



## Philemon

### Author and Title

Paul and Timothy are explicitly named as the co-authors in v.1. It becomes apparent, however, that the apostle Paul is the principal author when the first person singular 'I' is used from v.4 and throughout the rest of the letter. The title indicates that it is a personal letter to a man named Philemon. Some commentators believe that Paul intended it to be read to the entire church that met in Philemon's home (v.2) for the underlying theme is one of brotherly love and the need to do what is right in the eyes of God that are things all disciples of Christ should display in their day to day actions and words. This purpose cannot be stated with any certainty however, as Paul also wrote a general letter to the Colossian churches that was sent at the same time.

### Date

The letter was probably written circa AD62. Paul wrote it at the same time that he wrote Colossians and Ephesians. All three letters were then carried personally by Tychicus as the courier, who was accompanied by Onesimus - the key subject of this letter. This date assumes that the imprisonment Paul refers to is his imprisonment in Rome as recorded in Acts 28:16-31.

### Theme

The theme of Philemon is the power of the Gospel to transform lives: <<**Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me**>> (v.11), and to impact human relationships as Philemon is called to receive Onesimus back not as his slave, Greek *doulos*, but: <<**as a dear brother**>> (v.16).

This is not an apostolic command but a personal request from one Christian brother to another, asking that Philemon act out of his faith and duty to Christ in order to forgive his former slave, and to be fully reconciled to him because of their shared faith in Jesus as the Christ of God.

## Purpose of Philemon

Philemon was a wealthy Christian who lived in the city of Colossæ, about 100 miles or 161 km inland from Ephesus. Refer to the map.



Apparently, at some point during Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus (AD52-55), Philemon heard the Gospel and was saved. He began serving the cause of Christ in the Colossian community, opening his home for a group of disciples to meet there regularly.

At some point, Onesimus, one of Philemon's slaves, absconded and travelled to Rome, where he was then a fugitive, living in the most populated city of the Roman Empire in order to escape detection. In a rather remarkable set of circumstances, not recounted in the letter but certainly reflective of God's sovereignty, Onesimus somehow came into contact with the apostle Paul and became a Christian. The words given to Isaiah ring true on this occasion, as they so often do: **<<I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, "Here am I, here am I" >>** (Isaiah 65:1). As Onesimus grew in Christ, he spent

much of his time and effort helping Paul, who was severely constrained by his house imprisonment.

As much as Paul would like to have retained the services of Onesimus, Paul knew that Onesimus' fugitive status, severed relationship and wrongdoing against his master needed to be addressed, not from a civil or legal standpoint but from that of Christian morality and ethics. Paul thus wrote this letter as an appeal to Philemon to appreciate the transformation that had occurred in Onesimus' life, with a genuine heartfelt request for his former master to receive him back, not merely as a servant but as a beloved brother.

It is difficult to know if Paul was seeking Onesimus' full emancipation and freedom. It is clear, however, that he was seeking a transformed relationship between servant and master, a new relationship that would defy all of the ingrained status distinctions of the surrounding Greek and Roman cultures. There is no doubt that it would have been difficult for this kind of servitude to survive in the atmosphere of love created by the letter, and in fact the elements of Paul's appeal found in this letter helped lay the foundation for the abolition of such servitude.

The biblical story of Philemon and Onesimus tells its current readers that all believers share a common status in Christ that is more than simply a spiritual or eschatological reality.

### **Summary of Salvation History**

Christians are to endure suffering for the sake of Christ, looking back on Christ's sufferings and forward to the consummation of salvation at his Second Coming. Their treatment of one another in Christ is to be transformed in the light of his grace toward them.

### **Writing Style**

This simplified letter approximates the letters that people ordinarily write, in contrast to the more stylised and literary five-part format that characterises most NT epistles.

The letter is a masterpiece of persuasion and can be analysed in terms of how Paul seeks a favourable reception for the returning servant, where the normal response of the master would be vindictive.

Paul's strategy follows that prescribed by Greek and Roman rhetoricians of the day:

- Begin by building rapport and goodwill with an audience (vv.4-10).
- Then lay out the facts in a way that will convince the mind or intellect (vv.11-19).
- Finally appeal to the emotions of the audience (vv.20-21).

## Key Themes

### Theme

1. At the heart of this letter is the theme of reconciliation. Onesimus is reconciled to God and now he is in the process of being reconciled to a fellow believer.
2. The basis for Paul's appeal to Philemon is the supreme Christian virtue of love and not Roman social convention. Paul commends Philemon for the love he has shown, not only to him, but also to all of the believers in that region.

### Outline

- I. Greetings (1-3)
- II. Thanksgiving and Prayer (4-7)
- III. Paul's Plea for Onesimus (8-20)
- IV. Personal Remarks and Greetings (21-25)

### Summary of Philemon

Paul identifies himself as the author, Timothy as a co-author and probable scribe, with Paul's dear friend Philemon as the key recipient, greeting also others that meet in his house church, including members of his own family.

Paul also identifies himself as a prisoner of Christ. Since added names suggest the nature of a person's calling, i.e. Jesus as the Saviour, Peter as a Rock, Paul may well identify himself as Christ's prisoner to indicate the very substance of his missionary task and its costs. Further, he may be implying that the costliness of Christian ministry is the result of the revolutionary content of his message, thereby preparing Philemon for the revolutionary character of Paul's request of him. Paul's message bears witness to a new social order, and for that reason he finds himself in prison. This prepares the reader for a radical word concerning the relationship between a Roman slave and his owner.

Paul then goes on to elaborate the love he felt for them and the joy it gave him to know they were fulfilling their duty to Christ through obedient service.

The main focus of the letter then comes to the fore. Onesimus had been Philemon's slave. He had absconded and travelled to Rome, where he met Paul, came to faith and was transformed. Initially, he served Paul well but it was always felt that he should return to Philemon to be reconciled to him, and Paul gives a heartfelt request that Philemon should feel the same way, putting any past hurts or damage behind him, then accepting Onesimus back as a brother in Christ rather than a slave.

