

Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker² and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.⁴ I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers,⁵ because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints,⁶ and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.⁷ For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.⁸ Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required,⁹ yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you-- I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus--¹⁰ I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.¹¹ (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.)¹² I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.¹³ I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel,¹⁴ but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.¹⁵ For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever,¹⁶ no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother-- especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.¹⁷ So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.¹⁸ If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.¹⁹ I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it-- to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.²⁰ Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.²² At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you,²⁴ and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Introduction

It is often the case that Philemon is combined with Colossians in the commentaries because of the mention of the same people in both letters (Timothy, Archippus, Onesimus, Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke). Moreover, the circumstances are the same with Paul sending communication from prison to Colossae (Col 1.1), to the church Archippus serves (Col 4.17) and the church from which Onesimus comes (Col 4.9). Presumably both writings were brought by Tychicus and Onesimus (Col 4.7-9) from Paul. Although Philemon resides in Colossae, it appears that he is not greeted by Paul in the Colossian letter because he is the primary recipient of this companion letter addressed to him. What we find in reading is that this communication is an appeal of Paul to Philemon for Onesimus. In this letter, he does three main things: he sets the stage for his appeal (hinting as to what he is after), grounds the appeal (getting right to the edge of the appeal but still hinting), and then finally makes the appeal (directly and explicitly).

I. First, Paul sets stage for his appeal to Philemon for Onesimus

He sets the stage in the letter opening. Recall that openings and closings (earmarked by greetings) give insights into the purpose of the author. This opening contains a salutation and a prayer report.

A. The salutation

1. Identifies the writer and readers

Paul identifies himself as a prisoner for Christ Jesus (**Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother**). He is literally in prison. He identifies his coworker Timothy as our brother reinforcing the family bond that exists between them and the addressees. The readers are addressed endearingly: Philemon is **our beloved fellow worker**; Apphia is *our* sister and the family bond extends to the work they all do that is expressed in military terms: Archippus is *our* fellow worker, family member, soldier. In Col 4.17, he is mentioned as the servant in Colossae that

needed encouragement to **fulfill the ministry... [he] received in the Lord**. Apparently since Archippus is from Colossae then so is Philemon who is the primary recipient of the letter but not the exclusive recipient (1b-2): **To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house**. The letter is addressed to a local house church. Again, as we saw with Colossians, Paul's letters have specific target audiences but as revelation of the apostolic gospel, they have wider application. This letter to Philemon is a letter to the church in his house, the churches of Paul's day, and the churches of the time between the comings of Christ including us here today.

2. The salutation also gives a benediction

In a brief summary of his prayer for them, he knits the family bond between the coworkers and fellow soldiers to God our Father (1.3): **Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**. The word *our* is repeated five times in these three verses and cementing it together: God is our Father. He is the Father of all of us. Further, Paul prays for grace and peace from the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ because all blessing flow *from God through Christ our mediator who has become Lord by His resurrection*. Thus, implicitly, He is the incarnate God (Jesus) who is the promised Messiah (Christ) who has been exalted to Sabbath Lordship by obedience in death and through resurrection from the dead.

What the apostle depends on God to grant to Philemon (and all the people of God represented by the church in his house) is grace and peace. Grace is the power of God in saving sinners, giving new hearts by His **powerful working** (Col 2.12), by the power that was at work in raising Jesus from the dead. In other words, Paul prays for efficacious grace for the saving and sanctifying of sinners. Praying for peace refers to the blessings of salvation that are bestowed by grace. What Paul seeks from God by prayer in his appeal to Philemon is the blessings of grace that will affect this man in all his relationships. Thus, the stage-setting has begun.

B. A prayer report also helps set the stage for the appeal

It reveals much about Philemon and about this letter.

