

## Commentary on the Book of Philemon

### Philemon 1

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

Paul identifies himself as a prisoner, which he literally was in Rome. Paul acknowledges that Christ is sovereign over all of his circumstances. He writes on behalf of Timothy as well, which served to affirm his leadership in the church. Paul writes to Philemon, a beloved brother and fellow worker in the Lord. Apparently, a church meets in his house, and it is believed that Apphia is his wife and Archippus is his son, a fellow laborer of the Lord. Paul gives his standard greeting wishing them all grace and peace from God in Christ.

**4**I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers,  
**5**because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints;  
**6**and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake.

Paul is very thankful for these dear ones in the Lord, and he prays regularly for them. These believers have great faith and love for Christ and for His church. Paul prays specifically that this fellowship of faith would be effective (c.f. 1 Corinthians 16:9) in terms of bearing fruit for the kingdom as they grow in knowledge of Christ for the sake of Christ. We all are dependent upon God's grace. God must move and work and pour out His grace in anything that we do, or spiritually it will be in vain (Psalm 127:1).

**7**For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.

Paul has much joy and comfort knowing that these believers love all the saints, including him. Many Christians have spent time with them and have been refreshed and encouraged. It is a blessing to see how Paul does not flaunt his apostolic authority and position, but, rather, he tenderly speaks toward this man of God as his brother in Christ, with Christ being their ultimate authority.

**8**Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper,  
**9**yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you--since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus--

Paul feels that he could use his apostolic authority which Philemon would recognize to command Philemon to do what he is about to ask him to do. Yet rather than order Philemon as one under his authority, he appeals to him as a brother, taking a gentler, loving tone. He writes to Philemon as one who is aged, an imprisoned servant and ambassador of Christ, who is asking for Philemon's help as a favor and act of respect.

**10I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment,  
11who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me.**

Paul apparently led Onesimus to Christ during his imprisonment, and thus he refers to him as a spiritual child in the Lord. Onesimus, a former slave of Philemon, was formerly useless to Philemon because he had run from him to Rome. But Onesimus was saved and now seeks to do the will of God, thus making him useful to God (and thus Paul) and to Philemon as he seeks to return to his service.

**12I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart,  
13whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel;  
14but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will.**

Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon, and he explains that Onesimus has become a very dear friend to him. He wishes that he could keep him to encourage him during his imprisonment and to do ministry. Yet, Paul felt that he didn't have the right to keep Onesimus, given that Onesimus had an obligation to fulfill his duties as a slave to Philemon. Such would be honoring to God and keep a sound testimony. This would give Philemon the chance to restore proper fellowship between he and Onesimus, and there would be an opportunity for him to free him, thus leaving no room for a poor testimony. Paul wanted Onesimus only if he was assured of the free and good will of Philemon, not simply by compulsion or assumption.

**15For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever,  
16no 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.  
17If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me.**

Paul wonders if perhaps, in His sovereignty, God allowed Onesimus to flee Philemon so that in His mercy, Onesimus would be saved and become not merely a slave of Philemon but a brother in Christ. Paul believes that Philemon views him as a partner in the gospel, so he wants Philemon to receive Onesimus in the same way.

**18But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account;**

**19I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well).**

**20Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.**

Paul says that if Onesimus has wronged Philemon in any way or if he owes him anything that such outstanding burdens can be charged to Paul's account. Paul will cover any past damages that Onesimus has incurred against Philemon. This is a great testimony of mercy and grace. Paul is not saying that he is taking on Onesimus' sin but that he is willing to reimburse Philemon any of the negative consequences of his past sin. He doesn't want anything to get in the way of Philemon receiving Onesimus back. Paul emphasizes that he is writing the letter himself, and he emphasizes that he himself will repay any debt. It appears that Paul had also led Philemon to faith, so in that sense Philemon owes Paul his entire self. Paul wants him to remember the grace given to him lest he fail to give grace to Onesimus. Paul wants to see a brother in Christ benefit him by receiving back Onesimus as a brother in Christ so that his heart can be refreshed by seeing brotherly love at work.

**21Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say.**

**22At the same time also prepare me a lodging, for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you.**

Paul has great confidence that Philemon will honor Paul's requests and even go beyond them in terms of receiving Onesimus back and receiving him as a brother. Paul asks that a lodging be prepared for him in faith that he will be released so that he can visit them (c.f. Philippians 2:23-24). He hopes that they will pray for him to that end.

**23Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you,**

**24as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers.**

Epaphras (c.f. Colossians 4:12) was in prison with Paul, and Paul sends on greetings from his fellow workers Mark (c.f. Acts 13:5,13, 2 Timothy 4:11), Aristarchus (c.f. Acts 20:4, 27:2,4), Demas (2 Timothy 4:9-10), and Luke (the physician and author of the gospel). Mark and Paul had separated over a disagreement during a missionary journey (Acts 15:38-40), but it appears that they have reconciled matters, an example to Philemon as to how he should deal with Onesimus.

**25The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.**

Paul again with his familiar closing wishes them the grace of Christ to be with their spirits. This is not grace for salvation but grace for sanctification, to be able to grow in Christ and live in a way honoring to Him each day and in all things.

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