

Notes
on
Philemon

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Introduction

PHILEMON

Date. This letter was sent to Philemon about AD 62 at the same time that letters were sent to the Colossians and Ephesians ([Php 1:10](#), [Phm 1:13](#); [Col 1:1-9](#); [Eph 1:1](#) ff). Paul was still a prisoner in Rome and this group of letters was written while there (along with the one to the Philippians). Onesimus and Tychicus were the bearers of the letter to the Colossians ([Col 4:7-9](#)) and Tychicus the bearer of the one to the Ephesians ([Eph 6:21](#)) while Onesimus bears this letter to Philemon ([Phm 1:10](#)).

Personal character of the Epistle. There is no great doctrinal matter involved nor is it addressed to a church. But it is a delightful picture of domestic life among Christians in a little community in Asia Minor.

A family group. Apphia seems to be the wife of Philemon and Archippus is their son ([Phm 1:1](#) ff). Their home was used as a meeting place for the church in Colossae ([Phm 1:2](#)). The possession of slaves did not necessarily indicate great wealth, unless their number was considerable. This family probably came to know and love Paul during his work at Ephesus ([Act 10:10](#)).

Onesimus. He had a good name ("profitable") but had not lived up to it ([Phm 1:10](#)), he was a runaway slave. In Rome, a favorite resort for runaway slaves, he had been converted to Christ by Paul. Paul calls him his "child" and "a brother beloved" ([Phm 1:10](#), [Phm 1:16](#)).

Return of Onesimus. Paul acknowledges Philemon's legal claim on his slave Onesimus, and so sends him back but with a pleas for Philemon to voluntarily return him to help Paul ([Phm 1:8-14](#)). Paul speaks highly of Onesimus' Christian character and pleads for his reception on that basis and offers to repay what financial losses Philemon may have suffered when his servant ran away.

Christian slaves. Slavery had its grip on the Roman empire. These slaves were not all lower class people by any means. Many of them were captives of war. Some of them were persons of real culture and distinction. The conversion of slaves to Christ often put the master and slave in the same church. No where does Paul show more consummate skill than in the handling of such a subject in this Epistle.

Gradual emancipation. Paul saw in Christianity a spirit of love for Christian slaves as men and brethren which had in it the seeds of destruction of human slavery. This leaven of freedom has worked through the ages, and the Epistle to Philemon is a charter of freedom.

Christian courtesy. Being a Christian includes showing a gracious courtesy toward all men. Paul did not rail at Philemon but gently persuades and pleads with him.

Date: Roman imprisonment AD 60-62

An example of Paul's personal correspondence.

Brevity - tact - diplomacy - sensitivity - & human ([Phm 1:11](#), [Phm 1:20](#))

Paul, Christians and slavery, see p. 11-12 Living Word Commentary.

- a) Increasingly intolerable
- b) Increasingly strained, psychological, socially, & theologically.
- c) One of earliest expressions of Christian benevolence was the use of funds to purchase freedom of slaves. 1 Clement 55:2; Hermas, Mandates 8:10; Ignatius, To Polycarp 4.

See the Bible Textbook Series by Don DeWalt.

Four Things We Need to be What Paul Was

- 1) Prisoner - [Phm 1:1](#)
- 2) Prayer - [Phm 1:4](#)
- 3) Partner - [Phm 1:17](#)
- 4) Payers - [Phm 1:19](#)

Philemon Outline

- 1 - 3 Paul to Philemon - Greeting
- 4 - 7 Praise of Philemon
- 8 -17 Plea to Philemon
- 18-21 Pledge to Philemon
- 22-25 Personal matters

Lesson Summary

- 1. Honorableness - [Rom 12:17](#), [2Co 8:20](#)
 - 2. Restitution
 - 3. Providence -- [Est 4:14](#)
 - 4. Slavery
 - 5. Philemon as a wonderful example
 - a. Christian stewardship
 - b. Concerned for Christ & the gospel
 - c. Brotherly love and Faith
 - 6. An Advocate - [1Jn 2:1-2](#)
 - 7. Reconciliation --
Repentance - forgiveness - [Act 17:30](#)
 - 8. Account Paid - [Phm 1:15](#), [Phm 1:19](#)
(Ours paid by the Lord)
-

Php 1:1**Verse Comments:**

Paul a prisoner -- cf. vs [Phm 1:1](#), 9, 10, 13, 22, 23

1. He had converted Onesimus - v.10
2. Philemon, also a friend and convert - [Phm 1:10](#)
3. Onesimus - met Paul by chance, or intentionally sought him out.
 - a. "Runaway" or had he abandoned some special mission for his master
 - b. Sent back accompanied by Tychicus ([Col 4:7-9](#))
4. Purpose:

Paul a prisoner -- probably real and symbolic. (Why absence of "apostle" title?)

Although Paul is imprisoned at this time, he does not regard himself as a prisoner of the state; rather, he is a prisoner of Christ, confined due to his efforts to spread the gospel. Yet even in prison Paul continues his mission ([Php 1:13](#); [Php 4:22](#)). Compare note on [Eph 3:1](#). - FSB

Philemon -- Known only in this letter. The owner of the slave Onesimus and host of the church at Colossae ([Phm 1:2](#)). Philemon apparently became a believer through Paul's ministry ([Phm 1:19](#)). - FSB

Fellowlabourer -- with Paul at some earlier time - or in the Colossian church now.

Although Paul refers to Philemon as a fellow worker, the nature of Philemon's service is not clear; it does not seem that Paul visited Colossae ([Col 2:1](#)), so the two men must have met elsewhere (perhaps Ephesus). - FSB

Philemon 1:2

Apphia -- Known only here, a wife or sister.

