



THE BOOK OF PHILEMON



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INTRODUCTION

Paul wrote this great letter to Philemon, who was a man who lived in a place called Colossae. He was a very wealthy man, so wealthy that he owned at least one domestic slave named Onesimus. Onesimus ran away from his master and arrived in Rome, where he met the apostle Paul.

After they met, Paul shared the good news about Jesus with him, and Onesimus became a Christian. And so, in this letter, the apostle Paul is pleading on behalf of Onesimus, for Philemon to take Onesimus back and forgive him for all his wrongdoings.

At some point, Paul had convinced Onesimus that running away from his problems doesn't make them go away, but facing his problems can actually be a blessing. So Onesimus wants to return to his master now through the grace of God, and that's the setting for the letter to Philemon.

AUTHOR

All commentators agree that the apostle Paul is the author, and he wrote the letter whilst in a Roman prison. He wrote it to his long-time friend Philemon, possibly during the time of his ministry in western Asia from the city of Ephesus.

DATE

This letter, along with the letters of Ephesians, Colossians and Philippians, was all written by Paul during his first Roman imprisonment somewhere around A.D. 61 to 63. Some scholars suggest that the letter could have been written during Paul's Caesarean imprisonment in A.D. 58-60 before he left for Rome.

Still, others suggest that it may have been written during imprisonment in Ephesus around A.D. 55-56. Because Paul mentions many of the same people to whom he refers in the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, it is probable that this letter was written during his first Roman imprisonment.

OUTLINE

Introduction. Philemon 1-3
Thankfulness for Philemon. Philemon 4-7
Closing remarks. Philemon 23-25

THE TEXT

'Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.' Philemon 1-3

When the apostle Paul called himself a prisoner of Christ Jesus, he called himself that for two reasons, **Philemon 1**. The first reason is that he literally was in prison at this time; he was under house arrest, **Acts 28:30-31**. This tells us that Paul must have been a wealthy man because he stayed there in his own rented house. We know he was wealthy because if you were under house arrest, you had to pay for your own guard to guard you under Roman law.

We know he was wealthy because he took Doctor Luke with him everywhere. Luke was his personal doctor, and Paul paid for his services. And so he's imprisoned in Rome, but under moderate supervision in his own house, and it's from here that he writes this letter.

But I also believe that he calls himself a prisoner of Christ for another reason. Paul was 'a prisoner of Christ Jesus' because he was in prison for Christ's sake. In other words, when he became a Christian and started preaching the Gospel of Christ. He was being persecuted for the sake of Christ, and part of that persecution meant that he ended up in prison for the sake of Christ.

He is a prisoner of Christ because he wants to be a prisoner of Christ. Nobody forced him to become a follower of Christ. He chose to follow Christ because Christ's love was so great for him, **John 3:16 / Ephesians 3:18**. Paul understood that if Christ died for him, the worst of sinners, he had absolutely no doubts about how much God loved him, **1 Timothy 1:15 / 1 John 4:8**.

Paul knew exactly who he was and who his Master was, and he was absolutely aware of the love of Christ at all times. Even when Paul found himself in a stinking prison cell at times, he continued to remember the love of God. He knew that even in a prison, his God still loved him, still cared for him and would meet all his needs, and God allowed him to share that love with others.

Paul had company on this occasion; he had his brother Timothy with him, **Philemon 1**. Paul may have converted Timothy, and we understand this because of the language Paul uses to describe him, **1 Corinthians 4:17 / 1 Timothy 1:2**.

And we know that Timothy was held in high regard in places like Lystra and Iconium, and Paul wanted to take him along as a travelling companion, **Acts 16:3**.

So from the apostle Paul's point of view, Timothy wasn't just a brother in the Lord, **Philemon 1**, he was a man he could trust as a companion, he was a man he loved. Paul describes Timothy in such a loving way because Timothy, too, was touched by the love of God.

Here was a brother who genuinely cared for others and put others first, and here was a brother who had proved himself over and over again as a servant of the Gospel, **Philippians 2:20-22**. Timothy was trustworthy, genuine, a man who knew what true love was and a faithful companion in the Lord.

When we're touched by God's love, we want to extend that love to others, and that's what these Christians did with the love they received from God. That's why Philemon opened up his house so that anyone who wanted to receive this love could come in and receive it.

The name Philemon means 'beloved', and some commentators believe that Apphia is his wife and Archippus is his son, **Philemon 2**. We can't be sure about that, but one thing we are sure of is that they are faithful members of the church that meets in his house.

Philemon was a well-respected man in his community; he was a wealthy man, and he owned lots of land. He's so rich, as we mentioned earlier, he owns at least one slave. And Philemon himself became a Christian when he heard the Gospel being preached by Paul, **Philemon 19**.

Philemon is going to learn that Jesus always dealt with people with love; he's going to learn to rely on God instead of his wealth to get him through the day as Jesus did.

He's going to learn to see a slave as his brother in Christ, instead of seeing him as a piece of property to be exploited. He's going to learn that a slave and rich people all rely on the same grace that he does, and he's going to learn to share what he has with others, for the glory of God, as Jesus did.

And he did that when he opened up his house and allowed the church to meet in his house, **Philemon 2**. Remember that the early Christians didn't have church buildings like we do today; they met in people's homes, **Romans 16:3-5 / Colossians 4:15**.

Hiebert, in his commentary, says the following.

