



# Philemon

## *A Verse-By-Verse Commentary*

*(Originally written one verse per day)*

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## CHAPTER 1

**Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy *our* brother,  
Philemon our beloved *friend* and fellow laborer, Philemon 1:1**

Welcome to the epistle known as Philemon. It is a single chapter, containing only 25 verses. Thus, it will take less than one month to evaluate it one verse at a time. It is a tender and loving letter in several ways, and it is a marvelous conclusion to the epistles of Paul. The letter will provide insights into ethical issues for and between Christians. It is a letter which has a social component to it, particularly the issue of slavery. And yet, that particular issue is truly taken out of context by many. Using Philemon as an argument either for, or against, slavery is something the epistle was never intended for.

The book is also one which highlights disobedience in one way, and yet a request for mercy in another. The providence of God is clear and evident in the events which are described, and how they came about. Without explicitly relaying some details, it is evident that a tapestry has been woven nonetheless. In this, it mirrors other stories in the Bible, such as the book of Ruth, which show a “behind the scenes” working of God in order to effect an intended outcome.

Philemon also adds in an eternal element to things. Paul will relay in verse 16 that a new relationship has been established between Philemon and Onesimus, an eternal one, because of Jesus Christ. There is a new dynamic in play in their lives which will hopefully be the impetus for Philemon to respond favorably to Paul’s request.

Philemon is a wholly personal letter, written by Paul, and which is lacking any outward signs of doctrine or exhortation. And yet, it is a letter which contains an immense amount of underlying theology concerning what is right, and what is considered proper in matters of Christian charity. One scholar, Frankius, says that “This single epistle to Philemon very far surpasses all the wisdom of the world.” How could that be in such a short, personal letter? It is because it deals with issues that require wisdom which the world does not possess without a knowledge that man is accountable to a higher Source than this temporary life provides.

And so, with an all-too short introduction to this beautiful letter now concluded, Paul begins with his name. He has identified himself as he does in his other letters. However, he immediately diverts from what he normally says. Instead of identifying himself as an

apostle (a title he also skips with the Macedonian churches of Thessalonica and Philippi), he says, “a prisoner.”

The reason for this is not yet evident, but Paul is going to be appealing for his beloved “son” Onesimus. By identifying himself as a prisoner, he is eliciting sympathy from his addressee, Philemon. Elsewhere, he does identify himself as a prisoner, but it is for the sake of glorifying God in his imprisonment, not to elicit sympathy from it. He also elsewhere identifies himself as a “bondservant” of Jesus Christ, thus showing his allegiance to the Lord in all ways. In his identification as a “prisoner” here, he is demonstrating that his allegiance has led him as far as prison for the sake of the gospel.

Paul is literally a prisoner under Nero, but more significantly he is a prisoner “of Christ Jesus.” In adding this in, he is showing that he is not just a prisoner for general wrongdoing against the empire, but he is a prisoner for doing right towards God and the gospel of His Son. It is a second way of eliciting sympathy towards his yet-to-be-stated cause.

He next adds in, “and Timothy.” Timothy is often included in Paul’s initial greetings, along with others. However, Paul ensures that he is further known as “*our* brother.” Paul has introduced the fraternal bond between the two, and which then extends to Philemon as well. This is another way of eliciting sympathetic feelings from Philemon. In verse 10, he will explicitly call Onesimus “my son.” In calling Timothy “*our* brother” here, he is tying all four together into one family bond. Every time that Paul opens a letter, the choice of his initial greeting reveals much about the connection he has towards his audience. The same is certainly the case here in his final epistle.

Next, he identifies his addressee as “Philemon.” This is the only time he is mentioned in Scripture. He is a Christian, and he is a man of Colossae. The name is derived from *phileo*, which signifies “affectionate friendship.” Therefore, his name means, “Friendly,” or “Kindly.” He was brought to saving faith in Christ by Paul (v. 19), and he was evidently a faithful Christian as is evidenced by Paul’s words in the letter.

Paul then calls him, “our beloved.” His inclusion of this is to ensure that the fraternal bond which he has already established is realized as precious and enduring. The word used has two specific applications. The first is “the Beloved” when speaking of Christ in relation to the Father. The second is between believers, as beloved by God, and also as beloved by one another.

Finally, he adds in, “and fellow laborer.” It is a title which he uses frequently in his epistles when speaking of other believers in relation to the gospel; in fulfilling the calling which is placed upon believers concerning doctrine, instruction, evangelism, and etc. Paul again establishes a specific bond through the choice of this term. His plea for Onesimus in verse 13 includes the thought of him ministering to Paul for the gospel. How could one fellow laborer deny such a request, especially when it was needed because Paul was still in chains? As he could not actively do certain things for the gospel, he needed Onesimus there with him to ensure those things got done.

In all, Paul’s opening salutation is precisely stated in order to set an exacting tone for the rest of the letter. Every word has been carefully chosen to meet the intended and desired outcome.

Life application: We should look to Paul’s example of how to address others, not for the sake of manipulating them, but for the sake of meeting our true needs as they arise. Paul’s intent was sincere, his need was real, and his love of all concerned was obvious. In choosing his words so carefully, he was ensuring the most favorable outcome of the decision which he is making his appeal for.

*Lord God, thank You for the fraternal bond which exists between believers in Christ. And yet, it is unfortunate that the bond isn’t as strong as it should be in many cases. There are times to sever fellowship, and there are times to be merciful and forgiving. Help us to make the right choices about these things. Help our friendships to be based on a love of You and Your word first. From that, our relationships with other believers will be easier to define. Thank You for guiding us in this. Amen.*

**...to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:**  
Philemon 1:2

In verse 1, Paul first addressed the letter to Philemon. He now continues with three more addressees. The first is Apphia. It is her only mention in Scripture, and the root of her name denotes “endearment.” Paul calls her “the beloved.” However, the Greek word in some manuscripts says, “our sister.” Either way, it is supposed that she is Philemon’s wife, being noted first after Philemon. If not his wife, it is likely she was some close relation to him.

Next, Paul mentions “Archippus.” He is seen here and in Colossians 4:17 where Paul gives him a note of exhortation concerning the ministry he had received in the Lord. Here, he is called “our fellow soldier.” The term “fellow soldier” is used of Epaphroditus

in Philippians 2:25, and Timothy is said to be a “good soldier of Jesus Christ” in 2 Timothy 2:3. These terms place these men under Christ, the Captain of our salvation, as warriors in His cause. Obviously, it refers to a spiritual battle when this metaphor is used. Various commentaries claim he was probably a son of Philemon, but there is nothing to substantiate that other than that he is noted by name, and before Paul’s final addressee, meaning “the church in your house.”

Again, scholars are divided on what the term means. Some state that this term signifies a local gathering of Christians who met in Philemon’s house because it was a suitable place to meet. Others claim that the term is referring to his own family which is comprised of faithful Christians. There is no reason to assume that the term does not include outsiders who came by to form a local church though.

Life application: There are matters which are extremely important to get right concerning doctrine. These must be defended in a very fixed and rigid manner. There are issues which are important, but which do not affect salvation. These can be debated, but shouldn’t be a point of division. And then there are things like Apphia’s relationship to Philemon which have no bearing on doctrine at all. Unless there is a reliable external source which definitively explains who she is and what her relationship to Philemon is, there is no need to argue the matter. A simple comment, showing the uncertainty of the details, is all that is needed.

*Lord God, help us to live peaceably with our fellow believers, and indeed with all people, to the extent to which it is possible. It is certainly not possible to live in a peaceable way with people who are violently opposed to our faith in You, but in those times where we can live in a friendly manner with others, help us to do so. May we be the initiators of peace in the world we live in, setting an example for others to hopefully emulate. Amen.*

### **Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Philemon 1:3**

After identifying himself, and Timothy who was accompanying him, Paul then identified who he was writing to, and then extended other specific and general greetings. Now, he gives a greeting which is very similar to that found in many of his epistles, “Grace to you and peace.” The words are in the second person, plural. Thus, they are to all who are being addressed, not just Philemon.

Grace is unmerited favor which cannot be earned. This is the common greeting among the Greek people. Peace, however, is the common greeting among the Hebrew people.

In their language, the word is *shalom*. This is more than a greeting for calm or quiet, but is a state of wholeness and completion in all ways. Paul unites the two terms just as the church is being united between Jew and Gentile during his time. This grace precedes the peace because only after receiving the grace of God can a person experience the peace of God.

Paul extends this wonderful blessing to them “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” It is a greeting from the eternal God – both the unseen Father and His Son who reveals the Father to us. Rather than being an argument against the divinity of Jesus Christ, it is an argument for it. He is tying the two in as one – Jesus being a member of the Godhead. He is not making some type of great division, but a harmonious blending of the two.

Throughout Paul’s letters, as with the entire Bible, the deity of Jesus Christ is a concept and a precept which simply can’t be missed. It is the very heart of what God has done for the reconciliation of the people of the world.