Apphia our sister -- Some manuscripts describe Apphia as "our sister," identifying her as a believer; other manuscripts read "the beloved." She might be Philemon's wife, in which case Paul is addressing her because wives often managed household slaves in Graeco-Roman society (compare note on v. 10). Paul is calling on her—as well as Philemon—to receive Onesimus as a brother in Christ - FSB

Archippus -- Apparently the preacher at Colossae, [Col 4:17](#), probably Philemon's son, (or physical brother who lived with Philemon).

Fellowsoldier -- [Php 2:25](#) In Christ's great missionary campaign. Cp. Phil. 2:25, and our note. For the imagery, cp. [2Co 10:3-5](#); [1Ti 1:18](#); [2Ti 2:3-4](#) - CBSC

fellowsoldier -- The servant of Christ is involved in a war and must be prepared to stand firm in the face of opposition ([Eph 6:10-17](#)).

Church -- Letter also intended to be read by the church. The reconciliation Paul seeks between Philemon and Onesimus will involve the entire community.

Thy house -- singular, that of Archippus. Homes were used as meeting places, [Col 4:15](#), [Rom 16:5](#), [1Co 16:19](#), (see [Act 12:12](#), [Act 2:46](#)) -- The Hall of Tyrannus - [Act 19:9](#).

There were no known church buildings until the third century.

(The Greek text is ambiguous as to which of the two men mentioned in vv. 1–2 owns the home where the church met.)

✚Philemon 1:3

Grace to you . . The standard greeting that appears in all 13 of Paul's NT letters. It highlighted salvation's means (grace) and its results (peace) and linked the Father and Son, thus affirming the deity of Christ. - MSB

Grace to you and peace -- This greeting summarizes Paul's gospel message (see note on [Rom 1:7](#)). If the gospel can reconcile Jew and Gentile ([Eph 2:14-16](#)), it also can reconcile slave and master.

You -- is plural, referring to all those mentioned in v 2.

✚Philemon 1:4

Thank God -- Customary with Paul in opening his correspondence.

4–7 Paul's Prayer and Thanksgiving. Before Paul makes his appeal, he graciously and tactfully expresses his thanksgiving for Philemon ([Phm 1:4-5](#)) and describes how he prays for him ([Phm 1:6-7](#)). This thanksgiving previews themes in the letter: love ([Phm 1:9](#)), sharing or partnership ([Phm 1:17](#)), doing good ([Phm 1:14](#)), heart ([Phm 1:12](#), [Phm 1:20](#)), and refreshing ([Phm 1:20](#)). Because of Philemon's Christian love and partnership with him in the gospel, Paul hopes that he will do a good deed and refresh Paul's heart. - NIVZSB

I thank my God -- It was traditional in the Greco-Roman world to begin a letter with a standard form: (1) from whom; (2) to whom; and (3) a blessing or thanksgiving.

Paul followed this pattern (thanksgiving for readers, cf. [Rom 1:8](#); [1Co 1:4](#); [Php 1:3](#); [Col 1:3](#); [1Th 1:2](#); [2Th 1:3](#); blessing of God, cf. [2Co 1:3](#); [Eph 1:3](#); thanksgiving to God, cf. [1Ti 1:12](#); [2Ti 1:3](#)). - Utley

remember you in my prayers -- Implies more than simply calling persons to mind; he also appeals to God on their behalf. - NIVZSB

✚Philemon 1:5

Hearing -- Cause of his thanksgiving. *No one had born bad tales of Philemon.

I hear of your love -- Paul did not start the church at Colossae. Apparently Epaphras had brought him information about the developing heresy at Colossae (cf. [Col. 1:4](#)) and of Philemon's ministry to the saints (cf. [Phm 1:7](#)). - Utley

Love -- the foundation of his requests - v.9 [Phm 1:9](#)

- 1) Love & Faith to Lord
- 2) Love & Faith to Saints

love -- In the Gk. text, this verse is arranged in what is called a chiasmic construction. "Love" relates to the final phrase "toward all the saints." This love of will, choice, self-sacrifice, and humility ([Gal 5:22](#)) was a manifestation of Philemon's genuine faith "toward the Lord Jesus" (cf. [Rom 5:5](#); [Gal 5:6](#); [1Jn 3:14](#)). - MSB

all the saints -- Paul commended the churches in Ephesus and Colossae for their love for all the saints ([Eph 1:15](#); [Col 1:4](#)). He also commends Philemon with the hope that he will extend this same love to his runaway slave, Onesimus, who has become a saint through Paul's ministry (Phlm 10). - FSB

■ Philemon 1:6

Paul's prayer continued:

v.6 -- This verse can be translated in different ways. Paul is hinting that Philemon should be gracious toward Onesimus in light of God's goodness to Philemon (cp. vv 10, 17–19). - NLTSB

Communication -- sharing, *koinonia* [See LW of many ways this word is used, p. 16)

Sharing (Gk. *koinōnia*) as used here would seem to carry a wide range of meaning, including the ideas of generosity, partnership, and fellowship that result from the common faith and common life that believers have in Christ. This usage of *koinōnia* is similar to the way Paul commends the Philippians for their tangible generosity ("partnership," see note on [Phm 1:17](#)) in supporting the cause of the gospel ([Php 1:5](#)). Paul is laying the groundwork for his appeal to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus. - ESVSB

sharing -- Usually rendered "fellowship," the Gr. word means much more than simply enjoying one another's company. It refers to a mutual sharing of all life, which believers do because of their common life in Christ and mutual partnership or "belonging to each other" in the "faith." - MSB

sharing -- "fellowshp"; This verse has been interpreted in several senses: **(1)** the fellowship of believers with each other (cf. 2 Cor. 8:4; Phil. 2:1–5); **(2)** the sharing of the gospel with unbelievers (cf. Phil. 1:5); or **(3)** the sharing of good things with others. - Utley

Become effectual -- RSV "may promote the knowledge.."