'Christian congregations were dependent upon the hospitality of wealthy members who could furnish their own houses for this purpose. This note then contains an indication of the social status of Philemon. In a large city, there would be several such assemblies, **Romans 16:5 / Romans 16:10-11 / Romans 16:14-15**. Whether the church at Colossae had more than one place of assembly is not known. Probably they did.'

There was no 'church' as the world understands the word today; there were meeting places, but no church buildings. A 'church building' is just a convenient place to meet together, a place where like-minded people can come to worship God in peace.

And I think sometimes we forget this, that's why we need to get out of the habit of saying things like, 'I'm off to church' or 'see you at church on Sunday'. We are the church, and I think we forget that we're the body of Christ, which makes up His church, **Ephesians 5:29-30**. Paul isn't addressing a physical building; he's addressing the Christians who came together to worship God in Philemon's house. They are members of the body.

When Philemon opened up his house, he was sending an open invitation to other people in a very hostile society to come and receive the love and comfort he had received from God, **2 Corinthians 1:3-4**. So the church is here so that we can encourage, strengthen and love each other, with the encouragement, strength and love we ourselves receive from God.

And one way God shows His love is by giving us His grace and peace. Notice how Paul reminds Philemon of the source of that grace and peace and the spiritual state Philemon needs to be in, **Philemon 3**.

Whenever Paul writes to someone to deal with any situation, he doesn't go straight in and deal with the situation first; he always writes and gets his readers thinking straight first. He gets their minds focused on Christ first before dealing with any situation or problem.

In the first three verses, he has already mentioned 'Christ' two times; he mentions 'Jesus Christ' eight times throughout this small letter. So not only does he remind Philemon of who Christ is, he's reminding him of the spiritual relationship all Christians have with God.

Grace and peace are from the Father and the Son, and so they are both the source of every blessing, **Philemon 3**. Paul, who experienced so much grace and peace in his life by being delivered from his past sin of persecuting the church, **1 Corinthians 15:10**, wants to remind the church of their need for grace and peace.

When Paul says, 'grace and peace to you', he's talking about God's mercies, God's unfailing love, and God's favour. Notice how God meets our needs, Paul says 'according to his glorious riches', **Philippians 4:19**.

He doesn't say 'out of his glorious riches' but 'according to his glorious riches'. Paul says, God's riches are unending, they are unlimited, and they are immeasurable. God can never run out of blessings for us because they are immeasurable, **Ephesians 3:20**.

It's God's sun and every time His sun shines, it's a blessing from God to you, whether you're a Christian or not, **Matthew 5:45**. Every time His rain falls, it's a blessing from God to you, whether you're a Christian or not. Whether you are a Christian or not, every day you're alive is a gift from God to you.

And so Paul is saying that God is the supplier of everything, not just spiritual things but material things too, **Ephesians 1:3**. We enjoy our spiritual blessings because we've acknowledged where they come from. We've obeyed the Gospel, **Matthew 28:19-20 / Mark 16:15-15**, been baptised into Christ, **Acts 2:38**, and so we're now 'in Christ'.

'I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. 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. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.' **Philemon 4-7**

The Christians who met at Philemon's house were real Christians, **Matthew 6:15-16 / Galatians 5:22-23**. And we know they were real Christians because of the way their lives reflected their faith in Christ Jesus. Paul's prayer life was overwhelmingly abundant, **Philemon 4**. He must have been constantly praying for thousands of people all over the ancient world.

But did Philemon, who was such a true Christian and whose gifts abounded to the work of the Lord, did he need Paul's prayers? Yes, he did. So we all need prayer, and the apostle Paul is going to give us three reasons why we should be thankful in our prayers for faithful, genuine Christians.

1. We should be thankful when Christians demonstrate their faith and deeds together, **Philemon 5**.

When it comes to faith, the world has a very misleading conception of it. It's a very easy-going faith, a faith that doesn't require any self-examination, a faith that doesn't require you to do anything else; all you have to do is believe, **James 2:14-26**.

And because of this misconception, many Christians in the world today are very lazy when it comes to their faith. A lot of people have what the Bible calls a dead faith, **James 2:17 / James 2:26**.

But that wasn't a problem with Philemon, because of his faith in the Lord, he was far from being lazy. Paul heard about his faith, **Philemon 5**, and that's exactly what Philemon had built his reputation upon, loving others like Christ loved him, **John 13:34-35**.

Both Onesimus and Epaphras had reported to Paul that Philemon continued to be a faithful and loving person, both toward Jesus and toward his brethren. Real faith is driven by love, and when you receive the love of the Lord, that love produces faith in action; it's faith with legs attached.

Remember when God tested Abraham in **Genesis 22**? In **Genesis 22:2**, God told him to, 'Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.'

It's almost as if God Himself is thrusting the knife into Abraham piece by piece. This was a three-day journey, fifty-sixty miles, and so for Abraham to do what God asked, he was going to require 'faith with legs attached.'

We could imagine Abraham thinking to himself on that journey, 'This is my only son whom I love, but hey God, if that's what you want me to do, then I'll do it,' **James 2:20-24**.

Remember in **Exodus 4**, when God told Moses to go back to Egypt and ask Pharaoh to let His people go? Moses gave excuse after excuse, but finally, he gave in to God and said, 'If that's what you want to do, then God, I'll do it.'

So he travelled a distance of three hundred and seventy-two miles back to Egypt from Midian. The point is that God told Abraham what to do and where to go to do it, and he told Moses what to do and where to go to do it. But they were both willing to go anywhere and do anything God told them to do.