Life application: Outside of God’s creation, which reveals Him in a general way, we cannot comprehend Him except through His special revelation. One way we receive special revelation is through the mouths of His prophets. But these prophets all testified to the same thing – the coming of Messiah, Jesus Christ (see John 5:39). The most magnificent special revelation of God that we have received is the incarnation of Jesus. But for us, even this isn’t sight, it is found in the testimony of those who have recorded what they knew into the New Testament. So, in order to understand God, one must know Jesus Christ, and one cannot understand Jesus Christ unless he knows the Bible. Know your Bible!

*Heavenly Father, how grateful we are that we can fellowship with You personally. We have Your word and so we know who You are. We can have personal talks with you as we pray in solitude, or even in a mall bustling with activity around us. We can feel Your presence in church as we fellowship with others, praising You and giving thanks for Your wonderful care of us. Thank You for allowing us to fellowship with You, O God. Amen.*

**I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, Philemon 1:4**

The words of this verse are rather similar in content to Romans 1:9, Ephesians 1:16, Philippians 1:3,4, Colossians 1:3, 4 & 1 Thessalonians 1:2. In other words, it is a greeting which, even if slightly amended for the occasion, is common to Paul’s letters. In some

letters, the stress is on the thanks, in others it is on the prayers. For example, it is rather close to the words of Colossians 1:3 -

“We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you,”

However, when he wrote his letter to the Colossians, he noticeably mentions “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Here in Philemon, he has already carefully placed Christ Jesus within the Godhead in the previous verse, and so the thanks are obviously to Him as much as they are to the Father. Therefore, Paul combines the two into the simpler term “God.”

Here he notes that he is “making mention of you always in my prayers.” Paul’s idea of “praying without ceasing,” which he states in 1 Thessalonians 5, is evident in words such as these. Whenever the thought of one of his beloved brethren or churches came to mind, he would utter forth a prayer to God on their behalf. To him, praying was certainly a normal extension of his regular life and conversation with others.

Life application: God already knows the end from the beginning. His plan is also complete in His mind. Despite this, we should not have a fatalistic view of life where we ignore prayers. Instead, God figures our prayers into the plan, just as our free-will calling on Jesus is figured into the plan. If we don’t receive Jesus, we will not be saved. Likewise, prayers that are not uttered are not heard. God’s foreknowledge of all things outside of time factors in our actions within the stream of time. Pray!

*Heavenly Father, You have granted to us is the opportunity and honor to pray. When we open our hearts to You, You hear and respond according to Your great wisdom. With Jesus as our Mediator between us, we can know that those prayers which are offered through Him are acceptable to You. We have no need to worry if what our lips have prayed out to You are heard or not. They are! Thank You for our Mediator! Our prayers are heard because of Him. Amen.*

**...hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, Philemon 1:5**

This verse is very similar to Colossians 1:4 –

“...since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all the saints;”

The difference often puzzles scholars though, especially the idea of “faith” being directed “toward all the saints.” But this isn’t the intent. In what occurs numerous times in Scripture, Paul’s mind is transferring two separate thoughts to the letter in what is known as a chiasm. He is associating “love” with “toward the saints,” and “faith” with “toward the Lord Jesus.” Laid out in order we see the following:

- a. hearing of your love
- b. and faith which you have
- c. toward the Lord Jesus
- d. and toward all the saints

This is somewhat similar to what Luke does in Acts 2:38 concerning baptism –

- a. Repent [second person plural]
- b. be baptized [third person singular]
- b. each [singular] of you
- a. for the remission of your [second person plural] sins.

These subtle nuances are intended to direct our attention to what is being said, but we often will miss them, especially in translations, and even more especially when rules of grammar change between languages. Having it laid out clears up the confusion. Philemon’s faith is not being directed toward “all the saints,” but only toward the Lord Jesus. At the same time, his love is being directed “toward all the saints.”

This will be seen worked out in the coming verses as Paul will speak of faith in connection with Christ Jesus in verse 6, and then he will connect love with the saints in verse 7. For now, Paul’s prayers (verse 5) are in thanks to God because of the faith and love which is found in Philemon.

Life application: There are often perceived difficulties in Scripture which can be cleared up by referring to similar thoughts found elsewhere in Scripture, or by laying out verses in the various types of patterns which the Bible uses, such as parallelism, chiasm, etc. In learning these various patterns, and then evaluating verses based on them, the lights often come on as to what the true intent of a passage is.

*Lord God, thank You for the wonders which are found in Your word. It is an endless stream of delight, if we will simply open it up and study it. In the end, it always reveals wisdom right from Your mind. What more splendid thing could we pursue than that! Thank You for this beautiful gift. And thank You for Jesus who is the Subject of it all.*



*Praises to You for what You have done in Him, and how He is revealed in Your word.  
Amen.*

**...that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. Philemon 1:6**

Paul's words here are tied into what he said in verse 4. He said he was "making mention of you always in my prayers." This was so "that the sharing of your faith may become effective." The word he uses, which is translated as "sharing," is *koinónia*. It signifies participation, communion, and fellowship. It is "what is shared in *common* as the basis of fellowship" (HELPS Word Studies). As his words are tied into verse 4, and as the next verse will be tied in with verse 5, there is a parallelistic structure to these verses. This will be seen when we arrive at verse 7.

For now, Paul is praying for an outward display of the fruits of Philemon's faith, thus he will have demonstrated an effective (an active and energetic) faith. Understanding this, Paul is praying about what he hopes will be the character of Philemon concerning his actions as they are directed towards what Paul hopes he will do in regards to the issue that lies ahead in the epistle. One can see that the issue ahead is something important to Paul, and he is therefore praying that a positive response will be forthcoming from Philemon.

Paul then says that this demonstration of the fruits of his faith will be "by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus." The words, "by the acknowledgment," are an indication of the actual existence of his faith. He has faith; in sharing that faith, he is showing that his faith is genuine.

The words "every good thing which is in you," speak of an outwardly revealing of his faith. It is an expression of the faith that he possesses, and which acknowledges that he possesses it, and is now demonstrating it.

And finally, "in Christ Jesus" signifies that the faith is not a misdirected faith, but one which is based on the foundation of the faith, Jesus Christ. He is the basis for the faith; and therefore, Paul is praying that Philemon will exhibit an outward display of his faith, thus acknowledging that his faith is genuine, developed, and willing to go to the lengths necessary to meet the request that lays ahead in Paul's letter.

Obviously, if Paul is writing this, and Philemon were not to follow through with the request Paul then makes, it would be an indication that his faith had not met the

standard which Paul speaks of here. Paul is delicately leading Philemon to the point where he can hardly say “No” to the request which Paul will make.

Life application: Paul is directing his words in a very careful manner in order to elicit the desired outcome from Philemon. He is not manipulating him, because everything he says is in accord with what one would expect from a Christian. But he is making it exceedingly hard for Philemon to turn down the request that is forthcoming. One should never challenge another’s faith in an inappropriate manner, but it is acceptable to ask for a demonstration of faith from those we fellowship with.

*Lord God, help us to not just have saving faith, but to live out that faith in proper demonstrations of having it. When we are given a chance to exhibit our faith in meeting the real-life requests and needs of others, help us to do so. May our faith and deeds work together to demonstrate to the world that we are not only Christians in word, but also in deed. This we pray, that You will be glorified through the things we do. Amen.*

**For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.** Philemon 1:7

Here we continue with the parallelistic structure which started in verse 4. It was noted in the previous verse that verse 4 was connected to verse 6. The same is true with verse 5 being connected to verse 7. Thus, there is an a/b/a/b pattern evident –

- a. 4. I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers,
- b. 6. that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.
- a. 5. hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints,
- b. 7. For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.

Seeing this pattern, the word “For” which begins verse 7 becomes apparent. It is based on the “hearing of your love...” Paul acknowledges that now by saying that it is the reason “we have great joy and consolation in your love.” It should be noted that some manuscripts say “I” instead of “we.” This would make sense based on the “I” which began verse 4, but there is also no reason to assume that the singular in verse 4 is not now converted to the plural here to include Timothy. Either way, nothing is lost in doctrine.

The important thing is that the love which Philemon displayed is what has stirred up the “great joy and consolation.” This is, again, Paul’s way of continuing to lead Philemon in making a favorable decision when presented with Paul’s request. If there is such great joy and consolation at what he has already done, how much more joy and consolation there will be when he follows through with Paul’s request!

Next, he says, “because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you.” This then is tied to where Philemon’s love was directed in verse 5. It was toward “all the saints.” Philemon’s love toward the saints in turn refreshed those same saints. The word “refresh” signifies “rest after the needed task is complete; to pause (rest) ‘after precious toil and care’” (HELPS Word Studies). Thus, Philemon’s love was directed to saints whose hearts were burdened in their labors in Christ, and Philemon was able to provide them with rest from their labors.

Paul will use this same word again in verse 20 concerning a need for the same rest in his own weary heart in regards to Philemon. Again, it is Paul’s masterful way of making it impossible for Philemon to turn down his request. Philemon had become well known for refreshing the hearts of the saints, and Paul – whom Philemon was indebted to – would ask the same for himself. How could Philemon turn him down!

