

PHILEMON

The Book of Philemon is one of the “Prison Epistles” along with Colossians, Ephesians and Philippians written during Paul’s first Roman imprisonment. This is Paul’s shortest letter of the New Testament “Epistles,” yet it is powerful in meaning. Paul’s companion, Epaphras, had taught spiritual principles to Philemon (Colossians 1:7; 4:12-13). These spiritual principles would now be applied to daily life. Philemon is analogous to every believer who was once a slave to sin, but is being reconciled to their rightful Master (the Lord) through a mediator who is willing to pay the price for them.

Colossae was located 100 miles east of Ephesus on the Lycus River (a tributary of the Maeander River). In the valley where Colossae was located, there were several small cities where Epaphras started churches: Hierapolis (6 miles away) and Laodicea (10 miles away). During Paul’s third missionary journey, he had lived in Ephesus for 3 years and converted Epaphras. Epaphras traveled to Rome to report on false teachers infiltrating Colossae; although Paul had never visited these churches, he responded with a sharp rebuke to Colossae. Paul wrote the letters to Ephesus and Philemon in the same area as well.

Philemon was a Greek Christian who hosted the church of Colossae in his home. The servant of Philemon named Onesimus (“profitable”) had stolen some money and run away. This letter consists of Paul interceding for Onesimus by paralleling the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Paul presents the “Doctrine of Imputation” where our sins are placed on His account, and He imputes/declares righteousness that is undeserved by sinful man.

The slaves of Biblical times were tied closely to the marketplace. Slaves were considered assets to accomplish work, so they could be associated to a trade (Luke may have been a slave/servant as a doctor). Individuals could sell themselves or family members into slavery for a time or even purchase slaves for themselves. Slaves were often conquered enemies who were enslaved rather than killed. Individuals might also be born into slavery. Slavery was a central construct of the economy much like the modern worker. It is estimated that 30%-40% of Italy’s population were slaves during the 1st century AD. The “Slave Master” (andrapodistais ἀνδραποδισταῖς) is included in the list of sinners condemned by God (1 Timothy 1:10). Scripture encourages believers to assist those trying to escape slavery (Deuteronomy 23:15-16). Scripture also goes to great lengths to promote rights and justice for slaves (Job 31:13-15, Colossians 4:1).

Outline of Philemon	
Philemon 1:1-3	Greetings
Philemon 1:4-8	Thanksgiving & Confidence in Philemon
Philemon 1:9-11	Paul’s Appeal
Philemon 1:12-16	Returning Onesimus as a Brother
Philemon 1:17-20	Treatment in Regards to Paul
Philemon 1:21	Confidence in Philemon
Philemon 1: 22	Paul’s Upcoming visit
Philemon 1:23-24	Greetings from Paul’s Companions

3 Philemon 1

Read Philemon 1:1-3 ... Introduction to Philemon in Colossae

1:1 This letter begins by Paul (meaning “little” or “humble”) establishing his humility as a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

- The name of Christ Jesus places the term “Christ” (Christos Χριστός) first as it represents the sacrificial nature of the Messiah.
- All three names/aspects of the “*Lord Jesus Christ*” are given. Lord (divine master) Jesus (humanity) Christ (the Messiah).
 - The Greek term for “Lord” (Kyriou Κυρίου) comes from Israel’s Old Testament covenantal name of God. Israel was reluctant to use the name “Yahweh” (YHWH יהוה), so Israel substituted the name “Adonai” (אֲדֹנָי) which means “Lord.” The use of the word “Lord” asserts the full deity of Jesus.
 - The name “Jesus” (meaning “God is Salvation”) was given by an angel to Joseph (Matthew 1:21) and to Mary (Luke 1:31).
 - The term “Christ” (Christou Χριστοῦ) means “anointed one” for a special purpose or mission. Christ carries the meaning of Messiah from a sacrificial, “suffering servant” lifestyle to the point of death.

References to the Lord (divine master) Jesus (humanity) Christ (the Messiah)	
Philemon 1:1	Christ Jesus
Philemon 1:3	Lord Jesus Christ
Philemon 1:5	Lord Jesus
Philemon 1:6	Christ
Philemon 1:8	Christ
Philemon 1:9	Christ Jesus
Philemon 1:16	Lord
Philemon 1:20	Lord
Philemon 1:20	Christ
Philemon 1:23	Christ Jesus
Philemon 1:25	Lord Jesus Christ

- The name “Timothy” means “to honor God.” During Paul’s second mission trip (with Silas), Paul recruited Timothy who was most likely led to Christ by Paul during the first missionary journey (1 Cor 4:17; 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2). Timothy’s mother (2 Tim 1:5), Eunice (“good victory / conquering well”), was a believing Jew (2 Tim 3:15). Timothy was also influenced by his godly grandmother, Lois (2 Tim 1:5), but we only know that his father was Greek (Acts 16:1). Timothy personified the merging of the church as the Jew (his mother) and the Gentile (his father) were a single family bearing him.