And Philemon is no exception; his faith in Jesus led him to good deeds, and his good deeds were shown in his love for all the saints, **Philemon 5**. Even though Paul was under house arrest in Rome, word still got back to him about

Philemon's faith and his good deeds. He told Philemon that he had heard about his faith with legs attached, he's heard about his faith in the Lord, and he's heard about his love for all the saints, **Philemon 5**.

When we practice love like that, people are going to talk about it, **Galatians 5:6 / 1 John 3:18**. If our brother or sister needs help and we just ignore them, we're telling them and the world that God simply doesn't care about them, **James 2:14-17**.

If a non-Christian needs some kind of help and we don't help because we're too busy, we're telling them and the world that God is simply too busy to help them. The Christian faith needs to be a genuine faith with legs attached, a faith that is shown through love, a faith that leads us to serve others.

2. The more we share our faith, the more we learn about Christ, **Philemon 6**.

Paul says, the deeper Philemon recognises how greatly he has been blessed, the more motivated he will be to extend mercy and pardon to others, especially to Onesimus. And the very fact that Philemon has displayed such a loving spirit in the past, convinces Paul that he isn't writing in vain, **Philemon 6**.

O'Brien, in his commentary, says the following.

'In the present context, epignosis ("knowledge") conveys both the ideas of understanding and experience. The apostle's prayer was not simply that Philemon might understand or appreciate the treasures that belonged to him, but that he might also experience them.'

Remember, Paul hasn't mentioned Onesimus yet; he's laying the foundation of his letter first. And so Paul is clearing the ground and cultivating the soil very carefully before planting the name of Onesimus in **Philemon 1:10**. Paul wrote this letter to deal with the problem of Onesimus, and so he was complimenting Philemon concerning his reputation and the sharing of his faith.

He's reminding Philemon of his good Christian behaviour because he's eventually going to address the delicate subject of Onesimus' flight to Rome. In other words, what Paul wanted Philemon to do was to see God's forgiveness in his life in order to show forgiveness to Onesimus, **1 Peter 3:15**.

When we realise what we have in Christ as Christians, we will be so excited about it that we will want to share it with others. And the more we share with others what truths we've found in God's Word, the more we want to learn from God's Word so that we can share it with even more people. And that's exactly what Philemon has been doing: he's been actively sharing his faith with others.

He's beginning to understand more and more fully every good thing he has in Christ Jesus, **Philemon 6**. And so, because of that understanding, he wants to share his faith with others. He wants to let his light shine, and there's no better way of letting our light shine than combining our faith with deeds, **Matthew 5:14-16**.

3. When we share our faith and demonstrate our faith in a good deed, it's going to affect others, **Philemon 7**.

Paul's only hope for Onesimus had its foundations in the kind of man Paul knew Philemon was. And what was Philemon? He was Paul's brother in Christ, **Philemon 7**.

Philemon wasn't a nominal disciple; Paul's commendation of his Christian behaviour reveals that this brother had a great impact on all those with whom he came into contact.

He was a disciple who had made an impact on the lives of others outside of Colossae, where he lived. Philemon's love was so evident that he was a well-respected man in his community.

But his love for everyone was so evident that it went far beyond his community. It reached Rome, which was almost twelve hundred miles away from Colossae, where Philemon lived.

And so Paul says that brings him joy and encourages him so much that he tells every Christian visitor he ever gets whilst he's under house arrest, **Philemon 7**. And under a Roman dictatorship, that's great news to other Christians, that refreshes their hearts, **Galatians 6:9 / Philemon 4**.

The apostle Paul was prayer disciplined; he always had and expressed his appreciation for faithful Christians. He always mentioned individuals and congregations in his prayers, and here he mentions his thanks for Philemon. We should be remembering these people and thanking God for them.

Paul wasn't just thankful for Philemon; he was thankful because of his faith in God, and he was thankful because of his love for all the saints. He was thankful for his activeness in sharing his faith; he was thankful because he realised what he had in Christ.

He was thankful because of the joy and encouragement he gave Paul, and he was thankful because he refreshed the hearts of the saints, **Philemon 7**. As Christians, we have many reasons to be thankful, and we need to take every opportunity we get to get down on our knees and tell God how thankful we are, **Colossians 3:17**.

‘Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, 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— I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly, he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.’ **Philemon 8-11**

The apostle Paul knows exactly what it means to throw his authority around as an apostle, **Galatians 1:1**. But when he writes to his dear friend Philemon, he doesn't use his apostolic authority; he simply calls himself ‘a prisoner of Christ Jesus,’ **Philemon 1:1**.

In **Philemon 8-11**, we read about an appeal for love on behalf of Onesimus, who was Philemon's runaway slave. Remember, he's just finished telling Philemon that his love for all the saints and his faith in Christ have given Paul and the other saints great joy and encouragement.

As a Christ-sent apostle, Paul could have commanded Philemon to carry out the requests that he made in this letter, **Philemon 8**. But because Paul knows the character of Philemon, he sees no need to command him to do anything. Instead, Paul appeals to Philemon, **Philemon 9**. The word ‘appeal’ is the Greek word ‘parakaleo’, and it means to urgently ask for mercy.

By appealing to Philemon on the basis of love, Paul knows that greater results will occur. In other words, based on Philemon's love for Paul, Paul is urging him to take the right actions and have mercy on Onesimus.

By the time Paul wrote this letter to Philemon, he was an old man and probably in his late sixties, **Philemon 9**. In real terms, that's not old, but when we think about his life and the toils and hardships he's been through, **2 Corinthians 11:16-33**. It shouldn't surprise us if he has a few wrinkles on his face and a balding head.