1. First, the report reveals much about Philemon

Paul states what he seeks in prayer and why he seeks it. On one hand, he seeks to give thanks always (v. 4): **I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers**. In verse 5, he explains why he is so thankful: **because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints**. On the other hand, Paul seeks the blessing of effectiveness (v. 6): **and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ**. For the word "sharing," the NIV has partnership and the NAS has perhaps the best rendering, fellowship. This is the communion of the saints, the mutuality that the apostle stresses so often. The idea is common participation in the faith, in the truth of the gospel that you embrace by faith. His prayer is for effectiveness **for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ**. It is radically important to Paul that Christians grow in understanding, but for the right kind of effectiveness and the best kind of growth, there must be mutual interaction; there must be meaningful conversations that demonstrate your faith in the Lord Jesus and love to your brothers and sisters.

Oddly perhaps, the reason that Paul seeks this blessing on Philemon is due to the fact that he has been a blessing to others (v. 7): **For [because, Gk *gar* here in 7a in conjunction because, Gk *hoti* in 7b] I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you**. He has brought much joy and comfort to the apostle in his challenging circumstances and afflictions. His love is such that Paul speaks to him endearingly as **my brother**. Furthermore, Philemon has brought refreshment to the hearts of the saints (God has worked **through you** to this blessed end).

So, consider how much the prayer report reveals about Philemon. He is a man of faith and love, a Christian marked by love. There thus exists a deep loving bond between him and the apostle Paul.

2. Second, the report reveals much about this letter

Building on this relationship, Paul self-consciously indicates what he intends by writing to Philemon. Drawing a conclusion from their loving bond, he explains the nature of the letter: (8-9a): **Accordingly** [therefore, NAS], **though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required,⁹ yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you.** He is so driven by love, **for love's sake**, he says, that although he has the right to boldly command him **to do what is required**, to do whatever is the right thing to do, *this letter is not a command but an appeal*. In other words, I prefer to present you with an urgent request, a plea, a request made in an urgent and emotional manner.

This appeal of love is then deepened in 9b where the ESV has the translation: **I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus.** There is some ambiguity regarding the translation **old man**. The idea of age may be present as a synonym for presbyter or elder and thus it could be translated ambassador. Or age may be alluded to here in a more figurative way (or even literally) in the sense of someone who is older and thus an elder person versus an office holder. A figurative usage goes well with the next verse in which Paul speaks of an adult as his child. There is really no reference here to a man of old age. Whether it is translated ambassador or elder, the idea is that he is worthy of respect, even if not older in chronological years. Thus, either way, Paul says: I could pull rank, but **for love's sake** (the love between us due to the love of God) I do not assert my authority to command you to do what is right. His reference to being a prisoner for Christ (here in v. 9) carries with it the implication of his authority as an apostle who suffers in his calling for the gospel. It is also emotionally loaded for (as Lightfoot puts it, p. 333): "how could Philemon resist an appeal which was penned within prison walls by a manacled hand?" These personal references deepen the appeal, giving it a strong tone of love.

Thus, the opening sets the stage for the appeal by identifying the writer, reader, and the relationship between them that drives the nature of the letter as an appeal.

II. In the next main point, Paul grounds the appeal to Philemon for Onesimus

So far, no actual appeal has been presented. The stage has been set and now without being explicit about it, Paul heightens interest in the appeal he has yet to state by giving a heart-felt basis for it. In verses 10-16, he identifies the person of interest, Onesimus, along with background information that explains Paul's connection with him and more about why Paul writes as he does, again, by appeal and not by command: **I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.** ¹¹ (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) ¹² I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. ¹³ I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, ¹⁴ but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. ¹⁵ For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶ no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother-- especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. He hints at what his plea will be; the hints are strong leading to the edge of the idea. He presents some things that are geared to move Philemon to act on the appeal when he finally gets to it. There are at least four things here.

