

Outline of the Book of Philemon

The book of Philemon is a short, 25-verse letter that the apostle Paul has written to a man named Philemon. Philemon appeared to be a wealthy man who owned slaves in the city of Colossi (cf. Phile. 1:16). Philemon was also a Christian and an active worker in the kingdom of God, both teaching the lost and edifying the saved (cf. Phile. 1:6-7). This letter to Philemon concerns a slave by the name of Onesimus who had escaped his servitude in Colossi leaving work undone (Phile. 1:15). Onesimus had a “do-nothing” reputation while with Philemon (Phile. 1:11). Onesimus ran into Paul at Rome during the years of 61 to 63 AD and was converted (Phile. 1:10). Although Onesimus was once an “*unprofitable*” servant in labor, Paul revealed that he had now become a profitable laborer in the kingdom of God (cf. Phile. 1:11). Paul sent this letter to Philemon by the hands of Tychicus and Onesimus (see Date of Epistle below) in hopes that Philemon would not only forgive Onesimus for leaving his duties behind but also receive him into full Christian fellowship (cf. Phile. 1:17).

Date of Epistle:

There is ample evidence in the New Testament to identify the time of writing of this epistle to be during Paul’s first imprisonment at Rome; i.e., AD 61 – 63 AD. Paul had said, “*All my affairs shall Tychicus make known unto you, the beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow-servant in the Lord: whom I have sent unto you for this very purpose, that ye may know our state, and that he may comfort your hearts; together with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They shall make known unto you all things that are done here*” (Col. 4:7-9). These words reveal that Philemon and Onesimus were residents of Colossi and that Paul probably wrote Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon at the same time, having Tychicus and Onesimus deliver the epistles (cf. Eph. 6:21-22).

Lessons Learned from Philemon:

Brethren ought to be cautious when making a determination as to whom they can fellowship in Christ and who they cannot. Paul knew that Philemon was a spiritual man who would in no way give any sinners the right hand of fellowship unless he knew their spirit (i.e., character, disposition, and teaching [cf. Gal. 1:6-8]). Philemon knew Paul to be a spiritual man of love and faith and could thereby trust his judgment of individuals. Paul leaned heavily upon Philemon’s knowledge of him (note that Paul did not begin the letter with his usual “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ.” Paul’s relationship with Philemon was such that he did not have to say such a thing because Philemon had knowledge of the fact).

The first lesson to be learned from Philemon is that when brethren determine to give another the right hand of fellowship, they have made a serious move and assessment of this man’s spiritual state of being (cf. I Jn. 4:1-6; II Jn. 9-11). Philemon would have never immediately received Onesimus into Christian fellowship if it were not for the clear admonitions of Paul to do so (cf. Phile. 1:17). Righteous judgment of others is a part of each individual Christian’s obligation (cf. John 7:24).

A second lesson learned is that it is okay for another individual or church to write a letter of commendation (or condemnation) regarding the spiritual state of another. Paul wrote this letter to Philemon that he may know that Onesimus was not the same “do-nothing” sinner that had originally left him (cf. Phile. 1:10-11). The church in Ephesus composed a letter on behalf of Apollos that the brethren in Achaia would receive him into Christian fellowship (cf. Acts 18:24-28). Paul told us that when we emulate him (he wrote a letter of recommendation on the part of one Christian to be received into Christian fellowship by other Christians) the God of peace shall be with us (cf. Phil. 4:9).

Thirdly, we learn what it means to forgive and forget. Onesimus had obviously wronged Philemon by leaving him and having a “do-nothing” reputation (cf. Phile. 1:11, 15). Philemon could easily, in a spirit of bitterness, respond to Paul’s letter with anger. We are not told what Philemon’s response to the letter was; however, we do know that Paul felt that he knew Philemon well enough to judge that he would forgive and receive Onesimus (cf. Phile. 1:21). We should expect no less of each other. If one has wronged me and asked me to forgive them, I should be ready and willing to do so with a spirit of great joy (cf. Matt. 18:15; Lk. 6:37; 17:3).