And knowing the great friendship between Paul and Philemon, we could possibly imagine Paul having a smile on his face as he wrote these words to his long-time friend Philemon, with whom he had shared so many experiences.

Remember, Paul hasn't mentioned Onesimus by name yet and remember, they didn't have a postal system like we do today. There were no postmen going door to door, posting letters through people's doors. This letter was hand-delivered, and it was hand-delivered by Onesimus himself.

Can you imagine what was going through Philemon's mind when Onesimus turned up at his door? He could have turned Onesimus away, in fact, because Onesimus was strictly still his slave, Philemon could have had him put to death or put in prison. He might have become angry and started to lash out at him, but let me tell you why he didn't do that.

When Onesimus turned up at Philemon's house, he had the very letter we're studying today in his hand. And before he made any decisions relating to Onesimus, he read this letter first. Because when you receive a letter from anyone in authority, you take time to read it very carefully.

An apostle is a special messenger of Jesus Christ, a person whom Jesus gave authority for certain tasks. Now, there was a time when Paul's claim to be an apostle was questioned by others, **1 Corinthians 9:2**, but remember, he received a different calling to be an apostle. And when Jesus appeared to him on the Road to Damascus and spoke directly to him, **Acts 9:3-20**, Jesus gave him the authority to be an apostle, **Galatians 1:1**.

But when Paul wrote to his dear friend Philemon, he didn't write it as an apostle; he didn't write as one with authority but rather as a loving, caring brother in Christ.

In effect, Paul's saying, 'Philemon, please don't consider the appeal that I am about to make as an order, it isn't that at all, but an earnest plea from one brother to another.'

But why didn't Paul give Philemon a command concerning Onesimus? Because I'm sure if he did, Philemon would have easily carried out the command. But why didn't he command him?

Well, the answer has to do with the fact that Philemon was a slave owner, but not just any slave, a Christian slave. If any apostle had written a commandment for Christian slave owners to free their slaves, the whole attitude toward Christianity with regard to the despicable institution of slavery would have been changed.

Persecutions were already looming, and this would have been a thousand times more vindictive and destructive. And so slaves by the thousands would have 'accepted' Christianity whether they were truly converted or not, and a revolution would have been triggered.

And so Paul was careful not to command anything of Philemon, but he wanted Philemon to do what was right; he wanted him to do it the way the Lord would have done it.

The Message translation says, 'As Christ's ambassador and now a prisoner for him, I wouldn't hesitate to command this if I thought it necessary, but I'd rather make it a personal request.'

Paul is saying, 'Listen, Philemon, I have a favour to ask of you. I could use the authority Christ has given me, but I'm not going to do that, I'm just going to make a personal request from you.'

And it's because of his loving, caring approach that Paul can go on to say, 'Onesimus is here at your house because I sent him,' **Philemon 10**. He was practising what he preached; he was reminding Philemon of what it means to be a Christian, **Galatians 6:10 / Colossians 3:13**.

I can imagine Philemon pausing here as he read the name Onesimus. I can imagine him looking at Onesimus and thinking to himself I remember when you first became my slave.

He probably bought Onesimus at the local slave market, where they would auction them off, and someone would buy them for so many shekels. And how did Onesimus become his slave? Well, he may become a slave in one of three ways.

1. If Onesimus' father was a slave and Onesimus was born into that family, he would become Philemon's property. The owner could sell him and do whatever he wants with him.
2. If Onesimus was a thief who stole money and, under Jewish or even Roman law, if he stole and couldn't pay it back, then Philemon could take Onesimus as a slave.
3. If Onesimus was a murderer, but instead of killing him, they would decide to give him to the victim's family and the family could take him, sell him or do whatever they liked.

We don't know how Onesimus became Philemon's slave, but we know this much: Onesimus had no rights whatsoever, he was a piece of property, and Philemon owned him. Now, the apostle Paul often referred to himself as a father, **1 Timothy 1:2**, and when Paul uses this language, he's using a Hebrew metaphor.

The Jewish Talmud says the following.

'If one teaches the son of his neighbour the Law, the Scriptures reckon this the same as if he had begotten him.' In other words, if you've ever brought someone to Christ, in a sense, you've become their father.

Onesimus had become Paul's son while he was in chains, **Philemon 10**, which means that when he was in prison, he met Onesimus, and he had the blessing of converting him to Christianity. Now we don't know how and when this happened, but it did happen.

And so Paul, like a child who is loved by his Father in heaven, shared that same loving kindness with Onesimus. That kind of love that goes beyond our understanding, that kind of love that's so willing to forgive all our wrongs. That kind of love that can change a man from the inside out, that kind of love that can make the useless, useful, **Philemon 11**.

It can take a runaway slave like Onesimus, who was once useless, back to his master Philemon and make him useful. Interestingly, the name Onesimus means useful, and Paul appears to be using a play on words when he says, 'formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me,' **Philemon 11**.

In other words, at one time, Onesimus wasn't living up to his name, but now he is. The word 'useful' is the same word that Paul uses to describe how God uses the useless, **2 Timothy 2:21**. Onesimus was now not only useful to Paul but also to Philemon.

Paul has built up a relationship with Onesimus, and he was helping Paul share the Gospel. And when we have someone like Christ in common, we're going to get attached to that person very easily because we have common goals.

We have many things in common. And when we have those things in common, we don't want to run away and hide anymore; we want to go and meet our new brothers and sisters in Christ.

