

Notes on Philemon

2024 Edition
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Introduction

RECIPIENT

Philemon appears to have been a comparatively wealthy Colossian who owned slaves, as did most of the rich in his day. As many as a third of the inhabitants of most large urban centers, including Rome, would have been slaves, who, in the Roman Empire, were more like household servants in Victorian Britain than like slaves in antebellum North America.¹ One writer claimed that about one third of the populations of Greece and Italy were slaves.²

Philemon evidently came to faith in Christ as a result of Paul's influence (v. 19), perhaps when Paul was residing at Ephesus. Onesimus was one of Philemon's slaves, and he was probably a native Phrygian. He ran away from his master, perhaps not because Philemon treated him cruelly but because he dealt with him graciously by giving him unusual freedom. Onesimus may have been a runaway slave, or he may simply have been involved in some domestic trouble with Philemon.³ He eventually made his way to Rome where he could have hidden in the crowd. There, as a result of divine providence, he came into contact with Paul and became a Christian (v. 10).⁴

¹James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, pp. 252 and 302; G. W. Barker, W. L. Lane, and J. R. Michaels, *The New Testament Speaks*, p. 211.

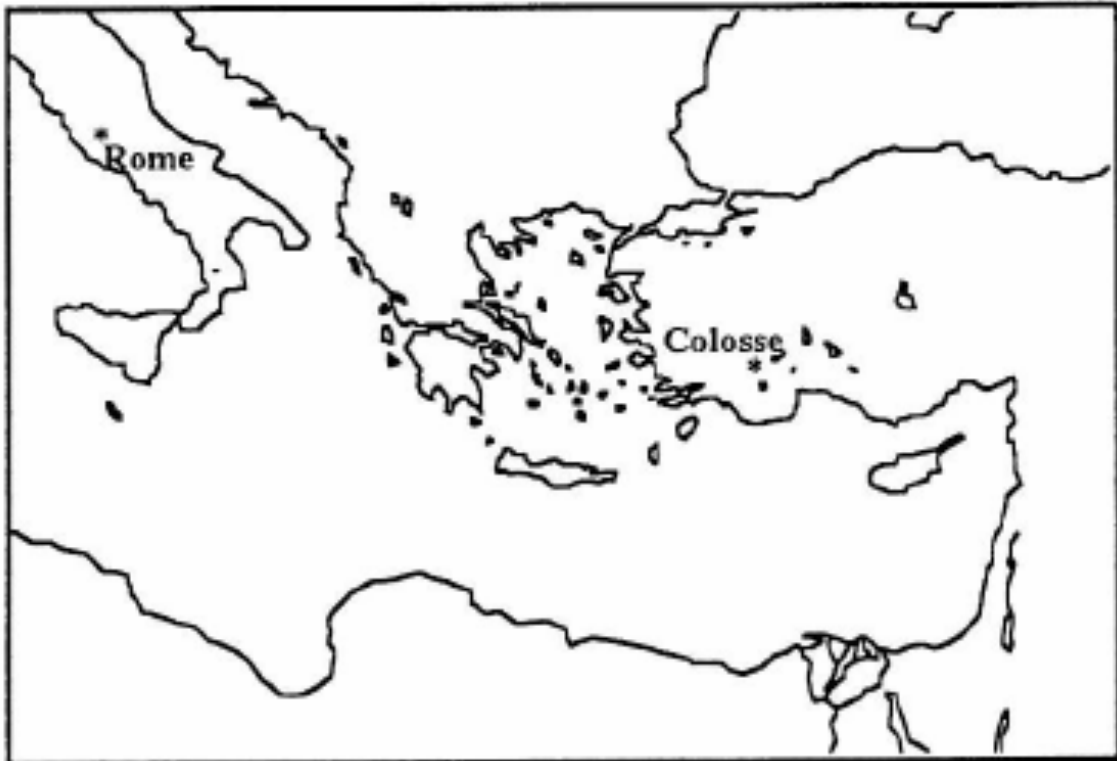
²See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, pp. 25-33, for an excursus on slavery in antiquity.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 17-19.

⁴Providence refers to the working of God through the normal circumstances of life.

PURPOSE

Following his conversion Onesimus became a valuable helper of the apostle (v. 11). Paul desired to keep Onesimus with him, but he felt a greater responsibility to return the slave to his Christian master (vv. 13-14). Onesimus needed to make things right with Philemon, whom he had wronged. Paul and Onesimus both knew the danger that the slave faced in returning, since slave owners had absolute authority over their slaves and often treated them like property rather than as people.¹



Paul wrote this brief 25-verse appeal in order to pacify Philemon and to promote reconciliation between the slave and his master. His other purposes were to commend Philemon for showing compassion to other believers (vv. 1-7), to announce his plans to visit Philemon following his anticipated release (vv. 8-22), and to send greetings from his associates

¹See Arthur A. Rupprecht, "Philemon," in *Ephesians-Philemon*, vol. 11 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 460.