Paul then finishes with, “brother.” Its placement at the end adds in an emphasis. No more touching word could have been added in to soften the heart of Philemon. Its placement is an immense act of persuasion for that which is forthcoming. Philemon is indebted to Paul (see verse 19), something which would place Paul in the stronger position in his discourse, and yet the use of the term “brother” brings them to equality once again. Paul’s words are so carefully woven together that Philemon would be a heartless soul indeed to not fully comply with what will be requested of him.

Life application: We may be over another Christian in employment, they may owe us money, there may be a great age difference between one another, etc., however, in Christ we are all on the same level when it comes to our position in Him. It would be good for us to remember this, and to never lord our earthly status over another believer. Humility is a trait that is sought out for by the Lord when He evaluates the hearts of His people.

*Lord God, help us to be humble before our fellow believers, not exalting ourselves over them because of our position, wealth, age, or whatever other worldly status we may possess. Rather, help us to serve, just as Christ came to serve. Help us to act in humility*

*and with respect to those who are our spiritual brothers in Christ. To Your glory we pray for softened hearts, willing to exalt others. Amen.*

**Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting,**  
Philemon 1:8

The word “Therefore” is based on what Paul has said in verses 4-7. He has reminded Philemon about his conduct before the Lord, and he has used it as a point of leverage for what he personally desires from Philemon going forward from here. The words of this verse and onward constitute the heart of what is on Paul’s mind, and thus the main subject of the letter. There will be a request made of Philemon, but it could be otherwise. This is seen in Paul’s next words, beginning with, “though I might be very bold.”

Paul has been gracious with his words concerning Philemon thus far. He will be humble in his request going forward also. However, he could be bold instead, meaning more direct and forceful. And further, he would be in his right to do so because his boldness would be “in Christ.”

He and Philemon are brothers in Christ (verse 7), and there is a matter of extreme importance to Paul which Philemon would be unbrotherly to refuse. This is so much so that Paul could be so bold toward Philemon, as he says, “to command you what is fitting.”

What he means is that what he will merely ask for, and that in humility, is something that he could rightfully direct Philemon to do because it is what is right and proper. When an employer has a job to be done, he doesn’t need to ask his employees to do it. Rather, he could simply direct it to be accomplished. However, some employers use a more subtle and gracious tone with their employees. Though they have a right to command, they instead use words which are less forceful. This is what Paul is doing here.

Paul has carefully and methodically built up his case for requesting this great thing of Philemon. He has then shown that he could simply tell him to do it and, as a brother in Christ, he would not be acting according to Christian values to turn Paul down. From here, Paul will lay out his request, anticipating Philemon will do what is right based on the request, without being forced to accomplish the thing he is being asked to do.

Life application: If you go to a fellow Christian, a minister, or a pastor, and you ask what path you should take, be ready to do what they say if it is what is proper in Christ. It is wholly inappropriate to ask for godly counsel, and then reject that counsel when it doesn't suit your desires. This is what the people of Israel did. They went to Jeremiah and asked for the word of the Lord, saying they would obey whatever word came back to them. However, when the Lord directed them according to their request, they rejected His word. The Lord's response was, "For you were hypocrites in your hearts when you sent me to the Lord your God, saying, 'Pray for us to the Lord our God, and according to all that the Lord your God says, so declare to us and we will do *it*.'" <sup>21</sup> And I have this day declared *it* to you, but you have not obeyed the voice of the Lord your God, or anything which He has sent you by me" (Jeremiah 42:20, 21). To reject what is right in Christ is to reject the word of the Lord. The people of Israel were judged and punished for their unfaithful stand in this regard.

*Heavenly Father, help us to stand on Your word, and to not reject what it says when it is inconvenient or doesn't suit our personal desires. What You have spoken is not left for us to pick and choose whether we will obey or not. It is given for the guidance of our lives in Your presence. May we keep it in context and, if that context directs us, may we act accordingly – to Your glory. Amen.*

**...yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you—being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ— Philemon 1:9**

Paul, having built his case concerning the command he could make, now completely changes the nature of such an appeal. Instead of a rightfully stated command, he says, "yet for love's sake." For Paul to command Philemon concerning the weighty matter which he will speak of might then put up a wall of resentment between the two. Though he has not yet stated his request, it is obviously something of great importance, and which could possibly be a burden of great measure on Philemon. Rather than imposing such a burden, he instead appeals to Philemon's love, towards Paul and towards their common faith in general. This is then fully revealed in the words, "I rather appeal to you."

From what could be commanded, Paul instead appeals based on love. Instead of a wall of enmity, he is looking for a holy kiss of fellowship. Instead of taking what could be taken, he asks for that which could be denied. Paul is placing his request back under Philemon's authority, chancing that it may be turned down, but counting on it being granted – even to over and above what he hopes for (coming in verse 21).

Having stated that what he desires is a request based on love, he then continues to lead Philemon's decision, providing words that would make it a cold-hearted gesture to refuse. He does this by stating two huge limitations which are placed on his own life. First, he says, "being such a one as Paul, the aged."

It is unsure how old Paul was at this time. The only real clue is the word used to describe him in Acts 7:58, translated as "young man." It signifies a man in his prime, even up to the age of 40. If he was 20, he might now be about 50. If he was 40, he might now be about 70. The facts concerning Paul's life, as revealed elsewhere in the New Testament, mean that he would be old even if only 50. He had lived a hard life from the day he met Christ, and his body would bear the pains associated with that. It would be that much more so if he were now 70. No matter what, the appeal to his age is one which will make it difficult for Philemon to turn down. But then Paul adds in more; something he has written about frequently over the years, and which is his sad state once again. He says, "and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ..."

He had obviously been free when he was with Philemon, but now he was imprisoned. All people in the empire would know what that meant. It would be a weary existence, cramped and dirty living, painful cold, tormenting heat, and constant deprivation. Those in prison were dependent on others for their very food. Whatever Paul's request is, he has tied his advanced age in with his miserable conditions, and he is basing it on Philemon's love. How could Philemon turn down his request and be considered a true and faithful brother in Christ? One can now see why Paul so carefully highlighted the positive attributes ascribed to Philemon by others in verses 4-7. Was such a record true or not? His response to Paul's coming request would reveal the truth or falsity of those reports.

Life application: How do people speak of you in your walk with Christ? If you feel you have a good record of service, or at least faithfulness in Christ, will you respond according to that record when a true need is asked of you by another brother in the Lord? This doesn't mean that we need to respond to every request. It is obvious that people prey upon churches and individual Christians. But when true needs arise, are you going to be a part of meeting them? Be as ready to meet the challenge as you were to accept the praises for your life in Christ in the past.

*Lord God, there are always needs brought before Your people. Some are by sharks who simply want to prey upon us because we are Yours. But there are many true needs which must be met, and which we may be asked to help with. Are the good words spoken about us in the past concerning our faith and generosity going to be met with deeds*

*comparable to those accolades? Help us in this Lord. Grant us wisdom in who we should give help to, but grant us a generous heart when we give. To Your glory. Amen.*

**...I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains,**  
Philemon 1:10

The structure of the Greek is much different than it is laid out here. It more literally reads, "I beg you for my child whom I have begotten in the chains, Onesimus." Placing his name last is Paul's way of emphasizing the entire thought. "I have a child; I begot him while I was in chains; he is Onesimus."

Everything written thus far by Paul has been penned for this particular individual, Onesimus. It is apparent that Philemon knows who Paul is speaking about, and there is something that he desires of Philemon concerning him. It is also obvious that there is a problem which exists between Philemon and Onesimus. It is one which would otherwise be an insurmountable problem, but because of Paul's careful wording, even including the way he has structured the words in this verse, a resolution is possible. It will be one not based on the relationship of Philemon to Onesimus, but on the relationship between Philemon and Paul, and because of Paul's new relationship with Onesimus.

The reason for his heartfelt plea is at least partially understood now with the words, "my son." Paul has become a father to him. He has used the word when speaking of the Galatians –

"My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you..."  
-Galatians 4:19

He then spoke of Timothy as his own son in Philippians, 1 Timothy (twice), 2 Timothy (twice), and of Titus in his letter to him. It is a term of endearment based on having led someone to Christ, or having adopted him through instruction about Christ. In the case of Onesimus, Paul further says, "whom I have begotten while in my chains." In other words, while Paul was still in prison, he had met with and converted Onesimus to the faith. From there, it is obvious that he continued to tutor him as a father would tutor his own son.

The name *Onésimos* essentially means "Useful," as in "profitable," or in "advantage." In order to understand the situation, it is necessary to go forward in the letter to determine what had happened. Onesimus was Philemon's slave, but he ran away from Philemon. This would obviously be hugely problematic, and this is why Paul has so tenderly

arranged his thoughts about Philemon first, and then about Onesimus. Because he is now Paul's son, there is a new dynamic which must be considered.