Although Paul was still in chains and under guarded house arrest in Rome awaiting trial, he believed his time there was coming to an end and indicated his intention to visit Colossæ. He ends the letter by sending the greetings of his co-workers in Rome and offering Philemon a blessing from Christ.

## I. Philemon 1-3 - Greetings

The beginning of this letter follows Paul's typical style, although it is addressed to a person rather than an entire community of believers.

<sup>1</sup> Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker,

### Philemon 1

The opening verse joins Paul the apostle with Timothy the evangelist and Philemon a church pastor, showing Paul's understanding that all are equal in their service to Christ. Those called fellow workers, soldiers and brothers in Christ are also called to endure whatever suffering comes along with the life they are called to. This verse is more than just a pleasant greeting as it specifies the nature of the relationship between the author and recipients; even drawing lines around the conversation being carried on within the letter itself. Meanings are more readily and rightly determined in terms of this rhetorical relationship formulated by the letter's opening words. This will carry so much more weight when Paul reaches the main reason for writing the letter to the recipient, in this case Philemon, who will subsequently be endeared to his brother in Christ through this opening salutation.

A prisoner of Christ Jesus. This would be better if read as 'a prisoner on behalf of Christ Jesus', although it is clear that he does not consider himself to be a prisoner of the Romans. As noted in the introduction, Paul was under house arrest in chains in the city of Rome. He was awaiting a hearing by the Roman Emperor Nero, to whom he had appealed his case during his trial in Caesarea when the Roman Governor Festus wanted Paul to travel to Jerusalem to be tried before the Jews, which Paul knew was a plan to kill him: <<*If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!*>> (Acts 25:11). Paul has written of his prisoner status to other churches as well, for example: <<*For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles*>> (Ephesians 3:1).

Timothy our brother. Timothy, probably acting as Paul's scribe, had first joined Paul during his second missionary journey as he passed through Timothy's home town of Lystra: <<*He came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was a Jewess and a believer, but whose father was a Greek. The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him*>> (Acts 16:1-2). Timothy had remained a faithful servant and friend of Paul and served Christ faithfully; Paul was clearly very fond of him: <<*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus, To Timothy, my dear son: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord*>> (2 Timothy 1:1-2). He often travelled on behalf of Paul to remote locations: <<*For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church*>> (1 Corinthians 4:17), or taking charge of ministry on Paul's behalf, with the full authority of Paul: <<*As I urged you when I went into*

*Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work – which is by faith>> (1 Timothy 1:3-4).*

To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker indicates he is a disciple of Christ. He appears to have been a local pastor, with a church meeting in his own home.

Dear friend translates the Greek word *agapetos*, which Paul uses elsewhere as an affectionate term for fellow believers: <<*To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ*>> (Romans 1:7), and whole congregations: <<*Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose*>> (Philippians 2:12-13).

<sup>2</sup> to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home:

### Philemon 2

Apphia may have been Philemon's wife; Archippus may have been Philemon's son, perhaps a fellow church leader or even both, and appeared to have a significant ministry in Colossæ: <<*Tell Archippus: "See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord"*>> (Colossians 4:17), although many see this verse as an admonition as he had fallen away from the faith.

The church that meets in your home. Partly because of the political status of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire, and partly due to lack of finances, there were no buildings dedicated to church services during the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. The early Christians met in private homes. Philemon opened his home in Colossæ, and someone named Nympha hosted the church in Laodicea: <<*Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house*>> (Colossians 4:15). There is extensive archæological evidence from many different cities showing that some homes were structurally modified to hold such churches.

Although most church meetings are now held either in purpose built buildings, some of them grand and spectacular, other meetings are held in rented buildings and still others continue to meet in private homes. John Wesley started off the Methodist movement with many open air meetings and some held in his own kitchen in the Epworth Rectory. The apostle John's vision gives an insight as to how it may be one day: <<*I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple*>> (Revelation 21:22). It does not matter whether people gather in a building of grand stone, ordinary brick or even a tent, for worship is not determined by places or buildings, but by the spiritual vitality of the relationships between the people, God and the Lamb. In fact, Paul's reference to Philemon's house church may well indicate that Christianity was still an unofficial, underground religious movement in Colossæ, or that it was such a new work that a social structure

had not yet been fashioned. Nevertheless, Paul addresses his readers as the church, composed of people whom God has called out of the world for salvation.

<sup>3</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

### Philemon 3

Grace and peace are part of a typical benediction written in NT letters that had its roots in Paul's Jewish heritage. The word peace was no doubt based on the Hebrew word *shalom*, which has a much richer connotation than the English word does, since it conveys not merely the absence of conflict and turmoil but also the notion of positive blessing, especially in terms of a right relationship with God and, as a result, the idea that 'all is well' in one's life. This may be manifested most clearly amid persecution and tribulation.

Grace is the Greek word *charis*, which indicates divine favour and goodwill, the spring of all good things; it is grace indeed that any spiritual blessing should be conferred on sinful humans for it is totally unmerited.

Grace is used extensively in the NT, although it is not restricted to that era: <<*You are the most excellent of men and your lips have been anointed with grace, since God has blessed you forever*>> (Psalm 45:2), <<*Though grace is shown to the wicked, they do not learn righteousness; even in a land of uprightness they go on doing evil and regard not the majesty of the Lord*>> (Isaiah 26:10), <<*Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs*>> (Jonah 2:8), <<*And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son*>> (Zechariah 12:10). It is a key attribute and gift of Jesus as the Christ, although surprisingly John only uses it four times: in 2 John 3, Revelation 1:4 and 22:21, and in the introduction to his Gospel: <<*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'" From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ*>> (John 1:14-17).

God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. The omission of the Holy Spirit in this blessing is not significant for Paul elsewhere demonstrates that all three are one and that when one is named the character of all three is present. Paul does give the fuller blessing in his closing benediction to the Corinthians: <<*May the grace*

*of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all>> (2 Corinthians 13:14).*

## II. Philemon 4-7 - Thanksgiving and Prayer

Before Paul makes his appeal, he graciously and tactfully expresses his thanksgiving for Philemon (vv.4-5), and describes how he prays for him (vv.6-7).