(vv. 23-25). The only disputers of Pauline authorship have been members of the Tübingen School.¹

"... Philemon provides insight both into the social realities of ancient society, in this case the relations between master and slave, which is surpassed only by 1 Corinthians, and into the way in which influence was brought to bear within the earliest churches between parties of differing social status."²

"Nowhere is the social influence of the Gospel more strikingly exerted; nowhere does the nobility of the Apostle's character receive a more vivid illustration than in this accidental pleading on behalf of a runaway slave."³

Paul probably addressed the epistle to Apphia, Archippus, and the church that was meeting in Philemon's house, in order to rally the support of other Christians to encourage Philemon in his Christian responsibility.

"Written for the purpose of awakening in Philemon sentiments which certain events had a tendency to extinguish in his heart, this epistle is suited to produce those feelings in the reader more than to be the object of explanation."⁴

DATE

When Paul sent Tychicus with his epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians, Onesimus probably went with him. Paul intended that this letter, along with Tychicus' personal entreaty for Onesimus, would secure the slave's forgiveness and acceptance. Since Paul evidently sent this letter along with the Epistle to the Colossians, as a comparison of the two documents suggests, he probably wrote both of them in Rome at the same time (60-62 A.D.). Furthermore, the same persons were with Paul when he wrote his letter to the Colossians, namely, Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Luke, and Demas (vv. 23-24; cf. Col. 4:10, 12, 14).

¹See Donald A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 589.

²Dunn, p. 299.

³J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, p. 301.

⁴J. N. Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, 5:258.

E. J. Goodspeed suggested that this epistle to Philemon is the same document as the lost letter to the Laodiceans, which Paul mentioned in Colossians 4:16.¹ John Knox agreed with Goodspeed but believed that Archippus lived in Colosse, owned Onesimus, and received this epistle.² The views of neither of these influential commentators have overthrown the majority opinion that I have expressed above. Some commentators believed that Paul wrote this epistle from Ephesus.³ But this too is a minority view.⁴

OUTLINE

- I. Greeting VV. 1-3
- II. Thanksgiving and prayer for Philemon VV. 4-7
- III. Plea for Onesimus VV. 8-21
 - A. Paul's appeal vv. 8-11
 - B. Paul's motives vv. 12-16
 - C. Paul's request v. 17
 - D. Paul's offer vv. 18-20
 - E. Paul's confidence v. 21
- IV. Concluding matters VV. 22-25

MESSAGE

As is true of so many of the shorter Bible books, this one too is an illustration (cf. Ruth and Esther). Philemon illustrates the outworking in life of the great doctrines taught in the other Pauline writings, especially the other Prison Epistles: Ephesians, Philipians, and Colossians. In Philemon there are pictures of individuals, pictures of social relationships, pictures of Christian doctrine, and pictures of ethical obedience.

Note first the pictures of individuals.

¹E. J. Goodspeed, *The Key to Ephesians*, pp. xiv-xvi.

²John Knox, *Philemon among the Letters of Paul*, pp. 91-108.

³E.g., Fitzmyer, p. 11.

⁴For refutation of this view, see Ben Witherington III, "The Case of the Imprisonment That Did Not Happen: Paul at Ephesus," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 60:3 (September 2017):525-32.

Paul is the first individual named in Philemon. This letter reveals much about Paul's character. We see him here as a man triumphing over circumstances (vv. 1, 9). Paul behaved supernaturally by Christ's power in him. He was a prisoner in Rome, and as such he may have felt frustrated as he sought to fulfill his calling as a pioneer missionary. But he viewed himself as Christ's prisoner. He believed that was where he was by Christ's appointment. Fellowship with Christ enables one to triumph over his or her circumstances.

We also see Paul triumphing over the temptation to flaunt his personal authority (vv. 8-9). Paul had the authority to command as an apostle, but he chose instead to appeal in love. This is how God deals with us (cf. Rom. 12:1-2; 2 Cor. 5:20). This is how love behaves.

Paul also triumphed over his personal wishes. Paul's personal preference was to keep Onesimus with him (v. 13). Nevertheless, he let what he knew to be right overrule his preference (v. 14). He did what was best for all concerned, not just what he wanted. Paul's great intellect and extreme devotion to the Lord often come to mind when we think of him. But the qualities of character that are illustrated in Philemon are most profound. They show the supernatural work of Christ in Paul's life. So all in all, Paul's life illustrated the triumph of Christianity in these three ways.

Onesimus is the another individual pictured in Philemon. His name literally means "useful" (cf. v. 11). In his behavior we see the radical change that God can work in any life that He regenerates. What was unprofitable became profitable. What was waste God made valuable. God can so change any life that it becomes something far different from what it was or what we might expect it to become.

