

Author: The Apostle Paul

Date and Setting: Philemon is one of Paul's four prison epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians), written in A.D. 60-63, during Paul's first Roman imprisonment. "Because Onesimus accompanied Tychicus, who carried the letter to Colosse, it is evident the two epistles were written at about the same time, probably in the summer of A.D. 62."

Recipient: Philemon was the recipient. Judging by his ownership of slaves and the size of his home (large enough to house the local church referred to in v. 2), Philemon was a wealthy resident of Colosse. Though it is not known when Philemon first heard Paul, evidently Philemon was a convert of the apostle (v. 19 b). It is likely that the two became friends during Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19).¹

Purpose: The occasion for writing is almost identical with the story of the epistle itself. Onesimus, a slave of Philemon, had run away, having evidently robbed his master (Phile. 18). His travels somehow brought him to Rome where, in the providence of God, he came in contact with Paul. Through this contact Paul led Onesimus to know the Savior. Then Onesimus in some way became useful to Paul (vv. 12-13).

But Paul realized that Onesimus had a responsibility to Philemon and should make restitution for his thievery. Thus Paul deemed it right to return Onesimus to Philemon. Tychicus was given the responsibility of carrying Paul's letter from Rome to the Colossians, and Onesimus evidently traveled back with him (Col. 4:7-9).

In this letter to Philemon Paul explained his situation and asked Philemon to treat Onesimus not as a runaway, thieving slave, but now as a beloved brother in Christ (Phile. 15-16 ; cf. Col. 4:9). In so doing, the apostle gave not only some insight into the institution of slavery in the Apostolic Age but also his Christian response to it. The reality of Galatians 3:28 becomes evident here in Philemon: "There is neither . . . slave nor free . . . in Christ Jesus." Paul also gave a brilliant cameo of gospel truth in the words, "Charge that to my account" (Phile. 18 , NASB).²

Key word: forgiveness

Key Verses: 16, 17—"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. If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me."

Christ in Philemon: The forgiveness that the believer finds in Christ is beautifully portrayed by analogy in Philemon. Onesimus, guilty of a great offense (vv. 11, 18), is motivated by Paul's love to intercede on his behalf (vv. 10-17). Paul lays aside his rights (v. 8) and becomes Onesimus' substitute by assuming his debt (vv. 18-19). By Philemon's gracious act, Onesimus is restored and placed in a new relationship (vv. 15-16). In this analogy, we are as Onesimus. Paul's advocacy before Philemon is parallel to Christ's work of mediation before the Father. Onesimus was condemned by law but saved by grace.³

I. The Greeting, (1-3)

1. THE AUTHOR INTRODUCES HIMSELF, (1a)

 **INTERPRETATION:**

¹ Walvoord, John F., Roy B. Zuck, and Dallas Theological Seminary. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*, Phm 1. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985.

² Ibid.

³ Bruce Wilkinson, and Kenneth Boa, *Talk Thru the Bible*, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1983, p. 444.

¹ **Paul**, (the Apostle Paul)

Imagine what Philemon must have thought when he opened this letter and saw it was from Paul. Timothy and Titus were the only other individuals to receive a personal letter from Paul, and none so personal as this. Timothy's and Titus' related much to the church. I am sure a great excitement surged through him as he received an inspired letter from such a good friend and significant person. Paul was the one who confronted him with his sin and need of forgiveness. I am sure Philemon read it at once and more than once. (Pat and Liese from Caleb or Seth—Sandy Stephens from Tim)

1) Paul states his present status, (1a)

Paul, a prisoner (not of Rome, but), **of Christ Jesus**,

Paul was in prison for the cause of Christ and he had no doubts that it was all so the will of Christ.

Paul didn't draw attention to himself, *“Poor me, I'm unjustly imprisoned. Don't you feel badly for me? This is not fair! This is not right! Oh, if I could only be free, like you Philemon.”* No! Paul's theology left no room for a personal independent life from God. He saw it all intertwined in Christ. Paul didn't view his life as being made up of good and bad luck. Paul viewed his entire life as being scripted by a divine Author. He was simply one of the many characters who were written into the drama who played a specific part of the Author's choosing.

What is your view of life?

- Is it being at the right place at the right time—or is it simply recognizing the place where you presently are as being holy ground.
- Does your life view revolve around who you know and what you know—or does it revolve around whose you are and what He knows?
- Is your life view take as much as you can get when you can get it—or is it accepting what you get as it comes to you?

What is your view of life? How do you understand the circumstances you experience? If you don't know and want to know. Ask yourself: “What do I communicate to others about my circumstances by my actions and attitudes?” Next, you have to decide if it is the right view or not and take the necessary steps to correct it if it is not.