1:2 Apphia (“increasing”) is known as the wife of Philemon while Archippus (“master of horses”) might be his son or pastor (Colossians 4:17).

- Paul viewed the Christian walk as an ongoing spiritual warfare (Ephesians 6:10-18) and repeatedly referred to his companions as “fellow soldiers.” (Philippians 2:25; 2 Timothy 3:2)
- The Greek term for “church” (ekklēsia; ἐκκλησία) was used in the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) to translate the Hebrew term “qahal” (קהל) which meant the “assembly of God’s people.”
- There is no record of church buildings until the 3rd century AD; until then, churches met in homes. (Acts 2:40; 5:42; 20:20; Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15)

1:3 Peace follows the grace of God.

- The Greek terms for “father” (patros πατρός) “brother” (adelphos ἀδελφός), and “sister” (adelphē ἀδελφή) reflects intimate family connection and interpersonal relationship.

Read Philemon 1:4-7 ... Philemon’s Reputation of Love and Faith

1:4 Paul would continuously pray and thank God for the early churches. (Romans 1:8; 1 Corinthians 1:4; 2 Corinthians 1:3; Ephesians 1:3; Philippians 1:3; Colossians 1:3; 1 Thessalonians 1:2; 2 Thessalonians 1:3; 1 Timothy 1:12; 2 Timothy 1:3)

1:5 The church of Colossae was renowned for love and faith. Paul encourages Philemon for his testimony and expects that Philemon will be true to the reports (and act accordingly).

- Philemon 1:5 states that believers are to have faith towards the Lord Jesus as well as love was towards each other. (Colossians 1:4)
- The Greek term for “God’s people” (hagios ἅγιος) is the term for “saints” which originated with the term “holy” (to be set apart for God’s service – as in “sanctuary”). The term “saint” is not associated with man’s goodness, but is defined by God’s goodness imputed to man. A saint is a “separated one to an assigned task.” (Romans 1:7, 15:25-26, 1 Corinthians 1:2, 14:33, 2 Corinthians 1:1, Philippians 4:21)

1:6 The Greek term for “fellowship” (koinonia κοινωνία) means sharing and communion.

- Knowledge can lead to becoming more effective edification and witness.

1:7 The testimony of a faithful believer encourages other believers in their walk with the Lord. The love of Philemon brings joy and comfort to others.

- The word “hearts” should actually be “bowels” (splanchna σπλάγχνα) because in Biblical times, the center of emotion/affection sprung from the intestines/gut.

Read Philemon 1:8-16 ... Request to Accept Onesimus as a Brother Instead of Slave

1:8 Paul could command “in Christ” certain spiritual actions, but instead, Paul appeals with love. Paul appeals to Philemon to “do good” out of freedom instead of requirement.

- The term “in Christ” (en Christō - ἐν Χριστῷ) is one of Paul’s favorite phrases emphasizing a “spiritual position” within the will and strength of the Lord.
- Paul had the authority of an apostle (apostolōn ἀποστόλων) which meant to act as an ambassador with official authority” as Christ’s representative. Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19, 22:6-21, 26:12-18).

1:9 Paul references unconditional love (agape ἀγάπη) three times in this short letter.

- Paul refers to himself as “Paul, the aged” (presbytēs πρεσβύτης) which usually applies to a man between 40-60 years of age.
 - As a prisoner of Christ Jesus, Paul had clearly suffered for the faith; believers (including Philemon) are also called to suffering and self-sacrifice.
- 1:10 By leading Onesimus (“useful; profitable”) to Christ, Paul considers Onesimus (the runaway slave) as his “spiritual” child (teknou τέκνου). The meaning of the names of slaves often carried meanings corresponding to the value of the slave.
- 1:11 This verse was a “play” on Onesimus’ name which meant “useful.” Once Onesimus had only been beneficial in a worldly perspective; however, he was now a brother in Christ transforming his efforts into eternal value.
- 1:12 Paul considered Onesimus the “core/heart” of himself. Instead of “heart,” the actual translation is “intestines” (splanchna σπλάγχνα) as the source of emotions.
- To runaway as a slave was a very serious crime with slave hunters killing, maiming and branding runaways who had been captured.
- 1:13 Paul preferred to keep Onesimus with him, and no doubt, Onesimus would have preferred to remain with Paul. However, Christianity is about reconciliation. Although Onesimus had become a believer, there were still consequences for his prior acts. Onesimus still needed to make restitution with the one that he had wronged prior to accepting the gospel.
- 1:14 Although Paul wanted Onesimus to remain with him, the first step of reconciliation was for Philemon to forgive Onesimus.
- Paul probably sent Onesimus with Tychicus who was bearing the letter from Paul. Tychicus carried the letters of Colossians and Ephesians to that same area (Colossians 4:7-9; Ephesians 6:21-22)
 - This is a good example of an underlying New Testament principle (Jeremiah 31:31-34) where believers do not act out of a requirement of the law, but out of a heartfelt attitude of love.
 - “...that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion, but of your own free will. “
 - Believers are often called above and beyond any stated requirement of the law as reflected in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).
- 1:15 God will receive His children as He receives the Son – for He views His children through the work of Christ.
- Paul alludes to the sovereign plan of God that would separate Onesimus from Philemon to find Christ before returning.
 - God had a larger plan for Onesimus; as a “founding Father” Ignatius was being taken to Rome to be killed, he referenced Onesimus as the bishop of Ephesus in his letter to the Ephesians.
- 1:16 Believers are to submit to one another in Christ. (Ephesians 5:21) While there is order and hierarchy, there is no favoritism of importance of one over the other (Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11), but believers are to esteem others higher than themselves. (Philippians 2:3)