When we're on the run and we don't want to be found, the best place to go is a city where there are lots of people in it. And that's what Onesimus did; he ran away to Rome, but even when he thought nobody knew where he was, God knew.

Hagar tried to run away from her problems, **Genesis 16:7-9**, just like Onesimus did, but when you have an encounter with the Lord, you can be sure that He might ask you to go somewhere where it's difficult to go. God might ask us to go somewhere, but God doesn't send us alone. Hagar went back to Abraham and Sarah, but this time she had God with her.

Not only did she now have God with her, but she also had something in common with Abraham and Sarah. She now knows the God of Abraham and Sarah, just like they do. And when you know God like that, you have everything in common with like-minded people.

And so Onesimus went back to Philemon not only with the promise that every single child of God has got today, but God is also with us always, **Matthew 28:20**. But Onesimus can go back with the knowledge that his master Philemon was now his brother in Christ, and that's a lot to have in common.

Paul, who loved Philemon but also loved Onesimus, wanted nothing but the best for the two of them, so he was trying to help them both out. He's trying to help Philemon see that this runaway slave is now his brother in Christ, and he can be very useful in sharing the Gospel with others.

Now we don't know what Onesimus did, but Paul says, 'if he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back,' **Philemon 18-19**. Now we'll deal with these verses a little later, but do you see what Paul is doing here? I want you to notice that Paul is doing two things for Onesimus.

1. Paul was willing to appeal for mercy on behalf of Onesimus, **Romans 8:33-34 / 1 John 2:1**.
2. Paul was willing to take the punishment that Onesimus deserved.

Now, why was Paul willing to do that for a runaway slave? Paul was willing to take Onesimus' punishment because he knew that's exactly what Christ did for him, **1 Timothy 1:15-16**.

Jesus knows Philemon, and He knows Onesimus, and because He knows them both, He used the apostle Paul to reconcile them back together again, **2 Corinthians 5:18-19**. Christ died for the righteous and the unrighteous; we might even say, He died for the useless and for the useful.

Not only did the apostle Paul's life change when he had an encounter with the Lord Jesus, but Onesimus' life changed too; their lives didn't just change temporarily, their lives changed for good.

And because Paul's life changed so much, he remembered what he preached to the Galatian church, 'A man reaps what he sows,' **Galatians 6:7**. Paul was reaping the benefits of sowing the seeds of love with Onesimus.

That's why Paul says, 'Onesimus has become his son' in **Philemon 10**, and that's why Paul says, 'Onesimus is his very heart' in **Philemon 12**. That's why Paul says, 'He would like to keep Onesimus with him' in **Philemon 13**.

That's why Paul says, 'He is very dear to him' in **Philemon 16**, and that's why Paul says, 'If he owes anything, he will pay it back to Philemon' in **Philemon 19**. Paul says our love towards others should be spontaneous.

'I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. 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. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favour you do will be spontaneous and not forced. Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good — 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 12-16**

The seeds that Paul had sown in Onesimus are beginning to show fruit. Not only did Onesimus accept the love that God had to offer him, but he also had a choice to do the right thing and go back and share that love with Philemon.

Remember, Onesimus was a runaway slave, and in an Empire with as many as sixty million slaves, there were constant fears of a slave revolt. And so when any slave ran away from their master, there were serious consequences; the laws against runaways were extremely strict.

If you were a runaway slave and you got caught, you could end up being crucified or branded with a red-hot iron on the forehead with the letter 'F' for fugitive. Onesimus was in constant danger of falling into the hands of the slave catchers, and it would have been dangerous to have sent him back alone, **Colossians 4:7-9**.

Paul was trying to protect Onesimus on his journey by sending Tychicus with him; he could have kept Onesimus with him, but he respected the civil law in sending him back to Philemon. Paul was doing the right thing, and so was Onesimus.

Paul would have liked Onesimus to stay with him, **Philemon 12-13**, probably because Onesimus could, in effect, be Philemon's minister to Paul while he's in prison, but he chose to freely return Onesimus to Philemon in order that Philemon has the right to exercise his choice in this matter.

And so again, Paul's actions honoured both Roman law and the right of Philemon to make his decision concerning what must be done. If Philemon's actions in this matter were done by obedience to a command of Paul, then it wouldn't have been a choice on his part to decide to do good to Paul.

He didn't want to do anything behind Philemon's back or make him do a good deed that he hadn't agreed to, **Philemon 14**. Paul wanted to do the right thing, but he wanted to do the right thing by God's standards, not human standards.

Our love for others should be spontaneous; it's the type of love that goes into autopilot, it's the type of love that sees a need and then goes on to help that need, **Galatians 6:1 / 1 John 3:16-18**.

And that's the type of love Paul is looking for from Philemon, that spontaneous love, that love that still gives you free will and isn't something forced. Paul did the right thing by sending Onesimus back to his master; Onesimus did the right thing by voluntarily going back to his master. Philemon now needs to do the right thing by accepting Onesimus back, not because he has to, but because it could be a part of God's plan.

When we think about it, since Onesimus ran away, there has been nothing but trouble. Philemon lost his slave worker and his asset, and it made Onesimus a criminal, possibly subject to the death penalty. Yet in all of this, Paul could see a purpose of God, and he wanted Philemon to see that purpose too.

Paul is basically saying, 'Philemon, you've heard people say that God works in mysterious ways. Well, it seems to me that God is working in an unusual way here. Let me tell you what I see, and perhaps it will make sense to you.' In other words, maybe the reason Onesimus left was that God had plans for him.