First, Onesimus was brought to faith under Paul in some amazing circumstance of imprisonment for the gospel showing that though he is bound, the gospel is not bound (v. 10). Because of his conversion Onesimus is no longer useless but useful, to both Paul and Philemon (v. 11). Touchingly, Paul says that he is sending him back to Philemon and doing so is like sending **my very heart** (12b). I wished to keep him with me to serve me on your behalf (13). So, second, as I send him back, I am seeking something from you for which I make the appeal of this letter, but in making it I seek your consent. I desire your willingness without compulsion in the

matter (v. 14): **I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.** Third, in 15-16, Paul mentions an uplifting possibility. He floats the pleasant idea that Onesimus' temporary departure as a runaway slave and his return now through his conversion was for the very purpose that you receive him back **forever** (v. 15). He goes on in verse 16 to add that this might mean that he no longer be viewed as a slave (NAS, correctly) but as a brother, and a beloved brother at that (16a). Further, that is precisely what he is to me, Paul says, begotten to faith in Christ by my labors (16b). Finally, fourth, in *a fortiori* fashion, if he is that to me, how much more must he be that to you (16c), **both in the flesh and in the Lord.** I know him in the blessed way of a son in the faith who is by that also in a special sense a beloved brother in Christ. But you know him in a doubly blessed way (Calvin): he returns as a member of your household in the flesh (as a slave under your household authority for greater usefulness) and he also returns as a member of your household of faith (for kingdom usefulness).

III. Third, Paul makes his appeal to Philemon for Onesimus

Finally, the writer does what we as readers have been made to anticipate all along: he now makes the specific appeal in verse 17: **So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.** It comes with the weight of a conditional: if you regard me as a coworker with you in the fellowship (partnership) of the gospel, and surely you do view me in this light (as the comfort you have brought me by your love shows) then receive Onesimus as you would receive me. This has to be the key verse of the book.

Now notice how Paul motivates compliance (cooperation; flexible agreement). With the appeal now on the table, he follows it through with motivating factors.

1. First, he motivates compliance by anticipating obstacles

In 18-19 he says: **If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.** ¹⁹**I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it-- to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.** The apostle wisely anticipates the possibility a wrong done by Onesimus that might mean that he has accumulated a debt. You figure out what it is and charge it to me. To that end I seal my promise to pay by my own handwriting (19a) and stating: **I will repay it.** Then he reminds Philemon of a debt he owes to Paul (19b): and do not forget that you owe me your very life. This is quite profound because Paul is the father in the faith not only of Onesimus but also of Philemon. Paul is God's instrument of gospel blessing, so Philemon owes Paul more than his life but his very self, the eternal safety of his entire existence body and soul (19b): Grasping this fact motivates compliance.

2. The second motivation to compliance is love

Thus, we read in verse 20: **Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.** He knows that Philemon has brought him comfort and joy in the past by an abundance of love (v. 7). Now he builds on the bond of love. Pointedly, if you comply and accept Onesimus as you would me, this will bring me joy and refreshment. In a question, it is like this: can you refuse to give me refreshment in this way given the deep loving bond you have for me and I for you? So, my plea is that you grant me refreshment by the acceptance of Onesimus. The motivation to honor his appeal to accept Onesimus is love. That it is **in the Lord** (20b) means that it is family love in union with Christ that the apostle places before Philemon to motivate him to accept his slave as a beloved brother. His conduct will thus bring Paul great delight.

3. Finally, Paul motivates compliance by expressing his confidence in Philemon

He says in verse 21: **Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.** He has confidence in Philemon that he will follow through in an abundant way, going above and beyond what is being asked of him. He knows this because he knows (as stated in 1.5) of his love for the saints rooted in genuine faith in the Lord Jesus.

Letter closing

At this point, Paul shifts to the closing of the letter in which he requests lodging for a visit to Colossae that God may grant through prayer (v. 22, **through your prayers**), he expresses kind words of love in greetings (23-24), and ends the letter with the typical and profound benediction (v. 25): **The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit**. The language indicates his trust in the power of grace from the risen Lord and God incarnate who died as Messiah. Thus, he petitions that “God grant you His grace to the depths of your person... to the real you, to the inner man of the heart.”

Application

This is a remarkable little letter about a potentially transformed relationship between a slave master and his slave. It is not about slavery as an institution or about the freeing of slaves, as if that is the right thing to do (the obedience of v. 21) that Paul has in mind. However, it is lovingly subversive regarding slavery. For the letter is an appeal to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus that he be received **not as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother** (v. 16). Given that the institution of slavery is not directly the appeal that Paul makes to a slave master (Philemon) on behalf of his slave (Onesimus), we have some questions to answer to round off our thoughts.