2) Paul introduces his associate, (1a)

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy (who was present with Paul when he composed the letter), **our** (meaning yours and my), **brother** (the Greek words for *“our brother”* come from two Greek words which mean *“from the same womb.”* Paul is addressing their mutual relationship one with the other, all being born of God's Spirit through Christ's work on the cross. I believe that this wording is used by Paul in a deliberate way as he will draw Onesimus into this circle of brotherhood in verse 16.)

2. THE AUTHOR ADDRESSES THE RECIPIENTS, (1b-2)

1) Philemon, (1b)

To Philemon (who was the head of the house, probably a man of some prominence, and the owner of Onesimus), **our** (Timothy's and my), **beloved friend** (this was a circle of shared love that again, Paul would try to pull Onesimus into), **and fellow laborer** (in the name of Christ and for the growth of His church. They were beloved friends and also a team in the work of Christ.),

2) Apphia, (2a)

² **to the beloved Apphia** (probably Philemon's wife who was also a believer and in this circle of reciprocal love),

3) Archippus, (2b)

to... Archippus (quite possibly Philemon's son, [cf. v. 2; Col. 4:17]) **our fellow soldier**, (who ministered in Colosse or Laodicea. Being called a "fellow soldier" by Paul was a high compliment as soldiers were well disciplined, always prepared for battle, willing to fight to the death and fully committed. Paul obviously thought very highly of Archippus and his service for the Lord.),

4) The local church, (2c)

and to the church (the local gathering of believers), **in your house**:

Believers meeting in a designated house, or in one another's houses for worship was common until about A.D. 200. During the third century church buildings became the prominent place for public and corporate worship.

There are a couple of reasons that Paul may be addressing the church concerning this matter with Onesimus.

1. Paul may be encouraging Philemon to exercise the same generosity towards Onesimus that he has in allowing his home to be used by the local believers for church.
2. Paul may be encouraging the church to accept Onesimus as a legitimate and beloved member of their own church family. We need to accept those who Christ forgives and accepts.

3. THE AUTHOR GIVES A BLESSING, (3)

1) First we see the substance of his blessing, (3a)

³ **Grace to you** (God's unmerited favor being individuals created in His image and saved through His Son, Jesus Christ), **and peace** (peace with God and thus in their daily life as well—"Grace is the means of salvation, peace its result."),⁴

Of all the blessing Paul could ask God to bestow upon Philemon, his family and the church, what Paul thought would be best was not material things, but God's grace and peace. **Grace** (God's unmerited favor), and **peace** (inner rest and confidence that the world cannot give), are blessings we need all through our lifetime. We need them not only from God for salvation, but we also need them all during our earthly journey, as we make our way to our heavenly home. We continue to sin against our God—so we need His on going grace and mercy. There will be many situations and circumstances in our lifetime that we will not understand and/or that will be beyond our human abilities to get through—so we need His on going grace and mercy.

The winds of hurricanes begin at 74 miles per hour and can reach speeds of 155 miles per hour. Rain, thunder and lightening accompany the vicious winds. Hurricanes can be very relentless in their pounding hour after hour. But there is a fascinating thing about hurricanes, they contain an 'eye' - a place which is calm in its center. Though the winds blow and rage all around the 'eye', it remains a spot of calm. So it is with the Christian. Just as the world rages and pounds away at you and those you love, the Lord is at the center and offers us grace and peace during life's storms. Are you experiencing God's grace and peace in your life? If not...why do you think you are not?

⁴ MacArthur, John. *Philemon*. Phm 1. Chicago: Moody Press, 1996, c1992.

2) We also see here the beneficiaries of his blessing, (3b)

Grace and peace be to “**you**” (not just the super Christians, but to all Christians—the happy and grieving, the strong and weak, the young and the old...all)

3) Next we hear the source of Paul’s blessing, (3c)

Grace and peace be to you **from God our Father** (not our enemy, but our Father—“our” referring to the saved and not the unbelievers), **and the Lord Jesus Christ** (not our Judge, but our Savior).

Mercy’s Free

By faith I view my Saviour dying,
On the tree, On the tree;
To ev’ry nation He is crying,
Look to me, Look to me;
He bids the guilty now draw near,
Repent, believe, dismiss their fear:
Hark, hark what precious words I hear,
Mercy’s free, Mercy’s free.

Did Christ, when I was sin pursuing,
Pity me, Pity me?
And did He snatch my soul from ruin,
Can it be, Can it be?
Oh, yes! He did salvation bring:
He is my Prophet, Priest, and King;
And now my happy soul can sing,
Mercy’s free, Mercy’s free.