Maybe Onesimus didn't think he was of much use to Philemon, so he would be better off going somewhere else. Maybe he was always restless in Philemon's home, and he just wanted to get away. But whatever God's plans for him were, he now wants to stay with Philemon for good, **Philemon 15**.

Onesimus made a wrong choice in running away, but that wrong choice led him to the Gospel. In other words, God can use our wrong choices to bring about good, but He doesn't move us to make wrong choices.

Do you remember Joseph? His brothers were jealous because of the attention their brother was getting from their father. They threw him in a cistern. Slave traders went by, and his brothers decided to make some money from Joseph. They sold him to the slave traders, and then they took him to Egypt.

And when his brothers went to Egypt a few years later for food because of a famine, they didn't recognise Joseph. Joseph finally reveals himself and basically says to his brothers, 'listen this was all a part of God's plan, to get us all to Egypt,' **Genesis 45:7**.

There are times when we never see the big picture; we only see what we want to see, **Jeremiah 29:11**. Joseph's brothers didn't know it was part of God's plan until they met up with him again, but Joseph understood what was happening.

And so did the apostle Paul. He knew it was for the best that Onesimus returned to his master; he knew it was part of God's plans. The new relationship, which Paul is discussing here, isn't about Onesimus no longer being a slave in the legal sense; that wasn't going to change. But it was going to change because Onesimus is now his brother in Christ, **Philemon 16**.

We all know that any person obeying the Gospel of Christ becomes the brother or sister of every other Christian. Onesimus' conversion didn't free him from his civil duties as a slave, but because he obeyed the Gospel, that changed his relationship with Philemon.

Paul says, 'listen Onesimus is dear to me, but even dearer to you, and you're going to see a big change in this man's life, you're going to see a dramatic difference in his work for you.'

And the reason he's going to see a big dramatic difference is that he's 'in the Lord' now, **Philemon 16** and his whole attitude toward his life and his master has changed.

The cross of Jesus Christ is the great equaliser; it makes all men equal because all are saved by the same blood, which was shed at Calvary. That goes for the man who was a mass murderer, and that goes for the woman who did nothing but good for people, **Galatians 3:28**.

Philemon and Onesimus know this, but they also know that when you become a Christian, you need to learn a new way of life, **Philippians 2:5**. Onesimus had to learn another new attitude too, the kind of attitude that Paul talks about concerning slaves, **Ephesians 6:5-8**.

Onesimus wasn't going to serve Philemon like he used to, oh no! He's going to obey Philemon with respect and fear. He's going to serve him with a sincere heart just like he would Christ. He wasn't going to sneak outside every now and then for a break when Philemon wasn't watching.

And the reason he was going to do all these things is that he's not working for Philemon anymore, he's working for Jesus. And the reward he gets from Jesus will far outweigh any pay packet he will ever get from Philemon.

Christians are the ones who should be trusted to do a job well, even when the boss is out of town. And that's the new Onesimus, who is standing at his master's door saying, 'Whatever you say, I will do, I won't try and run away again, I'm here to serve you wholeheartedly, as though I was serving our Lord and Saviour Jesus Himself.'

And don't think for a moment that Philemon has it all his own way here, he too has some attitudes to remember, as a master, **Ephesians 6:9 / Colossians 4:1**. In both of those passages, there's a rule that all masters, bosses or people who have others working under them must never forget.

And that's this, 'you too have a master,' and his Name is Jesus Christ, and so Philemon needed to remember this attitude. The attitude that says, 'he's not to threaten Onesimus', this attitude that says, 'God has no favourites'. The attitude that says, 'he has to provide all his slaves with what is right and fair'.

Barclay, in his commentary, says the following.

'Christianity is not out to help a man to escape his past and to run away from it; it is out to enable a man to face his past and to rise above it.'

Paul now goes on to share three sure signs, which will reflect our obedience to God, three ways of measuring our love for Christ, through our obedience to Christ.

'So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.' **Philemon 17-21**

Paul has just shared with us the way Christians should love each other.

1. We need to respect all Christians, as we respect God, **Philemon 17**.

When we become a Christian, there are certain laws or commands that we need to learn, but not only do we need to learn them, but we also need to practice them.

Paul indirectly obligated Philemon to receive Onesimus and remember that Paul and Philemon had previously worked together in evangelism, as **Philemon 1** reminds us.

Paul's now asking Philemon to accept Onesimus as a fellow worker, as Philemon had accepted Paul, **Philemon 17**. To emphasise his request to Philemon, Paul says that he would pay for any financial loss that Philemon may have incurred as a result of Onesimus' departure, **Philemon 18**. In other words, if Philemon believes that Paul is his brother in Christ.

If Philemon truly believes that Paul is his partner, when it comes to sharing the Gospel, then he should do what is right. He should welcome Onesimus as if it were Paul himself; he should do for Onesimus what he would do for Paul.

He should love Onesimus as if he were loving Paul himself; he should love Onesimus as if it were Christ Himself. Paul was expecting Philemon to give to Onesimus a welcoming that doesn't think about 'self' but others, a welcoming that's evident in his life and is motivated by love, **Matthew 25:40**.

And the way Philemon received Onesimus was going to be clear evidence of his attitude towards Paul and God. Love and obedience go together because we can't love God and then ignore His commandments; we just can't do it, **John 14:15 / 1 John 5:3**.

