

ONE LESSON ON PHILEMON

PHILEMON

Lesson Thirteen (Philemon 1-25)

Personal Greetings (1-7)

1 Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our beloved fellow worker 2 and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:

3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

4 I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, 5 because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints, 6 and I pray that the sharing of your faith may promote the knowledge of all the good that is ours in Christ. 7 For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

V.1 Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother – Paul wrote this personal note to Philemon from his first Roman imprisonment. During this same imprisonment, he also wrote Ephesians, Colossians, and Philippians. (See notes on Col. 1:2.) Verses one through five are virtually identical with Colossians, except for the persons addressed.

To Philemon our beloved fellow worker - Philemon was a Colossian, as can be seen by the fact that Onesimus was being returned to Colossae (Col. 4:9) and by the reference to Archippus (Col. 4:17; Philemon 2). He was a slave-holder (v. 15-16) and had a house large enough to serve as a meeting place for the church (v. 2). He had been converted to Christ through the ministry of the apostle Paul (v. 19), probably in Ephesus with his fellow Colossian, Epaphras (Col. 1:7). He was now a “fellow worker” in the kingdom.

V. 2 Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier – Since this letter to Philemon was strictly a personal letter, it is generally assumed that these two persons were members of Philemon’s household. Apphia is assumed to be his wife, since otherwise she would have been addressed after Archippus. Archippus, who held a position of some responsibility in the Colossian church (Col. 4:17), is assumed to be Philemon’s son.

V. 3 Grace to you and peace – This same greeting opens all of Paul’s epistles. (See the notes on Phil. 1:2 and Col. 1:2.)

V. 4 I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers —It must have given Paul great satisfaction to reflect on the spiritual progress of his many converts. Perhaps this was a part of his amazing ability to be content even in his imprisonment. What was true of Paul’s prayers for Philemon was true of his prayers for all the Colossians (Col. 1:3).

V. 5 because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have – The good report about all the Colossian Christians (Col. 1:4) was true of Philemon individually. Paul had probably heard both reports from the same source—Epaphras (Col. 1:8).

toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints – Philemon’s love toward “all the saints” was about to be tested by one of the more recent “saints”—Onesimus, his runaway slave.

V. 6 and I pray that the sharing of your faith – The “sharing” of Philemon’s faith may have been his own participation in a life of faith or it may have been his communication of that faith to others. The two ideas are closely interrelated, anyway.

may promote the knowledge of the good that is ours in Christ – Literally, “may become actively energetic” in the knowledge of that good. A man’s participation in faith must not be something static, but dynamic and energetic. Faith must function (Gal. 5:6) or it is worthless (James 2:20, 26).

V. 7 For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love – Philemon’s compassionate care for the local saints brought Paul joy, even in far away Rome. It is not likely that Paul had received anything personally from Philemon. Just the knowledge that his convert was sharing the love of Christ made Paul rejoice.

my brother – Paul made a point of their close personal fellowship in the family of God. This was an important prelude to the difficult appeal of verse ten.

because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you – Literally, the “bowels” or “internal organs” of the saints. This word was used in the Greek language to describe the seat of man’s emotions. (See notes on Phil. 1:8.) Paul used the expression again in Philemon 12 and 20.

The word for “refreshed” was used to refer to rest and refreshment from the weariness of toil. Note the use of the same word in Matt. 11:28, Mark 6:31, and I Cor. 16:18.

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A Personal Appeal (8-25)

8 *Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required,* 9 *yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an ambassador and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—* 10 *I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment.* 11 *(Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.)* 12 *I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.* 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;* 14 *but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own free will.*

15 *Perhaps this is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back for ever,* 16 *no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.* 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 through your prayers to be granted to you.*

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.*

V. 8 Accordingly – Since you are known to be so good to God's people.

though I am bold enough in Christ to command you – Paul could have used the authority of his apostleship to command Philemon to grant his appeal. He would also have used the obligation Philemon had from his own conversion by Paul.

what is required – “What is your duty; what is fitting” as in Col. 1:18. His duty was to receive Onesimus as a brother.

V. 9 yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you – Paul loved Philemon too much to force him to act against his will. Moreover, if Onesimus had been received back under duress, resentment and hostility would have smoldered for years.

I, Paul, an ambassador – The word should have been translated “an old man.” The translation “ambassador” is merely conjectural. According to Hippocrates, a man was called *presbutes* (as in this verse) from age forth-nine to fifty-six.

and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus – Paul referred five times in this brief letter to the fact of his imprisonment (v. 1, 9, 10, 13, 23).

Having appealed to Philemon as a prisoner, an old man, and a personal friend, Paul was now ready to ask Philemon to exercise his admirable compassion and love (v. 5 and 7) on Onesimus.

V. 10 I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment – Paul's final appeal was as a father appealing for his son. Indeed, Onesimus was Paul's son in the faith, since Paul had brought him to life in Christ.

Why did Paul have to make such an elaborate appeal? The answer lies in the temper of the times. It would have been legally proper and culturally expected that Philemon should immediately have Onesimus put to death.

V. 11 Formerly he was useless to you – “Onesimus” was a common Greek name, especially among slaves, meaning “profitable” or “useful.” Paul took the meaning of Onesimus' name to make an important point. Previously the “profitable” slave was useless; now he would be very useful. The gospel had changed his life.