Philemon is the third major character pictured in this letter. Two principles governed Philemon: faith and love (v. 5). Faith in the Lord should result in love for the saints (Christians). This is what God desires to produce in every Christian.

This epistle, which J. Sidlow Baxter called "a little masterpiece of diplomacy,"¹ also contains illustrations of social relationships.

¹J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*, 6:251.

Paul's relationship with Philemon illustrates what "does not seek its own benefit" (1 Cor. 13:5) means (v. 14).¹ If Philemon had responded out of necessity it would have been good, but if he responded out of his own free will it would be better. Paul desired the best for Philemon. Paul was always seeking to develop the best in others, and so should we.

Paul's relationship with Onesimus pictures what love "endures all things" (1 Cor. 13:7) means (v. 18). Paul acted like a roof over Onesimus' head sheltering his friend beneath. That is the relationship that Christ desires to create between people (cf. Gal. 6:2; 1 Pet. 4:8).

The relationship between Onesimus and Philemon shows what "love is patient, love is kind" (1 Cor. 13:4) means (vv. 16-17). Onesimus was willing to go back to Philemon to accept the consequences for his actions and to fulfill his obligations because of Christ's work in him. Furthermore, Philemon was able to receive the runaway slave kindly and graciously because of Christ's work in him. Reconciliation is a painful process sometimes, but it is very important.

The relationship between the Christians in the church that met in Philemon's house demonstrates what "love never fails" (1 Cor. 13:8) means (v. 2). When one member suffers, all suffer. When one rejoices, all rejoice. When one repents, all repent and receive the erring one back. When one forgives, all forgive and enter into greater unity than ever before. The picture of this runaway slave being received back into the church, as a brother and partner with all, is the ideal of the church. All walk together in common life, common light, and common love. Acceptance after repentance is also important. Love does not keep a record of offenses. Unfortunately some Christians do.

This epistle also contains illustrations of Christian doctrine.

Paul's plan that Philemon would accept Onesimus, in the same way that he would accept Paul, illustrates the doctrine of believer's acceptance in Christ (v. 17). Even though we have offended God He accepts us like He accepts His own Son, because Christ stands behind us. He is our Sponsor.

¹Quotations from the English Bible in these notes are from the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB), 2020 edition, unless otherwise indicated.

Paul's offer to Philemon to charge Onesimus' debt to Paul's account illustrates the doctrine of God imputing our guilt to Christ (v. 18). Christ volunteered to pay our debt of sin in our place. He is our Substitute.

Paul's reminder of what Philemon owed him, because God's grace had reached Philemon through Paul, illustrates the doctrine of the obligation imposed on every recipient of Christ's grace (v. 19). Because Christ has brought us God's grace, we have an obligation to obey Christ (Rom. 12:1-2). He is our Sovereign.

How does Philemon illustrate the great ethical obedience emphases of Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians?

This epistle illustrates what it means to "be filled with the Spirit," the great command in Ephesians (5:18). It also illustrates what it means to be controlled by the mind of Christ, the great command in Philippians (2:5). And it illustrates what it means to "let the word of Christ richly dwell within you," the great command in Colossians (3:16). Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus illustrated all these actions in this short epistle. All the necessary resources are in Christ.

Philemon teaches us that life in Christ changes every relationship. It also teaches us that our relationships to others test and demonstrate our relationship to Christ. It further teaches us that the transformation of the hearts of individuals can overcome social evils, such as slavery. We need to remember this in view of rising crime rates, overcrowded prisons, and increasing lawlessness.

In view of this revelation I would state the message of the book as follows: Life in Christ can and should change every relationship for the better. The purpose of this book is to provide instruction regarding basic Christian conduct in interpersonal relationships.¹

"The power of the Gospel and the noble character of St. Paul are the two notes sounded throughout [this epistle] ..."²

¹Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 2:2:91-104.

²W. E. Oesterley, "The Epistle to Philemon," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, 4:07.

Exposition

I. GREETING 1-3

Paul began this letter by introducing himself and Timothy, by naming the recipients, and by wishing them God's grace and peace. He did so in order to clarify these essential matters and to set the tone for his following remarks.

- v. 1 Paul described himself simply as "a prisoner of Christ Jesus." He was in prison because he served Christ, and it was God's will for him to be there (cf. Rev. 1:9).

