



The Letter to Philemon

The Letter to Philemon was written by the Apostle Paul and Timothy to Philemon as is noted in verse 1 of the letter itself. With both of these men noted, it is also easily determined that Paul is the primary author and perhaps Timothy's notation by name is to lend credence to the letter as well as to suggest that both authors are in agreement on what is being shared. The letter to Philemon was written somewhere around 62AD; which is roughly 30 years post the death, burial, resurrection and ascension of Christ.

According to history, it is suggested that the Letter to Philemon was written at the same time as Ephesians and Colossians and that all 3 letters were delivered to their destination by Tychicus and Onesimus. This date noted assumes that the imprisonment that Paul refers to was his imprisonment that was in Rome.

If one were to extract a theme from this letter from Paul to Philemon, it would be to make record of how the power of the Gospel can transform the life of a person as well as empower believers to forgive and restore relationships. Of which is the focus of this letter; Paul's desire for a relationship to be restored.

The English Standard Version Study Bible records the following in regards to the purpose, occasion and background of the letter: Philemon was a wealthy Christian who lived in the city of Colossae, about 100 miles inland from Ephesus. Apparently during Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus, Philemon hear the gospel and was saved. He began serving the Cause of Christ in Colossian community, opening his home for a group of Christians to meet regularly.

At some point, Onesimus, one of Philemon's bondservants, fled to Rome. Possibly having stolen money or property from Philemon and now is a fugitive, Onesimus was living in the most populated city o the Roman Empire, hoping to escape detection.

In a rather remarkable set of circumstances – no recounted in the letter but certainly reflected in God’s sovereignty – Onesimus somehow came into contact with the Apostle Paul and became a Christian. As he grew in Christ, he spent much time and effort helping Paul, who was severely constrained by his imprisonment.

As much as Paul would like to have retained the services of Onesimus, Paul knew that Onesimus’s fugitive status, severed relationship, and wrongdoing against his master needed to be addressed. Paul thus wrote this letter as an appeal to Philemon to appreciate the transformation that has occurred in Onesimus’s life and to receive him back not merely as a bondservant but as a “beloved brother”.

Chapter 1

1) Greeting

a) ¹Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker ²and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house: ³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

- i) Paul opens with greeting and reference to Timothy as well as naming Philemon but also Apphia and Archippus. Paul also makes reference to the church that met in Philemon's house
- ii) It is suggested that Apphia may have been Philemon's wife and Archippus may have been Philemon's son. Furthermore, it must be noted that Philemon had a church meeting in his home so this man was more than just a man of wealth in Colossae but also had a significant ministry in the city as well.
- iii) With this noted, it is possible that Philemon served in some kind of a pastoral role; this is just a suggestion regarding the situation and not a doctrinal matter.

2) Philemon's Love and Faith

- a) **“⁴I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, ⁵because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, ⁶and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. ⁷For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.”**

- i) Paul, in these verses, is celebrating Philemon and recognizing the value of Philemon's love and faith for Christ and for the Church. Philemon is a good man who loves others and demonstrates the purest of definitive characteristics of a man who is born again and has a new nature.
- ii) Paul even makes reference to the fact that he has derived much joy and comfort from Philemon because it would seem that the Heart of Paul for the Church is mirrored in the Heart of Philemon for the Church. Paul states, “**For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.**”
- iii) It is easy to ascertain that Philemon is a blessing to the Church and the people of that church are blessed by him and his work for the Lord!

3) Paul's Plea for Onesimus

- a) “**⁸Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, ⁹yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you— I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— ¹⁰I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. ¹¹(Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is**

indeed useful to you and to me.) ¹²I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.”

- i) I love how Paul shifts his dependency upon Philemon to submit to Paul because of he being an Apostle but rather seeks to influence him, or to appeal to him, as a brother. This is such a great tactic and strategy because Paul is not trying to power play Philemon because of his Apostolic authority to do so but rather seems to minister to Philemon a leadership principle to help him.
- ii) He then introduces his request for appeal by bringing up Onesimus who Paul had, spiritually speaking, adopted and nurtured in the faith.
- iii) Paul states, ¹⁰“I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. ¹¹(Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) ¹²I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.”
- iv) In these verses, Paul provides the definitive framework for his relational dynamic with Onesimus and is aware of Onesimus’ misdeeds towards Philemon thus Paul is seeking to be a mediator for forgiveness and restoration.

v) This shows the Character of Paul to not hide the truth of what he knows but rather exposes it for Philemon to be aware that Paul knows what has happened and is seeking for Philemon to be restorative to his relationship with Onesimus because now Onesimus is not just a bondservant to Philemon but is also a brother in Christ who served the Apostle Paul.

b) ¹³“I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, ¹⁴but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. ¹⁵For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.”

i) I believe that it may be plausible that Paul is looking at this situation in two ways: A) He is trying to model leadership and to protect his relationship with Philemon. And B) He is trying to model leadership and to protect his relationship with Onesimus.

ii) He is showing true leadership in exposing the truth to Philemon, protecting his relationship with Philemon by doing so and was seeking to demonstrate the value of restoring relationships rather than remaining at odds.

iii) The same can be said of Onesimus; Paul is showing Onesimus how to navigate a situation like this with ethics and biblical characteristics as well as showing Onesimus how to walk in Grace and Mercy in restoring a relationship rather than leaving it broken.

c) ¹⁷ So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. ¹⁸ If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. ²⁰ Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. ²² At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.”

i) Like any good lawyer, Paul lays out the perimeters of the case, exposes the truth, and then sets his case to close with his statement in verse 17, **“¹⁷ So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. ¹⁸ If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.”**

ii) As it were, if you consider me a friend then receive Onesimus in the way that you would receive me and if he owes any debt to you then charger it to me and I will pay for it. Paul was willing to do anything to restore this relationship rather than allow it to remain in shambles.

4) Final Greetings

a) **“²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, ²⁴ and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. ²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.”**

i) As is Paul’s norm in his writings, he closing with greetings and admonishment.

ii) But we can learn one thing from this book, it is this. Nothing is worth a broken relationship.