perhaps his closest colleague. (TLSB)

Timothy joins Paul in greeting Philemon and the other Christians of Philemon’s congregation. Probably that does not indicate that he is a coauthor or separate letter writer. Timothy’s name occurs with Paul’s most frequently in Pauline letter salutations,^f though in some epistles Sosthenes and Silas are also listed as letter senders parallel to Paul. By joining these other names to his own in the opening salutation, Paul gives testimony to the church that he and his associates all preach and teach the same Gospel. In that respect, Timothy “could hardly have failed to imitate Paul.” (CC)

Philemon. A Christian living in Colosse or nearby and the owner of the slave Onesimus. (CSB)

A Christian who lived in Colossae; he owned the slave Onesimus. (TLSB)

Philemon’s name occurs only here in Scripture, so nothing definite about him is known beyond this letter. However, two persons who are associated with Philemon are linked to the Christians in Colossae, and those links support the view that Philemon was among those Christians who lived in Colossae (though as a moderately wealthy businessman, he may have traveled often). (CC)

fellow worker. Philemon supported the Church and its ministries by hosting a local congregation in his home (v 2) and probably in other ways as well. (TLSB)

2 Apphia. Probably Philemon's wife. (CSB)

A fellow sister in Christ; probably Philemon's wife, since she is addressed separately from the Church. (TLSB)

Archippus. Another colleague in the ministry; possibly Philemon's son. (TLSB)

church in your house. NT churches often met in Christian homes (Ac 12:12; 1Co 16:19; Col 4:15). Christian churches today might meet in homes if they are new and small or located in countries where the Church is oppressed and forced underground. (TLSB)

sustratotas – here fellow soldier is taken to mean a brother in the office of the ministry, a fellow pastor.

Paul includes also other members of the Colossian church in his address: And to Apphia, our sister, and Archippus, our fellow-soldier, and the congregation in thy house. Apphia, or Appia, was apparently the wife of Philemon, distinguished also by her interest in the work of the Lord, like other women whose names stand out in the history of the early Church, such as Nary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Priscilla, Euodia, Syntyche, Lydia. Archippus seems to have occupied an even more important position than Philemon in the congregation, Col. 4, 17, and is therefore believed by many to have been the bishop, or pastor, of the congregation at that time. A fellow-soldier Paul calls him, using the figure of speech which appealed to him very strongly. 2 Cor. 10, 3, 4; 1 Tim. 1, 18; 2 Tim. 2, 3, 4. In a general way. Paul addressed his letter to the entire house-congregation of which Archippus was the head. It is by no means improbable that the entire congregation at Colossae was housed in the inner court of Philemon's dwelling, since this afforded considerable space, if built after the manner of Greek or Roman houses. (Kretzmann)

3 grace to you and peace from God – When grace is offered, it will lead to peace.

The greeting is that of most Pauline epistles: Grace to you and peace from God, our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. By the grace of God as it was revealed and manifested in Jesus Christ the right relationship between God and man has been reestablished. The Father having been reconciled to lost and condemned mankind through the blood of His Son, peace between the two contending parties had been established, or rather, the righteous and holy God, for the sake of Christ's merits, has again accepted the children that had left Him in disobedience. Thus to us, as believers, God is our Father; we have been restored to sonship through the vicarious satisfaction of Christ, and we are united in fellowship under the banner of our exalted Lord. Jesus Christ, these two persons of the Godhead being equal in majesty and deity. (Kretzmann)

our Father. Paul is reminding Philemon of their common Savior and Judge. (TLSB)

1–3 Paul begins with a short (compared to his other Letters) and yet personal greeting. His greeting begins and ends with Jesus Christ, the focus of Paul's life. Focus on Jesus should be present in our own friendships and greetings, both with other Christians and with those who do not yet know the Lord. We have opportunities to introduce people to our Lord and Savior. The Lord's grace and peace will strengthen our faith and equip us for all good service. • Lord, I thank You for my friends, and I pray for an opportunity to share Christ with those who have yet to meet You. Amen. (TLSB)

4 I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, 5 because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, 6 and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. 7 For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

4 *thank ... remember you in my prayers.* Paul set a powerful example in praying for his fellow Christians and the churches. His Letters usually open or close with mention of how he is praying for them. He often gives thanks for their faith and ministry and prays for their strength, spiritual growth, and Gospel witness, thereby setting an example for our prayers. (TLSB)

Some have suggested that the prepositional phrase “in my prayers” (ἐπὶ τῶν προσευχῶν) signified Paul’s *regular* prayers, which he performed in his capacity as an apostle on behalf of his congregations and many charges. (CC)

5 *because I hear of your love...faith you have* – This phrase helps the person(s) know that it not just empty flattery that is being shared. It also gives credit to the Lord for his work.