Textual Study of Philemon:

I. Introduction, salutations, and thanksgivings to Philemon and his family (1:1-7):

A. *“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved and fellow-worker, and to Apphila our sister, and to Archippus our fellow-soldier, and to the church in thy house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”* (1:1-3).

1. It is generally thought that Paul is in a Roman prison (62 AD) when writing this short epistle due to his *“prison”* statements. Timothy is apparently with him.
2. The letter is addressed directly to Philemon, Apphila (possibly Philemon’s wife), and Archippus (who may very well be Philemon’s son or at least a relative based Paul’s statement of address *“and to the church in thy house”*).
3. Philemon, whom Paul refers to as his *“beloved”* and *“fellow-worker,”* must have been a teacher of the gospel and one whom Paul had prior knowledge of. Perhaps Paul met Philemon in Ephesus, as many have suggested, or perhaps somewhere else.
4. Archippus is referred to as a *“fellow-soldier”* which indicates this man’s labors and struggles in the gospel (probably a preacher).

B. *“I thank my God always, making mention of thee in my prayers, hearing of thy love, and of the faith which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all the saints;”* (1:4-5).

1. Paul was a praying man who mentioned men and women by name to the Lord on a regular basis (cf. Eph. 1:15-16).
2. Paul had *“heard”* of the love, and faith of Philemon. Paul has communicated with men such as Onesimus regarding the faith of Philemon. It is not a sin to talk about the faithfulness or unfaithfulness of brethren and congregations that are not in your immediate geographic area (cf. I Cor. 1:11 in light of Phil. 4:9).
3. What Paul heard was that Philemon was a man of *“love... toward Jesus and all the saints.”* Bible love takes into consideration the physical (I Jn. 3:17-18) and spiritual (I Jn. 4:10ff) well being of others. Paul had also heard of Philemon’s *“faith”* (i.e., his willingness to seek justification as did Abraham – through faithful obedience cf. Gal. 3:6-8; Gen. 18:19; 22:18; 26:3-5). Due to the godly character of Philemon Paul was moved to thank God for him.

C. *“That the fellowship of thy faith may become effectual, in the knowledge of every good thing which is in you, unto Christ”* (1:6).

1. The word *“fellowship”* = *“sharing”* (LS 755). Paul prayed that the sharing of Philemon’s faith with others may be *“effectual”* (*energes*) = *“at work, working, active, busy... of soldiers, ships, effective, fit for service”* (LS 261).
2. This verse suggests Paul’s knowledge of Philemon’s labors in the gospel and so the apostle prays that his busy work would see good results. Philemon would be sharing his *“knowledge”* of the teachings of Jesus Christ with others. Philemon was thereby clearly a teacher of the faith (See study # 1; Prayer; pray that others’ labor in the faith would be Successful).

D. *“For I had much joy and comfort in thy love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through thee, brother”* (1:7).

1. Philemon’s love was expressed in faithful living and teaching toward brethren because of his love for Jesus Christ (cf. 1:5-6).
2. Philemon’s labors in Christ had not gone unnoticed. The saints of God had been *“refreshed”* by his knowledge, teaching, and care in Christ. The word *“refreshed”* (*anapauo*) = *“to regain strength”* (LS 60). The word refreshed is a verb in the perfect tense (Friberg 657). The perfect tense indicates past action in relation to the current epistle. The saints have in the past gained strength (probably some physical and spiritual) through the labors of Philemon.
3. Philemon’s labors brought comfort and joy to Paul as such work ought to cause us all joy.

II. Paul Encourages Philemon to forgive Onesimus (1:8-20):

A. *“Wherefore, though I have all boldness in Christ to enjoin thee that which is befitting, yet for love’s sake I rather beseech, being such a one as Paul the aged, and now a prisoner also of Christ Jesus:”* (1:8-9).

