

Philemon

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Author: Paul the Apostle · Written: c. AD 60-62 · Category: Pauline Epistles

Introduction

The Epistle to Philemon is **the shortest of Paul's letters and the most intensely personal**, yet it addresses one of the most explosive social issues of the ancient world: **slavery**. Written around AD 60-62 during Paul's first Roman imprisonment (the same period as Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians), this twenty-five verse letter is a **masterpiece of pastoral diplomacy and applied gospel theology**. The recipients are Philemon, a wealthy Christian in **Colossae** whose home served as a meeting place for the church (v. 2); Apphia (likely Philemon's wife); Archippus (possibly their son or a church leader); and the whole congregation that gathered in their house. The subject of the letter is **Onesimus**, Philemon's slave who had wronged his master—perhaps by theft (v. 18)—and fled to Rome, where in God's providence he encountered the imprisoned Paul. Under the apostle's ministry, **Onesimus became a Christian** (v. 10), and his life was transformed. Paul grew to love him deeply, calling him 'my own heart' and finding him genuinely useful in gospel service (vv. 12-13). Yet a legal and moral problem remained: Onesimus was a **fugitive slave**, and Roman law demanded his return. Harboring a runaway was a serious crime, and an offended master could legally punish the escapee with extreme severity, even death.

Paul's solution was to **send Onesimus back** carrying this letter—a stunning act of faith in the power of the gospel to transform relationships. The letter is a carefully crafted **appeal** (not a command, though Paul had apostolic authority to command) that Philemon receive Onesimus back '**not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved**' (v. 16). Paul employs every rhetorical and relational tool at his disposal: he appeals to Philemon's love (v. 9), their partnership in the gospel (vv. 6,17), and Philemon's reputation for refreshing the hearts of the saints (v. 7). He reminds Philemon that he owes Paul his very self—likely a reference to Philemon's conversion under Paul's ministry (v. 19). He offers to **personally absorb any debt** Onesimus incurred, writing in his own hand, 'I will repay it' (v. 19). Most powerfully, Paul asks Philemon to '**receive him as myself**' (v. 17), effectively requesting that the social status and honor Paul enjoyed be **imputed** to the former slave. This is the gospel in miniature: **Christ takes our debt, credits us with His righteousness, and asks the Father to receive us as He would receive the Son**. The letter dramatizes substitutionary atonement, imputation, reconciliation, and the new creation identity that transcends all human social categories.

What makes Philemon so remarkable is **how Paul handles authority**. He could have simply **commanded** Philemon to forgive and free Onesimus, leveraging his apostolic office and reminding Philemon of spiritual indebtedness. Instead, Paul **appeals** on the basis of love, expressing confidence that Philemon will do 'even more than I say' (v. 21), leaving the specific response to Philemon's voluntary obedience. This approach reflects

Paul's broader theological conviction that **Christian obedience must flow from transformed hearts, not coercion**. Forced compliance would accomplish the external act but miss the gospel's power to produce genuine love and generosity. By framing the request as an appeal to partnership and love, Paul invites Philemon to **freely do what is right**, making the act a genuine expression of Christian character rather than begrudging submission. The letter thus models Christian leadership that persuades rather than dominates, that cultivates willing obedience rather than extracting it by force.

The letter to Philemon also reveals **how the gospel worked like yeast** within the Roman social order, **gradually undermining slavery from within** rather than through violent revolution or political activism. Paul does not call for the immediate abolition of the institution (which would have been politically impossible and likely led to brutal retaliation), but he introduces a principle—**brotherhood in Christ**—that was fundamentally incompatible with treating human beings as property. When masters and slaves worship together as brothers, when a slave's spiritual value equals or surpasses his economic value, when the gospel creates a family identity that supersedes legal and social categories, the institution of slavery is doomed. History confirms this: wherever the gospel took root and Christian conscience was formed by Scripture, **slavery eventually crumbled**. Philemon was sent together with the epistle to the Colossians, carried by **Tychicus** and Onesimus himself (Colossians 4:7-9), creating a living connection between theological truth (Colossians) and practical application (Philemon). The letter stands as a timeless testimony that **the gospel reconciles, transforms social relationships, and produces communities marked by forgiveness, generosity, and love** that transcend every human barrier.

Book Outline

- **Greeting and Thanksgiving (vv. 1-7)** (1:1-7) — Paul greets Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the house church, then thanks God for Philemon's love and ministry of refreshment.
- **Paul's Appeal for Onesimus (vv. 8-16)** (1:8-16) — Instead of commanding, Paul appeals on the basis of love, describing Onesimus's conversion and urging Philemon to receive him as a beloved brother.
- **Offer of Restitution and Confidence in Obedience (vv. 17-21)** (1:17-21) — Paul pledges to repay any debt, asks Philemon to refresh his heart, and expresses confidence that Philemon will do even more than requested.
- **Final Requests and Greetings (vv. 22-25)** (1:22-25) — Paul hopes for release and a visit, conveys greetings from fellow workers, and ends with a benediction.

