

## Philemon

Philemon is one of the seven undisputed letters of Paul\* and is unique in that, unlike the others, is directed to an individual and not a community. It is also the shortest of Paul's letter to be included in the New Testament, only 335 words in the original Greek (464 in English in the NRSV)

The letter involves three persons: Paul the Apostle, Onesimus (an errant slave who has been working with Paul), and Philemon, a wealthy church leader and the owner of Onesimus. In the letter, Paul seems to be asking Philemon for a favor without explicitly stating what said favor might be.

Before we get into the letter itself, though, let's talk about the context.

### Paul

Paul mentions that he is in prison, but it isn't clear where or when this might be. Paul himself writes of being imprisoned in several letters and the Book of Acts also speaks of Paul being in prison. However, Acts and Paul's own letters are sometime difficult to reconcile. Many scholars believe that Philemon may have been written from Ephesus where they believe he was in prison around the years 54 or 55.

Alternately, it could have been while he was in prison in Caesarea around 59 or 60 awaiting his audience with the Emperor for the trouble he caused in Jerusalem or in Rome once he arrived there.

Prisons in ancient Rome served a somewhat different purpose than prisons in our day. Prisons were where people were held awaiting their trial and punishment. The assumption in ancient Rome was that you were guilty unless you could show your innocence, the opposite of the US justice system. No one would have been sentenced to prison as a punishment, though people could linger there for long periods of time awaiting justice, as oftentimes "judges" would try to coerce bribes from families of the imprisoned or because officials just wanted to inflict some additional suffering on someone they disliked, there was no "right to a speedy trial" in ancient Rome.

Generally, prisoners were kept in groups, not individual cells, so it makes sense that Paul would mention the others he was imprisoned with. The prisons didn't really provide for any of the material needs of prisoners; family and friends were expected to provide food, clothing, and any other personal needs. There were also private prisons, mostly used for debtors, but where prisoners of means could go so long as they could afford it.

### Onesimus

Onesimus is a slave. From the letter we understand that for some reason he has been absent from his master and that his absence is also associated with a financial loss to the master beyond the absence of his labor alone. Perhaps he has stolen some money from his master to pay for his escape, perhaps

\* Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon.  
Colossians, 2 Thessalonians are debated  
Ephesians, Timothy and Titus are considered epigraphical

he was responsible for a business loss on behalf of his master and ran away in fear, perhaps he was sent as a courier and failed to return with the payment he was sent to retrieve, or perhaps the situation is some other scenario we can imagine. The truth is we don't know because the letter doesn't say. We know only that they are separated and that there may be a debt of some sort he owes.

Slavery was commonplace throughout all Mediterranean societies and especially within the Roman Empire. It is believed that at least a quarter or maybe as many as a third of the people living in the empire were slaves. Unlike American slavery, slavery was not based on skin color or place of origin. Like American slavery, Roman slaves had few, if any rights. They were property not people and their owners had complete control over their lives including the ability to punish them as they saw fit up to and including death.

There were several ways people could become slaves. One avenue was to be captured in wartime; this was actually more prevalent during the Roman Republic but still an important source of slaves in Paul's time. One could be born into slavery; the children of slaves belonged to the slave's owner. Inability to pay a debt could result in one becoming enslaved, and people could sell themselves into slavery (also usually related to debt).

Some slaves were more akin to indentured servants, which is to say that they negotiated a contract whereby they agreed to be a slave for a period of time in the expectation of being taught a trade.

Some slaves were given positions of great responsibility, managing households or estates for wealthy owners, being tutors and teachers, or managing workshops and engaging in trade. In some few cases, slaves such as these might be given a stipend which, if saved, could enable a slave to buy their freedom. The vast majority of slaves were engaged in agricultural work and as domestics.

Slaves who did manage to secure their freedom were known as *libertus* (freedman) and were granted some rights short of full citizenship. Onesimus would seem to be among those slaves with perhaps some education and engaged in responsible work for their master.

### Philemon

Philemon is a wealthy man. We know this from the clues in the letter itself; he owns slaves (which only the wealthy do), he has a house large enough to host a congregation of worshippers, and we can also surmise his prestige based on how Paul himself speaks to him. Philemon is also a believer, apparently through Paul's own evangelizing. He is a "big deal" both in society and in the church. There is a tradition that Philemon was at some point a bishop in the very early church.

Beyond that we know very little. We don't even know where he lives, though from clues in other letters, most scholars believe his home is near Colossae, which was a declining city in modern day Turkey not far from Ephesus.

## The Text

V1-2 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

Apphia is probably Philemon's wife and Archippus his son.

V3-7 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

Paul is trying to persuade Philemon to do something as a favor and he begins with the soft sell, buttering him up and flattering him – even though it is all based in truth, it's still communicated in a way meant to evoke positive feelings.

V8-9 For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

Here Paul is switching his tone, just a little and applying just a bit of pressure – while also saying that he's choosing to not apply any *real* pressure. He also tries to elicit some sympathy calling himself an old man while also reminding Philemon that he is actually *in prison* because of his work for Christ.