Lit. "powerful." Paul wanted Philemon's actions to send a powerful message to the church about the importance of forgiveness. - MSB

acknowledgment -- "knowledge", In Paul's writings wisdom and knowledge are not separated from ethical living, but form a unified whole (cf. [Php 1:9](#); [Col 1:9-10](#)). - Utley

■ Philemon 1:7

great joy -- motive of his thanksgiving.

your love -- Paul uses this term (*agapē*) three times in this small book. He had heard of their love and faith for Jesus and His followers ([Phm 1:5](#)); he had much joy and comfort in their love ([Phm 1:7](#)); and he appealed to this God-inspired love to motivate Philemon ([Phm 1:9](#)). - Utley

Bowels -- Lit "entrails" ([Act 1:18](#)) Fig. designation for the "seat of emotions"

This is literally the term for "bowels" (*splagchna*, cf. [Act 1:18](#)). This is possibly related to the OT sacrifice of these specific body parts on the altar (cf. [Exo 29:13](#); [Lev 3:3-4](#), 10, 15; [Lev 4:8-9](#); [Lev 7:3-4](#); [Lev 8:16](#), 25; [Lev 9:10](#), 16). The ancients located the feelings in the lower viscera or abdomen (cf. [Isa 63:15](#); [Jer 4:19](#)). For Paul it relates to Christian love (cf. 2:1; [2Co 6:12](#); [2Co 7:15](#); [Php 1:8](#), [Php 1:21](#); [Col 3:12](#); [Phm 1:7](#), [Phm 1:12](#), [Phm 1:20](#)). - Utley

Refreshed -- rest ([Mat 11:28](#) effect of Jesus' ministry), refers to inner man, [1Co 16:18](#)

This comes from the Gr. military term that describes an army at rest from a march. - MSB

the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you -- Philemon was well known for his love for his fellow believers, which brought Paul great joy. He had been actively involved in ministering to other Christians in a way that had profoundly encouraged them. - ESVSB

Philemon's generosity prepares for Paul's request that Philemon now refresh Paul's heart. This request makes a play on words since Paul describes Onesimus as his "very heart" in [Phm 1:12](#). - NIVZSB

■ Philemon 1:8

bold -- The word "bold" is *parrēsian*, rendered "courage" and "confidence" in [Heb 3:6](#); [Heb 10:19](#), [Heb 10:35](#).

Enjoin -- command, order, demand; As an apostle, Paul had the authority to command Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother in the Lord, but he does not take this approach. Paul hopes that Philemon will be motivated by love, not duty ([Phm 1:9](#)). - FSB

Convenient -- "fitting" NKJV;

■ Philemon 1:9

Paul the aged -- That his appeal may be more sure to touch Philemon, he reminds him that Paul is an old, gray-haired, scarred veteran of Christ, who has grown aged in his service, and is now a prisoner suffering for his Lord. - PNT

The Greek word here, *presbytēs*, is used for men between 50 and 56 years old. Paul's age might explain why he relied on Onesimus' help. - FSB

old man -- Suggests that Paul is in the final stage of a normal lifespan. He is identified as a "young man" in [Act 7:58](#) when he supported the stoning of Stephen, and that was some 30 years prior to this time. That the younger should defer to an older member of a family ([Lev 19:32](#)) encourages Paul to make his delicate request. - NIVZSB

the aged -- More than a reference to his chronological age (which at the time of this letter was about 60), this description includes the toll that all the years of persecution, illnesses, imprisonments, difficult journeys, and constant concern for the churches had taken on Paul ([2Co 11:23-30](#)), making him feel and appear even older than he actually was. - MSB

Paul lists several reasons why Philemon should honor his request

1. Paul's apostleship (v. 8)
2. Paul's age (v. 9)
3. Paul's imprisonment (v. 9)
4. Paul's ministry in Onesimus' life (v. 10)
5. Onesimus' possible ministry to Paul (v. 11, 13)
6. Paul's love for him (v. 12)
7. Onesimus has been changed from a slave to a brother in Christ (v. 15–16)
8. Philemon's attitude toward Paul (v. 17)
9. Philemon's salvation at Paul's witness (v. 19)
10. Philemon's ministry to Paul (v. 20)

- Utley

Philemon 1:10

Phm_1:10

my son Onesimus -- Paul considers Onesimus' to be his spiritual son, suggesting that Paul led him to faith in Christ. Paul also describes Timothy and Titus as his sons ([1Ti 1:2](#); [2Ti 1:2](#); [Tit 1:4](#)). - FSB

became my son -- Translates a Greek verb that means “to give birth”; refers to Onesimus' conversion ([1Co 4:15](#)) - NIVZSB [[Gal 4:19](#)]

my child -- Rabbis use this phrase to describe their students, but in this context it refers to Onesimus' salvation through Paul's witness (cf. [1Co 4:14-15](#); [2Co 6:13](#); [2Co 12:14](#); Gal. 4:19, [1Th 2:11](#); [1Ti 1:2](#); [2Ti 1:2](#); [2Ti 2:1](#); and [Tit 1:4](#)). - Utley

Onesimus -- The name **Onesimus** literally means “useful” or “profitable” and was frequently given to slaves. He is also mentioned in [Col 4:9](#) as accompanying Tychicus with the letter to the Colossians. - ESVSB

While in prison at Rome, Paul had led him to faith in Christ. - MSB

in my chains -- bonds, imprisonment; This is literally “in my bonds.” It is uncertain how Onesimus met Paul in prison: (1) Onesimus was imprisoned with Paul, (2) Onesimus had been sent on an errand to Paul in prison, or (3) he came to Paul because he knew that Philemon was a friend. - Utley

Philemon 1:11

Phm_1:11

Unprofitable -- profitable -- a play on Onesimus's name "useful" or "profitable." Paul saying that he is now ready to live up to his name.