1. To “*enjoin*” (*epitasso*) someone is to “to put upon one as a duty, to enjoin, to order one to do... to impose commands” (LS 303).
 2. Paul has something that he clearly wants Philemon to do. As not only an apostle of Jesus Christ but as a fellow Christian, Paul has the authority of God to say to Philemon that it is your “duty” to do so and so I “order” you (as a fellow Christian who upholds the unity of faith) to do so.
 3. Rather than taking such a bold position with Philemon, Paul chooses rather to “*beseech*” Philemon to do this duty. To “*beseech*” (*parakaleo*) = “to call to, exhort, cheer, encourage...” (LS 597). Paul is calling upon Philemon in an encouraging way to do his duty. Paul is now aged and a prisoner and seeks to motivate Philemon do that duty that he knows he must do.
 4. The Christian may approach another Christian to motivate one to do their duty in more than one way. Paul states that he has every right to command Philemon to do his Christian duty; however, age and wisdom demand that he approach him with a spirit of gentleness and thereby “*beseech*” him to do his duty. If Paul was converted at the age of 35 (Acts 9) during the year 38-40 AD then he must now be in his early sixties (~ 62 years old).
- B.** “*I beseech thee for my child, whom I have begotten in my bonds, Onesimus, who once was unprofitable to thee, but now is profitable to thee and to me:*” (1:10-11).
1. The duty that Paul calls upon Philemon to accomplish has to do with Onesimus. At one time this man named Onesimus was “*unprofitable*” (*achrestos*) to Philemon (i.e., “useless, unserviceable... of useless, do-nothing persons” LS 142). According to the definition of the word “*unprofitable*” it is apparent that Onesimus was at one time a “do-nothing” person. Paul never reveals what caused Onesimus to be viewed as “*unprofitable*” to Philemon. The fact of the matter is; however, that Onesimus was at one time a “useless do-nothing person.”
 2. Paul calls Philemon to do his Christian duty, regarding Onesimus, because Onesimus has now obeyed the gospel (cf. I Cor. 4:15 for use of the phrase “*begotten*”). Onesimus has been cleansed from his past sins (cf. Acts 2:38) and is now “*profitable to thee and to me.*”
 3. Instead of being a “do-nothing” person, Onesimus is now a do everything and useful person. He has changed for the better! The conjunction word “*but*” indicates a change. We may often be apprehensive to let our guard down around others who in the past were sinful men yet through these verses we find that it is possible for sinful men to change.
- C.** “*whom I have sent back to thee in his own person, that is, my very heart: whom I would fain have kept with me, that in thy behalf he might minister unto me in the bonds of the gospel:*” (1:12-13).
1. Paul had become “*aged*” (cf. 1:9) and needed help in day to day activities of preaching. Apparently Onesimus was helping Paul with his preaching so that the gospel might continue to fulfill its designed power, i.e., to save souls (Rom. 1:16). Saving souls was Paul’s work and at his age he began to need more and more assistance.
 2. Onesimus was retained by Paul because the apostle felt that if it were Philemon, instead of Onesimus, Philemon would have certainly stayed with him and worked. Paul; however, sends Onesimus back to Philemon (his rightful place).
 3. Note the comparison between Onesimus and Paul’s “*very heart.*” The comparison indicates that Onesimus is likened unto Paul so that when Philemon saw Onesimus it was like seeing Paul (in character and spirit). Philemon should thereby have no reservations regarding this once depraved slave.
- D.** “*But without thy mind I would do nothing; that thy goodness should not be as of necessity, but of free will*” (1:14).
1. Though Paul would have “*fain*” kept Onesimus with him to help him with his labors, he fully understood that Onesimus belonged to Philemon.
 2. Philemon would have no doubt allowed Paul to use Onesimus for all the labors he needed of him; however, at this time Paul knew that the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus needed to be repaired and it would not happen while Onesimus was with him.
 3. If it be Philemon’s will that Onesimus serve Paul in his labors then this would be well; however, Paul would not have Onesimus continue to labor with him without Philemon’s permission and approval. Every day that Onesimus was gone from Philemon was a day of

labor lost on the part of Philemon. Paul would not take the liberty of using someone else's property for his gain without their consent. These words may sound strange to us; however, slavery was accepted and lawful in these days (cf. Eph. 6:5). Paul never attempts to rid the world of slavery nor does he attempt to regulate it. Paul simply gives orders regarding serving as one is allotted to do and thereby please both master and God (Col. 3:22-25).