Jesus my weary soul refreshes:
Mercy’s free, Mercy’s free,
And every moment Christ is precious
Unto me, Unto me;
None can describe the bliss I prove,
While through this wilderness I rove,
All may enjoy the Saviour’s love,
Mercy’s free, Mercy’s free.

Long as I live, I’ll still be crying,
Mercy’s free, Mercy’s free,
And this shall be my theme in dying,
Mercy’s free, Mercy’s free,

And when the vale of death I’ve passed,
When lodged above the stormy blast,
I’ll sing, while endless ages last,
Mercy’s free, Mercy’s free.⁵

Praise God, for His daily grace, peace and mercy!

⁵ Eckert, Paul. *Steve Green’s MIDI Hymnal* : A Complete Toolkit for Personal Devotions and Corporate Worship. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1998.

II. The giving of thanks, (4-7)

1. THE BASIC PARTICULARS CONCERNING PAUL’S THANKS, (4)

1) The Recipient of Paul’s Thanks, (4a)

⁴ **I thank my God**...⁶

When can you use the possessive “*my*”? When something is real and when it is not only in your possession, but yours to possess by right. Paul did not misuse the term here. God was Paul’s God and Father Their relationship was personal, active, intimate, caring and relational. Is God the Father your God and if He is do you spend quality time with Him?

2) The Extent of Paul’s Thanks, (4b)

⁴ **I thank my God, making mention** (to my God), **of you always**... (whenever I think of you Philemon, I cannot help but thank God for you and lift you up before Him),

3) The Means of Paul’s Thanks, (4c)

⁴ **I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers**, (When I go to God’s throne I take you with me Philemon. You are very much a part of my life and our conversations.)

How often do you thank God for those around you and make them a regular part of your conversations at God’s throne? How often do you let others know that you care enough about them to keep them in habitual prayer?

2. THE STIMULUS BEHIND PAUL’S THANKS, (5)

1) Philemon’s Love Stimulated Paul to Give Thanks, (5a)

⁵ **hearing of your** (agape), **love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints**,

Philemon didn’t open his home for the believers to worship at, just to be nice, for recognition or for a fee. He did it because he loved his Lord as well as the Lord’s children. Philemon’s love was the same as God’s love, agape. His love was one of conscious choice and will. It was a once and for all committed love based upon his decision, not their actions. It was a love that necessitated sacrifice and humility on a daily basis. It was a love that permitted Philemon only so many real choices of action that he could take concerning Onesimus.

There are a lot of positives and negatives to exercising God’s agape love.

Negatives:	Positives:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• You must respond in a loving manner, no matter what one does to you or to anyone else.• You must respond in a loving manner, no matter what one does not do for you, or	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• God affirms the genuineness of our salvational faith in Christ by or sincere love for the brethren.• God provides us with a clear conscience as we obey His command to love one

⁶ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. Jas 1:17

<p>for anyone else</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You must practice agape love no matter how you may feel on any particular day. • You cannot ever change your mind about whether you are going to love an individual or not. • You cannot select which needs you will respond to and which ones you will not. • You will certainly be taken advantage of at times. 	<p>another.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God will give us an heavenly and eternal reward for loving one another. • God's power and character are put on display by our loving one another. • God reveals to the unsaved that we are His disciples by our love for one another. • God the Spirit is not grieved nor quenched.
---	--

The negatives of committing ourselves to agape love, for the most part, revolve around our own personal human feelings, desires, rights, strengths and weaknesses. Whereas the positives, for the most part, revolve around God's will, character, enabling power and glory.

As Paul is pointing out to Philemon, that the love of God that he has committed himself to live by, mandates certain decisions and actions towards Onesimus, so is it for us towards all the Onesimus' in our daily life. We really have no choice to make. God's love has made the choice for us. The only real choice is to follow God's will or not.

Now at the same time, God's love is not wishy-washy it that it mandates that we overlook every wrong a fellow believer does and never confront and/or discipline them. Quite the contrary. We are clearly told that if we live an ungodly life, God will confront us and discipline us if necessary **because He loves us**, (Rev. 3:19).

2) Philemon's Faith Stimulated Paul to Give Thanks, (5b)

⁵ **hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints,** (which now includes Onesimus),

God describes three of the greatest elements of the Christian Faith in 1 Corinthians 13:13.⁷ Do you know what they are? Faith, hope and love. Do you know which is the greatest? Love. Do you know why? Because God says that love never fails nor ceases to exist.⁸ This is in the sense that love never fails to persevere through any situation or dark age. Its evidences will always be able to be found somewhere, through someone, in someway. Love will never cease to exist in any period of time or eternity.