† Comparing Col 1:4, the NIV has interpreted “your love and your faith, which you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints” (lit.) as an example of the literary device called “chiasm,” in which the thought is structured like the Greek letter *chi* (x): Paul often employs “chiasm,” also called “chiasmus”—parallel words or phrases in reverse order—usually symbolized by the formula *a b b a*. An example is in Paul’s frequent phrase: “God [a—name] our Father [b—relationship] and the Lord [b—relationship] Jesus Christ [a—name]” (v. 3; Gal 1:3). A double chiasmus occurs in Gal 2:7–9: “the uncircumcised” (a); “the circumcised” (b); “the circumcised” (b); “the Gentiles” (a); “the Gentiles” (a); “the circumcised” (b). Some examples are in the Greek text but are lost in the English translation, as in Gal 3:3, where the word order in Greek is: “Are you so foolish? After beginning (a) with the Spirit (b), by human effort (b) are you now trying to attain your goal (a)?” (CSB)

The focus of faith is Jesus, and the focus of love is the saints; by structuring the sentence this way, Paul emphasizes how these concepts are inextricably linked. (TLSB)

Paul was perpetually *thankful* (εὐχαριστῶ, a verb in the present tense, v 4a) to God while always “making remembrance” (μνησθῆναι and ποιούμενος, a participle in the present tense, v 4b) of Philemon in his prayers, in as much as he kept “hearing” (ἀκούων, a participle in the present tense, v 5a) about Philemon’s love and faith. The finite verb and participles of verses 4–5 are cast into the present tense and aspect, so that *thanking*, *remembering* in prayer, and *hearing* went on simultaneously together—thus linking up and reinforcing each element, while resonating with the others. (CC)

saints. Fellow Christians in the local church and in the ministry at large. (TLSB)

This phrase calls for an explanation of the proper biblical meaning of “saints/holy people” (ἅγιοι). Paul was not thinking here of “special virtuosos of the good life,” but ordinary Christians who have been called by God through the Gospel to faith in Christ, who forgives all their sins, rendering them holy. In Baptism they have been clothed with Christ and Christ’s righteousness.⁸⁷ Their status as holy people before God is the result of the imputation of Christ’s own righteousness to them and the plenary forgiveness of their sins, earned by Christ on the cross, which they receive through faith alone. (CC)

6 *sharing of your faith.* We share our faith by bearing witness, sometimes by words and sometimes by deeds. Paul encourages Philemon to live out or witness to his faith by a special work of mercy. (TLSB)

sharing. Gk *koinonia*. (TLSB)

every good thing. Effective, living faith bears fruit in appreciating what is good and in good works. (TLSB)

for the sake of Christ. God gives us good works to perform so that Christ may be glorified. (TLSB)

7 *hearts.*† The English equivalent of the Greek for “intestines”—the part of the body that is figurative for the emotions of pity and love (see vv. 12, 20). The Greeks made little distinction between the internal organs above and below the diaphragm. (CSB)

Philemon’s support for the Church and his fellow Christians must have encouraged them, and Paul was pleased to hear about it. Perhaps when Onesimus became a Christian, he had a new appreciation for Philemon’s faith and had told Paul of his activities. (TLSB)

4–7 Paul gives thanks for his friend Philemon’s love and faith. Apparently, he has heard enough to know that this is real and not for show. We should consider what people see in our lives, and how it might affect them. God can make our life of faith into an effective witness to Christ’s glory. Through the Gospel, He already works effectively in us. • O Lord, I pray that You would use me as Your witness so that I might refresh those around me. Amen. (TLSB)

Paul’s Plea for Onesimus

8 Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, **9** yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— **10** I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus,[b] whose father I became in my imprisonment. **11** (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) **12** I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. **13** I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, **14** but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. **15** For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, **16** no longer as a bondservant[c] but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. **17** So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. **18** If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. **19** I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. **20** Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. **21** Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. **22** At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

8 *command.* Paul is gently persuading Philemon to imitate God’s love and grace by freeing the slave Onesimus. Paul had spiritual authority to direct Philemon to do this, but he would like Philemon to learn and live out the lesson rather than merely respond to a command. This may also explain why Paul did not mention his apostolic authority in opening the Letter (cf Ti 1:1). (TLSB)

Paul uses “what is right” (τὸ ἀνήκον, v 8) as an open-ended expression that points toward the Gospel as the source of all that is good and right for humanity—all that comes by God’s grace, not by force or a command of Law. Paul encourages Philemon to act with the same sort of Christian decorum indicative of right conduct anywhere in the church, regardless of station. (CC)

9 *old man*. Paul may not have been all that old, but he was probably older than Philemon in years and certainly older in the faith. (TLSB)

prisoner. Paul is not asking Philemon for any sacrifice as large as his own imprisonment. (TLSB)

