

# The Epistle of Paul to Philemon

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“It may be thought strange that a short letter, written entirely on a private subject, without reference to the proof or defense of any doctrine of the Gospel, should, by the general consent of the Churches of God, from the highest Christian antiquity, have been received into the sacred canon, not only as a genuine production of St. Paul, but as a piece designed by the Holy Spirit for the edification of the Church. However, such is the fact; and we may add, that this very piece was held so sacred that even the ancient heretics did not attempt to impugn its authenticity or corrupt its matter, while making dangerously free with the four gospels, and all the other epistles!”

-Adam Clarke’s Commentary on the New Testament

## Who was Philemon? And Who was Onesimus?

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Philemon was a Christian in the city of Colossae, a convert of Paul’s, and a seemingly rich man in whose house a church met. He and Paul seemed to be pretty close friends.

Onesimus was the name of a slave who belonged to Philemon. His name means “profitable.” This letter was written some 4 to 5 years after Paul had left Ephesus and was in prison for the first time in Rome. Onesimus, it seems had escaped Philemon and even possibly stole some money from him and had run away to Rome. While there, he had run into Paul. Maybe he knew Paul from Philemon himself, or from when Paul maybe visited Philemon’s home. However, it appears he didn’t get saved until he met Paul in Rome.

Paul disciplined Onesimus some and now was sending him back with Tychicus to Philemon along with this letter. The object of this epistle is to intercede with Philemon to forgive Onesimus, the runaway slave, and to receive him as a Christian brother. Paul himself offers to repay the stolen money or any money that Philemon lost as a result of Onesimus staying in Rome with Paul for so long.

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This book is one of the four “prison epistles”, along with Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians that were written during Paul’s first imprisonment in Rome. It was written around 60 or 61 A.D. and probably dispatched the same time as Colossians. In it the apostle asks that the converted runaway slave, Onesimus, be received back into the household without punishment.

He also strongly hinted that Onesimus would be useful to him in the work of evangelism. Nowhere does Paul openly state that Philemon should set Onesimus free. Nor can we fully assume that Onesimus would be freed if he were to join Paul in his missionary work.

This letter demonstrates perfect courtesy, tact, delicacy, and generosity, peaking with Paul's tender appeal to Philemon to receive Onesimus in verses 17 and 18: "receive him as myself. <sup>18</sup>If he hath wronged thee, or oweth *thee* ought, put that on mine account;" Paul give us a picture of Christ appealing to the Father to receive us and forgive our sins, to put them on His account.

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Zodhiates mentions that Paul followed the law of Moses regarding fugitives or runaway slaves found in Deuteronomy 23:15,16:

**Deuteronomy 23:15,16 <sup>15</sup>Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee: <sup>16</sup>He shall dwell with thee, *even* among you, in that place which he shall choose in one of thy gates, where it liketh him best: thou shalt not oppress him.**

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Paul didn't betray him as a fugitive, nor did he send word back to Philemon to come to Rome to take Onesimus back. After leading Onesimus to Christ, he disciplined him and then sent him back to Philemon.

History and tradition tell us that Philemon did receive him and took Paul's veiled hint and gave him is freedom.

Others mentioned in the epistle are Apphia, probably Philemon's wife and Archippus, likely the pastor of the church in Philemon's house. Epaphras was another Colossian imprisoned in Rome (who was mentioned in Colossians as bringing the gospel to Colossae).

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Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus are in a real-life drama of profound social significance. Each has heard the claims of Christianity from totally different backgrounds. Paul was once a rigorous Jew of the Dispersion who advanced in Judaism beyond all his contemporaries. Philemon was a wealthy Asiatic Gentile. Onesimus was on the bottom rung of the social ladder, a runaway slave. They find themselves united in the gospel of Christ. Here is a living example of Paul's statement that "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3:28). It was in this oneness that Paul sought a solution to the problem presented by the relationship of Onesimus to Philemon.

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Neither Paul nor the other authors of the NT ever openly call for the abolition of slavery. He does state that if one can be free, then by all means seek for freedom. Instead of demanding the abolition of slavery, he makes repeated appeals for Christian love.

Philemon is not to act out of obligation to the apostle. He is to be motivated by the love of Christ within himself. Out of that, Paul suggests, should come more than mere reconciliation, "knowing that you will do even more than I ask" (v. 21).

Freedom of slaves, like all freedom, must come from the heart of Christ-inspired men. Under this compulsion, slavery must ultimately die. That it took so long for it to do so, that slavery was practiced by many Christians in America until the Civil War ended it, that it is still, in one form or another, in the world today--these humbling facts show the tenacity of socially entrenched sin and the failure of Christianity to deal with it. While all ethical behavior for Christians should arise out of love, rather than regulation or constraint, yet it takes fully committed disciples to put it into practice.

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### Outline

- I. The Prayer of Thanksgiving for Philemon. (1-7)
  - A. Salutation (1-3)
  - B. Thanksgiving and Prayer (4-7)
- II. The Petition of Paul for Onesimus. (8-16)
- III. The Promise of Paul to Philemon. (17-25)

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### Commentary on Philemon

- I. The Prayer of Thanksgiving for Philemon. (1-7)
  - A. Salutation (1-3)

1-3 <sup>1</sup>Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy *our* brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer, <sup>2</sup>And to *our* beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house: <sup>3</sup>Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul is obviously writing to Philemon, whom he refers to as “dearly beloved” and a fellowlabourer, meaning he was busy serving in the Great Commission at a time when being a Christian was very dangerous. He was committed to Christ, not just a nominal saved person.