"As himself the Lord's bondsman he will plead for another bondsman whose story is the burden of this letter. In begging mercy for this bondsman he points to his own bonds. No less than six times in this brief letter does Paul make reference to his imprisonment (vv. 1, 9, 10, 13, 22, 23)."¹

"He is not asking for a measure of sacrifice from Philemon, as one who knows nothing of sacrifice. He has forfeited his freedom for Christ's sake and so has a ground for appealing. This is a principle involved in any true pastoral work. The pastor can only appeal to his people for self-sacrifice and discipline if he himself knows the meaning of discipline in his own life. Otherwise his call is empty and lifeless."²

Paul probably did not refer to his apostleship in this letter because of the personal nature of the appeal contained in it. Philemon undoubtedly knew Timothy by reputation if not personally. The mention of his name implies that Timothy agreed with Paul concerning what follows in the letter. Philemon's name does not appear elsewhere in Scripture.

¹D. Edmond Hiebert, *Titus and Philemon*, p. 88.

²Herbert M. Carson, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon*, p. 104.

- v. 2 Apphia was evidently a family member, probably Philemon's wife. Paul may have addressed her specifically because normally the wife had the day-to-day responsibility for the household slaves.¹

Archippus may have been their son,² or perhaps Philemon's physical brother, or his friend. He seems to have been old enough to have been responsible for some kind of ministry (Col. 4:17). He may have been the leading man in the church that met in Philemon's house.³ Paul also addressed the letter to the other Christians meeting with Philemon's family in their Colossian house-church (Col. 4:17).

"Christian congregations were dependent upon the hospitality of wealthy members who could furnish their own houses for this purpose. This note then contains an indication of the social status of Philemon. In a large city there would be several such assemblies. (Cf. Rom. 16:5, 10, 11, 14, 15.) Whether the church at Colossae had more than one place of assembly is not known. Probably they did."⁴

- v. 3 Paul's benediction is the same as the one in the Colossian epistle, except that he added the name of the Lord Jesus Christ here (cf. Col. 1:2). Perhaps Paul intended that this addition would remind the recipients (plural "you" in Greek) of their union in Christ and of God's grace to them in Christ.

II. THANKSGIVING AND PRAYER FOR PHILEMON 4-7

Paul commended Philemon for the fruit of the Spirit that the Spirit had manifested in his life. Paul could commend Philemon for this because Philemon had not quenched or grieved the Spirit but had followed the

¹Rupprecht, p. 458.

²Jacobus J. Müller, *The Epistles of Paul to the Philippians and to Philemon*, p. 174; William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*, p. 210.

³Oesterley, 4:211. Cf. Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 1907.

⁴Hiebert, p. 94.

Spirit's leading in his life. Paul also prayed that Philemon's demonstration of love and faith would continue to abound. He said this so that Philemon would be encouraged to respond to the request that follows in a manner consistent with God's will.

vv. 4-5 "When Paul states he gave thanks 'continually' he means that he did not forget Philemon in his regular prayers ..."¹

"Again we should not regard this as mere literary flourish. ... Paul must have had an extensive prayer list and presumably spent some time each day naming before God all his churches, colleagues, and supporters. This would help maintain and strengthen the sense of a faith shared with 'all the saints' (5-6)."²

Whenever Paul remembered Philemon in prayer he gave thanks for Philemon's ongoing faith. Evidently his testimony had been consistently honoring to the Lord. The basis of this thanksgiving was Philemon's love and faith. Reports of these qualities had undoubtedly reached Paul through Epaphras (Col. 1:7-8) and probably others as well. The object of Philemon's love was all the saints, and the subject of his love was the Lord Jesus (v. 5). The Greek construction is chiasmic (cf. Eph. 1:15; Col. 1:4).³ That is, the first and fourth elements in verse 5 go together, as do the second and third. This construction emphasizes the unity of the entire thought: love for the saints grows out of faith in Christ.

v. 6 We should probably understand Paul's prayer petition for Philemon to be that his sharing with others, which was an outgrowth of his faith, would become even more energetic (cf. Phil. 1:5; 2 Cor. 8:4). Paul would give him an opportunity to demonstrate fellowship shortly. This interpretation includes another possible interpretation, namely, that Christ might be increasingly visible through his life. As Philemon's appreciation

¹Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, p. 277.

²Dunn, p. 316.

³A chiasmus is a rhetorical or literary figure in which words, grammatical constructions, or concepts are repeated in reverse order, in the same or a modified form.

of God's grace toward him grew, he would naturally want to demonstrate more grace toward others in his interpersonal relationships.¹ Paul had in mind Onesimus, particularly, as the special recipient of Philemon's demonstration of grace.

"In the present context *epignosis* ["knowledge"] conveys both the ideas of understanding and experience. The apostle's prayer was not simply that Philemon might understand or appreciate the treasures that belonged to him, but that he might also experience them."²

"In all the epistles of the Roman captivity St Paul's prayer for his correspondents culminates in this word *epignosis* ... This *epignosis* is the result and the reward of faith manifesting itself in deeds of love ..."³

v. 7 Paul felt great joy and comfort as he heard of Philemon's love. The Greek word translated "hearts" (*splagchna*) designates total personality at the deepest level.⁴ Philemon had already demonstrated the kind of behavior that Paul was going to call on him to show again. Paul's request of Philemon would test his response. However Paul was confident of Philemon's cooperation. He appealed to him on an equal level of authority as his "brother" (cf. v. 2, where Paul called Apphia his "sister").