Life application: When a person becomes a Christian, a new set of possibilities arises in how we can and should treat that person. We may have been enemies, but that should now change. There may be debts owed, but those should be forgiven. And so on. This is the attitude we should have toward those who come to Christ. Understanding this, Christians should endeavor to maintain those feelings of forgiveness to those who have been brothers and sisters all along. This is a tough challenge, because some never mature in Christ. They fail to grow in wisdom and knowledge, they continue to act immaturely, and they are real sore spots within the fellowship. Paul gives advice on how to handle fellow believers like that elsewhere in his letters. Be well brushed up on those things so that you are ready to properly handle difficult people who are believers.

*Lord God, help us to do our best to be forgiving of our fellow believers, but help us to be wise in Your word and what it says, concerning those who fail to mature in You, and who continue to act in a way which is unsound. In knowing what Your instruction says about these things, we don't have to feel guilty when we cut off fellowship – even from believers. Help us in this, O God. Amen.*

**...who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.**

Philemon 1:11

Paul now makes a pun based on the meaning of the name of Onesimus. As noted previously, his name means "Useful," as in "profitable," or in "advantage." Now, using a different Greek word, *euchrétos*, which carries the same basic meaning, he notes that Onesimus was once "unprofitable to you."

Philemon had a slave named "Useful," and his slave was apparently of no value to him. He may have been lazy, a thief, or whatever else, but at some point, he even went so far as to run away from him. The name he bore was an unbecoming epithet. However, Paul shows that a change has taken place by saying, "but now is profitable."

Useless Onesimus had become useful Onesimus. There was profit to be found in him, but it was not in the way which he had previously been considered in terms of value. Paul will explain how he hopes value can be derived from him in verse 16. For now, all he notes is that he who once was unprofitable now has value "to you."



In the conversion of Onesimus to faith in Christ, there could possibly now be a new and wonderful dynamic, if Philemon would simply avail himself of it. Paul is asking for him to consider this, and to act on it for the sake of love. He then finishes this verse with, “and to me.” This is a creative type of afterthought that Paul uses from time to time in order to include himself in something that others will also benefit from. For example, he does it Philippians 2:27 when saying, “For indeed he was sick almost unto death; but God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow.”

The inclusion of himself now is the key to all of his words which built up Philemon, and which showed Paul’s own difficult condition. He has a need, and that need can be met in Onesimus. However, in meeting this need for Paul, Onesimus will also be profitable to Philemon.

Concerning the conversion of Onesimus the scholar Maclaren says, “Christianity knows nothing of hopeless cases. It professes its ability to take the most crooked stick and bring it straight, to flash a new power into the blackest carbon, which will turn it into a diamond” (Expositor’s Bible).

Life application: Our willingness to put aside past differences, or past wrongs, can become the basis for amazing friendships or partnerships. The person who is forgiven will often feel a continuing debt is owed for such kindness. The wrongs of the past become overshadowed by an attitude of thankfulness and gratitude which can lead to wonderful things for both concerned, if we are willing to make that first move of reconciliation. Let us carefully consider this, especially in light of what we have been forgiven in Christ Jesus.

*Lord God, in Christ we have been forgiven a debt we could never repay. Help us to always consider that in regards to wrongs which have been brought against us. There are times we can withhold forgiving others, as Your word indicates, but when a person is repentant over their conduct towards us, we are to forgive, even as we have been forgiven. Help us in this Lord, it can often be difficult. Amen.*

**I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart,**  
Philemon 1:12

The Greek verb of the first sentence is what is known as an epistolary aorist. It literally reads, “I did send.” The letter assumes the arrival of Onesimus at the time it is received, even though he is with Paul at the time it is written. Paul has either asked Onesimus to

return to Philemon, or Onesimus desired to return and Paul agreed that it was right to do so. Being a runaway slave, Philemon then has the right to do with him as he wished. He could even have him executed. But the return of Onesimus is one which now almost required leniency by Philemon. And this for several reasons.

First, the tense of the verb assumes that Onesimus is standing there with Philemon. If Onesimus had desired to take the letter and run away in the opposite direction, Philemon would not be reading the letter. Thus, Onesimus voluntarily returned to his master.

Secondly, Paul then says, “You therefore receive him.” Though this is a recommendation, it is based upon everything he has written up to this point. All of the heartfelt words which preceded this note concerning the return of Onesimus would have to be rejected. Philemon’s state as a Christian in Paul’s eyes was on trial.

Would he prove to be a merciful brother, a faithful friend, and a loving follower of Christ? Or, would he throw all such thoughts to the wind and come down on Onesimus with a heavy hand? Had Philemon understood the infinite display of mercy that was extended toward him in Christ? The offense by Onesimus was actually trivial in comparison to it. How would he respond to the heartfelt pleas of his aged, imprisoned friend?

A variation in source texts arises here. Some leave out the words, “You therefore receive.” The difference is noted between the following two translations:

I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. (ESV)

I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, (NKJV)

This difference is not as great as it seems. The word “receive” is found in verse 17, and so a copyist’s eyes may have seen it there and then looked back down and added into the text. Or, it was a part of the original. However, either way, the intent is the same because of it being included in verse 17.

Thirdly, Paul then says of Onesimus, “that is, my own heart.” Speaking of Onesimus, he now shows the extent of love he has developed for Onesimus. He had become Paul’s son (verse 10), and he was profitable to him (verse 11). And yet, he was willing to send him back to Philemon to face whatever might happen because of his certainty that it was the right thing to do. Onesimus, despite being his very heart, was still the property of Philemon. To not send him back would make Paul a possessor of another’s property.

To send him anywhere else would make him guilty of agreeing to wrongdoing. This is explicitly stated in Ephesians 6:5-8 –

“Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; <sup>6</sup> not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, <sup>7</sup> with goodwill doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men, <sup>8</sup> knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether *he is a slave or free.*”

To write these words in Ephesians, and then to not expect them to be followed through with because Onesimus had become “my own heart” to him, would make Paul (and Onesimus) guilty of violating the very prescriptive words that he had penned elsewhere. Such could not be considered acceptable. A duty to Philemon existed, and it needed to be accomplished.

Now in this verse is seen the reason for all of Paul’s carefully penned words which preceded it.

Life application: Commentaries on this verse, and the verses to come, follow along with the personal views of the commentators on the issue of slavery. Some justify slavery based on Paul’s needing to send Onesimus back to Philemon. Thus, it is argued that slavery is wholly condoned by the Bible. Others argue the exact opposite, claiming that Paul’s words appeal to ending Onesimus’ slavery (as seen in the coming verse) despite the issue of property which needs to be settled first. Neither view is acceptable concerning the issue. The Bible makes no statement either way. It simply accepts slavery as a part of the human condition and leaves it up to the ruling powers to choose how they will handle the matter. It is wholly inappropriate to use the Bible as a tool to promote one’s personal agenda by taking select verses out of their intended context.

*Lord God, Your word is far too precious for us to use it for justifying personal views on issues which we find offensive or that we favor if those verses are taken out of context in the process. Help us to keep your word in its intended context at all times. From there, we can make our own decisions concerning moral issues and work to have them realized in the land (and in the government) in which we live. Help us to never misuse Scripture in the process. Amen.*

**...whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. Philemon 1:13**

The words, “whom I wished to keep,” refer to Onesimus who was Paul’s “own heart.” He had a great desire that he would keep him there with him. However, the verb is in the imperfect tense. As Vincent’s Word Studies notes, “The imperfect tense denotes the desire awakened but arrested.”

In other words, the desire in Paul was stirred to keep Onesimus (as he says) “with me,” but he knew that it would be inappropriate to do so, and so he quieted his desire. It could be translated more understandably as “whom I was wishing to keep with me.” He then explains the reason for it by saying, “that on your behalf he might minister to me.”

The Greek more literally reads, “in your behalf.” In other words, he is hinting that if Philemon were there in person, he would want to tend to Paul in the manner that Onesimus also would have tended to him. As Onesimus was Philemon’s slave, even if he didn’t minister to Paul directly, he would have been happy to appoint Onesimus to fill that role.

Paul is tactfully saying that in returning Onesimus to Philemon, he was doing it out of what was appropriate, even though having him stay would have been something Philemon would have agreed to anyway. He is making it more and more impossible for Philemon to turn down the request which he will make in the verses ahead. And this is especially true because the ministering on Philemon’s behalf for Paul was because he was in “chains for the gospel.”

Paul was a prisoner because of his proclamation of the gospel. It is the gospel which Paul preached to Philemon, and to which Philemon responded. How could he then turn down the request Paul will make when it is exactly the same need that he once had, and which was filled in Paul’s sharing with him the good news? Every single word, including its tense, is being used to relay to Philemon the importance of the matter to Paul, and each word is given to convince him that no other option would be acceptable than the granting of the request which Paul will eventually make.

Life application: There are things that we may desire, but which we are not permitted to have. Paul’s words show us that even though he knew that Philemon would certainly grant what he wished, he could not act on that knowledge without going through the proper process of allowing Philemon to actually make the final decision. In other words, the end does not justify the means. We cannot say, “I knew what the outcome would be,

and so I skipped to the end and avoided all the unnecessary steps to save time.” In the end, we are not God, and we may actually have not thought of every possible option. We must do what is right each step of the way.