Philemon had a choice: would he choose to love his God and treat Onesimus like the world would? Or will he choose to love his God and welcome Onesimus back into his household, as his new brother in Christ?

Philemon had to choose the right way to treat Onesimus, and he still had to balance his love for Christ with his obedience to Christ. We will want to do what Jesus asks us to do because of what Jesus did for us. And what is one of the things Jesus did for us?

2. He cancelled our debt, **Philemon 18-19**.

Many people believe that Onesimus robbed his master before he ran off, but there's no evidence of that happening. And notice that Paul says he's writing this with his own hand.

What he's doing here is using a legal-type bond between himself and Philemon. Paul's saying I'm going to pay for any debt Onesimus owes so that there will be no obstacles in the way of his appeal, **Philemon 18**.

We don't know what Onesimus did; we don't know if he was supposed to do a job for Philemon but didn't want to do it. We don't know if he stole something from Philemon so that he could run away to Rome.

Maybe Philemon had to hire another slave to take Onesimus' job. We just don't know, but one thing we do know is that Paul's willing to take on that debt, so that Philemon and Onesimus can have the best start to their new relationship.

Paul lays himself out for poor Onesimus, and with all his means pleads his cause with his master. Now, why would Paul do that? As Christ was willing to pay the price for Paul's sins, **1 Peter 2:24**, Paul was willing to pay the price for Onesimus' sins.

So Paul wanted the best start for them both, but it was going to take genuine repentance on Onesimus' part, and it was going to take genuine forgiveness on Philemon's part. Paul says, 'Put it on my account, I will pay whatever he owes you,' **Philemon 19**.

When God demanded payment for our sins, He sent His one and only Son into the world to pay the debt that we owed for our sins, **John 19:30**. Because Paul had received God's amazing grace and had his debt cleared by God, he knew what it was like to be in debt. And Philemon must have heard the words of Jesus ringing in his ears, **Matthew 6:12**. Paul isn't bragging or placing any pressure on Philemon, **Philemon 19**, he's saying, 'remember I was the one who told you about Christ, I was the one who told you that your debt has already been paid for you, and all you had to do was accept it, and remember how you felt indebted to me?'

This was Paul's gentle reminder that Philemon was indebted to him for his conversion. Paul had made great sacrifices in order to preach the Gospel free of charge to people like Philemon, who obeyed in order to receive the free gift of God's grace. Paul's working on the conscience of Philemon, so that Philemon will deal with Onesimus the way Paul dealt with him.

Now, remember, Paul has already told Philemon that his love has refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people back in **Philemon 7**, but here Paul makes it personal. If Philemon did according to what Paul requested, then Paul would be spiritually refreshed, **Philemon 20**.

And we know he's talking spiritually because he says refreshed 'in Christ.' In other words, Paul would be reassured that his labours on behalf of Philemon would have produced a Christ-like character.

3. Let your actions reflect the Master you have in heaven, **Philemon 21**.

Philemon may not have been a great preacher, he may not have been a great song leader, but 'he sure can be a great encouragement to others'. He can be an encouragement to Paul by being obedient to Paul's request, **Philemon 21**. In other words, Paul says, show me that Christ is still working in you.

Paul was under house arrest when he wrote this letter, and being under house arrest can be a very lonely place, but when you're lonely, you need a pick-me-up from time to time, you need some encouragement from time to time.

Paul, who was very aware of his God, Paul, who needed some fellowship, Paul, who was the writer of over half of the New Testament. This same apostle Paul says to Philemon, 'Hey Philemon, give me some encouragement, refresh my heart in Christ,' **Philemon 21**.

Paul was so confident in Philemon welcoming Onesimus back that he knew Philemon would do even more than he asked, **Philemon 21**. Now I believe because of what we read back in **Philemon 13**, that Paul was confident that not only would Philemon set Onesimus free, but that Philemon would also send Onesimus to minister to him in prison. Paul says, 'I know you won't just do as I ask, but I know that you will do even more than I ask,' **Philemon 21**. Paul's letter, full of appeal, was also full of hope and remember Philemon wasn't a bad or a harsh man.

Paul had every reason to expect that Philemon would fulfil his Christian duty and do even more than Paul asked. And the reason he would do even more is that Philemon is aware of how much more God has given him, **Matthew 7:11 / Romans 5:9-10 / Romans 5:15 / Romans 5:17**.

Paul was a blessed man, and he understood that, and he's trying to remind Philemon of just how blessed he is. He says, 'Philemon, I know you'll do what I'm asking you to do, but I also know that you will go the extra mile for Onesimus and for me'. Paul knew if Philemon understood how blessed he was, this would motivate him to do even more.

'And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.' **Philemon 22-25**

Paul's purpose was to visit Colossae again to see his old friend Philemon and the church that met in his house, but by informing Philemon of his intention to visit him, **Philemon 22**, Paul is saying, 'I'm coming to see how you handled my request.'

Philemon was going to have to prepare a room for Paul's visit, and he would have to make sure that he had taken Paul's advice in the way he was to receive Onesimus back into his household.

Philemon had been praying for Paul's release from prison so that he could come over and visit the church that meets in his house and encourage them, **Philemon 22**. All those who had heard of Paul's imprisonment were praying for him, and Paul trusted that those prayers were soon to be answered in his release from prison.

He had full confidence in their prayers for him and that God would answer those prayers and release him. In other words, because of Philemon's and the saint's prayers, he fully expects to be his guest again.