Study of the literary genre of Paul's letters have revealed that the second section of his letters, where he generally thanks God and offers a prayer for his readership, serves three purposes:

1. To establish good rapport between Paul and his readers, so that they will respond positively to the guidance that is given.
2. To propose the context of thanksgiving, the faith-based ideals and moral values, toward which the church should aspire.
3. In the petitions offered, to introduce a specific threat to their church that will inhibit spiritual growth.

Paul's epistolary thanksgiving sets the tone for the letter and functions as a critical preface to what follows in the letter's main body.

<sup>4</sup> I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, <sup>5</sup> because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints.

### Philemon 4-5

I always shows that Paul does not just pray for things once or twice but perseveres in prayer. The Lord's brother called on his readers to persevere as well: <<***But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life***>> (Jude 20-21).

I always thank my God is an indication of how Paul was so committed to his faith in God despite the personal hardships he had endured since coming to faith in Christ, even though he was now in chains for his unshakeable belief in his Lord Jesus Christ. Paul had learned to be thankful in all situations and exhorts others to do the same: <<***Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus***>> (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). The prophet concurs: <<***Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour***>> (Habakkuk 3:17-18).

Because I hear. Despite the difficulties in travel, it was more common than people today might think and Paul constantly had reports from people who visited other regions and churches: <<***But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you***>> (1 Thessalonians 3:6).

I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith shows the joy that men like Paul genuinely felt when those they had seen come to faith live their lives the way they should. The apostle John shared a similar opinion: *<<It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us>>* (2 John 4), and: *<<It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth>>* (3 John 3-4).

Love for all the saints is part of the fruit of the Spirit; indeed, it is listed first: *<<But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law>>* (Galatians 5:22-23). God is the author of all the good that is in anyone, or that which is done by them: *<<O Ephraim, what more have I to do with idols? I will answer him and care for him. I am like a green pine tree; your fruitfulness comes from me>>* (Hosea 14:8). Therefore, all honour and praise belongs to him: *<<Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name. “But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand>>* (1 Chronicles 29:13-14).

<sup>6</sup> I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.

### Philemon 6

I pray. It is clear from all of Paul's letters that he was a man of prayer and he clearly prayed for many people on a regular basis. It is a discipline that James exhorts with good reason: *<<Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective>>* (James 5:16). Paul prayed for those he had not yet met: *<<God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you>>* (Romans 1:9-10), he prayed in prison: *<<About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them>>* (Acts 16:25), he prayed at the farewell meeting with the Ephesian elders: *<<When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed>>* (Acts 20:36), above all he prayed for the growth of others in their faith and service: *<<For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better>>* (Ephesians 1:15-17).

Active. Discipleship is not a passive role, for faith has to be demonstrated. Faith alone is the requirement for salvation but actions are the natural outworking to demonstrate the presence of that faith: *<<As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead>>* (James 2:26).

**Sharing**, Greek *koinōnia*, as used here would seem to carry a wide range of meanings, including the ideas of generosity, partnership and fellowship that result from the common faith and common life that believers have in Christ. It suggests an idea that followers of Jesus are a whole community of persons in which something is shared in common that is essential for life; they not only belong to one another but actually become mutually identified. This usage of *koinōnia* is similar to the way Paul commends the Philippians for their tangible generosity in supporting the cause of the Gospel, i.e. being in partnership: *<<In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus>>* (Philippians 1:4-6). Paul is laying the groundwork for his appeal to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus. Philemon's **sharing** will result in his own deeper knowledge of every good thing in Christ; that is, a deeper awareness and experience of the blessings that Christ has for him.

**A full understanding of every good thing.** **Understanding** translates the Greek word *epignosis* that refers not to theoretical knowledge but to knowledge that is acquired by experience. Paul is speaking about **every good thing** Philemon experiences while in Christ, which is where God's grace can be found.

**In Christ** describes the state of all those who have been reconciled to God through the blood of Jesus, who now abide in him, grow spiritually through him and demonstrate this in the outworking of their faith for: *<<He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together>>* (Colossians 1:15-17).

<sup>7</sup> Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.

### **Philemon 7**

**The hearts of the saints** have been **refreshed** through Philemon's words and deeds. Philemon was well known for his love for his fellow believers, which brought Paul **great joy**. He had been actively involved in ministering to other Christians in a way that had profoundly encouraged them.

With regard to their **hearts**, see the comments made on v.12. Paul had similar words for the Corinthian churches: *<<This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God>>* (2 Corinthians 9:12).

### **III. Philemon 8-20 - Paul's Plea for Onesimus**

Paul makes his appeal by first describing the remarkable change that has happened to Onesimus (vv.8-12), and then suggesting how helpful Onesimus would be to him in his imprisonment (vv.13-14).

Paul then wonders if God has been sovereignly involved in this situation so that Philemon may receive Onesimus back now as a fellow Christian (vv.15-16), who will therefore be all the more useful to Philemon.

He concludes with a direct appeal that Philemon take Onesimus back just as he would receive Paul in person (vv.17-20).

<sup>8</sup> Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, <sup>9</sup> yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul – an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus –

### Philemon 8-9

Therefore links Paul's assertion that he could order Philemon to comply back to the prayer he has offered in v.6, which is that Philemon will demonstrate his true faith in this matter.

Bold, the Greek word *parrēsia*, suggests frankness or openness to speak freely about difficult matters. When coupled with order it clearly demonstrates that Paul could use the commandments and teaching of God to force the issue through, if he chose to do so. It is interesting that Paul's situation actually made others bold too: *<<Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly>>* (Philippians 1:14).

Order you. Paul chooses not to demand anything of Philemon but to appeal to him on the basis of love. This approach defines Paul's relationship with the church, one that is based on love not authority. It also shows that his intent is not coercive but collaborative.