You cannot be a child of God if you don't love the brethren, but if you don't have faith, you cannot please God.⁹ Not only that, but whatever you do not do in faith is sin. Not doing something in faith is to do something contradictory to your convictions, or not in God's strength and for His glory.¹⁰

⁷ And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Co 13:13)

⁸ Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. (1 Co 13:8)

⁹ But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. (Heb 11:6)

¹⁰ Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin. (Ro 14:22-23)

Paul is telling Philemon, that he thanks God everyday for his love and faith towards God, as well as the saints. Paul is telling Philemon here that he knows Philemon's godly love will persevere through this issue with Onesimus and that Philemon will not act contrary to his convictions and sin.

How about you? What would people predict you would do in a difficult situation? What kind of love marks your life? A selfless or a selfish kind of love? Are you known for being faithful to your convictions, uncompromising? Are you known for even having convictions?

3. THE HOPE BEHIND PAUL'S THANKS, (6)

1) The Further Personal Development and Public Display of Philemon's Godly Faith, (6a)

⁶ (By telling Philemon about the prayer of thanksgiving in his heart to God, Paul believed), **that the sharing (koinonia)**—carries two basic meanings ¹ to share in or with, and ² to fellowship with)¹¹, **of your faith** (in Christ, and/or towards the saints, Philemon), **may become effective** (*lit., powerful*; that your faith may be powerfully demonstrated again),...

A crook perks up and gets all excited about seeing the opportunity to take advantage of someone or a situation. Paul perked up and got all excited as he saw an opportunity for Philemon to take advantage of. The crook's hopeful prize is of a selfish nature that he hopes to gain for himself. Paul's hopeful prize is of a selfless nature, that Philemon will not miss out on glorifying God through.

- Believers are saved for good works, (Eph. 2:10)
- Believers are to abound in every good work, (2 Cor. 9:8)
- Believers are to be fruitful in every good work, (Col. 1:10)
- Believers are thoroughly equipped for every good work, (2 Tim. 3:7)
- Believers are zealous of good works, (Titus 2:14)
- Believers are saved for good works, (Eph. 2:10)
- Believers are saved for good works, (Eph. 2:10)
- Believers good works are spiritual sacrifices, (Heb. 13:16)

2) The Further Personal Development and Public Display of Philemon's Godly Knowledge, (6b)

⁶ **that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of** (realizing or admitting that), **every good thing which is in you** (meaning the good that is in Philemon and the good that Philemon has performed is), **in Christ Jesus**, (it is by Christ's power and for His glory that it was done).

Paul is appealing to Philemon to not waste this God given gift of enablement and opportunity. Paul is appealing to Philemon to think this situation through theologically rather than from a purely personal and human perspective. Paul is trying to get Philemon to read between the lines rather than just the obvious print. Paul is saying to Philemon, "Think about this. Do you think Onesimus' running away, bumping into me, being drawn by God to salvation, now being willing to repent of his sin and return to you is all just coincidence?! Philemon, this is the direct result of the hand of God and there is yet more to be accomplished to God's glory and for the further edification of the saints. Philemon, I've done what I can and now you must

¹¹ Based on the two basic meaning of Koinonia, Paul could be saying any one or combination of things, such as:

1. "your fellowship with us in our common faith"
2. "your sharing of the faith with others"
3. "your fellowship which binds you to us by means of the faith"
4. "your sharing of benevolence, by means of your faith" (vs., 5,7)

do what you can. Further demonstrate the power of your faith in our God by realizing, admitting that you must forgive Onesimus.”

So must we think theologically, read between the lines in all of our situations and circumstances, in order that we may further demonstrate the power of our faith to God’s glory, the edification of the saints and hopefully as well, that the lost will ask questions about God.

Every time we evidence our faith in a time of difficulty, or fear, or trial, or during a period of hard waiting, whatever it may be, whenever we demonstrate our faith through it, our God is glorified and the saints are benefited in some way. Paul’s prayer is that Philemon with glorify God and bless the saints by forgiving Philemon. I am sure that the news of Onesimus running away was known by the general unbelievers in the local community as well. The unbelievers would be watching to see what Philemon’s response to Onesimus’ return would be as well. The opportunity is there, but will Philemon make the right choices?

4. THE CONFIDENCE BEHIND PAUL’S THANKS, (7)

⁷ **For** (referring back to verse 4, “*I thank my God...*” For), **we have great joy**¹² (pleasure, delight), **and consolation** (comfort, relief), **in your** (agape), **love, because the hearts**¹³ (the tremendous emotional agony within the hearts), **of the saints** (fellow believers), **have been refreshed** (have been put to rest, quieted, stilled), **by you, brother**, (your gracious attitude and actions has brought tremendous joy and peace to those who know you and have been ministered to by you.