Key Themes

- **Gospel Reconciliation:** The letter centers on restoring a broken relationship. Because both master and slave belong to Christ, forgiveness and reconciliation become the expected outcome.
- **Christian Brotherhood Transcending Status:** Onesimus returns not merely as property but as Philemon's brother. The gospel creates a family identity that supersedes economic or social categories.
- **Appeal Motivated by Love, Not Coercion:** Paul refuses to command compliance, preferring to appeal for voluntary obedience so that Philemon's goodness would be freely offered (vv. 8-14).
- **Intercession and Advocacy:** Paul steps into the breach, pledging to absorb Onesimus's debt and vouching for his transformed character. His mediation reflects Christ's advocacy for believers.
- **Providence and Transformation:** What appeared as rebellion God used to bring salvation. Paul suggests Onesimus departed briefly so Philemon could have him back forever (vv. 15-16). The gospel transforms the 'useless' into 'useful.'
- **Partnership in the Faith:** Repeated references to 'fellowship' (koinonia) emphasize that believers share life, resources, and reputations. Paul expects Philemon to refresh his heart just as he has refreshed others.

Key Verses

I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds: Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me: Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:

— Philemon 1:10-12 (Paul plays on Onesimus's name ('useful') to highlight the transformation wrought by grace and to ask that receiving him be tantamount to receiving Paul.)

For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever; 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?

— Philemon 1:15-16 (Providence turned a painful separation into an opportunity for eternal brotherhood. The gospel relativizes social categories within the body of Christ.)

If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.

— Philemon 1:17 (Paul asks Philemon to impute Paul's status to Onesimus—a living picture of believers being received by God on the basis of Christ's standing.)

If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account; 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.

— Philemon 1:18-19 (The apostle offers substitutionary payment, mirroring Christ's assumption of our debt. Yet he also reminds Philemon of the grace he himself received.)

That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.

— Philemon 1:6 (Christian fellowship becomes powerful when believers recognize the riches they share in Christ and express them through tangible love.)

Historical Context

The Roman Empire's slavery system permeated daily life. Onesimus likely stole property or funds before fleeing. By law, harboring or helping a fugitive slave was punishable, yet Paul risked involvement for the sake of reconciliation. The letter traveled with Tychicus and the epistle to the Colossians (Colossians 4:7-9), where Onesimus is called a 'faithful and beloved brother.' The situation tested whether the cosmic reconciliation described in Colossians would reshape societal relationships.

Literary Style

Philemon is a rhetorical gem. Paul uses tactful persuasion, affectionate language, wordplay, and gentle reminders of Philemon's indebtedness to him. He frames the appeal within the social custom of patronage and friendship, transforming cultural expectations with gospel truths. The letter's brevity heightens its emotional impact and invites the reader to participate in the drama.

Theological Significance

Though it contains no extended doctrinal argument, Philemon incarnates key doctrines: substitution (Paul offers to pay), imputation (receive him as me), reconciliation (former enemies become brothers), and providence. It displays how justification and union with Christ reshape ethics and social structures from the inside out, anticipating the eventual demise of slavery within Christianized cultures.

Christ in Philemon

Christ is the true Master in whose service there is no Jew or Greek, bond or free. Paul's offer to assume Onesimus's debt reflects Christ's work on the cross, and the transformation of a slave into a brother mirrors believers' adoption into God's household. The refreshing love Philemon is asked to show flows from every 'good thing in Christ.'

Relationship to the New Testament

Philemon complements Colossians, written at the same time and likely delivered together. Onesimus appears in Colossians 4:9, demonstrating the fulfillment of Paul's request. The appeal to voluntary goodness parallels Paul's counsel in 2 Corinthians 8-9 about generous giving. The reconciliation theme resonates with Ephesians' vision of one new humanity and with Jesus' parables about forgiveness (Matthew 18). Later Christian abolitionists frequently cited Philemon as a template for undermining slavery through gospel transformation.

Practical Application

Modern believers rarely face runaway slaves, but we often navigate broken relationships, social inequities, and the need for courageous mediation. Philemon teaches us to treat fellow Christians as family regardless of background, to pursue reconciliation proactively, and to let love—not coercion—motivate obedience. It also reminds us that our debts have been paid by another, so we can extend costly forgiveness to others.

Chapter 1

Greeting

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

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

- 8 Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient,
- 9 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.
- 10 I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:
- 11 Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:
- 12 Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:
- 13 Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel:
- 14 But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.
- 15 For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever;

- 16 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?
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Paul's Appeal and Promise

- 17 If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.
- 18 If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account;
- 19 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.
- 20 Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord.
- 21 Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.
- 22 But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you.
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Final Greetings and Benediction

- 23 There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus;
- 24 Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers.
- 25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

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