This converted slave was formerly useless (*achrēstos*), but is now “useful” (*euchrētos* cf. [2Ti 4:11](#)) to both Paul and Philemon.

F. F. Bruce's translation of this section in *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, p. 393, is very helpful in seeing the word play: "His name is Onesimus-profitable by name and profitable by nature. I know that in former days you found him quite unprofitable, but now, I assure you, he has learned to be true to his name-profitable to you, and profitable to me."

Philemon 1:12

Phm_1:12

whom I have sent again -- Lit., "*I did send*"; the "epistolary aorist," as in [Col 4:8](#).

I have sent -- Paul takes a risk in sending Onesimus back to Philemon. According to Roman law, an owner could severely punish—even execute—a runaway slave (compare note on [Phm 1:10](#)); anyone who harbored a runaway slave could face charges, as well. Even so, Paul sends Onesimus back to Colossae with Tychicus and this letter (compare [Col 4:7-9](#)) - FSB

If Onesimus was a fugitive slave, he could be subject to a variety of disciplinary actions meted out at his master's discretion, from flogging to branding to manacles to execution. Paul hopes to avert such retribution by identifying Onesimus as his "very heart." He emphasizes how dear this "son" (v. 10) has become to him in Christ. - NIVZSB

I have sent him back to you -- This phrase had a legal connotation of "referring his case to you." This also shows that believers must face the consequences of their actions even if they were committed before salvation. It also affirmed the legal rights of slave owners (cf. [Phm 1:14](#), [Phm 1:18](#)). - Utey

Bowels -- see v. 7 [Phm 1:7](#)

my very heart -- Not the common word for heart (Gk. *kardia*) but *splagchna*, literally "internal organs" (esp. the stomach and intestines). It connotes affection, intimacy, and a deep love (cf. [Phm 1:7](#); [Phm 1:20](#); [Php 2:1](#); [Col 3:12](#)). Paul is not handling this situation as a detached arbitrator but as one who has developed a fond affection for Onesimus. - ESVSB

Philemon 1:13

Phm_1:13

Whom I would have retained -- Would gladly have kept him with me to render for thee the service you would be glad to give me while I am in chains, only(14) - PNT

I would -- Lit., "*I was wishing*"; the imperfect indicates a half-purpose, stopped by other considerations. Lightfoot compares for similar imperfects [Rom 9:3](#); [Gal 4:20](#). - CBSC

on behalf of you -- Paul wants Philemon to know that Onesimus has helped him and his ministry. In the Greek text of Philemon, Paul's remark here is worded as if Philemon had sent Onesimus to assist Paul. - FSB

Paul's need for someone to assist him as a prisoner is greater than any need Philemon might have of his slave. He wants to keep Onesimus with him, but he wants Philemon to make the decision himself ([2Co 9:7](#)). In sending back Onesimus, Paul demonstrates the kind of unselfish love that he wants Philemon to show in response. - NIVZSB

Because Paul was a financially independent person, he endured criticism from several quarters. Yet as the years went by he was able to receive help from some churches he ministered to. This help was in two specific ways: (1) the church of Philippi (cf. [Php 1:5](#), [Php 1:7](#); [Php 4:15](#)) and possibly the church of Thessalonica (cf. [2Co 11:9](#)) sent him money to help with his expenses in prison and (2) the church at Philippi sent a representative, Epaphroditus, to help Paul, (cf. [Php 2:25](#)). In a similar sense Paul saw Onesimus as a gift from Philemon and the church at Colossae. - Utley

■ Philemon 1:14

Phm_1:14

apart from your consent Paul recognizes that Onesimus' fate ultimately belongs in Philemon's hands. For this reason, Paul refrains from keeping Onesimus with him. - FSB

Do nothing -- v.14 i.e, such as keeping Onesimus.

your good deed -- Paul does not specify what he would have Philemon do: Keep Onesimus as his slave and send him back to serve Paul? Set Onesimus free and allow him to return as a freedman with greater independence to serve Paul and the gospel? - NIVZSB

not by compulsion ..

not as according to necessity Again, Paul indicates that he wants Philemon's decision regarding Onesimus to be made freely, not out of obligation (see [Phm 1:8-9](#); note on v. 8). - FSB

voluntary -- Or "of your own personal will." Paul wanted Onesimus to minister alongside him, but only if Philemon openly and gladly agreed to release him. - MSB

Though Paul probably could have talked Philemon into letting him keep Onesimus in Rome, he did not want to take undue advantage of their relationship. Paul preferred that such permission would be **spontaneous** (*hekousion*, "voluntary," used only here in the NT). No one knows whether Philemon freed Onesimus and sent him back to minister to Paul in Rome, but it is an interesting thought. - BKC

It might seem that he almost suggests to Philemon to *send Onesimus back to him*. But this is not likely in itself, in view of the long and costly journey involved; and besides, he looks forward to visit Colossae himself before long (ver. 22). What he means is that he sends back Onesimus, because to retain him would be to get a benefit from Philemon willing *or not*, and Philemon's "good" had always been willingly given.