A young man named Eddie became tired of life and decided to leap from a bridge into a turbulent river. Jim, a total stranger, saw Eddie being swept downstream and plunged into the water in an effort to save him. Eddie, a good swimmer, noticed the man floundering desperately in the strong current and knew that without his help he would drown. Something stirred within him. With all of his strength, Eddie swam over to the man and rescued him. Saving that stranger, who had attempted to save him, brought new hope and meaning to Eddie’s life.

We as Christians can become so immersed in our own troubles that we think only of ourselves, and all sorts of negative thoughts flood our soul. Many times in that state of mind, we can only see what others could do for us, not what we could do for them.

Philemon had trained his eyes to see though and beyond his own troubles and into the pain and anguish of others. He was known as the man who could cause the sun to shine again in a world of darkness. Philemon was known as a man who could bring the crashing waves of emotions created by a fierce storm of life to a still calm; with a beautiful sunset to boot. He did this all through his love. Which more reflects you?

III. The declaration, (8-9)

1. PAUL DECLARED HIS PRIVILEGE, (8)

⁸ **Therefore** (because of your exemplary godly character and actions Philemon), **though I might be very bold** (speak freely, dogmatically), **in Christ** (as His apostle), **to command you what is fitting**, (to order you to do what you should do)

2. PAUL APPEALED TO PHILEMON’S HEART, (9)

¹² The word “joy” here is a derivative of two Greek words, **charizomai**: to be kind; and **charitoo**: to grace, highly favor, (Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, AMG Publishers: TN, 1992, p.1471). More often than not, “joy” here is translated “grace.” The message is that Philemon’s gracious attitude and actions has brought tremendous joy and delight to those who knew him and had been ministered to by him.

¹³ “**Heart**” here literally means “**bowels**,” which refers to the headquarters of one’s emotions. This word is used when one wants to express powerful emotions, reflecting one’s deepest needs and desires. Some of the people Philemon ministered to must have been in such dire circumstances that they were in tremendous emotional agony.

⁹ (Even though I could order you, Philemon, to do what you should do), **yet for love's sake** (because of my love and respect for you), **I rather appeal to you**, (to do the right thing on your own, rather than being commanded to do it)—(and this is to say nothing about my), **being such a one as Paul** (who am respected by many as well), **the aged** (an elder around sixties), **and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ**, (the consequences of my willingness to do things right).

The strongest motive for right conduct is love. It makes us want to do what we know we should. In fact, it creates within us honesty and trustworthiness.

The following story illustrates this truth in a compelling way: When Louis Lawes became warden of Sing Sing Prison in 1920, the inmates existed in deplorable conditions, even for a criminal. This led him to introduce humanitarian reforms. He gave much of the credit to his wife Kathryn however, who always treated the prisoners as human beings. She would often take her three children and sit with the gangsters, the murderers, and the racketeers while they played basketball and baseball. Then in 1937, Kathryn was killed in a car accident. The next day her body lay in a casket in a house about a quarter of a mile from the institution. When the acting warden found hundreds of prisoners crowded around the main entrance, he knew what they wanted. Opening the gate, he said, "Men, I'm going to trust you. You can go to the house." No count was taken; no guards were posted. Yet not one man was missing that night. Love for one who had loved them made them dependable.

This was the position from which Paul was making his appeal. It was a position fashioned out of mutual love and respect for the other, not by laws and authority. It wasn't demanding one's rights, it was appealing to another's heart. It is the highest form of obedience. It is the kind of obedience our Lord, enjoys receiving the most from us.

IV. The Appeal, (10-25)

1. THE BENEFICIARY OF PAUL'S APPEAL, ONESIMUS, (10-14)

1) Onesimus Was Paul's Spiritual Son, (10a)

¹⁰ **I appeal to you** (Philemon), **for my** (spiritual), **son Onesimus**,¹⁴ (who Paul introduced to Christ)

2) Onesimus Was Led to the Lord While Paul Was in Prison, (10b)

whom I (as a minister of reconciliation¹⁵ and by God's grace), **have begotten while** (literally), **in my chains**, (in prison, at Rome),

3) Onesimus Was In His Lost State, Unproductive/Unfruitful, (11a) (He was not living up to his name)

¹¹ **who once was unprofitable** (more of a detriment than an asset), **to you**, (Philemon)

4) Onesimus Is Now in His Saved State, Productive/Fruitful, (11b)

but now (since his conversion, Onesimus), **is profitable** (useful), **to you and to me**, (well as),¹⁶

¹⁴ Onesimus, means "*profitable*," which is probably far from what Philemon thought of him before he received this letter.