*Lord God, the Bible shows us time and time again that the end does not justify the means. We must follow the proper path in whatever thing we do in order to get to the end of the matter. This can be especially hard when following that path may not get us to the end we feel is best. But this is life, and it is You who have set the moments of our existence. Help us then to live in Your will always, no matter where the proper path takes us. Amen.*

**But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.** Philemon 1:14

Paul’s words of the previous verse said that he “wished to keep” Onesimus with him. He then said that this was so that he could minister to Paul on Philemon’s behalf. He was writing as if Philemon’s help was to be conducted through Onesimus. He now says, “But without your consent.”

Obviously, Philemon would not be help Paul if he didn’t consent to helping him. Therefore, he couldn’t claim Philemon’s help without consent. And so without this consent, he says, “I wanted to do nothing.” In the previous verse, the tense of the verb “I wished” was imperfect. That now changes to “I wanted” in the aorist tense. In essence, he was first saying, “I was wishing.” Now he is saying, “I am finally determined.” One could think of him saying, “I had really hoped to keep him with me, but I firmly decide that he must be sent back.” There is a subtle plea for mercy, and then there is the acknowledgment that he must do what is right in order to allow the plea to be granted.

Imagine someone (Mark) having \$50.00 that belonged to someone else (Gordon). Mark may need \$20.00 for lunch. He could say, “Gordon wouldn’t mind me spending \$20.00 for lunch.” Further, Gordon owes Mark a giant debt of another kind. What an incentive to help himself to the small amount of \$20.00!

As noted in the previous verse, it may be true that Gordon wouldn’t mind Mark taking the money, but there may be more involved than just whether Gordon minded or not. He may need all \$50.00 to pay his car registration. To go spending that money, without specific approval, would be wrong. Further, even if Gordon didn’t mind, Mark’s spending the money without Gordon’s approving it in advance would then deprive Gordon of his right to bless his not-so-clearly thinking friend.

This is akin to what Paul is saying now. “I know that you would be willing to minister to me, and that you would be willing to do so through Onesimus, but I also know that without your consent, it would be inappropriate for me to keep him.” Paul next relays to Philemon exactly what should be relayed from Mark to Gordon by saying, “that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.”

Paul is doing what is right in all ways with this matter, and yet he is doing it in such a way that it would be the epitome of ingratitude for Philemon to take any other course of action than to respond favorably to Paul’s request. It is a masterful way of having the matter settled in his favor, or showing the true nature of Philemon in the process. Paul is allowing Philemon to be gracious to Paul while still directing him to do the right thing. This is actually similar to how he handled the matter of collection from the church in Corinth for the saints in Jerusalem in 2 Corinthians 9:1-5.

Life application: Using tact is always a good way of leading people to make the right decisions while allowing them the dignity of not looking bad in the process. It is a skill which must be developed, and it should be carefully applied in sensitive matters. Paul was a master at it, and his example will serve us well in related matters, if we will simply take advantage of it.

*Lord God, grant us the wisdom to be tactful in how we conduct our affairs with others. Feelings can easily be hurt over what we might think of as minor issues. And so be with us as we interact with others, knowing that we also desire the same respect and care from them over matters which concern us. And because Your word shows us examples of how to conduct ourselves in such ways, grant us the wisdom to read that precious gift daily. To Your glory. Amen.*

**For perhaps he departed for a while for this *purpose*, that you might receive him forever, Philemon 1:15**

Paul now sums up his thoughts of verses 12-14, as is indicated by the word “For.” He is making a summary statement as to why he is sending Onesimus back, including a possible reason why things turned out as they had. This is indicated by the word *tacha*, translated as “perhaps.”

The word’s meaning is “quickly,” and thus it is used in the sense of “quick to assume as true.” Paul is making a speculation about why things turned out as they did concerning Philemon, Onesimus, and himself. He knows it is not mere chance, but he also cannot speak for God as to why things occurred as they did without God specifically revealing

the matter to him. And so to avoid claiming something as God's actual intent without knowing what the actual intent was, he simply speculates. And the speculation is based on the separation which occurred between Philemon and Onesimus.

The words, "he departed," fail to convey Paul's masterful use of the language employed here. The word is in the passive voice, not the active. First, he doesn't say, "ran away." This would have reopened a wound which he has spent many verses trying to heal. To say he ran away would simply bring back to memory the need for punishment of his disobedient slave. Everything said thus far would be overshadowed by the act of disloyalty perpetrated against him. He also doesn't say "departed," which would indicate an active leaving for whatever reason – be it to escape permanently, or to take off for a summer to join the circus. Rather, the passive voice should be translated as, "was parted." This then fits like a glove over the word "perhaps," uniting them into a combined thought concerning the guiding hand of God.

God was still behind what occurred. Even if it was active on Onesimus' part, it was still passively directed by God. This then would correspond to the similar account of what occurred between Joseph and his brothers. They actively cast him into the pit, and they actively sold him off to slavery, but Joseph confirms that God was in the background, directing the events for a greater purpose –

"But now, do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life." Genesis 45:5

Next, Paul notes that this parting was "for a while." The Greek reads, "for an hour." It was both a finite amount of time, and a short one at that. If there was a parting, the time was well used in meeting a set, determined purpose. Philemon could argue over a long separation, filled with exotic travels and interesting stories, but how could he not see that such a short separation, filled with such obvious, carefully orchestrated, and specific events was intended to reveal the behind-the-scenes workings of God? In this, he could not argue that he was truly deprived of his property in an unnecessary way.

Understanding Paul's intent of these words, he next says that all of it was "for this *purpose*..." It is an introductory statement leading to his climatic conclusion which is, "that you might receive him forever."

He said that they "were parted." There was intent and purpose in what occurred, and there was an end to that parting, as is evidenced by Onesimus standing there awaiting Philemon's completion of reading Paul's letter. Now, instead of a parting there is

receiving. In the parting there was perceived loss. However, in his return there is gain. The Greek word Paul uses here, *apechó*, signifies “to have by separating from.” In other words, by letting go of one thing, you are able to possess another. It is used at times to signify “receiving payment.” Someone lets go of their time in employment in order to receive payment in return.

Therefore, Paul is saying that Onesimus was parted from Philemon so that Philemon could receive Onesimus in a new way. The parting was temporary (for an hour), but now the return can be “forever.” The word Paul chooses, *aiónios*, is consistently translated as “eternal.” There was the breaking of a lesser-quality human bond, and there is now new gain in an eternal one. The spiritual has replaced the carnal. This is not speculation on Paul’s part. Even if the purpose of God for the separation was not fully known, the result of that separation is. Onesimus has become a believer, and so – by default – there is now a new relationship between him and Philemon which exists. It will now be up to Philemon to decide which relationship is of the highest value to him.

Life application: Paul would not claim inspiration in what occurred when it was not specifically granted to him. He, an apostle of Jesus Christ, was denied the full revelation of events which specifically pertained to him and to two of his brothers in Christ. What an absolute tragedy that people believe the lies of preachers and other supposed “holy men of God” who continually make claims concerning God’s purposes in things they have no idea about. The very best thing you can do is run from someone who claims they have a word from the Lord or a special insight into what God intends – be it prophecy (the rapture is next week!) or life guidance (give, and your breakthrough is just ahead!). Stand on the word of God alone, and know that not everything that occurs will be explained to us in this present life.

*Lord God, help us to be wise and discerning concerning people who claim to have “a word” from You. It is true that we have “the word” from You in the Holy Bible. That is sufficient. Those who go beyond this are showing their true nature; a nature we should quickly walk away from. Help us to be sound in our theology, reasonable in what we believe, and not duped by those who falsely claim that they have special revelation from You apart from Scripture. Amen.*

**...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. Philemon 1:16**

The reason that Paul alluded to in the previous verse as to why Onesimus may have departed from Philemon for a while is now revealed. Paul believes that it may be that



the Lord was behind the scenes, directing the events, so that Philemon might receive him “no longer as a slave but more than a slave.” This is now truly the first time that the status of Onesimus, in relation to Philemon, has been revealed.

Until this point, it was really unknown what their relationship to one another was. But now, we find that Onesimus was Philemon’s slave. And yet, Onesimus had obviously run away from him. This wasn’t like someone not showing up for work in today’s world. It is similar to a military man going AWOL from his post. This was a direct crime against his master.

If one was reading this letter for the first time, they would truly understand the extreme care that Paul has taken to ensure every word was meticulously chosen and written out. The life of Onesimus could be in jeopardy, depending on the reaction of Philemon. But Paul appeals to him to receive him not merely as a slave, but ever more closely as “a beloved brother.” The words, “no longer,” are intended to direct Philemon’s heart away from the master/slave relationship and to have him look at the union of fellowship which has come about because of a third party who intervened in both of their lives, the true Master of both of them.