"As it were" softens the "*of necessity*"; Philemon might not be unwilling, but there would be *the look of his being so*. - Constable

■ Philemon 1:15

Phm_1:15

perhaps -- Paul was suggesting that God providentially ordered the overturning of the evil of Onesimus' running away to produce eventual good (cf. [Gen 50:20](#); [Rom 8:28](#)). - MSB

departed -- RSV "was departed" His departure probably worked hardship.

you lost Onesimus -- (NLT) (literally *he went away*): This might be a euphemism for running away, in order not to mention Onesimus's offense directly. - NLT SB

why he was parted from you -- The Greek verb is passive, without indicating any agent of the action explicitly expressed. - ESV SB

a time -- The time between Onesimus' escape from Philemon and his return with Tychicus ([Col 4:9](#)) - FSB

a while -- Philemon's temporary loss (**for a little while** is lit., "to an hour") of his slave resulted in his having him returned permanently. Some slaves were able to stay undetected in large cities or isolated areas, never to be returned to their owners. - BKC

he was separated from you -- Paul de-emphasizes the reason behind Onesimus's absence by using the passive voice, which encourages Philemon to see God as the agent and to attribute the absence to God's mysterious purposes. God intended this separation for good ([Gen 50:20](#)) so that they might be united forever. - NIVZ SB [also [Gen 45:8](#)]

receive him -- The Greek verb is often used of *receiving payment*; e.g. [Mat 6:2](#), [Mat 6:5](#), [Mat 6:16](#). We might almost paraphrase, "*get him paid back*"; as if he had been "*lent to the Lord*." - CBSC

For ever -- for good. The words **for good**, which translate *aiōnion* (normally rendered "forever"), may mean either permanently in this life or forever in heaven.

Philemon 1:16

Phm_1:16

no longer a slave -- Though Onesimus was still legally Philemon's *slave*, Philemon must think of him as *a beloved brother* and be committed to his well-being. - NLT SB

no longer as a slave -- Paul could have said more explicitly, "no longer a slave," which would make it clear that he expected Onesimus's emancipation. The particle "as" (Gk. *hōs*) allowed more freedom for Philemon to ponder and then choose to do what was right, rather than having Paul command him directly. Clearly, however, Paul expected an entirely transformed relationship between the two of them based on the fact that Onesimus was now Philemon's **beloved brother**. - ESV SB

no longer as a slave -- Christians are no longer to regard others according to human categories ([2Co 5:16](#)). As brothers and sisters in Christ, Christians share a bond that transcends the legal master-slave relationship ([Gal 3:28](#); [Col 3:11](#)). They become slaves to one another through love ([Gal 5:13](#)), and that tie lasts beyond death. When a master is expected to treat a slave as a brother in Christ and as the representative of the apostle Paul ([Phm 1:17](#)), the institution of slavery is subverted. One can serve Christ as a slave of some earthly master, but Paul does not regard it as a desirable state ([1Co 7:21](#)) - NIVZ SB

more than a slave, a beloved brother -- This verse expresses the heart of Paul's request, which is based on his conviction that the gospel of Christ transforms human relationships. Because Philemon and Onesimus have been united with Christ, they both belong to the one family of God; Onesimus the slave has become Philemon's brother. By embracing Onesimus, Philemon can bear witness to the gospel's power to transform and reconcile. - FSB

brother -- The Greek word used here, *adelphos*, often refers in the nt to those who have faith in Jesus Christ; it emphasizes unity and equality over division. In addition to using *adelphos* here to describe the transformation of Onesimus, Paul uses it twice in reference to Philemon ([Phm 1:7](#), [Phm 1:20](#)), putting slave and master on equal terms in accord with the gospel. - FSB

more than a slave ... beloved brother -- Paul did not call for Onesimus' freedom (cf. [1Co 7:20-22](#)), but that Philemon would receive his slave now as a fellow-believer in Christ (cf. [Eph 6:9](#); [Col 4:1](#); [1Ti 6:2](#)). Christianity never sought to abolish slavery, but rather to make the relationships within it just and kind. - MSB

no longer as a slave ... a beloved brother -- Christianity did not attack slavery openly (cf. [Eph 6:5-9](#)) but destroyed it through its view of the dignity and worth of human beings (cf. [Gal 3:28](#); [Col 3:11](#)). - Utley

brother beloved -- Receive him as a brother to me.

the flesh -- in everyday affairs. In this physical life (*see note on* [Php 1:22](#)), as they worked together.

in the Lord -- The master and slave were to enjoy spiritual oneness and fellowship as they worshiped and ministered together. - MSB

Philemon 1:17

Phm_1:17

If thou count me a partner -- Christian fellow-laborers are partners. See [2Co 8:23](#), where Titus is named as Paul's partner. Then receive him, as you would me. - PNT

partner -- commercial and legal word also.

partner -- The Greek word used here, *koinōnos*, indicates that Philemon shares in Paul's ministry. This partnership is the basis for Paul's reiteration of his request: Welcome Onesimus as you would welcome me. - FSB

partner -- Paul's term 'partner' must not be weakened to mean merely an intimate friend or companion. It suggests the fellowship or partnership of those who have common interests, common feelings, common work. It is a spiritual fellowship and has a double aspect, Godward as well as brotherward. - Constable

partner -- (Gk. *koinōnos*) is from the same root as "sharing" (Gk. *koinōnia*) in [Phm 1:1](#). The good that is in Philemon should now be expressed in his new relationship with Onesimus. As God has received his people for the sake of Christ, they are to receive one another (see [Rom 5:6-11](#); [2Co 5:16-21](#); note on [2Co 2:10](#)). - ESVSB

accept him as you would me -- Paul's statement may have derived from Jesus' words in [Mat 25:44-45](#) or Paul's experience with Jesus on the road to Damascus (cf. [Act 9:4](#)). By persecuting Christians, Paul was persecuting Christ. By accepting Onesimus, Philemon was accepting Paul. True love is wonderfully corporate, and reciprocal. We show our love for God by how we love one another (cf. [1Jn 2:9](#), [1Jn 2:11](#); [1Jn 4:20](#)). - Utley