"Paul must have put Philemon in a precarious position indeed. In pleading for forgiveness and restitution for Onesimus without a punishment that was obvious to all, he was confronting the social and economic order head on. While he does not ask for manumission [release from slavery], even his request for clemency [leniency, mercy] for Onesimus and hint of his assignment to Paul

¹See Homer A. Kent Jr., *Treasures of Wisdom: Studies in Colossians & Philemon*, pp. 163-64.

²O'Brien, pp. 280-81.

³Lightfoot, p. 334.

⁴*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. *splagchnon*, et al., by H. Köster, 7(1971):555.

defied Roman tradition. By this plea Paul is also giving new dignity to the slave class."¹

III. PLEA FOR ONESIMUS 8-21

Paul appealed to Philemon to receive Onesimus back and to forgive him. The reason for this appeal was to enable Onesimus to fulfill his obligations to Philemon and to encourage Philemon to benefit from Onesimus' conversion rather than to be stumbled by it.

A. PAUL'S APPEAL 8-11

v. 8 Paul's "confidence" (Gr. *parresia*) was his assurance that if he commanded Philemon to do as he requested, since Paul had the authority of an apostle, Philemon would do it.

"The term *parresia* which literally means 'all speech' was used originally in the sphere of politics to signify the democratic right of a full citizen of a Greek city-state to speak out one's opinion freely. Later it was found as a characteristic of the relations between true friends in opposition to the feigned compliments of flatterers ..."²

Paul's confidence was "in Christ" in that it rested on his relationship to the Savior. For Paul the essence of being a Christian was being "in Christ" (cf. vv. 20, 23).³ Paul chose not to appeal to Philemon with a command or order. Rather he appealed on the basis of love (v. 9), namely, the love of Christ that bound all the parties involved in this situation together.

"If a slave ran away, the master would register the name and description with the officials, and the slave would be on the 'wanted' list. Any free citizen who found a runaway slave could assume

¹Rupprecht, p. 460.

²O'Brien, p. 287.

³See James S. Stewart, *A Man in Christ*.

custody and even intercede with the owner. The slave was not automatically returned to the owner, nor was he automatically sentenced to death. While it is true that some masters were cruel (one man threw his slave into a pool of man-eating fish!), many of them were reasonable and humane. After all, a slave was an expensive and useful piece of personal property, and it would cost the owner to lose him."¹

- v. 9 Paul perhaps referred to his aged condition in order to remind Philemon of the many years of affliction that he had undergone for the sake of the gospel, which probably aged him prematurely. Several commentators pointed out that "old man" (Gr. *presbyteres*) may have originally read "ambassador" (*presbeutes*, cf. Eph. 6:20), but there does not seem to be sufficient reason to accept this view. At this time Paul would have been about 55 years old, which in his day was older than it is in ours, because life expectancies were shorter then. He appealed as a father for his son in the faith. His reference to his present imprisonment also would have encouraged Philemon to grant his request.

"... Paul knew Philemon as modern commentators cannot and no doubt had a good idea of how Philemon was likely to react to such sentiments being read in public in the church of which he was a member as well as leader."²

This type of appeal would have had much greater force in the honor-shame culture in which these people lived than it does in our modern western power-weakness culture.

- vv. 10-11 Onesimus' name means "useful." Paul mentioned Onesimus' name here (v. 10) for the first time having prepared Philemon for the unpleasant memories associated with his formerly unfaithful servant. Paul called Onesimus his (Paul's) "son." The figurative parent-child relationship was common in both

¹Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 2:270-71.

²Dunn, p. 328.

Judaism and the pagan mystery religions as an illustration of the teacher-pupil relationship or the leader-convert relationship.¹

"In addition to the tender love that is contained in this expression there lies in it the thought of immaturity: Onesimus is only a child as yet and in this condition needs much tender care lest his young spiritual life suffer or die."²

"This is the one-time self-righteous Pharisee, the heir of Jewish exclusiveness, and he is speaking of a Gentile, and a Gentile slave at that, from the very dregs of Roman society—yet he can refer to him as a *son*. So his statement (Col. iii. 11) that 'there is neither Greek nor Jew ... bond or free' [Gal. 3:28] is no empty formula but reflects the attitude of heart to which he himself had been brought by God."³

"Scripture does not sanction slavery, but at the same time does not begin a political crusade against it. It sets forth *principles of love* to our fellow men which were sure (as they have done) in due time to undermine and overthrow it, without violently convulsing the then existing political fabric, by stirring up slaves against their masters."⁴

Paul had evidently led Onesimus to Christ while Paul was in confinement. The apostle softened the unpleasantness that the mention of Onesimus' name would have produced by making a pun.⁵ "Useful" had been "useless" to Philemon, but now he was living up to his name. He had proved useful to Paul,

¹Eduard Lohse, "Colossians and Philemon," in *Hermeneia*, p. 200.