Do what you ought to do, on the basis of love. Paul had already written about the virtues of Philemon, who exhibited the love of a disciple in his dealing with others. He knows that it is his duty to forgive others as commanded by his Lord and so all Paul has to do is to draw his attention to his duty to be obedient. The outcome is then the responsibility of Philemon for that is down to the individual, not the teacher or leader: *<<But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles">>* (Acts 18:6).

I appeal to you is the Greek word *parakaleo*, which Paul uses not so much to contrast his right to insist that Philemon do what is right, but more in line with the way he might appeal for prayer for some personal difficulty or for the support of others, e.g. *<<I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judæa and that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there>>* (Romans 15:30-31).

An old man. Paul may have been 60 years old, or even older; he was described as a young man almost 30 years earlier when, as Saul of Tarsus, he supported the persecution of Stephen and the other Christians: *<<At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged*

**him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul>> (Acts 7:57-58).**

His reference to his age could be a call for respect as an elder statesman in the church or one of pastoral comfort for the heart of an aging man suffering the discomfort and restriction of his imprisonment because of his service to Christ. However, the Greek word Paul uses for old man is *presbyteres*, which indicates his age and the detrimental health impact of his imprisonment that meant he was dependant on Philemon's good will and personal grace with regard to this issue.

Now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus. While Paul's imprisonment represents his missionary identity, it is Jesus for whom Paul is imprisoned. The response Paul strongly desires from Philemon springs from his orientation toward discipleship: because of Christ Jesus, Philemon should respond favourably toward Onesimus, even though it may be costly and at odds with the surrounding social order.

**This passage provides a deeper understanding of Paul's thought processes.**

1. It provides a more implicit link between Paul's appeal and his earlier prayer for Philemon, for his request is based on the confidence of answered prayer, and that Philemon will act compassionately toward a man who is no longer his slave but his brother in Christ, thereby increasing the sense of partnership within their house church.
2. Paul's appeal naturally draws attention away from his accepted personal authority and toward his personal need, for he was now an old man and also under arrest, totally restricting his movements. Paul's appeal is rooted, therefore, in his awareness of his own need for Philemon's generous support.

Paul's status as a prisoner of Christ Jesus was one of which he was not ashamed: *<<I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death>> (Philippians 1:20), and he called on others to act in a similar fashion: <<So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time>> (2 Timothy 1:8-9). There are those who should and will be ashamed, such as those who failed to do what was right for God or his people: <<The men stole into the city that day as men steal in who are ashamed when they flee from battle>> (2 Samuel 19:3), <<He stared at him with a fixed gaze until Hazael felt ashamed. Then the man of God began to weep>> (2 Kings 8:11), <<I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, "The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him">> (Ezra 8:22), <<Then you will remember your ways and be ashamed when you receive your sisters, both those who are older than you and those who are younger. I*

*will give them to you as daughters, but not on the basis of my covenant with you>> (Ezekiel 16:61), <<The seers will be ashamed and the diviners disgraced. They will all cover their faces because there is no answer from God>> (Micah 3:7), and: <<If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed>> (2 Thessalonians 3:14).*

<sup>10</sup> I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains.

### Philemon 10

I appeal to you is used again as it was in v.9, indicating the humility of Paul, despite the position of authority he still held due to his status as an apostle, and reputation in the wider church, and his proven work for Christ.

The name Onesimus means beneficial, useful or profitable and was frequently given to bondservants. However, it is likely that Paul gave him this new Christian name at the time of his conversion to faith. He is also mentioned in Colossians 4:9 as accompanying Tychicus with the letter to the Colossians and also to the Ephesians. See the comment made on v.12.

Who became my son, also translated whose father I became, literally ‘I gave birth to him’, Greek *gennaō*, and is used elsewhere: <<*Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel*>> (1 Corinthians 4:15), and: <<*It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always and not just when I am with you. My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!*>> (Galatians 4:19), where Paul employs the image of labour pains, describing the spiritual birthing of Onesimus.

That Paul remarks on his relationship with Onesimus before the latter’s relationship to Philemon is deliberate as it portrays the changed nature of the man, for he is now a true born again believer in Christ. Thus he is a different person than that formerly known to his master and this knowledge should help Philemon to remove any animosity he may still have felt toward his absent slave.

Since both Onesimus and Philemon are Paul’s spiritual sons through the same process of coming to faith because of the Gospel message he brought to them, then their relationship to each another is that of spiritual brothers by spiritual regeneration.

While I was in chains. A man may be physically bound, yet God’s Word and Spirit are not and cannot be bound; spiritual children may then be born to him.

<sup>11</sup> Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

## Philemon 11

Useless, useful, are the Greek words *achrēstos* and *euchrēstos*. The play on words describes the before and after of Onesimus' conversion. By absconding from Philemon, Onesimus had become useless, but having repented and become obedient to Christ, Onesimus had now become useful both to Paul and to Philemon. This assertion may have been surprising to Philemon for he had no evidence that Onesimus could be of use to him again, but it does open the way for the next part of Paul's appeal: that Onesimus be accepted back as a brother, not as a slave. This change particularly highlights the transforming power of the Gospel of truth for these two words are frequently contrasted in ancient moral literature and typically refer to a person's character more than to the quality of one's work.

This point is deepened by the recognition that the common root of these two words *chrestos* sounds the same as the word for Christ, i.e. *Christos*. One academic argues that Paul used this pun, as was common in ancient literature, to draw attention to the changes that had taken place in Onesimus now that he was in Christ.

It is interesting to perhaps pause at this point to consider why this letter was included in the NT, for it is primarily a personal matter about a runaway slave, who had come to faith, and was being reconciled to his former master, no longer a slave but now as a brother. The underlying tones are useful for teaching and therefore it can be included in that context as Paul writes elsewhere: <<*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work*>> (2 Timothy 3:16-17). However, the story of a runaway is typical of the story of mankind, who often try to runaway and hide from God because they know they have sinned. It started with Adam and Eve: <<*Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden*>> (Genesis 3:8). There are also those that runaway because their calling seems to be too tough for them: <<*The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.'* But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord>> (Jonah 1:1-3), yet the message of the Gospel is always to seek reconciliation with God, not matter what an individual may have done in their life. After all, it was God who made the first move by sending his Son: <<*This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another*>> (1 John 4:9-11).