Philemon 1:18

Wronged -- see [Col 3:25](#), occasioned by one?

oweth -- The slave might be trusted by his master with money for purchases; or he might work at a trade, or do casual service for others, his master claiming the proceeds. Thus he might be his owner's debtor. - CBSC

If he has wronged you suggests that Onesimus not only ran away from Philemon but probably took money from him as well. This would have provided him the means to purchase passage to Rome and to live there for a time. Roman society expected brutal punishment of fugitive slaves, at times resulting in death. Thus Paul is asking Philemon to do something quite extraordinary by forgiving Onesimus's debt. - ESVSB

The implication of the grammar of verse 18 is that Onesimus did ...owe Philemon [perhaps he had stolen something, or indebted to him for the word he didn't do by running away-WG], and that Paul pled with Philemon to put the charge to Paul's account. - Utley

Though Paul did not name Onesimus' offense, it probably involved a monetary loss for Philemon. Onesimus may have stolen some money or goods when he escaped from his owner, or the absence of Onesimus' services may have involved Philemon in financial loss. Paul did not castigate Onesimus for some crime; he simply wrote **if he has wronged you or owes you anything**. - BKC

my account -- Language of commerce; Another hint. It was customary for a new owner to take on whatever debts were involved with a slave.

charge this to my account -- Acknowledging that Onesimus likely owes a debt to Philemon, Paul takes this obligation upon himself. - FSB

Onesimus might have stolen some things from Philemon's home or had a debt to pay off when he ran away. - NLTsb

charge it to me -- Paul makes no excuses for Onesimus. He takes for granted that Onesimus committed some offense, but he does not name it to avoid rubbing salt in the wound. Whatever it was, it cost Philemon financially and brought dishonor to him. Paul removes a barrier to forgiveness with his promise to repay any damages from theft or loss of services. - NIBZSB

Paul asked Philemon to **charge** (*elloga*, an accounting term) Onesimus' financial obligation to Paul. This generous act compares in a small way with Christ's substitutionary work on the cross. As Onesimus was in debt to Philemon, so sinners are in debt; they must pay for their sins against God. As Paul was not involved in any way with Onesimus' guilt, so Christ was sinless, separate from sinners ([Heb 4:15](#); [Heb 7:25](#)). And as Paul assumed Onesimus' debt, so Christ took on Himself the sins of the world ([Isa 53:6](#); [Joh 1:29](#); [Heb 7:27](#); [Heb 9:26](#), [Heb 9:28](#)). - BKC

Philemon 1:19

Phm_1:19

v. 19 seems to be the nature of an I.O.U.

It shows the importance and personal concern for Paul to personally write this himself (without a scribe. [This verse only?])

I Paul have written it -- Lit., “*did write it*,” an “epistolary aorist” (Col. 4:8); “the tense commonly used in signatures” (Lightfoot).—Here, surely, he takes the pen (cp. Col. 4:18) and writes his indebtedness in autograph, with a formal mention of his own name; then, he gives the pen back to the amanuensis. - CBSC

“A signature to a deed in ancient or mediæval times would commonly take the form ... “*I so-and-so*” (Lightfoot). - CBSC

with my own hand -- Paul took the stylus from the secretary’s hand to write this promissory note that legally assumes the debt. His offer models what Christ did for us on a far greater scale. Paul takes upon himself the charge of Onesimus’s legal indebtedness so that Philemon might forgive him (cf. [Col 2:14](#)). - NIVZSB

“I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand” Apparently Paul used scribes to write for him (cf. Tertius in [Rom 16:22](#)), probably because of his eye problems (cf. [Gal 4:15](#); [Gal 6:11](#)) possibly caused at his conversion experience (cf. [Act 9:8](#), [Act 9:18](#); [Act 22:11](#); [Act 26:13](#)). However there may have been some forged letters claiming to be written by Paul which circulated among the churches (cf. [2Th 3:17](#)). Therefore, Paul took the pen and wrote the last few verses himself (cf. [1Co 16:21](#); [Gal 6:11](#); [Col 4:18](#); [2Th 3:17](#); [Phm 1:19](#)). - Utley

Evidently Paul wrote this whole epistle with his own hand rather than through a secretary as was his custom. Alternatively Paul may have signed his name at this point and then personally wrote out his guarantee. - Constable

I will -- The “*I*” is emphatic in the Greek. - CBSC

Thine own self -- Refers to Philemon's own conversion.

you owe me even your very self -- Paul has just volunteered to take over Onesimus’ debt to Philemon; now Paul reminds Philemon of his own indebtedness to Paul. This likely refers to Philemon coming to faith in Christ through Paul’s ministry. Even though Philemon cannot repay this debt, he can refresh Paul’s heart by forgiving Onesimus and, perhaps, sending him back to Paul. - FSB

you owe me your very self -- One last moving reason for Philemon to grant Paul’s request: Paul reminds Philemon either that he was converted under Paul’s ministry or that Paul brought the gospel to his area. - NIVZSB

Whether this means Philemon was converted directly or indirectly through Paul’s preaching is not clear (cp. [Col 1:7](#)) - NLTBSB

A reference to the fact that Philemon was converted through Paul's ministry, so that Philemon "owed" Paul something far greater, namely, his eternal life. The debt that Onesimus owed to Philemon, therefore, is insignificant by comparison. - ESVSB