²Richard C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon*, p. 962. Cf. Gal. 4:19; 1 Thess. 2:7.

³Carson, p. 108.

⁴Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Practical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, p. 1392.

⁵Some scholars, such as Lenski, pp. 962-63, reject the idea of a pun here.

and he could be useful to Philemon too. There was no need for Paul to identify exactly what sin Onesimus had committed against Philemon. Instead of magnifying it, he minimized it (cf. 1 Pet. 4:8).

"*Achrestos* ["useless"] designates Onesimus with reference to his flight and the time before his conversion. Apparently he was useless even before he ran away. He was a Phrygian slave and as such 'had confirmed the popular estimate of his class and nation by his own conduct'¹ since Phrygian slaves were proverbial for being unreliable and unfaithful."²

"(The name *Philemon* means 'affectionate' or 'one who is kind.' If the slave was expected to live up to his name, then what about the master?)"³

B. PAUL'S MOTIVES 12-16

vv. 12-14 Onesimus had so endeared himself to Paul that his departure was an extremely painful prospect for the apostle. Paul could have justified keeping the slave with him, but he judged that Onesimus' obligation to return to his owner was more important. Furthermore, Paul did not really have authority over the slave. That rested with his master.

"By returning he [Onesimus] would place himself entirely at the mercy of the master whom he had wronged. Roman law, more cruel than Athenian, practically imposed no limits to the power of the master over his slave. The alternative of life or death rested solely with Philemon, and slaves were constantly crucified for far lighter offences than his."⁴

¹Lightfoot, p. 310.

²O'Brien, p. 292.

³Wiersbe, 2:271.

⁴Lightfoot, p. 312.

If Paul had kept Onesimus with him Philemon would have felt obligated by his regard for Paul to let his slave stay with the apostle. The service that Paul probably had in mind for Onesimus was to proclaim the gospel, not to perform menial prison duties for Paul.¹ Nevertheless, Paul wanted Philemon to respond to his slave freely.

"The principle of consideration for others here manifested by Paul is a factor of vital importance today for effective Christian leadership. Many are the difficulties which might be avoided if those in places of authority in Christian work would follow Paul's example in this."²

"In the eastern part of the Roman Empire [including Asia Minor] during this period, fugitive slaves who sought sanctuary in a household were likely to be given temporary protection by the householder until either a reconciliation with the master had been effected or else the slave had been put up for sale in the market and the resulting price paid to the owner ..."³

vv. 15-16 Paul suggested that God may have permitted the events that had taken place so that they would result in greater good (Rom. 8:28), and he urged Philemon to view them in that light. The master should now regard his slave no longer as a slave but as a beloved brother in Christ, which he was.⁴ This does not mean that he would necessarily give Onesimus his freedom, though he might, but that he would treat him lovingly at least—like a brother. It is possible that when Paul wrote verse 15 he had in mind the Jewish law of the slave's voluntary return to his master in order to remain his servant forever (i.e., for the rest of his life; Deut. 15:16-17).⁵

¹O'Brien, p. 294.

²Hiebert, p. 113.

³O'Brien, p. 292.

⁴Cf. Lightfoot, p. 341; Hendriksen, p. 220. See also the appendix in *ibid.*: "Scripture on Slavery," pp. 233-37.

⁵Oesterley, 4:208.

"Lest Philemon should dislike Onesimus being called 'brother,' Paul first recognizes him as a brother, being the spiritual son of the same God."¹

There is evidence that, long before Christianity, a slave who became an initiate into a mystery religion ceased to be regarded as a slave but lived with his former owner as a free man.² In Onesimus, Philemon would receive one with whom he could share the fellowship of Christ and one who would render him more conscientious service than he could expect from a non-Christian.

Though it is a minority view, G. Campbell Morgan believed that Onesimus was Philemon's physical brother, on the basis of verse 16.³ Most commentators have understood the phrase "in the flesh" to mean something like "on the physical level," and "in the Lord" to mean "on the spiritual level."

"The supreme work of Christianity is to transform men, so that out of their transformed lives shall come the transformation of all social conditions, and the victories of righteousness and of love."⁴

"The principles of the gospel worked into the conscience of a nation destroy slavery."⁵

"Christianity is not out to help a man to escape his past and to run away from it; it is out to enable a man to face his past and to rise above it."⁶

"It is quite clear that in this letter Paul is not really dealing with the question of slavery as such or the resolution of a particular instance of slavery. In this verse, at least, he treats the question of brotherly love. Although Onesimus' earthly

¹Jamieson, et al., p. 1392.