Read Philemon 1:17-18 ... The Mediator Takes on The Sinner’s Debt

1:17 The request is that Philemon view Onesimus in a larger identity – not simply as a slave, but as Paul himself. This is similar to the way that believers should view every believer in need as a creation of God. (Matthew 25:31-46)

1:18 Paul is willing to pay the price for the sins of Onesimus (Galatians 3:13; 1 Peter 1:18-19; 2:24;

Read Philemon 1:19-25 ... Conclusion of Philemon

1:19 Paul authenticates the message by declaring that he is writing this himself. (1 Corinthians 16:21; Galatians 6:11; Colossians 4:18; 2 Thessalonians 3:17; Philemon 1:19)

- Paul had led Philemon to Christ as well – possibly during Paul’s time in Ephesus (Acts 19:10, 20)

1:20 Paul concludes with a sincere request that Philemon respond appropriately to the letter. This echoes God’s call to believers who read His Word; that they would receive His Word with a humble heart and respond accordingly.

1:21 Paul expects that Philemon will go above and beyond the minimum requirement and accept Onesimus in love.

1:22 Paul is anticipating his release from incarceration (Philemon 1:25; 2:24). Paul would be released after several years of house arrest in Rome; however, after several mission trips, Paul was re-arrested by the Emperor Nero and martyred.

- Paul was confident in his release as an outcome of Philemon’s prayers for him.
- Paul opened his letters referencing his prayers for the church (2 Corinthians 9:14; 13:7, 9; Ephesians 1:16; Philippians 1:4; Colossians 1:3; 1 Thessalonians 1:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:11; 2 Timothy 1:3; Philemon 1:4) and closed his letters by requesting prayer for himself. (Romans 15:30; Ephesians 6:19; 1 Thessalonians 5:25; 2 Thessalonians 3:1; Philemon 1:22)

1:23 Epaphras was the founder of the churches in the Lycus River Valley which included Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea (Colossians 4:12-13; Philemon 1:23).

- The name Epaphras (“Covered with Foam”) is a shortened version of Epaphroditus related to the mythological goddess, Aphrodite. Other meanings of Epaphras include: charming, lovely or devoted to Aphrodite.

1:24 Paul sends greetings from his ministry companions.

- Paul had changed his opinion of John Mark. Paul found John Mark “useful” years after arguing to persuade Barnabas not to bring him on the second missionary journey (Acts 15:37-38). John Mark was the cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10) and the scribe of Peter (1 Peter 5:13).
- Aristarchus was a ministering companion of Paul who originated from Thessalonica (Acts 27:2). He had been seized by the mob in the riot of Ephesus, but appears to have been released unharmed. (Acts 19:29)
- Demas had been a faithful co-worker of Paul (Colossians 4:14; Philemon 1:24), and yet during Paul’s second incarceration in Rome, Demas would forsake Paul to go to Thessalonica (2 Timothy 4:10). Demas loved the present “age” (αἰὼνα αἰῶνα) which may mean that his life had been threatened. Demas may have remained true to God, but abandoned Paul in prison.

- Luke was Paul's personal physician (Colossians 4:14) who remained faithful to Paul until the end. (2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 1:24; 2 Corinthians 8:18). Luke was the writer of the books of Luke and Acts.

1:25 Paul repeatedly began and concluded his letters with the concept of grace; salvation itself begins and ends with God's grace.

- God's goodness and grace is the ultimate treasure as every good gift comes from God. (James 1:17)
- Salvation (and every goodness experienced throughout creation) is initiated by God's grace.