A new relationship exists between the two because of the new-found faith of Onesimus. Yes, he was a slave to Philemon, but he was now a brother in Christ. Paul implores him to receive him as such. He then increases the hope of such a reception by saying, “especially to me.”

Paul had a new brother in Christ, one he had come to love as a son (verse 9). He was asking for that to be considered. It was Philemon’s right to act as he chose towards his property, but it was his duty as a Christian to consider Paul’s feelings and needs as well. And so the appeal by Paul would be hard to turn down. What Christ had done in both of their lives necessitated them to consider one another’s needs, hopes, and feelings. However, Paul doesn’t stop there. He then adds on another thought for Philemon to consider by saying, “but how much more to you.”

Paul’s appeal is actually of less weight than what Philemon should consider in doing right towards Onesimus. There was already a set relationship between the two. It is almost impossible to find any close relationship which has not been strained at times. But those that are based within the home are normally overlooked in a different way than those outside the home. Further, Onesimus was willing to voluntarily come back to Philemon, carrying the very letter that Paul wrote in order to face whatever decision was rendered. And even more, in coming back, he would be far less likely to repeat such

disobedience in the future, having learned that his rebellion was a cause of real trouble for any and all who were touched by it. Unlike a person returned by force, he was willing to return on his own, thus showing that he understood the seriousness of his actions and a willingness to not repeat them.

Philemon was being asked to consider this and apply these things from both a human and a divine perspective. As Paul says it, “both in the flesh and in the Lord.” In the flesh, refers to Philemon’s human side. He had gained a brother in Christ, but that still involves a human element. We all deal with other Christians from our human perspective. The dynamic changes when another comes to Christ, but everything about who we are, and who they are, remains in a physical state. Philemon could expect a better worker. Onesimus could hope for a more accepting master.

And both of them would also have to consider their state “in the Lord.” How one perceives the grace and mercy that has been bestowed on himself is an indication of how he will then pass those same benefits on to others. As Jesus Himself said, “...to whom little is forgiven, *the same* loves little” (Luke 7:47). Both Philemon and Onesimus had been forgiven much in Christ. If Philemon forgave Onesimus’s minor offense against him because of Christ, Onesimus would go to great lengths to be the best worker – slave or free – that he could be in the future.

Finally, like an earlier verse, this verse has been used to speak against slavery. Commentators have attempted to show that because of the new relationship between them in Christ, slavery is entirely unacceptable. No such thought is on Paul’s mind. He has elsewhere told both bondservants and masters to handle the relationship properly, not to end it (see Ephesians 6:5-9). He didn’t tell them that the relationship was wrong. Instead, he told them how to correctly handle it.

Today, the relationship is changed one from bonded slavery to employers and employees, but it is actually similar in how the relationships are handled. To use such faulty logic concerning what is wholly acceptable, both in a given society and within the pages of Scripture, will eventually lead to even nuttier ideas, such as socialism and communism. Societies choose how to handle earthly relationships, but the common and decent treatment of others, regardless of the type of relationship, is outlined in the pages of Scripture.

Life application: Keep all things in context, and do not insert personal biases or presuppositions into Scripture. Let the word speak for itself. If someone is opposed to a

social issue, such as slavery, they are to make their case apart from the Bible if the Bible is silent, or neutral, on that issue.

*Lord God, we come before You to offer our gratitude and praise for what You have done for us. Regardless of our station in life. Whether rich or poor, slave or free, we have all of the riches of eternity before us, and our chains of sin have been broken; we are free. May we now live out our lives always in anticipation of the wonder and blessing which lies ahead. In doing this, we will always be filled with gratefulness and praise for what You have done! Amen.*

**If then you count me as a partner, receive him as *you would* me.** Philemon 1:17

Paul has just asked Philemon in the previous verse to receive Onesimus “no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother.” He then gave the parameters of that brotherly status with the words, “especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.”

He has established the parameters then by asking Philemon to reckon Onesimus as a brother to Paul, and even more than as a brother of his own. Paul had already identified Philemon as a “brother” in verse 7. Thus, he is asking that the same relationship between him and Philemon be understood as existing between the three of them (inclusive of Onesimus) now.

With that understanding, he now pens a word carefully chosen to speak of the relationship between himself and Philemon, *koinónos*. It is one who participates mutually and belongs equally in a fellowship. Thus, he is a “joint-participant.” And so, Paul’s words could be paraphrased, “If then you count me as a joint-participant in fellowship.” They are brothers in Christ, but to what extent? Paul is asking that Philemon not only consider their fraternal bond *because of* Christ, but their mutual partnership *in* Christ. What is the difference? A good example of one who is a brother, but who is not on a mutual level is found in 2 Thessalonians 3:14, 15 –

“And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. <sup>15</sup> Yet do not count *him* as an enemy, but admonish *him* as a brother.”

Clearly, Paul makes a distinction between one who is a brother in fellowship and one who is not in fellowship. Paul is asking for Philemon to count him as one in fellowship. He then explains the way that he can express this special bond by saying, “receive him as

*you would me.” He elevates Philemon’s treatment of Onesimus to the same treatment as he would give to Paul himself. In such an act by Philemon, Paul would know that their fellowship was mutual, grounded, and truly directed to the same great goals within the church.*

Life application: How far are you willing to go to prove the depth of your fellowship with another. Onesimus has committed a grievous offense against Philemon, but Paul is asking that it be forgiven entirely. Are we willing to act in the same manner for the sake of Christian fellowship? Let us consider the state we were in before coming to Christ, and then let us consider the great forgiveness we have received in Him. From there, we can then more readily see that whatever we forgive of others in Christ is truly nothing in comparison to what we have received.

*Great, glorious, and gracious heavenly Father! We thank You for the infinite forgiveness which was granted to us through the giving of Your Son. In Him, a debt which could never be repaid by us was swept away completely. Now, give us willing hearts to act in a similar manner when lesser, earthly offenses are brought against us. When we are asked to forgive, help us to not withhold that which is requested. In this, we can reflect You in our actions, and so help us to do so. Amen.*

**But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. Philemon 1:18**

Paul, now speaking of Onesimus, says, “But if he has wronged you.” Philemon, even after all of the words of Paul requesting mercy upon himself, and also of restoration (implying leniency) upon Onesimus, knows that Philemon may feel that a debt is owed because of what Onesimus has done. Onesimus may have failed to perform certain jobs before running away, costing Philemon money. Even if not, Onesimus had escaped which may have caused a search to be made. Notices may have been sent out identifying Onesimus. In this, there may have been some sort of expenses.

What is important to understand though, is that Paul doesn’t actually say that Onesimus owed anything. He simply raises the matter, preempting any later call for recompense to be made. Paul, however, writes the issue of having done wrong in the indicative mood. This may imply that the hypothetical supposition is actually a certain fact. Paul is tactfully and carefully choosing his words to alleviate any greater feelings of injury to Philemon while still acknowledging that he very well may have been wronged.

At this point, Philemon could get the letter, look at Onesimus standing there, and say, “For Paul’s sake, I am forgiving you and granting you your freedom, but before that

happens, you owe me for what you cost me.” By Paul stating in advance that Onesimus may have wronged him, he is letting it be known that he has already considered this fact as well. With this in mind, he then says, “or owes you anything.”

This would then cover any perceived debt owed by Onesimus. Even if he hadn't stole anything, his failure to work before, or during, his absence could be considered a chargeable loss. Paul has preempted frustration building up in Philemon by noting any such perceived loss now. Instead of feeling that he is on the losing end of Paul's heartfelt request, Paul then says, “put that on my account.”

Paul's choice of wording here is *ellogéō*. It is a word found only here and in Romans 5:13, and it signifies imputation. In essence, he is saying that if Onesimus has done wrong, Paul desired that the debt be imputed to him and that Onesimus would be found not guilty of any chargeable offense. There could be no perceived loss if Paul was willing to ensure that any such loss was covered. Paul is willing to pay a debt he did not owe in order to keep Onesimus from being obligated to a debt he had no way of paying.

Life application: There are times when people are simply unable to pay their debts. It is at these times that we should consider helping them out, if at all possible. However, we need to be wise in this matter. The book of Proverbs gives instances when it is unwise to be surety for another (one example is Proverbs 17:18). Many things must be taken into consideration before we act, but there are certainly times when we should act. Be wise, but be willing to give as the situation dictates.

*Lord God, help us to be wise when we are asked to help others out. There are some people who have needs, but who have not been responsible with their lives, leading to those needs. There are others who have been gracious, prudent, hard-working, and yet they have come upon hard times. Help us to be wise and discerning about these things. It is sure that Your word gives us many examples to guide us, and so help us to apply its precepts carefully at all times. Yes, help us in this, O God! Amen.*

**I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay—not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides.** Philemon 1:19

Paul's previous words were, “...if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account.” The words he now writes become important then because he would be bound by his words. In saying, “I, Paul, am writing with my own hand,” it is not as if a scribe had accidentally written something that Paul may have considered and then rejected. Rather, his hand wrote the words, ensuring that Philemon would know his sincerity.