¹⁵ Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. 2 Co 5:18-20

¹⁶ "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser...5 "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned...8 By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples. (Jn 15:1, 5-6, 8)

5) Onesimus Was Now Repenting of His Sin and Returning to His Master, (12a)

¹² **I am sending him back**, (with Tychicus, as he belongs to you [Tychicus not only carried the letter to Philemon, but the letter to the Colossians as well]).

The prodigal slave was much like the prodigal son. The son learned the wrong of his ways and returned to his father to ask forgiveness and make restitution. So it is with Onesimus. Philemon's part was to be the loving and forgiving master.

6) Onesimus Became a Man after Paul's Own Heart, (12b)

You therefore receive (forgive and restore), **him, that is** (to say nothing of the fact that he carries with him a part of), **my own heart** (I have come to love him dearly),

The loving father in Luke 15, without hesitation forgave his son and restored him to the family he left. We do not see if Philemon forgave and restored Onesimus, but we assume he did. One of the greatest reasons we believe this is not because of the pressure Paul's letter may have put on him, but because Paul described Philemon as being a very loving Person himself, (v.v., 5-7). If we cannot love as Christ loved, it will be much harder for us to forgive as He forgave; even if confession and repentance is expressed.

7) Onesimus Became a Desirable Servant to All, (13-14)

¹³ **whom I wished** (desired, would have preferred), **to keep with me** (here in Rome—in order), **that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel**, (i.e., that he may support me on your behalf, in the same way that you would gladly do if you were here).

¹⁴ **But without your consent** (as you are his master and Onesimus must do what you ask of him and not what I ask him), **I wanted to do nothing** (that would take advantage of you, or out of assumption, or inappropriate), **that your good deed** (of forgiving Onesimus, allowing him to minister to me, or in any other way), **might not be by compulsion** (feeling I have left you no choice), **as it were, but voluntary**, (that it may be what you want, that you may fill the desire of your heart towards Onesimus).

Dan Schaeffer tells this story: A number of years ago in a small town in Spain, a man and his teenage son had an argument. The falling out led to deep feelings of bitterness and unforgiveness on both sides. The son soon left for the city. The father regretted the way he had treated his son and began to search for him. After several months, he still had not been able to locate the young man.

Finally, as a last ditch effort, he placed the following ad in the classified section of a Madrid newspaper: "Dear Paco, meet me in front of the newspaper office at noon. All is forgiven. I love you. Your father."

By twelve o'clock the next day, there were over 800 men named Paco gathered outside the newspaper building. Every one of them was looking for forgiveness from his father.

[Pursuit, Vol 3, No 2, 1994. Page 10.]

The ministry of reconciliation is a wonderful and powerful service of grace. Whether it leads to judicial forgiveness, which is what Paul offered Onesimus, or whether it leads to personal forgiveness, which is what Philemon was asked to give. Those who grant forgiveness to the repentant, are a blessing to others as well as the recipients of being wonderfully blessed themselves.

2. HOW GOD USED ONESIMUS' EVIL FOR GOOD, (15-16)

¹⁵ **For perhaps** (is it not possible, Philemon, that by God's providence), **he** (Onesimus), **departed for a while** (*lit.*, "for an hour"), **for this purpose** (of being saved, becoming a child of God—God being the Author and Finisher, the means and the end of our faith), **that** (in order that), **you might receive him** (back), **forever** (What is an hours trouble compared to an eternity of blessing, Philemon? Remember this is God's perspective, given to us through Paul.),

¹⁶ **no longer** (merely), **as a slave but more than** (or in addition to), **a slave** (a personal possession)—**a beloved brother** (an equal, a valued confidant), **especially to me** (his spiritual father), **but how much more to you** (who he is bound to), **both in the flesh** (as your servant he serves you as his master), **and in the Lord**, (as you both are servants of our Master, serve the Lord together).¹⁷

God never takes, but that He doesn't give something in return. Sometimes it is physical blessings (e.g., material prosperity, safety, or stronger relationships), sometimes it is spiritual blessing (e.g., more christlike character, heavenly rewards, or stronger faith), and sometimes it is both.

Philemon lost a slave, but gained a brother. He lost a personal slave, but gained a fellow bondservant. He lost a servant that did his work according to Philemon, but he gained a servant that did his work as unto the Lord.