²C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon*, p. 147.

³G. Campbell Morgan, *The Unfolding Message of the Bible*, p. 374.

⁴Idem, *Living Messages ...*, 2:2:104. Cf. Müller, p. 168.

⁵Alexander Maclaren, *The Expositor's Bible*, 6:301. Cf. Lightfoot, p. 323; Lenski, p. 951.

⁶William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, p. 321.

freedom may be of positive value, in the last analysis it is of no ultimate significance to him as a Christian as to whether he is slave or free. Finally what matters is to have accepted God's call and to follow him ..."¹

C. PAUL'S REQUEST 17

Finally Paul articulated his request. He based it on his relationship with Philemon as a Christian brother, a partner in union with Christ.

"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. It is the partnership of mutual Christian faith and life. It is upon Philemon's acceptance of this fellowship that Paul bases his appeal. The form of the conditional sentence assumes the reality of that fact. Philemon's refusal of Paul's request would be inconsistent with his acknowledgment of this partnership."²

One writer believed that fellowship is the major concept in this epistle.³

"Onesimus, in the lowest social status in the Roman world—a slave with no rights—was on a spiritual plane equal with his owner Philemon and with the leading apostle!"⁴

D. PAUL'S OFFER 18-20

v. 18 Paul then hastened to remove a possible obstacle to the reconciliation that he had requested. Pilfering was common among slaves (cf. Titus 2:10). Paul was apparently unaware of anything specific that Onesimus owed Philemon, but he offered

¹O'Brien, p. 298. Cf. 1 Cor. 7:20, 24.

²Hiebert, p. 117.

³Darrell L. Bock, "A Theology of Paul's Prison Epistles," in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, p. 307.

⁴Edwin C. Deibler, "Philemon," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, p. 772.

to pay whatever might be indebted if such a condition existed. Onesimus may have stolen from Philemon ("if he ... owes you anything").¹ Or he may simply have run away and so caused his master inconvenience ("if he has wronged you in any way").² "Charge that to my account" means the same as "impute it to me." Paul's offer is a beautiful illustration of biblical forgiveness based on imputation (cf. Rom. 5:13; 2 Cor. 5:21).³

"It is of interest to note that Paul was able and willing to pay Onesimus' debts. Every now and again we get glimpses which show that Paul was not without financial resources [sometimes; cf. Phil. 4:12; Acts 24:26; 28:30]."⁴

v. 19 Evidently Paul wrote this whole epistle with his own hand rather than by using a secretary, as was his custom.⁵ Alternatively Paul may have signed his name at this point and then personally written out his following guarantee.⁶ Paul reminded Philemon of his own debt to the apostle (v. 19). Apparently Philemon had become a Christian through Paul's ministry either directly or indirectly.

The parenthetical insertion "not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well" is a rhetorical device called *paraleipsis*. By using it a writer states that he is reluctant to say something ("not to mention to you that ...") that he does nevertheless say. This is a way of inserting information

¹G. B. Caird, *Paul's Letters from Prison*, pp. 222-23; Lightfoot, p. 341.

²F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, p. 400; Ralph P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 167; Lohse, p. 204.

³See Robert G. Gromacki, *Stand Perfect in Wisdom: An Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*, pp. 200-201.

⁴Barclay, p. 323.

⁵Cf. Lightfoot, p. 342; Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 3:2:434; Hiebert, p. 119; Kent, p. 175.

⁶Dunn, p. 339.

delicately.¹ "Not to mention to you that ..." means "Not to stress the fact that ..."²

- v. 20 By receiving and forgiving Onesimus, Philemon would be repaying Paul and encouraging him. Another play on words occurs with the Greek word translated "benefit," which is the root word for the name Onesimus. One writer rendered this clause, "Let me get help as well as you get Helpful."³ As Philemon had refreshed the hearts of the saints (v. 7), so Paul asked him to refresh Paul's own heart by forgiving and accepting Onesimus.

E. PAUL'S CONFIDENCE 21

"Obedience" is a strong word to use to describe consent to a request from a friend. Perhaps by using it Paul delicately reminded Philemon of his apostolic authority. Doing even more than Paul requested probably implied Philemon's wholehearted, enthusiastic acceptance of Onesimus rather than just compliance with the letter of Paul's request.

"Freedom of slaves, like all freedom, must come from the heart of Christ-inspired men. Under this compulsion, slavery must ultimately wilt and 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 Christendom 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."⁴

"Paul has been criticized for not denouncing slavery in plain terms. But, when one considers the actual conditions in the Roman empire, he is a wise man who can suggest a better plan

¹Hiebert, p. 120. Cf. Marvin R. Vincent, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians and to Philemon*, p. 190.

²Hendriksen, p. 223.