<sup>12</sup> I am sending him — who is my very heart — back to you.

## Philemon 12

I am sending him, back to you shows that Paul is confident in the outcome otherwise he may have advised Onesimus to remain in Rome until the call came for him to go home. Onesimus was travelling with Tychicus, who was almost certainly the courier of the letter, as he was for the letters to the Colossian churches in general: <<*Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here*>> (Colossians 4:7-9). They had no doubt come via Ephesus, to whom Paul also wrote at that time: <<*Tychicus, the dear brother and faithful servant in the Lord, will tell you everything, so that you also may know how I am and what I am doing. I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage you*>> (Ephesians 6:21-22).

My very heart. Not the common word for heart, Greek *kardia* but *splagchna* which is also used in v.7, and is literally internal organs, especially the stomach and intestines. It connotes affection, intimacy, and a deep love for, according to Greek psychology, it is the part of the body where feelings of compassion are produced. Colloquially, it could be translated as gut feelings, but compassion is intended here: <<*If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose*>> (Philippians 2:1-2), and: <<*Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience*>> (Colossians 3:12). Paul is not handling this situation as a detached arbitrator but as one who has developed a fond affection for Onesimus.

Luke uses the verbal form of *splagchna* in contexts that show love and compassion are not detached emotions, but an experience of love that draws someone to help another that is in need. This is seen in the Parable of the Good Samaritan: <<*But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him*>> (Luke 10:33), and the Prodigal Son: <<*So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him*>> (Luke 15:20); this particular parable is very relevant to the situation between Philemon the father and Onesimus the wayward son. Both of these examples should be seen as discipleship in action. Compassion is neither pity nor a good deed, but is an outworking of genuine love and care for someone else.

<sup>13</sup> I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel.

## Philemon 13

I would have liked to keep him. Paul's movements were severely restricted and it was likely he never left his home prison. Men like Onesimus would have been the

eyes and ears for Paul, and would have run errands for him, keeping lines of communication open and purchasing any consumables for Paul, such as writing materials. It also seems from the language used in the letter that Onesimus had genuine love and compassion for Paul. Therefore, by sending him back, Paul was demonstrating an act of unselfish grace on the part of both men, in order that Onesimus can be reconciled to his former master. This was a sacrificial act in line with the teachings of their shared Lord.

Take your place is metaphorical, for Philemon would never have been expected to undertake the same type of work for Paul, although a person's social status or even position in the church should not mean they are above such work if called to serve in that capacity. By having Onesimus with him, Paul would have felt a closer affinity to Philemon in his heart during their absence, a man he had described as: <<**a dear friend**>> (v.1). This substitutionary role of Onesimus is one way that he has become useful to Philemon as Paul had expressed in v.11.

In helping me. Paul's word choice for helping, Greek *diakoneo*, is striking because it comes from a different word for slave from the one he then uses in v.16 (*doulos*). Paul uses words from the *diakoneo* family when speaking of Gospel ministry rather than of the degrading work associated with a prisoner's slave. However, it seems that Paul's intent was more ironical. Onesimus was no longer a slave, even though his labour of love could well have been seen as degrading work; rather, he is Paul's minister and therefore a useful substitute for Philemon as recently noted.

In chains for the Gospel. Paul was originally arrested in Jerusalem because he was despised by his brother Jews who had not come to faith in Jesus and saw him as being a heretic and a threat to their affluent lifestyle, as he was drawing people away from their sphere of influence into the light of Christ.

<sup>14</sup> But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favour you do will be spontaneous and not forced.

#### Philemon 14

I did not want to do anything without your consent. Paul did not think it right to keep Onesimus with him in Rome and did not want to compel Philemon to accept him back. Instead, it was his intention to persuade him, so that his love is authentic and not coerced, i.e. any favour you do will be spontaneous and not forced. Paul does not want to create a situation where the reconciliation of the two men was only achieved due to any obligation that Philemon might have felt toward Paul. If that were the case then any reconciliation would be hollow and could even be damaging to Paul's relationship with Philemon. It would certainly not be the good public witness for Christ that Paul also hoped to achieve.

Under Roman law, Paul was not necessarily obliged to return Onesimus to his owner, for Philemon was not a Roman citizen, nor would Paul accept Philemon's right to the ownership of another person, especially one who was a child of God. His appeal is clearly made on the grounds of what is right according to the teachings of their mutual faith. It is a matter of Christian

morality with clear social implications, especially given the era that it was been played out in.

Not forced. Any disciple who knows what is right in the sight of God should do what is expected without any feeling of compulsion, reluctance or because it looks good: <<*Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver*>> (2 Corinthians 9:7), and: <<*Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve*>> (1 Peter 5:2).

<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good –

### Philemon 15

The reason he was separated from you. The Greek verb is passive, without indicating any agent of the action explicitly expressed. It is best seen as a divine passive, where God is understood to be sovereignly behind the events. It is thus reminiscent of Joseph's betrayal by his brothers, which resulted in his long sojourn in Egypt. After Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, he remarked: <<*So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt*>> (Genesis 45:8).

Have him back for good. King Solomon once wrote: <<*A hot-tempered man must pay the penalty; if you rescue him, you will have to do it again*>> (Proverbs 19:19), but Onesimus is now a reformed man in the Lord and he will not flee from his service ever again. Therefore, this can be seen as Onesimus returning to the faithful service of his master but now as a beloved brother, still working in his service but together in a joint venture for the kingdom.