Philemon 1:20

Phm_1:20

Yea -- So (in the Greek) [Mat 15:27](#); [Php 4:3](#).

let me have -- This verse is similar to [Rom 1:12](#). How we live as Christians encourages and refreshes other believers. - Utley

Joy -- "Joy" same root word as "profit" = Onesimus. Paul's play again on words.

benefit -- The Greek word used here, *oninēmi*, sounds like "Onesimus." Through this wordplay, Paul might be asking Philemon to send Onesimus back to him. - FSB

The words "some benefit" translate the Greek *onaimēn*, which is obviously related to the word "Onesimus." Paul was saying in effect, "Let me find in you, as I have found in him, a true Onesimus." - BKC

In the Lord -- as a Christian.

in the Lord -- Paul is interested not in how he might benefit materially but in how the work of the Lord benefits. - NIVZSB

Refresh -- as you (Philemon) have refreshed others, [Phm 1:7](#). Paul asking Philemon to live up to his reputation.

my heart -- Paul had rejoiced because "the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through [Philemon]", and in [Phm 1:12](#) he said, "I am ... sending my very heart." Now in v. 20 Paul picks up this language again, using the Greek *splagchna* ("heart") for the third time, and commands Philemon to **refresh my heart in Christ**. - ESVSB

Philemon 1:21

Phm_1:21

confident of your obedience -- Paul's confidence probably comes from his knowledge of Philemon's character and his commitment to the gospel ([Phm 1:5-7](#)). - FSB

I -- vs. 19-20 ε'γω' emphatic "I" used 3 times, Paul emphasizes that he, and not Onesimus is writing this.

I wrote -- Better, in English epistolary idiom, **I have written**. - CBSC

and even more -- Paul might be hinting that he would like to see Onesimus released (cp. [Phm 1:13-14](#)), or he might simply be expressing confidence in Philemon's kindness. - NLTSC

and even more -- Some think that **even more** could suggest freeing Onesimus. Others think Paul was hinting that Philemon should send Onesimus back to minister to Paul (cf. [Phm 1:13-14](#)). Paul may have deliberately not given specific instructions to Philemon, giving him the freedom to decide which course of action would be best. - ESVSB

more than I say -- The **more than** forgiveness that Paul was urging upon Philemon was either: **1)** to welcome Onesimus back enthusiastically, not grudgingly (cf. Luke 15:22–24); **2)** to permit Onesimus, in addition to his menial tasks, to minister spiritually with Philemon; or **3)** to forgive any others who might have wronged Philemon. Whichever Paul intended, he was not subtly urging Philemon to grant Onesimus freedom. - MSB

do even more -- “The word emancipation seems to be trembling on his lips, and yet he does not once utter it” (Lightfoot, p. 389).

■ Philemon 1:22

Phm_1:22

prepare a guest room for me -- Paul expects to be released from prison and come to Colossae for a visit. It is uncertain if this indicates that Paul has abandoned (or at least delayed) his previous plans to go further west to Spain. - ESVSB

a guest room -- Lit. “a lodging,” a place where Paul could stay when he visited Colosse. - MSB

Prepare a guest room. This is the only direct command in the letter. Hospitality was vital to traveling missionaries. - NIVZSB

Paul’s request for **a guest room** in anticipation of his visit reinforces his request that Philemon treat Onesimus kindly. At his coming, he would see how Onesimus had been treated. - NLTBSB

Prepare a guest room for me -- likely in Philemon’s home. The prospect of a visit from the apostle would comfort Philemon but would also spur him to respond quickly to Paul’s plea for Onesimus. The “guest room” points to Philemon’s financial status. Like Paul, many Christian workers have been encouraged and assisted in their ministries by such provisions. - BKC

a lodging -- The Greek may mean either “*lodging*” or **hospitality**. General Greek usage is in favour of the latter. The “*hospitality*” would no doubt be gladly provided in Philemon’s own house; but St Paul, with his unfailing courtesy, does not *ask* this. - CBSC

Given -- May indicate the working of God, or court officials.

through your prayers -- Paul knew that many were praying for his release (cf. [Php 1:25-26](#)). (How could Philemon pray for Paul’s release and yet refuse to release Onesimus?) By using the plural **you** and **your**, Paul referred back to those mentioned in [Phm 1:1-2](#): Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and all the believers with them. - BKC

Philemon 1:23

Phm_1:23

vv 23–25 Paul usually closes his letters with greetings from others and a benediction. Cp. [Col 4:7-18](#); Paul's letters to the Colossians and to Philemon were probably carried to Colosse at the same time by Tychicus and Onesimus. - NLTSB

Epaphras -- *Epaphras* was a native of Colosse who first brought the Good News to Philemon and his family [Col 1:7](#), [Col 4:12](#).

Epaphras is one of Philemon's fellow Colossians, whom God had used to plant the church in that city ([Col. 1:7](#); [4:12](#)). He is now in Rome as Paul's **fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus**. The circumstances of his arrest are unknown. - ESVSB

Epaphras” He was the founder of three of the churches (Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea) in the Lycus River Valley (cf. [Col 4:12-13](#); [Phm 1:23](#)). He was probably converted during Paul's revival at Ephesus (cf. [Act 19:10](#)). His name was a shortened form of Epaphroditus, which was etymologically related to the goddess Aphrodite. Another man by this same name was mentioned in [Php 2:25](#); [Php 4:18](#). However, he was from a different geographical area. - Utley

Fellowprisoner -- Literally? or figurative in the Lord.

my fellow-prisoner -- Perhaps only in the sense that he shared Paul's imprisonment by becoming his companion. - BKC

my fellowprisoner -- Cp. [Col 4:10](#), and note. This passage is in favour of explaining the term there also to mean “a visitor who is so much with me as to be, as it were, in prison too.” - CBSC