V. 12 I am sending him back to you – Legally, Onesimus was still a runaway slave. His conversion to Christianity did not change his legal standing in the eyes of Rome. As long as Onesimus stayed in Rome, he was a fugitive.

Moreover, in one sense, Onesimus was still property that belonged to Philemon. Philemon had bought him with his own money and suffered financial loss when Onesimus ran away. There is even a hint in v. 18 that Onesimus may also have stolen money from Philemon when he left.

Imagine what would have happened to Christianity and to the Roman Empire if all a slave had to do to obtain his freedom was to profess Christ!

my very heart – Literally, “my insides, my bowels” as in verses 7 and 20. When Onesimus meant this much to Paul, how could Philemon refuse him?

V. 13 I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf – Paul added just one more item to the growing list of reasons why Philemon was indebted to Paul. Paul could have kept Onesimus without even consulting Philemon. Onesimus—now a very good and conscientious

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servant—could have served Paul in ways Philemon could not.

V. 14 but I preferred to do nothing without your consent – The rights of the legal owner had to be respected. Paul wanted to let Philemon give his own “judgment” or consent in the matter.

that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own free will – Philemon also had the right to make his own decision to be generous toward Onesimus. If he had been forced to receive the slave, he would have felt no satisfaction and received no blessing.

It is true that Paul made this appeal in such a way as to make it practically impossible for Philemon to refuse. At the same time, however, he left the final decision to Philemon. Thus, while strongly encouraged by Paul, it was still a matter of Philemon’s own free will.

V. 15 Perhaps this is why he was parted from you for a while – Paul gently suggested that the whole affair might even have been a providential act of God. Instead of saying that Onesimus ran away, Paul said he “was parted from you.” Thus, instead of blaming Onesimus, Philemon should thank God.

V. 16 no longer as a slave – Philemon got Onesimus back forever, but not as a slave. It is true that Onesimus returned to serve Philemon as his slave, but now he would be more than a slave. He would be a brother.

Philemon was not asked to free Onesimus or return him to Rome. He was asked to accept as a brother the man he knew as a worthless criminal—and this was harder.

both in the flesh and in the Lord – In the mere physical sense, Onesimus would be a better servant; in the spiritual sense, he will belong to Philemon as a brother.

V. 17 If you consider me your partner – The appeal is now made on the basis of mutual participation in the kingdom of Christ. The word “partner” also implies intimate friendship.

receive him as myself – Since Onesimus was Paul’s very “heart” (v. 12), to receive him was to receive Paul himself.

V. 18 If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything – There is a hint in these words that Onesimus may have stolen money from his master. Whatever losses Philemon had suffered, Paul would repay. This would remove every possible obstacle between Philemon and his new brother.

V. 19 I, Paul, write this with my own hand, I will repay – Even if the rest of this letter was written by an amanuensis (as Col. 4:18), this was written by Paul’s own hand. He was signing a promissory note.

to say nothing of your owing me even your own self – While they were on the subject of debts and obligations, Paul none too casually reminded Philemon of his own debt to Paul. Even if he forgave Onesimus and overlooked any financial losses, he still would not have paid all his obligation to Paul. Paul had led him to Christ and brought him eternal life!

V. 20 Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord – Paul used the word *oninasthai* for having “benefit,” making a direct play on the name Onesimus.

Refresh my heart in Christ – Just as Philemon had “given rest to the inward parts” of the saints (v. 7), now he was to do the same for Paul by receiving Onesimus as a brother.

V. 21 Confident of your obedience – Paul felt every confidence that Onesimus would do his Christian duty (v. 8). With Paul expressing such confidence, how could Philemon possibly let him down?

knowing that you will do even more than I say – This possibly meant that Philemon would even set Onesimus free.

V. 22 prepare a guest room for me – No doubt Paul truly expected to be released soon and hoped to enjoy the company of Philemon. Perhaps this is all that should be inferred from Paul’s statement.

At the same time, if Philemon had any thoughts at all about treating Onesimus harshly, he has now been forewarned that Paul would be coming soon in person to greet him and Onesimus.

V. 23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner – Since Epaphras was himself from Colossae (Col. 4:12), he had special reason to send greetings to Philemon. He, like Aristarchus (Col. 4:10), in some way shared in a special way in Paul’s imprisonment.

V. 24 and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers – The same co-workers were named in Col. 4:10-14, where they sent greetings to all the church in Colossae. They were all interested in Onesimus and would be eagerly waiting to see what Philemon would do.

V. 25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit – As always, Paul closes with a mention of grace. If God had given his “unmerited favor” to Philemon, then surely Philemon should forgive “undeserving” Onesimus in return.

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STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. If Philemon was a Christian, why was he a slaveholder?
2. What are the known facts about Philemon?
3. What had Philemon done in verse seven to give Paul such joy and comfort?
4. How many different appeals or approaches did Paul use toward Philemon?
5. Why did Paul wait until verse 10 to finally get to the real point?
6. What does the name “Onesimus” mean? What is the play on words with this name in verse 11 and in verse 20?
7. Why did Paul try to *persuade* Philemon to do what was right? Why didn't he just tell him?
8. Why didn't Paul call for the total release of Onesimus? Shouldn't a slave who becomes a Christian go free?
9. What did Philemon owe to Paul?
10. Do you think Paul meant anything special in his request for a guest room? Was this a veiled threat?
11. What have you learned from the study of Philemon? Why was it included in the New Testament? Will it have any effect on your life?