For good can also be taken as for all eternity for both their futures are confirmed in Christ and it draws an association from the Torah, where the Greek word Paul uses *aionion* is used in the LXX and translated as 'for life': <<*These are the laws you are to set before them: "If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything. If he comes alone, he is to go free alone; but if he has a wife when he comes, she is to go with him. If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the woman and her children shall belong to her master, and only the man shall go free. "But if the servant declares, 'I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free,' then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life*>> (Exodus 21:1-6). In Philemon's case, he is to bring Onesimus before the Lord as the Judge so that they can equally become servants of the Lord for all eternity, no longer as master and slave but as spiritual brothers and partners. Philemon's actions toward Onesimus need to be framed in the context of worshipping and bringing glory to God.

<sup>16</sup> no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

### Philemon 16

No longer as a slave seems to indicate that Paul may have expected Onesimus' emancipation. At no time does Paul try to plead Onesimus' innocence. He had committed a serious crime and deserved the appropriate punishment. His absconding was bad enough, as it would damage the reputation of Philemon and his household. It appears he also stole from Philemon. Onesimus was a convicted sinner, forgiven by God. Therefore, Paul is calling for Philemon to act out of the same grace that had been shown to Onesimus and indeed to Philemon himself at the time of his own salvation and ever since. That is why they are now brothers in the Lord with Paul as the spiritual father of them both. They are equal partners for: <<*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*>> (Galatians 3:28).

Elsewhere, Paul writes: <<*Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favouritism. Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven*>> (Colossians 3:22-4:1). Paul's comments in Philemon in no way contradict this passage from Colossians, especially as the two letters were written and delivered at the same time. In the letter to the church in Colossæ, Paul is assuming that either the slave or the master is not a disciple. When both slave and master are disciples then the relationship immediately changes to one of brothers. Again, this does not mean that the master cannot employ his former slave, for it is their relationship that changes.

The Greek word *doulos* is used for slave and can also be translated as bondservant or servant. There were different levels of servanthood in the NT era including those who were slaves in the traditional sense and those who were actually paid workers, who would have the right to freedom either for payment or after a lengthy period of service, perhaps to pay off a debt. Some bondservants were actually entrusted with carrying out business on behalf of their masters: <<*Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money*>> (Matthew 25:14-18), or undertaking roles of key responsibility: <<*Abraham was now old and well advanced in years, and the Lord had blessed him in every way. He said to the chief servant in his household, the one in*

charge of all that he had, “Put your hand under my thigh. I want you to swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I am living, but will go to my country and my own relatives and get a wife for my son Isaac”>> (Genesis 24:1-4).

The particle as, Greek *hōs*, allowed more freedom for Philemon to ponder and then choose to do what was right, rather than having Paul command him directly. Clearly, however, Paul expected an entirely transformed relationship between the two of them based on the fact that Onesimus was now Philemon’s brother in the Lord.

<sup>17</sup> So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

### Philemon 17

Partner, Greek *koinōnos*, is from the same root as sharing, Greek *koinōnia*, in v.6. The good that is in Philemon should now be expressed in his new relationship with Onesimus. Since God has received his people for the sake of Christ, so too they are to receive one another: <<*You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation*>> (Romans 5:6-11), and: <<*So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*>> (2 Corinthians 5:16-21).

The presence of *koinonia* within a class-based society that was previously one of social division between those who have power, wealth, value and influence, and those who do not, gives public testimony to the empowering grace of God.

What Paul is asking for is that Philemon forgives the harm Onesimus may have done by leaving him, certainly damaging his reputation and breaching any trust that may have been placed in him. Forgiveness is a key attribute for disciples of Christ for a very good reason: <<*If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven – if there was anything to forgive – I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us.*

*For we are not unaware of his schemes>> (2 Corinthians 2:10), not forgetting: <<And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins>> (Mark 11:25), and: <<I write to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name>> (1 John 2:12).*

Welcome him as you would welcome me uses the Greek *proslambano*, which suggests the type of personal welcome one might expect when invited into a good friend's home, which is the type of greeting that Paul himself would expect when he next visits Philemon.

The combination of the words partner and welcome shows there was an expectation that Onesimus would be welcomed into the house church where he was once a slave but would now be a fully accepted member of the community.

<sup>18</sup> If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me.

### Philemon 18

If he has done you any wrong suggests that Onesimus not only ran away from Philemon but possibly took money or possessions from him as well. This would have provided him the means to purchase passage to Rome and to live there for a time. Roman society expected brutal punishment of fugitive slaves and bondservants, at times resulting in death. Thus Paul is asking Philemon to do something quite extraordinary by forgiving Onesimus' debt.

<sup>19</sup> I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back – not to mention that you owe me your very self.

### Philemon 19

I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. Although Paul was probably dictating the letter to Timothy (v.1), Paul takes the stylus at this juncture and signs his own name. This action underlines his personal guarantee that he will repay any loss Philemon has incurred, i.e. I will pay it back; a remarkable offer considering the fact that Paul, an impoverished prisoner, was accepting full financial liability for anything that Onesimus might owe to Philemon, a person of considerable wealth.

It is unlikely that Philemon would have missed the point in the responsibility of paying back a debt. Paul owed Philemon nothing yet was prepared to take on the responsibility of paying back someone else's debt. Jesus too owed nothing, i.e. he had no sin, yet had stood in the place of Philemon, and indeed for everyone else, so the personal debt that Philemon can now repay is to accept Onesimus back as a true brother in Christ. As recently noted but worth repeating, Paul's words to the church groups in Rome sum this up very well: *<<You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been*

*reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation>> (Romans 5:6-11).*