10 *Onesimus*. His name means useful. (CSB)

One of Philemon’s slaves, who had apparently run away, made his way to Rome, and fallen in with Paul. Paul did not mention Onesimus or how he might have wronged Philemon until after starting to build the case for a pardon based on God’s grace. (TLSB)

The name “Onesimus” is derived from the verb ὀνίσμι, to “profit, benefit, help” (LSJ, I). It can scarcely be a coincidence that the sole NT appearance of that verb is in Philemon 20, where Paul will say, “May I benefit [ὀναίμην] from you in the Lord.” (CC)

my child. Paul led Onesimus to faith in Christ, in effect becoming his spiritual father. (TLSB)

11 *useless ... useful*. A play on the meaning of Onesimus’s name. (CSB)

Before Onesimus rebelled and ran away, he may have pilfered the house or been lazy. (TLSB)

useful to you. A wordplay; Onesimus means “useful.” Now that Onesimus is a Christian, Paul expects that he will be able to help with Christian ministry either with Philemon or with Paul. (TLSB)

12 *sending him back*. If Philemon does not recognize the opportunity to show grace, Onesimus will go back into service as a slave. Regardless, it was wrong to run away, so returning to face punishment strengthens his credibility and witness as a Christian. (TLSB)

my very heart. Paul loves Onesimus like a son (cf v 10). (TLSB)

13 *on your behalf*. Philemon could not be there to support Paul in Rome, but he could allow Onesimus to stay, which would support the ministry. (TLSB)

The proxy service that Onesimus had already rendered for Paul in prison—whatever it was—must have been well-known to Philemon and the others in the original situation. The type of specialized skills Onesimus possessed may to a large extent have determined the type of service Paul had in mind, or perhaps the two letter carriers (Tychicus, Col 4:7; Onesimus, Col 4:9) conveyed to Philemon the sort of oral instruction that has not been preserved in writing. In any event, “Onesimus could not continue to serve Paul ‘on behalf of’ Philemon without Philemon’s explicit approval.” (CC)

imprisonment for the gospel. The third mention of Paul’s imprisonment. Philemon should be horrified that the man who led him to faith (v 19) is under arrest because of the Gospel, and by extension he should realize the horror of keeping Onesimus, his new brother in Christ (v 16), in slavery. Paul does not command the elimination of all slavery, but is focused on a personal level. (TLSB)

14 compulsion. If Paul does not subject Philemon to compulsion, why should Philemon subject Onesimus to compulsion by keeping him in slavery? Again, Paul is guiding Philemon to do the right thing, but by choice rather than under duress. (TLSB)

Paul hoped that Philemon would react willingly (κατὰ ἐκούσιον, Philemon 14)—and, by extension, cheerfully, ungrudgingly, and wholeheartedly—at possible prospects with Onesimus (even if details of their future together must remain, for us, opaque). The slave had been for Paul a quite unexpected godsend, and the latter’s initial meeting with Onesimus, the slave’s conversion (v 10), and his subsequent “usefulness” to Paul (v 11b) had happened “apart from your [Philemon’s] consent” (v 14). Paul possibly meant Philemon’s legal consent, because γνώμη in some contexts can have that meaning. (CC)

accord. Lit, “willingly.” Philemon needs to decide what to do now that Onesimus has returned, bearing this Letter. “Truly good works should be done willingly, or from a voluntary spirit, by those whom God’s Son has made free” (FC SD IV 18). (TLSB)

15 Paul sees God’s hand in Onesimus’s coming to him to hear the Gospel and notes the eternal consequences (“you might have him back forever”). (TLSB)

Paul’s letter, anticipating Philemon’s every thought, now compels Philemon to reconsider those circumstances that had led to the change in Onesimus. In spite of every appearance to the contrary, Onesimus had not simply run away, suggests St. Paul. Instead, Onesimus had been “separated” (ἐχωρίσθη, v 15) from Philemon—yet only temporarily (πρὸς ὥραν), and according to God’s grand and gracious design. The wording points to God’s providence. (CC)

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In verse 16 Paul establishes the fact that Onesimus may well remain a slave of Philemon “in the flesh” (ἐν σαρκί)—that is, in the sphere of his natural, everyday life (cf. Phil 1:22, 24). And yet Philemon could no longer regard Onesimus as “just a slave” (TEV rendering of ὡς δοῦλον), for now the earthly relationship has been enhanced by a union “in the Lord” (ἐν κυρίῳ), that is, in the realm of the Gospel. The two spheres are complementary, not mutually exclusive. (TLSB)

17–19 Luther said, “Even as Christ did for us with God the Father, thus Paul also does for Onesimus with Philemon.” (CSB)

17 your partner. Paul puts his personal relationship with Philemon on the line in his plea for Onesimus, much as Jesus Christ intercedes for us with God the Father. Cf Php 1:5. (TLSB)