- E. *“For perhaps he was therefore parted from thee for a season, that thou shouldest have him for ever; no longer as a servant, but more than a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much rather to thee, both in the flesh and in the Lord”* (1:15-16).
1. Now we are given a clear picture as to what Philemon and Onesimus' relationship was and what transpired to cause a distasteful separation. Onesimus was Philemon's servant (slave) and a “do-nothing” one at that. He may have stolen some of Philemon's property but it seems more likely that Onesimus robbed Philemon of time and labor (cf. 1:18).
 2. Paul says that apparently this original bitter separation has “*perhaps*” turned out for the betterment of both Philemon and Onesimus. Philemon not only now has a slave but a beloved brother in Christ (“*specially*” to Paul).
 3. Paul's point is that Philemon will most certainly see a change, wrought by God, in Onesimus for the better. Onesimus will be a better servant (serving according to fleshly laws) and now one who shares spiritual fellowship with Philemon “*in the Lord.*” Onesimus is now one with Philemon in hope (cf. Gal. 3:28ff).
- F. *“If then thou countest me a partner, receive him as myself”* (1:17).
1. Now we get to the heart of the matter. Earlier we noted that Paul was calling upon Philemon to do his Christian duty yet we did not define what this was in regards to Onesimus (cf. 1:8ff).
 2. Paul calls upon Philemon to now “*receive*” this once “do-nothing” slave (but now a reformed Christian) “*as myself.*” To “*receive*” (*proslambano*) = “to take to oneself, take as one's helper or partner... to take part in a work, be accessory to” (LS 693). Consider the use of *proslambano* in Romans 14:1, 3 and 15:7. God “*receives*” those who serve Him in good conscience while not doing anything sinful in and of itself. To “*receive*” one, from a spiritual standpoint, is to accept the person on the bases of their spiritual standing with God. Paul assures Philemon that when he accepts or receives Onesimus he is, in all reality, receiving one like Paul.
 3. Paul states, “*If then thou countest me a partner...*” then receive (accept) Onesimus. The word “*partner*” (*koinonos*) = “a companion, partner in a thing” (LS 441). “A fellow partner, a sharer, partaker” (Moulton 235). The context is spiritual (cf. 1:16) and thereby the partnership (sharing) and “*receiving*” on the part of Philemon to Onesimus is concerning a fellowship issue. Philemon could in no way receive his servant slave Onesimus into his fellowship if the servant continued in his sin. Paul reveals that Onesimus has changed and that Philemon can rest assured that his receiving Onesimus will in no way violate any fellowship principles that Philemon was aware of (cf. II John 9-11).
 4. Paul is asking Philemon to forgive Onesimus because the servant has repented of his sins and obeyed the gospel (cf. 1:10).
- G. *“But if he hath wronged thee at all, or owes thee aught, put that to mine account; I Paul write it with mine own hand, I will repay it: that I say not unto thee that thou owest to me even thine own self besides”* (1:18-19).
1. The word “*if*” leaves the details of Onesimus' guilt in question. Apparently Onesimus has escaped his duty of servitude to Philemon by running to Rome (cf. 1:15). The monies owed on the part of Onesimus would not be funds stolen from Philemon in said case but rather money that Philemon lost in having someone else do the labors that Onesimus would have otherwise done.
 2. Paul explains to Philemon that he will repay any thing owed by Onesimus if such is the case due to the fact that he had been using him (cf. Philemon 1:13). Paul; however, reminds Philemon that he is truly indebted to him just as Onesimus now is due to their both being his children in the faith (i.e., Paul converted both of them). Consider the fact that Paul spoke of debts owed to others in relationship to one who shares spiritual things with another in Romans 15:27. Paul said, “*Yea, it hath been their good pleasure; and their debtors they are. For if the*