A long-debated question is whether Paul wrote the entire letter himself, or if he took the pen from a scribe at this point and finished the letter from here on. We can speculate on the matter, but in the end, it is unknown. Either way, he personally wrote this portion, and it became his signature of approval for the entire letter. If the entire letter was written by him, it would be an unusual occurrence, and a note of the most tender affection.

After acknowledging his guarantee, he then says, “I will repay.” The word “I” is emphatic. This is the purpose of noting he had written the words with his own hand. If Philemon were to incur any losses from Onesimus’ actions, he knew that Paul would ensure he was paid back. What this means is that even in prison, Paul was able to guarantee the debt was paid. Whether he had saved money over the years, or whether he knew that gifts of support were forthcoming that he could use, he was not destitute, and Philemon would have no fear that there would be loss on his part.

Having now made the guarantee, Paul gives an almost ironic set of words for Philemon to consider by saying, “not to mention to you that you owe me.” In essence, Paul has rightfully agreed to pay whatever debt was owed because of Onesimus, but Philemon would be wrong in even considering requesting such payment. There was a debt still outstanding from Philemon towards Paul which was greater than any debt he incurred from the situation with Onesimus. Whereas Paul might owe a set amount of money to correct Philemon’s loss, Paul tells Philemon “that you owe me even your own self besides.”

Paul had led Philemon to Christ. That is something that could never be repaid. It held eternal significance. The monetary loss incurred by Onesimus was a temporary, earthy debt. There was no comparison between the two. And so Paul is allowing the greater debt to be canceled when Philemon releases the lesser debt. It really is a touching note when considered properly.

Life application: Have you taken the time to thank the person who led you to Christ, or the one who has helped you develop in Christ? There are debts and then there are debts. The debt of gratitude for spiritual matters far outweighs, and will eternally outlast, the temporary debts of this life. Be sure to let those who have spiritually ministered to you know of your appreciation for their willingness to open their mouths and speak the words of life.

*Lord God, there was a time when we were far from You. But then someone came into our lives and spoke the words of life that led us to the foot of the cross. Our eternal destinies*

*were changed, our souls were saved, and life took on an entirely new meaning. Help us to be appreciative of those who are willing to share this glorious message, and also help us to be willing sharers of it as well. To Your glory we pray. Amen.*

**Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.**

Philemon 1:20

The translation here, following the KJV, misses the pun which Paul is making. The Greek literally reads, “Yes, brother, from you may I have profit in *the* Lord.” The word he uses, rightly translated as “may have profit,” is *oninémi*. It is found only this once in the Bible, and it signifies to derive “benefit,” or “profit.” The similarity of the word to Onesimus is not to be missed. Paul is making a confirmatory statement as indicated by the word “Yes.” He then makes it an endearing statement by again stating the word “brother.” And then from that, he makes his verbal pun by saying, “let me have profit from you.”

He is asking for a type of gain from the hand of Philemon, and that gain is the pardon and release of his profitable son in the faith Onesimus, or Profit. The words are as carefully written now as they were when he was preparing to state what was on his mind in the earlier verses. And to show the depth of his request, he adds in, “in the Lord.” In essence, he is saying that Philemon’s approval of Paul’s request would indicate that the Lord’s hand was, in fact, involved in everything that has happened. It would then confirm the Lord’s presence as Paul had surmised was the case in verse 15 with the words, “For perhaps.”

From there, Paul restates his desires with the words, “refresh my heart in the Lord.” The word translated here as “heart” signifies the inward parts; the internal organs. It thus refers to the deep-seated, visceral feelings of a person. Paul is looking to have the aching in his heart, the growling pains of his stomach, and the empty feeling which is deep inside of him refreshed by Philemon’s granting of his request.

As a side note, some manuscripts say in this second clause, “in Christ,” instead of “in the Lord.” As Christ is the Lord, nothing doctrinal is missing. Either way, he is placing the entire request, including the easing of his heart, in the context of being united together with Philemon in Christ the Lord.

Life application: Sticking to one translation of the Bible is not a wise way of pursuing the word of the Lord. If one doesn’t know the original languages, reading multiple versions, and then studying why there are differences between them, will greatly help the reader learn what is actually being said. For example, the use of irony is often missed by one

translation, but brought out well in another. Be a wise student of Scripture and read the Bible as often as you can, and in a multitude of translations.

*Lord God, thank You for the many varied translations of the Bible that You have granted to us through the hard work of many scholarly teams. We now have a much rounder idea of what is actually said in Your word by comparing various translations with the originals that are also available to us. What a blessed generation we are. Help us not to squander the great blessing of such marvelous access to Your word. Our lives are brief. May we use our time wisely in the pursuit of Your superior word! Amen.*

**Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.** Philemon 1:21

Paul has made several requests, specifically stating in verse 8, that he might have been bold and commanded what is fitting, but instead, he appealed for love's sake. It is as obvious as the nose on a person's face that Paul is asking for Onesimus to be freed from his slavery, but yet he never states this. He only said that he would pay any debts (v. 19) and that he desired Onesimus to minister to him (verses 13 & 14).

It is these things that are referred to with the words, "Having confidence in your obedience." Paul has made a set of requests, and he is sure that Philemon will comply with those requests. They are not commands, but they will answer the heartfelt desires of Paul when they are met by his obedient son. This is why he wrote what he had thus far. But then Paul adds on his next words; words which can only be seen as a desire for Onesimus' complete release from slavery. This is what Paul is seeking in writing, "knowing that you will do even more than I say."

What more could he do? The answer is threefold. First, he could forgive Onesimus completely, including any outstanding debts, and even not charging Paul for them. Secondly, he could grant Onesimus freedom from his slavery. And thirdly, he could then send him to Paul to minister to him. This is what would show a true and complete granting of Paul's implicit requests, along with his explicit ones. Paul has said as much about slaves elsewhere, telling them that they are to serve faithfully as slaves, but if they can be made free, to accept that freedom (1 Corinthians 7:21). Paul wants this for Onesimus, and he is hoping for it from Philemon.

Life application: As has been noted in other verses of the book of Philemon, Paul is not speaking against the practice of slavery. The verses here and elsewhere cannot be used to say the practice is right or wrong. It is explicitly allowed in both testaments of the



Bible. It may be true that it is not what was originally intended for man, but with the fall came many things we must accept as a part of the fallen world. In the case of Onesimus, Paul would have him freed because of his status as a Christian, and his love for both the master and the slave. The issue does not go beyond this. Be careful to not force into Scripture what Scripture does not say.

*Lord God! Praises to You for what You have done for Your redeemed. We may be in unhappy situations in this life. We may have an unhappy marriage, we may be bound to a job which is highly displeasing, and some of Your people may be in bondage of one type or another, having lost all worldly freedom. But in Christ, we are the freest beings of all. We know that these trials and troubles are temporary, and so we can endure through them in the sure hope of something much better yet ahead for us. Thank You for this wonderful assurance! Amen.*

**But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.** Philemon 1:22

Paul has completed his words of petition concerning Onesimus, and so he now changes the direction of his letter using the Greek word *homa*, translated here as “But, meanwhile.” It is word giving the sense of, “at the same time.” He is assuming that his request concerning Onesimus will be acted on, and so he asks that while that is occurring Philemon will “also prepare a guest room for me.”

Translating this as “guest room” is too familiar for Paul’s intent. A “guest room” implies a room in one’s own house, whereas the Greek word simply means “hospitality,” or “a lodging.” The only other time it is used is in Acts 28:23 while speaking of Paul’s lodging while he was awaiting trial. Paul is asking that accommodations be made by Philemon (the verb is singular), probably hoping that they will be at Philemon’s house, but he tactfully refrains from asking for this, demonstrating his usual courtesy of not being a burden on another.

Paul is in prison at this time, and yet he asks for this to be done anyway, next giving the reason with the words, “for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.” Here the words are in the plural. It is not just Philemon, but all mentioned in verse 2 (including the church) that he knew were praying for him. He is certain that because of their prayers he will be released and able to return to see them. The word translated as “I shall be granted” indicates “a favor.” In other words, God would have Paul released as a favor through their prayers.

This statement is, of course, another reason why Philemon would need to be especially considerate of how he handled the situation with Onesimus. Paul would be back, and the response to his letter's request would be evident the moment he arrived. How would Philemon have acted upon his heartfelt words? He certainly had other places to visit, and other churches to minister to, but he would be coming to this one when he was released. Though the subject of Onesimus has ended in the letter, it is still on prominent display in how the letter would be responded to.

Life application: How do you act towards others in Christ when you have a need? Paul was careful to not ask for a room in Philemon's house. He simply asked for help finding lodging. The amount we impose on others is often an indicator of our respect for their personal time and capabilities. The less we ask, while still asking some small thing, shows that we respect them enough to ask for help, but care about them enough to not be overburdensome on them.