“Receive him [Onesimus] as me” (v 17b). Everything depended on how Philemon would respond to this request put to him by Paul. Probably the welfare and destinies of many Christians hung in the balance. In addition to those whom Paul names—Apphia, Archippus, and the church that met at Philemon’s house (v 2)—Philemon’s response would doubtless have had an impact upon unnamed family members, guests, slaves and freedmen, their dependents, and still other hangers-on, because households in classical society typically consisted of more persons under one roof than in even the largest of modern families. (CC)

18 Paul offers to make right anything Onesimus stole or damaged when he ran away. (TLSB)

Earlier Paul had tactfully alluded to Onesimus' flight as a momentary separation (ἐχωρίσθη πρὸς ὥραν, "he was separated for a while," v 15). Now Paul no less gently refers to Onesimus' robbery, yet the apostle's reference to that robbery is merely hypothetical: "And if he has wronged you in any way or owes anything, charge this to my account." (CC)

19 *with my own hand.* Equivalent of signing the promise in v 18. (TLSB)

to say nothing of your owing me your own self. If Philemon is not yet persuaded, this should clinch the argument. He learned of God's grace through Paul's ministry. (TLSB)

The point is that Paul promises to pay Onesimus' damages, even as he apparently paid other sums of money occasionally in the course of a quite lengthy ministry. (CC)

20 *I ... my.* Both pronouns are emphatic, making an obvious allusion to v. 7. (CSB)

benefit. The Greek for this word is another play on the name Onesimus. (CSB)

A call for action; Paul expects that Philemon's decision will be good for Onesimus, Philemon, and himself. (TLSB)

Refresh. Philemon has been gracious to other Christians (v 7); his decision about Onesimus should continue that gracious behavior. If so, it will encourage and please Paul. (TLSB)

21 *obedience.* Even though Paul has not commanded Philemon in what to do, he used careful, personal arguments to make clear what God would expect. (TLSB)

22 *at the same time.*† It was not unusual for an ancient letter, though occasioned by one matter, to also include another matter. Often, as here, the second matter had to do with how and when the author planned to meet the recipient again. An alternate translation might be: "By the way ..." (CSB)

guest room. Paul hopes for release from house arrest soon, and would like to stop for a visit. This adds urgency to Philemon's decision. (TLSB)

given to you. Paul's visit would be a gift from God and a blessing for Philemon and the church that meets in his home. (TLSB)

8–22 Paul makes a plea for the freedom of Onesimus and bases his case on grace, love, and friendship. By example, Paul intercedes for Onesimus, just as Jesus Christ intercedes for us. Jesus has called us friend; to whom should we extend friendship in His name? As our friend, His grace and love give us salvation and the hope of eternal life. • Lord, hear me as a dear friend and fellow servant to those in need. Make me a gift to them. Amen. (TLSB)

Final Greetings

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

23 *Epaphras.* A Christian from Colossae (Col 4:12), known to Philemon. (TLSB)

fellow prisoner. Apparently, Epaphras was imprisoned with Paul. (TLSB)

24 These Christians all supported or worked with Paul in evangelism, church planting, and teaching. (TLSB)

Demas and Luke. The author of Acts and the Gospel of Luke; he sometimes traveled with Paul. (TLSB)

25 *with your spirit.* Paul wanted Philemon to be completely at peace with what Paul said and taught and also with his decision regarding Onesimus. (TLSB)

23–25 Paul mentions five friends who serve with him or support him in the Gospel ministry. This is only part of the network of God's people, which includes Onesimus, Philemon, and now us. We should cherish this network of fellowship and support and not take it for granted. God has called us into His kingdom and made us part of His family, and He will help us and use us to help and encourage one another. • Lord, make me a useful servant. Thank You for my near and extended family in Christ. Amen. (TLSB)

SLAVERY.

There can be little doubt, as a prominent writer (Brace, *Gesta Christi*) has pointed out, that the spread of Christianity was the cause of the increasing sentiment among the nations against slavery. It is true that the position of the slaves among the Jews was not attended with such shameful degradations as among the heathen, where slavery was a canker and the lot of the average slave was worse than that of a beast of burden. As the influence of Christianity increased, the hold of slavery gradually weakened, and where it was still maintained, the inhuman cruelties which were formerly practiced were gradually abandoned. Slavery in the Eastern Empire was abolished at the end of the fourteenth century, in Greece in 1437. The serfdom which arose from the universal disorder and chaos of society in the Latin Empire was looked upon with disfavor from the first by men that realized whither it tended. In modern times enlightened states have abrogated both serfdom and slavery, the latter being abolished in England in 1833, 1846 in Sweden, 1849 in Denmark, 1348 in France, 1855 in Portugal, 1863 in the United States, 1871 in Brazil. (CC)