Gentiles have been made partners of their spiritual things, they owe it to them also to minister unto them in carnal things.” The Jews shared the gospel with the Gentiles and thereby the Gentiles owed them carnal things (the least they could do for such a valuable work). Likewise, Paul reminds Philemon that the message he preached to him that caused him to become a Christian saved his soul and so surely he is indebted to Paul. Nonetheless, if Philemon determined to be paid for the absence of Onesimus then Paul would do all that he could do to pay the debt since he did use Onesimus.

3. Paul was seeking to remove any hindrance from the mind of Philemon so that the two (Philemon and Onesimus) may share together in Christian fellowship.

H. *“Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my heart in Christ”* (1:20).

1. Paul’s “*joy*” will be “*in the Lord.*” When Philemon “*receives*” Onesimus into spiritual fellowship then Paul will be filled with spiritual joy.
2. Paul’s “*heart*” (mind, will, and intellect) will be “*refreshed... in Christ.*” To be “*refreshed*” (*anapauo*) = “to regain strength” (LS 60) as in verse 7. Paul had commended Philemon for “*refreshing*” the minds of other saints with his knowledge of truth in verse 7, and now Paul asks this brother to “*refresh*” (strengthen Paul with joy) by receiving Onesimus into his spiritual fellowship. We can be strengthened when the faith of others is found as we can also be spiritually weakened by heartache when others are found unfaithful.

III. **Benediction and Conclusion (1:21-25):**

A. *“Having confidence in thine obedience I write unto thee, knowing that thou wilt do even beyond what I say”* (1:21).

1. Two previous relationships or experiences add up to the words before us. First, Paul’s past relationship with Philemon left a sweet taste in his mouth as to the faithfulness and love this brother has in Christ Jesus. Secondly, Paul has heard more of Philemon’s faithful works in Christ from men such as Onesimus and perhaps others such as Epaphras.
2. Such testimony gives Paul confidence that Philemon will even go beyond the current admonition to receive into his spiritual fellowship Onesimus. Paul has confidence that Philemon will both forgive Onesimus and receive him into his fellowship as a member of the church that meets in their house (cf. 1:2).

B. *“But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I hope that through your prayers I shall be granted unto you”* (1:22).

1. It seems clear, in light of the facts revealed in the NT regarding Paul’s imprisonments, that he is writing this epistle from a Roman prison with real hopes of being released and able to visit brethren again in the flesh.
2. Paul makes a statement, regarding Philemon’s prayers on his behalf, as though he is very confident that this brother is so praying for him. Should we not all pray for each other?

C. *“Epaphras, my fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus, saluteth thee; and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow-workers”* (1:23-24).

1. Paul had sent Tychicus and Onesimus from Rome to Colossi with the letters to the Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon. Epaphras was a member of the church in Colossi (cf. Col. 4:12). The isolation of Epaphras from Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke is likely explained by the fact that Philemon must have had a special knowledge of him. Many assume that this is enough evidence to place Philemon as a member of a church in the city of Colossi.
2. Note the names in the list as compared to II Timothy 4:9ff. Apparently at that point Paul was in deep trouble; however, the names now listed with commendation indicate that all is well with Paul and his companions (hope of release is indicated).

D. *“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen”* (1:25).

1. If God’s “*grace*” be with you then surely His words are abiding within (cf. Titus 2:11-12).
2. Paul’s concluding remarks are the usual; however, they have deep meaning. If God’s gracious offer of salvation belongs to me that means that I am walking in truth. Paul’s hope for Philemon is that he would always so walk and thereby receive the glorious and gracious promises of the Lord.