- I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Je 29:11 (NIV)
- But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. Is 40:31
- Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, Eph 1:3
- But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil. Lk 6:35

Biblical Examples:

- **Joseph**, (lost his family, freedom and was sold into slavery as well as put in prison—God gave him the blessing of preserving Israel from famine)
- **Moses**, (lost his family, status, and was exiled—God gave him the blessing of leading Israel out of captivity)
- **Job**, (lost his children and wealth—God gave more than what he lost back)
- **Apostle Paul**, (lost his health—God gave him the ability to reveal a greater display of God's grace)

3. PAUL'S THREE APPEALS ON BEHALF OF ONESIMUS, (17-20)

1) Receive Onesimus as you would me, (17)

¹⁷ **If then** (or better, since then—Philemon, having said all that I have said), **you count me as a partner** (a good friend, a valued Christian brother, a respected colleague), **receive him** (Onesimus), **as** (in the same way as), **you would me**, (if I showed up on your doorstep, as a partner).

2) Charge all of Onesimus' debts to me, (18-19)

¹⁸ **But** (I know justice is involved here, so), **if he has wronged you** (legally—which he had as a run away slave), **or owes anything** (financially—which he had with the loss of his labor and possibly something he had stolen), **put that on my account**, (I am willing to personally pay both the legal and financial penalty).

¹⁹ **I, Paul, am writing with my own hand**, (so you know how much this means to me and it also means that this is a legal I.O.U.). **I will repay** (all that is owed)—**not to mention** (or better, I am not going to stress the fact, go into all the details), **to you** (Philemon), **that you owe** (or are indebted to), **me** (for), **even** (a greater debt), **your own self besides**, (having introduced you to Christ. Onesimus' debt is material and temporal, but yours Philemon is spiritual and eternal).

¹⁷ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Ga 3:28

Paul gives us here a view of Christ's substitutionary death on our behalf (2 Cor. 5:21),¹⁸ as well as how to love your neighbor like the parable of the good Samaritan says to, (Luke 10:35).¹⁹

Concerning the substitutionary death of Christ, Paul plays the part of Christ, God the Son, Philemon plays the part of God the Father, and Onesimus plays the part of the repentant sinner. Onesimus is seeking reconciliation with Philemon, and Paul is doing all that he can in order to make it possible.

3) Refresh my heart through Onesimus, (20)

²⁰ **Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord** (I believe this is the Lord's will and whatever you do for Onesimus will be just like you did it for me personally ["Do what the Lord would have you do, and you will have joy."]); **refresh** (put to rest, quiet, still), **my heart in the Lord**, (as you have refreshed the hearts of so many saints, ["Do what the Lord would have you do, and you will be refreshed." {v. 7}]).²⁰

4. PAUL'S CONFIDENCE THAT PHILEMON WOULD DO THE RIGHT THING CONCERNING ONESIMUS, (21)

1) Because Philemon was habitually obedient, (21a)

²¹ **Having confidence in your obedience** (your past record, your personal testimony [cf. vv. 4-7]), **I write to you,**

2) Because Philemon was habitually generous, (21b)

knowing that you will do even more than I say. (i.e., have asked—maybe Paul is inferring that Philemon will free him from being a slave, or maybe forgive all his debts and penalties, or maybe return him to Paul).

A magazine story told of an illiterate man in one of the inland provinces of China. Shortly after his conversion he demonstrated such love for the Lord and concern for souls that he was sent out to distribute Bibles and Christian literature. For some years, he traveled this way serving the Lord. Wherever he went, he witnessed for the Savior even though he spoke with a stammering tongue. Many people read the Bibles, but they also observed his life which was truly a living epistle of Christ. Later, when the Lord took him home to Heaven, those with whom he had labored said of him, "There was no difference between his life and the Book."

You don't have to tell a godly person to live godly. You only need to encourage them, share your confidence in them, state your appreciation for them. People will naturally do what they are.

V. The Concluding remarks, (22-24)

1. PAUL EXPECTS TO BE RELEASED FROM PRISON AND COME FOR A VISIT, (22)

²² **But, meanwhile, also** (would you do one more thing for me), **prepare a guest room for me, for I trust** (I am confident), **that through your** (*pl.*, thus referring to Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the local Church's) **prayers** (on my behalf), **I shall be granted** (freedom and will come), **to you.** (Paul was released shortly after writing this letter, but we are not told if he did indeed visit Philemon.)

Prayers are the nerves that move the muscles of omnipotence. Prayer is not an exercise in futility because God's will will be done in any case; prayer is the means by which God's will is carried out. "The effective

¹⁸ For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. 2 Co 5:21

¹⁹ On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you.' Lk 10:35

²⁰ "Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.' Mt 25:37-40

prayer of a righteous man,” wrote James, “can accomplish much” (James 5:16). Paul understood that the sovereignty of God works its purposes through prayer.²¹

One of the reasons that we go to our prayer closet or gather together with others to pray, is to unleash the nerves and muscles of our omnipotent Heavenly Father.

- Don’t let your prayer time then, become a mere ritual.
- Don’t let your prayer time then, become secondary.
- Don’t let your prayer time then, become impersonal.