*Lord God, give us wisdom in how we deal with others. Help us to evaluate their situations, and not demand too much of them time-wise, or favor-wise. Some people have lots of time, and we can chat with them on the phone for an hour. Some lead very busy lives and we should keep our talks short. The same is true with all aspects of relying on others. Help us to be aware of their constraints before we impose too heavily upon them. But in all our relationships, let us be thankful that they exist. Close friends are a true blessing from you! Amen.*

### **Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, Philemon 1:23**

Paul now begins his final words to Philemon. He starts with greetings from five individuals. The first is found in this verse, Epaphras. This individual is mentioned in Colossians 1:7 & 4:12. In Colossians, he is called by Paul, "our dear fellow servant." He is also noted there as a being from Colossae and "a bondservant of Christ." Some tie him in with Epaphroditus who was seen in the letter to the Philippians. Epaphras is merely a shortened form of the same name, and so it is possible. However, as he is from Colossae, this is unlikely because Epaphroditus was elsewhere said to be from Philippi.

Here, Paul calls him, "my fellow prisoner." This would be the reason for naming him first. As both were in prison, it would show a special bond existed. However, it is debated as to whether his bondage was literal or spiritual. It could be that he voluntarily shared in Paul's confinement in order to assist him. Or, it could be that he was temporarily confined because his relations with Paul brought him under suspicion of the empire.

Whatever is specifically meant by the term, he is a fellow prisoner “in Christ Jesus.” The meaning of this is obvious. Regardless of his status as a prisoner, it is because of his faith in Christ that he is in this state. There with Paul, he also sends his greetings on to Philemon.

Life application: Paul was in prison, others with Paul were made prisoners, and countless other souls in Christian history have been imprisoned (and worse) for their faith. If such treatment comes upon us in the future, we need to understand that there is no shame in this. It is better to be in chains as a Christian than it is to deny Christ and walk about in earthly freedom.

*Lord God, it's difficult to think of how many people have been willing to give up their freedom, and even give up their lives, for the exalted name of Jesus. And yet these countless souls did just that. They realized that the glory ahead far outweighs any temporary gain in this fallen world. Should such a time come in our own lives, help us to be willing to follow in that same mindset. Give us strength in this, O God. Amen.*

**...as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers.** Philemon 1:24

This verse, along with verse 10 (which mentions Onesimus), place the writing of Philemon at close to the same time as the writing of the book of Colossians. Here is what it says in Colossians 4 –

Tychicus, a beloved brother, faithful minister, and fellow servant in the Lord, will tell you all the news about me. <sup>8</sup>I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that he may know your circumstances and comfort your hearts, <sup>9</sup>with Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is *one* of you. They will make known to you all things which *are happening* here.

<sup>10</sup>Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, with Mark the cousin of Barnabas (about whom you received instructions: if he comes to you, welcome him), <sup>11</sup>and Jesus who is called Justus. These *are my* only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are of the circumcision; they have proved to be a comfort to me.

<sup>12</sup>Epaphras, who is *one* of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. <sup>13</sup>For I bear him witness that he has a great zeal for you, and those who are in Laodicea, and those in Hierapolis. <sup>14</sup>Luke the beloved physician and Demas greet you. <sup>15</sup>Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea, and Nymphas and the church that *is* in his house.

Later in Colossians 4:17, Paul addresses Archippus, who is still in Colossae, and who is also an addressee in this letter to Philemon (verse 2). It can be inferred then that the timing is the same, and the letters were probably sent at or near the same time.

“Mark” is John Mark who went along with Paul and Barnabas on a missionary journey, but who left that task before it was finished. Because of this, on the next missionary journey, there was a sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas. Barnabas wanted to bring Mark along again. The disagreement was so severe that they split apart, each going his own way. Barnabas took Mark and Paul took Silas, and off they went in different directions. However, Paul had obviously received Mark with an open hand once again and they were there together.

Aristarchus is a fellow Jew who is listed three times in Acts (19:29, 20:4, and 27:2). He is also named in Colossians and here in Philemon. Though a Jew, he was a Macedonian from Thessalonica as well (just as Paul was from Tarsus of Cilicia).

Demas is noted next. Eventually, he will forsake Paul as is recorded in 2 Timothy –

“Be diligent to come to me quickly; <sup>10</sup> for Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed for Thessalonica—Crescens for Galatia, Titus for Dalmatia. <sup>11</sup> Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry.” 2 Timothy 4:9-11

Finally, he mentions “Luke.” This is the same Luke noted in Acts 17:10, and he is recorded as being with Paul in 2 Timothy 4:11. He is a Gentile. He is also a physician, something readily supported by his annotations in both the Gospel of Luke and in the book of Acts. His carefully worded statements demonstrate an observant eye and an understanding of both health and healing issues.

These men are called “my fellow laborers.” They all sent their personal greetings to Philemon, thus adding in one more reason for Philemon to grant Paul’s request. All of them were aware of the situation, they were obviously aware of Paul’s letter and its contents, and they were all friends of Philemon. It would be hard indeed to not approve the request Paul has made without offense to all of them.

Life application: Is holding fast to one’s pride worth losing friends in Christ? Philemon had been offended by the actions of Onesimus, but he was also faced with either forgiving him and doing as Paul requested, or he might lose his Christian brothers in the process. In the end, anything lost through Onesimus’ disobedience was promised to be

restored. The only reason to not approve the request would be pride. Let's hope he did the right thing, and let us also endeavor to do the right thing as well.

*Lord God, the one thing we cling to in this life, and which is the most detrimental of all, is the sin of pride. This is especially true in salvation. We don't want to admit that we are sinners in need of a Savior, that nothing we can do will save us. Instead, we must submit ourselves to the only One who can – Jesus. Help us to put away our pride for salvation, and to keep it away in our salvation. Help us in this, O God. Amen.*

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. Philemon 1:25**

This final greeting is extremely similar to that of the closing of the book of Galatians. The only difference is in Paul's use of the word "brethren" in Galatians. That was explained then as being necessary because, despite the temptations of the Judaizers, Paul still considered them brethren and wanted that point highlighted, even at the very last moment of his direct and purposeful epistle. The inclusion of the word here is unnecessary. Paul has already called Philemon "brother" twice. Those also greeted in the epistle were in good standing with him, and so he skips the term. Instead, he simply speaks to all of them collectively with a plural pronoun.

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ" is one of the greatest concepts found in the Bible. Man is fallen and man needs grace for his salvation and for his continued walk with the Lord. Paul asks for this marvelous blessing to be bestowed upon Philemon and those with him. In this petition, it is understood that they are undeserving of it. One cannot merit grace. Therefore, the petition is one of hope that this unmerited favor "of the Lord Jesus Christ" will continue to be lavished upon them – sinners already saved by that same grace.

This grace, being unmerited, is especially highlighted here for them to consider their position before God. They have been granted grace in the spiritual renewal found in Christ, and from the bonds of sin-debt which tied them down, and he is now in the highest hopes that grace will likewise be bestowed upon Onesimus in an earthly way. Paul is reminding them that they stand by grace and that this grace should be with their "spirit." The spirit is the highest part of man. It is the aspect of us which is reconnected to God because of grace, not works.

Man spiritually died when Adam disobeyed God; Jesus Christ regenerates our spirit through His work. Faith in that deed, and faith alone, is what brings this about. Paul asks them to consider this and let this grace continue to be that which guides their spirit. It is

certain that he desires it to be especially directed toward the wayward slave who is standing there awaiting a decision on his fate as Philemon's eyes fall upon the last words of the letter. And with that said to his dear fellow Christians who meet in the house of Philemon, he closes with "Amen." So be it!

In coming to the ending of the letters of Paul which bear his signature, we should stop and be thankful for how God used him to bring us such wonderful epistles of doctrine, instruction, training, and encouragement. He spent his life's energy to the glory of God, understanding the immense debt that he owed, and which had been canceled because of the shed blood of Christ. It is more than fitting then that his final epistle is not one of actual prescriptive doctrine, but one which appeals to the very heart of the gospel in another way. In a chest full of precious jewels, Philemon radiates out its own splendor among them. It shines out prominently as a reminder to each of us that we have received grace and mercy, and so we should also consider bestowing it upon others. Their offense against us is far less than our offense against God. Let us remember this always.

Life application: If you have come to the book of Philemon, after having read it and contemplated it, has it changed your heart towards another who needs your loving grace and tender mercy? At the foot of the cross, the ground is level. We all needed His forgiveness, and we received it. Are you prepared to give it to someone who has offended you far less than you have offended God? Convert your heart of stone into one of tender flesh, look upon the affliction of the one who stands near, and grant them the pardon they need to be restored in their spirit towards you. Let peace and fellowship be seen in you towards others because of the cross of Jesus Christ.

*Lord God, we all have debts owed to us, and debts that we owe. Some are debts which must be paid because of earthly responsibilities. And, some are debts that we can forgive, or ask to be forgiven, because of our position in Christ. Help us to be willing to cancel those debts among our fellow believers that will allow them to more freely live in Your presence, knowing that we have been forgiven so much more because of Jesus. Help us in this, O Lord. Amen.*