³Handley C. G. Moule, *Colossian and Philemon Studies*, p. 311.

⁴Rupprecht, p. 457.

than the one pursued here for the ultimate overthrow of slavery."¹

"As we read between the lines it seems best to interpret the 'more' as a desire of the apostle for Onesimus to be returned to him for the service of the gospel ..."²

Matthew Henry cited 14 arguments that Paul used in verses 8 through 21 in order to convince Philemon to receive and forgive Onesimus:³

- Philemon's love for all the saints (v. 8)
- Paul's authority (v. 8)
- The basis of Paul's appeal being love, rather than authority (v. 9)
- Paul's age and his condition as a prisoner (v. 9)
- Paul's spiritual relationship to Onesimus (v. 10)
- Philemon's own interest (v. 11)
- Paul's love for Onesimus (v. 12)
- Paul's self-denial in parting with Onesimus (vv. 13-14)
- The assurance that Onesimus would not run away again (v. 15)
- Onesimus' relationship to Philemon as his spiritual brother (v. 16)
- Onesimus' identification with Paul (v. 17)
- Paul's promise to pay Onesimus' debt to Philemon (vv. 18-19)
- The joy that Paul would receive by Philemon's compliance (v. 20)
- Paul's good opinion of Philemon (v. 21)

IV. CONCLUDING MATTERS 22-25

v. 22 Paul expected release from his house arrest in Rome soon (cf. Acts 23:29; 24:13; 25:25-27; 26:31-32; Phil. 2:24). This happened, but we have no record that Paul did or did not fulfill his desire to visit Philemon. The prospect of this visit would have motivated Philemon even more to accept Onesimus. Paul believed that the prayers of the Christians in Philemon's church could result in his being released.

¹A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 4:469. Cf. Barclay, pp. 311-12.

²O'Brien, p. 306. Cf. Bruce, p. 406.

³Henry, pp. 1907-8.

"Paul held that prayer had an objective as well as a subjective value. He believed in prayer as a mighty working force in the spiritual universe. As such he sought and valued the prayers of others on his behalf, and he himself faithfully exercised such intercession for the saints."¹

- vv. 23-24 Epaphras was an evangelist of the Lycus Valley and a leading man in the church at Colosse. He may have been the leading pastor (Col. 1:7; cf. Phil. 2:25). He was probably not in prison with Paul (Col. 1:8; cf. 4:10). The term "fellow prisoner" is more likely a figurative expression referring to the Christian's spiritual warfare.² Another view is that Epaphras simply resided in the same house in Rome with Paul who was the prisoner.³ Paul mentioned his other four companions—Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke—also in Colossians 4:10 and 14.
- v. 25 The final benediction is typical of Paul. The word translated "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.

What happened as a result of this letter? Did Philemon forgive Onesimus? We have no direct record of his response to this letter. But the fact that Philemon preserved this epistle and allowed it to circulate among the churches strongly suggests that he did respond as Paul had requested. In Colossians 4:9 Paul referred to Onesimus as "our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of your own," which would have encouraged reception of him in Colosse. According to Christian tradition Onesimus later became bishop of Ephesus.⁴ However another Onesimus may have been this bishop.⁵ Later church legends also identified Philemon as bishop of Berea,⁶ and bishop of Colosse.⁷

¹Hiebert, pp. 123-24.

²Lenski, p. 974.

³W. J. Conybeare, in *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*, p. 687; E. M. Blaiklock, *Today's Handbook of Bible Characters*, p. 582.

⁴O'Brien, p. 265.

⁵Fitzmyer, p. 15.

⁶See Jamieson, et al., p. 1391.

⁷Fitzmyer, p. 86.

The fact that Paul brought pressures of various kinds to bear on Philemon, to respond as he requested, while verbally appealing in humble terms, has created problems for some readers of this epistle. Was Paul being manipulative? Was he guilty of emotional blackmail? I do not think so. It would have been obvious to Philemon, as it is to us, that Paul definitely wanted a certain response to this letter. Nevertheless it would have been equally clear that Paul was making his appeal on the basis of love rather than apostolic authority. Motivation promotes the self-interest of the hearer, but manipulation promotes the self-interest of the speaker.

"Those who see in Paul's earlier appeal a form of emotional manipulation should also acknowledge here [in v. 14] that Paul in effect confesses his vulnerability and complete dependence on Philemon's goodwill. In the social relationships of a church existing in an unequal society there is a particular responsibility on the part of the powerful to act toward others in a spirit of goodness rather than standing on their rights."¹

It is not inconsistent with love to motivate by pointing out obligations, opportunities, and consequences.²

¹Dunn, p. 333.

²See the fine article by Charles L. Schenck Jr., "Paul's Epistle on Human Rights," *His* 26:8 (May 1966):1-4, which the author wrote during the civil rights movement in the United States.

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