You are a child of the Father, who loves you more than you can ever imagine.

- He wants to spend time with you.
- He is more than interested in what is happening in your life.
- He wants to reveal Himself to you in new, surprising, expected, and intimate ways.

2. PAUL SENDS GREETINGS FROM HIS COLLEAGUES, (23, 24)

²³ **Epaphras** (possibly the founder of the Colossian Church, as well as the church at Laodicea and Hierapolis)²², **my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus** (apparently in prison with Paul for the cause of the gospel of Christ as well), **greet you** (wishes you well),
²⁴ **as do Mark** (the cousin of Barnabas, who accompanied but later deserted Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey,²³ which later cause Paul to distrust him,²⁴ who after that was mentored by Peter,²⁵ who afterwards reestablished close ties with Paul,²⁶ who also wrote the Book of Mark),²⁷ **Aristarchus** (a Jewish believer of Thessalonica, who was with Paul in Ephesus at the time of the riot,²⁸ who was on the ship with Paul that sank on its way to Rome,²⁹ who also appeared to be a fellow prisoner with Paul,³⁰ who according to tradition was martyred by Nero), **Demas** (who evidently was still faithful to Paul at this time, as he would not be later),³¹ **Luke** (who was a doctor,³² who accompanied Paul on his third missionary

²¹ MacArthur, John. *Philemon*.

²² as you also learned from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, Col 1:7

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. For I bear him witness that he has a great zeal for you, and those who are in Laodicea, and those in Hierapolis. Col 4:12-13

²³ Now when Paul and his party set sail from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John, departing from them, returned to Jerusalem. Ac 13:13

²⁴ Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing.” Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; Ac 15:36-39

²⁵ She who is in Babylon, elect together with you, greets you; and so does Mark my son. 1 Pe 5:13

²⁶ Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry. 2 Ti 4:11

²⁷ And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their ministry, and they also took with them John whose surname was Mark. Ac 12:25

²⁸ So the whole city was filled with confusion, and rushed into the theater with one accord, having seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians, Paul’s travel companions. Ac 19:29

²⁹ So, entering a ship of Adramyttium, we put to sea, meaning to sail along the coasts of Asia. Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica, was with us. Ac 27:2

³⁰ Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, with Mark the cousin of Barnabas (about whom you received instructions: if he comes to you, welcome him), Col 4:10

³¹ Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed for Thessalonica—Crescens for Galatia, Titus for Dalmatia. 2 Ti 4:10

journey, who was the only person with Paul for awhile during his last imprisonment,³³ and later wrote the books of Luke and Acts), **my fellow laborers**, (members of my leadership team).

Failure in our lives or in the lives of those that we associate with, is an unfortunate fact of life. Whether we are going to fail or not is not really even an issue. Of course we are going to fail. It's not an option. Not only is it not an option, but the more we live on the frontlines of this spiritual warfare, penetrating the gates of darkness, the more failure we will probably experience. Both, John Mark and Demas, were on the frontlines, in the lions lair. They were under heavy fire. They were surrounded by the enemy. They were facing life or death situations. To run or defect would have been the most tempting and natural thing to do in their situations. The real issue of failure is, what we do when we fail. John Mark dealt with failure by learning from it and growing beyond it. Demas did not learn from his failure. He attacked those who did. The defeated many times want to bring the victors down to their level or lower even. We must beware of such temptations.

VI. The benediction, (25)

²⁵ **The grace** (unmerited favor), **of our Lord Jesus Christ be with** (bless), **your** (*pl.*, thus referring to Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the local Church's) **spirit**, (your inner man), **Amen**, (so be it).

An anonymous author contributed this item to an almanac: "In farming, it has been found that digging out the rocks which frequently encumber the fields does not always increase the crop. In many soils they are an advantage, attracting moisture and radiating heat. You will find that the largest berries grow around these stones. In an experiment made in England, the results of removing them were so unfavorable to the crop that they were brought back and spread over the ground."

Often we cry out to God for the removal of obstacles that we feel hinders our service and fruitfulness, only to find out later that they were actually advantageous to us and promoted our spiritual growth.

Obstacles are easy to come by; a dime a dozen. They come from every sector of our life. Through our marriage, our children, our parents, our relatives, our friends, our work, our play, and our home. We do not need to pray for them. They show up at our doorstep every morning. They ride with us to work. They follow us home. They even go to bed with us. Think of the opportunities for growth here! What we need though, like plants need the rain, is God's grace in order to accept and grow through them. Paul knows the need and prays accordingly as so should we.

³² Luke the beloved physician and Demas greet you. Col 4:14

³³ Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry. 2 Ti 4:11