Philemon 1:24

Phm_1:24

Mark -- John Mark, a cousin of Barnabas, accompanied Paul and Barnabas during the first missionary journey, but returned home in the middle of it ([Act 13:13](#)). Paul and Mark were apparently now reconciled (also [2Ti 4:11](#))

When Barnabas wanted John Mark to accompany him on the second missionary journey, Paul refused. Because of this disagreement, Paul and Barnabas parted company ([Act 15:39](#)). Mark later joined Paul in his missionary work, and Paul commended him to others ([2Ti 4:11](#); [Phm 1:24](#)). The Gospel of Mark is commonly attributed to John Mark who also accompanied Peter. It was said that Mark's gospel comprised the preaching of Peter. (For more on Mark see the introductory note on [Mar 1:1](#).)

Mark -- ([Act 12:12](#), [Act 12:25](#); [Act 13:5](#), [Act 12:13](#); [Act 15:36-41](#); see [2Ti 4:11](#); [Phm 1:24](#); [1Pe 5:13](#)), whose stature is bolstered when identified as “the cousin of Barnabas”.

Aristarchus -- A missionary companion from Thessalonica, in Macedonia ([Act 20:4](#)). He was with Paul in Ephesus and Jerusalem and during his voyage to Rome ([Act 19:29](#); [Act 20:4](#); [Act 27:2](#)).

Acts does not suggest that *Aristarchus* was also under arrest, so perhaps he was *in prison* *with* Paul voluntarily, sharing his confinement in order to encourage him and assist him in ministry.
- NLTSB

Demas, Lucas -- both Gentiles. Demas stands here among the faithful, and see [Col 4:14](#). But see also [2Ti 4:10](#).

This group of names (with the names of Archippus, ver. 2 above, and Onesimus, ver. 10) links this Epistle to that to Colossæ, in time and place of writing, and in destination. - CBSC

Luke -- He was Paul's faithful traveling friend, co-worker, and physician (cf. [Col 4:14](#); [2Ti 4:11](#)). He was with Paul during many of his preaching stops in Acts. This is confirmed by the "we" statements in Acts (cf. [Act 16:11](#), [Act 16:16](#); [Act 20:6-7](#), [Act 20:13](#); [Act 21:1](#), [Act 21:5](#); [Act 21:7](#); [Act 21:10](#); [Act 21:12](#); [Act 21:15](#); [Act 21:17](#); [Act 21:25](#); [Act 27:1](#); [Act 27:18](#); [Act 27:26-27](#)). Luke may have been the "man of Macedonia" in [Act 16:9](#). - Utley

Luke -- Luke was apparently with Paul throughout his two-year imprisonment in Caesarea and then in his two-year Roman imprisonment. - ESVSB

[While the gospel of Luke may have been penned during the time of Paul's 2 year Caesarean imprisonment, "Acts" may have been penned during this 2 year imprisonment at Rome. This would also account for the sudden ending of "Acts" without any account of Paul's travels after his prison release. - WG]

In [Col 4:11](#) Paul also added "Jesus, who is called Justus" to his closing greeting there.

fellow workers -- co-workers.

Closing Notes and Some LESSONS:

What was the motive that prompted Paul to send Onesimus back? [Phm 1:12-16](#).

Philemon: An Appeal For a Brother

The Appeal: vs 4-21 (organized as prescribe by Roman and Greek teachers)

[Phm 1:4-10](#) Building the rapport

[Phm 1:11-19](#) Persuading the mind

[Phm 1:20-22](#) Moving the emotion

* v. 10 - name of Onesimus not mentioned til end of rapport. The appeal not sated til near the end of section to persuade the mind, v. 17.

Introduction [Phm 1:1-3](#)

Closing [Phm 1:22-25](#)

LESSONS

1. The blessings and fruit of a Christian family, [Phm 1:1-2](#)
2. Glorify God with our lives, [Phm 1:5-7](#)
3. Ungodly men are unprofitable to themselves and to others, [Phm 1:11](#)
4. Lay us treasures in Heave, [Phm 1:15](#)
5. The brotherhood of all Christians, [Phm 1:16](#)
6. Love's motive is powerful, [Phm 1:9-10](#)
7. The diplomacy of requesting rather than commanding sometime wise to forgo the exercise of authority, v.
8. The fellowship that ties, [Phm 1:17](#)
9. How to handle your brother,
10. Do things out of love rather than constraints.
11. Standing by (or for) a new brother

Philemon 1:25

Phm_1:25

See [Phm 1:24](#) for some closing lessons/

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ -- Paul's typical closing in his letters (e.g., [Gal 6:18](#); [1Th 5:28](#))

your -- "Your" is plural, pointing back to those addressed in verses [Phm 1:1-2](#).

your spirit -- Plural; Paul expects the spirit of the whole church to be infused with divine graciousness. - NIVZSB

your spirit -- Note that the phrase "be with your spirit" is a good example of the small "s" (spirit) which is used of man's spirit, (or self, cf. [Act 7:59](#); [2Ti 4:22](#)) not the Holy Spirit (cf. [Gal 6:18](#); [Php 4:23](#)). - Utley

The "your" is plural in the Greek text and refers to the whole church in Philemon's house. This is the only occurrence of *pneuma* ("spirit") in the epistle, and it clearly refers to the human spirit. - Constable

Amen -- The word is probably to be retained here. So R.V. text. It is properly a Hebrew adverb, meaning "surely;" repeatedly used as here in the O. T. See e.g. Deut. 27:15, &c.; Jer. 11:5 (marg. A.V.). - CBSC