Paul was also writing to Apphia, thought to be Philemon’s wife, and Archippus, thought to be the pastor of the church meeting in Philemon’s house, and he was also writing to the church there in Colossae in general. This would put some pressure on Philemon, since others would know the content and what Paul was asking him to do.

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### B. Thanksgiving and Prayer (4-7)

**4-7 <sup>4</sup>I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers, <sup>5</sup>Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints; <sup>6</sup>That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. <sup>7</sup>For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.**

Paul starts out by graciously praising Philemon for his love and faith towards Christ and towards His saints. That his faith is made known by all the good works he’s performed in Christ. His love for the saints “refreshes the bowels of the saints”, meaning their hearts are refreshed and encouraged. It’s always best, when you have to do some correcting or ask something difficult of someone to start out by praising them for something genuine.

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### II. The Petition of Paul for Onesimus. (8-16)

**8-16 <sup>8</sup>Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient, <sup>9</sup>Yet for love’s sake I rather beseech *thee*, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ. <sup>10</sup>I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds: <sup>11</sup>Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me: <sup>12</sup>Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels: <sup>13</sup>Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel: <sup>14</sup>But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly. <sup>15</sup>For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever; <sup>16</sup>Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?**

Paul begins to intercede with a friend, who owe's his salvation to Paul in a sense, for Onesimus, the slave. He starts out by tactfully saying that he could command Philemon, as an apostle in Christ to do the right thing, but instead he chooses to ask as his aged friend and prisoner for the cause of Christ. He asks for his son in the faith, Onesimus, whom he led to Christ while in prison in Rome the first time.

He acknowledge that in the past Onesimus was "unprofitable" to Philemon. Was he a terrible worker as a slave, or is Paul just referring to the fact that he had run away? But, now this once worthless slave is saved and a "profitable" man in the service of Christ, making him therefore profitable or useful to both Paul and Philemon.

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Paul is now sending him back to Philemon, allowing Onesimus to make right his running away. Paul asks Philemon to receive him, and adds that Onesimus is very dear to his heart with the phrase, "that is, mine own bowels". He states that he would have liked to have had Onesimus stay with him in Rome to help him and minister to him in place of Philemon in the work of the gospel. But Paul states he needed to make it right with Philemon first, "but without thy mind would I do nothing".

So that Philemon could by his own free will choose to let Onesimus serve in the gospel with Paul. Paul conjectures that maybe it was God's will that he ran away, so that he could get saved and return as a brother in Christ.

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#### III. The Promise of Paul to Philemon. (17-25)

**17-25** <sup>17</sup>If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself. <sup>18</sup>If he hath wronged thee, or oweth *thee* ought, put that on mine account; <sup>19</sup>I Paul have written *it* with mine own hand, I will repay *it*: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides. <sup>20</sup>Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord. <sup>21</sup>Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say. <sup>22</sup>But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you. <sup>23</sup>There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus; <sup>24</sup>Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers. <sup>25</sup>The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with your spirit. Amen.

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Paul then appeals to their relationship (between himself and Philemon), for Philemon to receive Onesimus as if he were Paul himself. This situation now takes on the picture of Christ interceding with the Father for us.

If Onesimus has wronged Philemon, perhaps stolen money, then Paul asks that that sin be put on his account, that he'll repay it, reminding Philemon what he owes Paul for the work Paul had in his salvation. He asks Philemon to refresh or encourage his heart by being gracious to Onesimus, maybe even giving him his freedom, so that he could return to help Paul in the gospel.

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Paul then adds more praise, stating that he knows Philemon will do more than he's asking of him. He then asks for him to prepare a lodging for Paul because he hopes to go to Colossae after being released. He finishes with salutations from Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke. We all by now know who Mark, Demas, and Luke were.

Epaphras was with Paul during a part of his 1st Roman imprisonment, joining in Paul's greetings to Philemon. He was the missionary by whose ministry the Colossians had been converted to Christianity ([Col 1:7](#)), and probably the other churches of the Lycus region had been founded by him as well. In sending his salutation to the Colossians Paul testified, "He hath much labor for you, and for them in Laodicea, and for them in Hierapolis" ([Col 4:13](#)).

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Aristarchus was one of the faithful companions of the apostle Paul who shared with him his labors and sufferings. He is suddenly mentioned along with Gaius as having been seized by the excited Ephesians during the riot stirred up by the silversmiths ([Acts 19:29](#)). They are designated "men of Macedonia, Paul's companions in travel." He was a native of Thessalonica ([Acts 20:4](#); [27:2](#)). He seems after the Ephesian uproar to have remained in Paul's company and he was one of those who accompanied Paul from Greece via Macedonia ([Acts 20:4](#)).

Having preceded Paul to Troas, where they waited for him, they traveled with him to Palestine. He is next mentioned as accompanying Paul to Rome ([Acts 27:2](#)). There he attended Paul and shared his first imprisonment. He is mentioned in two of the letters of the Roman captivity, in the Epistle to the church at Col ([4:10](#)), and in the Epistle to Philem ([1:24](#)), in both of which he sends greetings. In the former Paul calls him "my fellow-prisoner." According to tradition he was martyred during the persecution of Nero.

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