Paul was here making an oath that would be sacred to men of God both then and now. Other examples from Scripture are: <<This is what we will do to them: We will let them live, so that wrath will not fall on us for breaking the oath we swore to them>> (Joshua 9:20), <<Then the Israelites asked, “Who from all the tribes of Israel has failed to assemble before the Lord?” For they had taken a solemn oath that anyone who failed to assemble before the Lord at Mizpah should certainly be put to death>> (Judges 21:5), <<The king then took an oath: “As surely as the Lord lives, who has delivered me out of every trouble, I will surely carry out today what I swore to you by the Lord, the God of Israel: Solomon your son shall be king after me, and he will sit on my throne in my place”>> (1 Kings 1:29-30), and: <<The next morning the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul>> (Acts 23:12). However, there is one oath that stands out above all other examples, that made by Jesus: <<Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant>> (Hebrews 7:22). A man’s word was his bond but the written word carried a legal guarantee: <<“Then, just as the Lord had said, my cousin Hanamel came to me in the courtyard of the guard and said, ‘Buy my field at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. Since it is your right to redeem it and possess it, buy it for yourself.’ “I knew that this was the word of the Lord; so I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel and weighed out for him seventeen shekels of silver. I signed and sealed the deed, had it witnessed, and weighed out the silver on the scales. I took the deed of purchase – the sealed copy containing the terms and conditions, as well as the unsealed copy – and I gave this deed to Baruch son of Neriah, the son of Mahseiah, in the presence of my cousin Hanamel and of the witnesses who had signed the deed and of all the Jews sitting in the courtyard of the guard>> (Jeremiah 32:8-12), and: <<So he called in each one of his master’s debtors. He asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ “‘Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,’ he replied. “The manager told him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.’ “Then he asked the second, ‘And how much do you owe?’ “‘A thousand bushels of wheat,’ he replied. “He told him, ‘Take your bill and make it eight hundred’>> (Luke 16:5-7).

Paul usually used a scribe to write his letters, such as Tertius in Romans: <<I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord>> (Romans 16:22). However, he tended to write part of the letter in his own hand to personalise and authenticate it: <<I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand>> (1 Corinthians 16:21), <<See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!>> (Galatians 6:11), <<I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you>> (Colossians 4:18), and: <<I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write>> (2 Thessalonians 3:17).

Owe me even your very self is a reference to the fact that Philemon came to saving faith through Paul’s ministry, so that Philemon owed Paul something far

greater, namely, his eternal life, or at least he owed that to Christ through Paul's faithful service. Either way, the debt that Onesimus owed to Philemon was therefore insignificant by comparison.

Overall, Paul's arguments are not coercive or forceful, but powerfully persuasive to anyone who would consider themselves a true servant of Christ. At most, Philemon would have to swallow his pride and it is unlikely he would have ever charged any financial loss either to Paul or Onesimus. As will be seen in comments made on v.22, it is possible that Philemon not only accepted Onesimus back as a brother, releasing him from his service, but may even have set him up with his own home in Ephesus.

<sup>20</sup> I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.

### Philemon 20

I do wish in the NIV fails to correctly translate the true force behind Paul's statement in this verse that is seen elsewhere: <<**Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ**>> (v.20 NASB). **Yes**, Greek *nai*, introduces Paul's subsequent wish as a more emphatic repetition of his request that Philemon welcome Onesimus as a partner. While Paul recognises that such a radical departure from social convention would derive from Philemon's status in the Lord, he also recognises in the parallel phrase that Philemon has a proven capacity for refreshing hearts.

I may have some benefit from you in the Lord. Those who work closely with each other in the service of God have a natural affinity that usually has a demonstrated positive outworking, especially towards those who have given so much to the others: <<**What has happened to all your joy? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me**>> (Galatians 4:15), and: <<**We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us**>> (1 Thessalonians 2:8). Paul knew Philemon to be a good man of noble character and expected good things from him: <<**But the noble man makes noble plans, and by noble deeds he stands**>> (Isaiah 32:8).

In v.7 Paul had rejoiced in Philemon's proven work: <<**refreshed the hearts of the saints**>>, and in v.12 he said: <<**I am sending him – who is my very heart**>>. Now in v.20 Paul picks up this language again, using the Greek *splanchna* for heart again for the third time, and commands Philemon to refresh my heart in Christ. What the Lord has already worked into Philemon's life is now to become a reality in his relationship with Onesimus.

## IV. Philemon 21-25 - Personal Remarks and Greetings

Paul concludes the letter by indicating that he plans to travel to Colossæ (vv.21-22), and by extending greetings from various co-workers in Rome (vv.23-25).

<sup>21</sup> Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

## Philemon 21

Confident of your obedience does not imply obedience to Paul but obedience to God, for God's people have always been called to obedience: <<*Obey what I command you today. I will drive out before you the Amorites, Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites*>> (Exodus 34:11), <<*If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands, I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees of the field their fruit*>> (Leviticus 26:3-4), <<*Then you will remember to obey all my commands and will be consecrated to your God*>> (Numbers 15:40), <<*Love the Lord your God and keep his requirements, his decrees, his laws and his commands always*>> (Deuteronomy 11:1), and: <<*Whoever obeys his command will come to no harm, and the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure*>> (Ecclesiastes 8:5). It is a test of genuine discipleship: <<*Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him*>> (John 14:21), and: <<*Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us*>> (1 John 3:24).

Knowing that you will do even more for Philemon should naturally follow the Lord's teaching, which is always to do more than is asked or expected, even without being asked, for such is the heart of Christ: <<*You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you*>> (Matthew 5:38-42).

Some think that even more could suggest freeing Onesimus. Others think Paul was hinting that Philemon should send Onesimus back to minister to Paul. Paul may have deliberately not given specific instructions to Philemon, giving him the freedom to decide which course of action would be the right choice to make.

<sup>22</sup> And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.

## Philemon 22

Prepare a guest room for me. Paul expected to be released from prison and come to Colossæ for a visit. It is uncertain if this indicates that Paul had abandoned, or at least delayed, his previous plans to go further west to Spain, as he had written to the church in Rome: <<*So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this fruit, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way*>> (Romans 15:28). Many people link this verse to a similar one by the writer to the Hebrews to strengthen the argument by some that Paul wrote that letter too: <<*I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon*>> (Hebrews 13:19).

Paul was used to being hosted by local people whenever he visited, as it was considered to be part of their duty before God to be hospitable, and Paul acknowledges them for doing so. For example: <<*Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings*>> (Romans 16:23a).