A. How does the letter bear on slavery as such?

Our context today in America with its history of slavery is race sensitive, perhaps to a fault, since when all else fails, many call their opponents racists in an attempt to get an edge over them (it is dishonest sophistry). In this context, people bristle at the fact that Paul sends a slave back to his master without denouncing the institution of slavery. Of course, we must remember that slavery in the Roman Empire was not race based but mostly due to war. Also, the conditions in life of most slaves was quite amicable as it resembled employer-employee relationships in significant ways. As to no condemnation of slavery as such, there are some helpful considerations. In 1 Cor 7.21, Paul states that if one becomes a Christian as a slave, he is not to concern himself about it, and if he has the opportunity to gain his freedom, he should avail himself of it. The household code (Col 3.21-4.1) shows how extensively union with Christ transcends the social institution because slaves are free in Christ and masters have a Master in heaven. Further, this letter to Philemon (preserved in the NT canon by God in His providence) teaches that a converted slave is to be received **no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother**. This involves a massive transformation of relationships now linked by faith in the Lord Jesus. For the time between, the teaching of this letter subtly and lovingly subverts all forms of slavery from the inside out. In these principles, Paul presents a rationale for a totally new social arrangement for reconciliation among fallen sinners now by faith in anticipation of the reconciled world to come in Christ's heavenly kingdom.

B. What then is a central concern of the apostle for the people of God in the transformed relationships of the new household of faith?

Central is Paul's concern, prayerful concern for growth in knowledge by means of close interaction in a bond of love. For example, he seeks the blessing of effectiveness (v. 6): **and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ**. He speaks here of the communion of the saints, the mutuality that the apostle stresses so often. It is radically important to Paul that Christians grow in understanding. However, for the right kind of effectiveness and the best kind of growth, there must be mutual interaction by sharing meaningful conversations with other saints. Then you demonstrate your faith in the Lord Jesus and love to your brothers and sisters. So, perhaps the greatest lack today that affects the good confession of the churches from the bottom up is the neglect of the **sharing of your faith** [that leads to] **the full knowledge** [of the gospel] **for the sake of Christ**.

C. Do we have here a picture of Christ and His family (to apply *mutata mutandis*)?

If we wonder where the gospel is to be found here, recall that Paul embodies his message and, per Col 1.24, he completes what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ. This is by apostolic proclamation through suffering to thus forge the gospel foundation for the church. Paul as prophet enacts the gospel in the pattern of Christ.

Accordingly, we have to make adjustments but, on one hand, Paul is a prophet-like embodiment of Christ our Elder Brother. This seems to jump up and off the page in Philemon 17: **So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.** Thus Jesus says: if you have fellowship and union with me as your Elder Brother then receive the beloved brothers and sisters as you receive me! If you love me do what is required, keep my commandments, especially the commands to love. Receive them as you would receive me regardless of their social standing, peculiarities of personality, wealth, or privilege. Thereby, your life will bring me delight!

On the other hand, Paul represents Christ our redeemer who says that any wrongs we have done, **charge that to my account** (v. 18). As Martin Luther said, “Here we see how Paul lay [s] himself out for poor Onesimus, and with all his means plead [s] his cause with his master, and so set [s] himself as if he were Onesimus, and had himself done wrong to Philemon. Even as Christ did for us with God the Father, thus also do [es] Paul for Onesimus with Philemon. We are all his Onesimi” (Klein citing Lightfoot, 318); we owe Christ our very selves, our life, our all.

Beyond all else, it seems that this beautiful story of tender love and intercession that contains nothing explicit about the accomplished work of Christ is a prophetic enactment of precisely the tender love and intercessory work of our Lord Jesus Christ that secured redemption by which rebellious slaves become beloved brothers and sisters in the household of God.

Let us fall down before the majesty of God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ in repentance and acknowledgment of our failures to love His brothers and sisters as we ought; may the Holy Spirit grant that our conversations and fellowship may be effective for growth in knowledge of every good thing to the glory of the triune God in Christ’s church now in anticipation of the glories of His heavenly kingdom yet to come, amen.