Philemon and the church understood the power of prayer, and when the apostle Paul heard that they were praying for his release, they all were expecting nothing less from God than to have their prayers answered. The point is, Philemon would have to have a room ready for Paul if he really believed his prayers were going to be answered.

Daniel was a man of prayer, and in **Daniel 6**, we find a bunch of men looking for any excuse to get rid of Daniel. And so these men went to King Darius and convinced him to write a decree, and the decree was, 'no one was allowed to pray to any god or man, except King Darius', **Daniel 6:12**.

And they convinced the king to agree that if any man did pray within the next thirty days, they would be thrown into the lion's den, but Daniel prayed anyway, **Daniel 6:10**. Now, what do we think Daniel was praying about?

The story goes on to say that the men saw him and told the king, and so the king, who was very fond of Daniel, had no choice but to throw him into the Lion's den. Not only did the power of prayer send an angel of the Lord to shut up the lion's mouths, **Daniel 6:22-23**. But the power of prayer was able to shut up the mouths of Daniel's enemies because they ended up in the lion's den themselves, but they didn't survive.

Prayer is powerful, and if you pray expecting great things to happen, they will happen, **James 5:16**. Philemon believed that God was able to get Paul out of prison; Paul believed that God could get him out of prison. Every day, saints from all over the world are down on their knees praying that God will bless our congregations, even more than we can ever imagine.

EPAPHRAS

Notice that Paul refers to Epaphras as his fellow prisoner, **Philemon 23**. This isn't literal, but in the spiritual sense that Epaphras was captured by the Lord. Epaphras was a Colossian, a minister of the church at Colossae, and so the chances are he was well known to Philemon, **Colossians 1:7**. He was a converted Gentile, and he was a man full of zeal, a man who was prayer trained, and he had helped Paul in preaching at Colossae, **Colossians 4:12-13**.

MARK

Paul also mentions Mark, **Philemon 24**, who was Barnabas's sister's son, the son of that Mary, in whose house the church met, and prayed for Peter when he was in prison. He's the man whom Saul and Barnabas took along with them to Antioch, and beyond, but left them at Pamphylia.

We also know that Saul and Barnabas had a big argument over Mark when he returned to Antioch. But despite that argument, Mark was back with Paul at this point in time.

ARISTARCHUS

Paul also mentions Aristarchus, **Philemon 24**, who was a Macedonian of Thessalonica. It's very likely that Paul actually converted him to Christ. According to **Acts 19:29**, he was with Paul in the uproar raised by Demetrius at Ephesus. Later, he went along with Paul into Asia and went with him on his voyage to Rome and was now a fellow prisoner there with Paul.

DEMAS

Demas is also with him, **Philemon 24**, and is mentioned in **2 Timothy 4:10** as the one who deserted Paul and returned to the world. And what's interesting about him is that if the letter to Philemon was written later than 2 Timothy, then that means that he must have been restored to fellowship because he's now with Paul again.

LUKE

Paul also sends greetings from Luke the evangelist, **Philemon 24**, Paul's personal physician, the brother whose praise was in all the churches, and a constant companion of the apostle in his travels.

Paul calls them all his fellow workers, **Philemon 24**, which is a huge compliment. They were all ministers of the Gospel, and this shows Paul's great humility towards them and others. The chances are Philemon knew most of these guys because most of them worship in Colossae, and as we looked at earlier, Paul mentions them by name in **Colossians 4:10-14**.

Paul included Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke in his letter to Philemon because he knew that just mentioning Philemon's friends' names would bring joy and encouragement to all the saints that meet in Philemon's house.

Paul relied on God's grace, **Philemon 25**, Epaphras and Mark relied on God's grace, Aristarchus relied on God's grace, Demas and Luke relied on God's grace and Onesimus, and Philemon relied on God's grace.

In the closing of his letter to Philemon, Paul calls on the favour of Jesus for the entire welfare of Philemon. It's Paul's prayer that Jesus shows special favour to this godly man, **3 John 2**. The word 'your' in **Philemon 25** is plural in the Greek text, which means Paul is including the whole church which meets in Philemon's house.

Notice that the word 'spirit' in **Philemon 25** isn't a capital 'S', so he's not referring to the Holy Spirit. Now you might ask, well, what difference does that make? Just as God is a triune being made up of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. God created us as triune beings, made up of a spirit, soul and body, **1 Thessalonians 5:23**.

Paul's basically saying to Philemon, 'I want you to accept Onesimus as God accepted you'. 'I want God's grace to touch you in such a way that your spirit will communicate with God and do the right thing in taking Onesimus back into your home.'

Paul says, 'I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus.' **Philemon 5**. He says, 'Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people'. **Philemon 7**, and he also says, 'I prefer to appeal to you based on love.' **Philemon 9**.

The word for 'love' which Paul uses throughout this letter is the Greek word 'agape.' How is 'agape love' different from other types of love? Well, the essence of 'agape love' is self-sacrifice. We need to understand that this kind of love was radical not only because God was the source of that kind of love but because it was unheard of by many.

Try getting a Jew to show 'agape love' to a Gentile, **John 4:9**, you try getting a Greek to show 'agape love' to a foreigner, **John 13:34-35**. It's a selfless, sacrificial love that isn't based on a feeling, but a determined act of the will, a joyful resolve to put the welfare of others above our own.

We don't know if Philemon did the right thing and submitted to Paul's appeal. We don't know if he released Onesimus from his slavery contract and sent him back to Paul. I think he probably did, and the reason for me thinking that is simple: Paul's whole appeal was built upon 'agape love'.