Ancient Mediterranean cultures were based on ideas of shame and honor. Part of that honor system required an acute awareness of who owes what to whom. Ancient Rome isn't an individualistic capitalist society like ours. People's primary identities were strongly wrapped up in their place in society at large, but also within their kin groups. As we can see throughout Paul's letters he posits Christianity as a kind of wide-scale kin group that is meant to supplant all others, and to shift ones identity away from their existing network relationships and onto a Christian one instead.

There is some debated concerning whether the original text actually said "old man" or merely an "elder" as in someone with authority (Greek *presbyteres* vs *presbeutes*). In truth we don't really know Paul's age. The closest we get is in the Book of Acts where Paul is described as a "young man" at the stoning of Stephen. Of course, we don't have a date for the stoning, but it was probably within ten years of Jesus' own death, which would make Paul about ten years younger than Jesus, so if the letter to Philemon was written in the mid to late 50's, Paul was most likely in his late 40's or early 50's, not exactly ancient, even in the ancient world.

V10 I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment.

This is the “ask,” but what exactly is Paul asking for? Does he want Philemon to forgive Onesimus and allow him to return and continue to work with Paul? Is he asking him to free Onesimus? It’s all a bit ambiguous. What is clear is Paul’s clear affection for Onesimus and his genuine desire to intercede on his behalf.

V11-12 Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you.

Paul is actually engaging in some wordplay here. The Greek for “useless” is *achrestos* which sounds a lot like *achristos* which means without Christ. And “useful” in Greek is *onesimos*, which of course is similar to Onesimus. This does suggest that Onesimus is perhaps a more recent convert, though that isn’t clear nor is it clear how Paul and Onesimus came together so perhaps Onesimus was already a believer and sought Paul out.

Nevertheless, Paul is suggesting that whatever business it was that resulted in Onesimus’ departure means that Onesimus may not be well suited to that role, but that Paul *has* found him to be well suited for the work of the gospel. He is also continuing to remind Philemon of how much regard he, Paul, has for Onesimus.

One question we might ask is why Paul would send a slave back to his master. We’ll get into that more later, but there were both legal and cultural reasons for Paul to do so, and Paul, generally, is supportive of secular legal norms. There are also reasons, undoubtedly, concerning his desire to not alienate Philemon or discourage him from the good work of faith he is doing.

V13-14 I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced.

Paul makes clear here that *his* desire is for Onesimus to continue his work with Paul, but of equal importance to Paul is maintaining his good relationship with Philemon. Paul also seems to be suggesting that he feels he *could* allow Onesimus but that he wished to avoid a confrontation that could endanger the gospel mission.

We also see here that, at some point, it was Philemon who was working with Paul to evangelize and establish the church and so he is inviting Philemon to see Onesimus differently, more as a person like himself and less like his property – an idea he will expand on in the next couple of verses.

V15-16 Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

Here Paul reframes the situation for Philemon's benefit, that whatever caused the issue with Onesimus was perhaps the will of God being played out and not just an issue with a disobedient slave. In other words, Paul is inviting Philemon to change his perspective on the humanity of Onesimus and to widen his own circle of inclusion for who can be considered among God's people.

Generally speaking, God seems to prefer persuasion over coercion. People must make an active choice to live within God's will. We are not automatons or robots without free will, nor are we puppets whose every action and choice are predetermined. God has granted us agency and it is up to us to exercise it well (or not).

V17-19 So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self.

Paul continues his invitation to Philemon to re-humanize Onesimus and goes further to say he would cover any actual material losses Philemon may have experienced, while also suggesting that whatever loss Philemon has experienced is as nothing compared to all he has gained from Paul. Essentially Paul is offering to pay damages but also hoping Philemon sees the relative lack of importance of the financial losses compared to the spiritual gain. Paul's offer is reinforced by his writing the letter himself. Most letters in the ancient world, including most of Paul's epistles were likely dictated to a secretary. In Galatians, Paul refers to his large, and apparently somewhat sloppy, handwriting.

All of which begs the question, does Paul have the resources to actually pay him for the damages incurred? A definite maybe. Paul clearly comes from a high status family that had Roman citizenship. Citizenship in this era was granted sparingly outside of Italy. Someone in Paul's family would have had to be in the Roman legions, a leading elected official, or wealthy enough to buy it (ie bribe someone). We also know Paul is not only literate but employs complex rhetorical strategies in his writing suggesting a very good education.

So though Paul mentions that he was a leather worker (tents were made of leather) that would not preclude him from having access to other personal resources, not to mention that he could likely have been able to raise funds from the churches he founded and other wealthy believers.

V20-21 Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

I think a fair interpretation of the request to do “even more than I say” is a veiled expectation that Philemon would grant Onesimus his freedom and release him from slavery so that Onesimus too might make a free will choice to return to Paul and partake of the gospel mission with him.

V22-25 One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Paul closes his letter by inviting himself to visit Philemon and sending along the greetings of others in his entourage. Epaphras is apparently also in prison, but the others, including Mark and Luke, are nearby providing support but are not also in prison with him.