There is circumstantial evidence that Paul was released after facing Nero in court and then travelled east, possibly visiting Crete, where he left Titus to complete the work: <<*The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you*>> (Titus 1:5), and later arranged to meet up with him in Nicopolis: <<*As soon as I send Artemas or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, because I have decided to winter there*>> (Titus 3:12). It is also likely that he visited Ephesus, which can be seen in his letters to Timothy, the first of which was thought to have been written between his periods of imprisonment in Rome, while Timothy was in Ephesus and Paul was on his way to Macedonia, and the second during his final imprisonment in the capital before being martyred: <<*Timothy, my son, I am giving you this command in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by recalling them you may fight the battle well, holding on to faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and so have suffered shipwreck with regard to the faith. Among them are Hymenæus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme*>> (1 Timothy 1:18-20), and: <<*Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done*>> (2 Timothy 4:14).

Some commentators believe that Alexander played a key role in having Paul re-arrested in Ephesus to be shipped back to Rome for the last time. As a metal worker, he may have had a grudge against Paul, for they made a lot of money making metal images of the Greek goddess Artemis and Paul was drawing people away from her to Christ. This was the cause of the riots in Ephesus recorded in Acts 19:23-41.

There is an interesting passage of Scripture in Paul's final letter before he went to his death in Rome: <<*May the Lord show mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains. On the contrary, when he was in Rome, he searched hard for me until he found me. May the Lord grant that he will find mercy from the Lord on that day! You know very well in how many ways he helped me in Ephesus*>> (2 Timothy 1:16-18). This would seem to confirm that Paul was in Ephesus after his release from prison in Rome for the first time. But what is of greater interest is the man Onesiphorus, which means 'bringing profit', has the same root as Onesimus and would have been a suitable name for Philemon to have given him for his freedom! What Paul writes about him so closely matches that of Onesimus tending to him in Rome and then it is subsequently noted he has his own household in Ephesus. Could it be that Philemon not only welcomed him back and gave him his freedom, but also set him up for a new life as a free man in Ephesus? Most interpreters hold that he is a separate person who was willing to assist Paul during the time of persecution in Rome. The structure of the language concerning Onesiphorus is also the past tense and it seems that he too may have been martyred by the time of Paul's death and it was just his

family that were in Ephesus. Thus there is no real evidence to link the two men.

**Restored to you.** The Greek word *charizomai* allows a double meaning for this brief statement. It can mean that Paul's freedom will be restored to him so that he can continue in his ministry. The word can also indicate the giving of a gift, which implies that when Paul does visit after his release he will be imparting spiritual gifts upon those in Philemon's church, which is part of his own apostolic calling and gifting: *<<God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong – that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith>>* (Romans 1:9-12).

**In answer to your prayers.** As discussed previously, Paul was a man of prayer and he expected others to be naturally like him, and just as he was praying for them, he was aware they were praying for him: *<<I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me>>* (Romans 15:30), and: *<<He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favour granted us in answer to the prayers of many>>* (2 Corinthians 1:10-11).

<sup>23</sup> Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings.

### **Philemon 23**

**Epaphras** is one of Philemon's fellow Colossians, whom God had used to plant the church in that city: *<<You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf>>* (Colossians 1:7), and: *<<Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured>>* (Colossians 4:12). He was then in Rome as Paul's fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus. The circumstances of his arrest are unknown, but Paul's mention of him here could go beyond his physical incarceration, calling on his fellow Colossians to become like **Epaphras** in his spiritual bondage to Christ.

<sup>24</sup> And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.

### **Philemon 24**

**Mark**, **Aristarchus**, **Demas** and **Luke** are also named in Colossians 4:10-14 *<<My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.) Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me. Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him*

*that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis. Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings>>.*

Mark, also called John, was called the cousin of Barnabas in the closing remarks to the Colossians although he was actually his nephew, being the son of Mary, Barnabas' sister, who hosted a church in her Jerusalem home: *<<When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying>>* (Acts 12:12). He had travelled with Barnabas and Paul on their first missionary journey but left them without consent after they had travelled from Cyprus back to the mainland: *<<From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem>>* (Acts 13:13), causing dissention between Barnabas and Paul later on: *<<Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord>>* (Acts 15:36-40). Mark later became reconciled to Paul and served him faithfully. In the interim, he worked closely with the apostle Peter and is the author of Mark's Gospel.

Aristarchus was a fellow worker with Paul and was with him during the riots in Ephesus: *<<Soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's travelling companions from Macedonia, and rushed as one man into the theatre>>* (Acts 19:29).

Lamentably, Demas later followed worldly pursuits and deserted Paul in his greatest hour of need: *<<Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia>>* (2 Timothy 4:9-10).

Luke is the author of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. Luke was apparently with Paul throughout his two-year or so imprisonment in Caesarea, and then a further two-year Roman imprisonment, staying with him to the very end during his final period of imprisonment too: *<<Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry>>* (2 Timothy 4:11).

Again, this verse from 2 Timothy demonstrates the reconciliation of Mark to Paul, not too dissimilar to what Paul is asking of Philemon in this letter. Practice what you preach comes to mind!

My fellow workers. Being a disciple of Christ is an active duty of love and great joy, but full also of hardship, sacrifice and even danger. These men, and other people like them, were called to work in the harvest field and they did not disappoint for they were an answer to Paul's many prayers in response to Jesus' command to: *<<Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field>>* (Matthew 9:38). Such people deserve the respect of their brothers and sisters in Christ: *<<Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who*

*work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other>> (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13).*

<sup>25</sup> The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

### Philemon 25

Paul ends with a brief but heartfelt benediction for his dear friend. He asks for the grace of Jesus to be with your spirit, that is, for him to know the true grace of God in his inner being.

Be with your spirit. The Spirit of Christ is the one who mediates the grace of the Lord Jesus by interacting with the believer's own human spirit.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the one that is with all believers, for it was said of him that: *<<You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy>>* (Psalm 45:7), and he has made a promise to those who keep his commands: *<<Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age>>* (Matthew 28:19-20). This is important to know, because: *<<Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved>>* (Acts 4:12).