

Philemon

Summary: *Paul writes from prison to Philemon, a wealthy Christian in Colossae, on behalf of Onesimus — Philemon's runaway slave who has become a believer through Paul's ministry. Paul appeals not by apostolic authority but by love, asking Philemon to receive Onesimus back 'no longer as a slave but as a beloved brother.' He offers to repay any debt Onesimus owes, subtly reminds Philemon of his own spiritual debt to Paul, and expresses confidence that Philemon will do even more than Paul asks. The letter is a masterpiece of pastoral rhetoric, applying the gospel of reconciliation to a concrete social situation.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *Philemon is the shortest of Paul's letters and the most personal. It contains no doctrinal exposition, no church controversy, and no prophecy — yet it demonstrates the gospel's power to transform human relationships more vividly than any theological treatise. Paul's rhetorical strategy is extraordinarily sophisticated: he begins with praise (vv. 4-7), establishes the basis for his appeal as love rather than authority (vv. 8-9), reveals Onesimus's new identity in Christ (vv. 10-16), makes a concrete financial offer (vv. 17-19), and applies gentle pressure through expressed confidence (vv. 20-21). The pivotal verse — 'no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother' (v. 16) — does not explicitly command manumission but creates a framework in which continued enslavement becomes morally impossible. The letter's inclusion in the canon testifies to the early church's recognition that the gospel must address the most ordinary and difficult human situations.*

Translation Friction: *Paul does not explicitly command Philemon to free Onesimus. This silence has been debated for centuries: some see Paul as accommodating slavery, others see the letter as an implicit but devastating case for manumission. We render the Greek without resolving this debate, noting Paul's careful rhetoric in the translator notes. The legal situation of Onesimus is also debated — he may have been a fugitive slave (the traditional reading) or a slave sent by Philemon who overstayed his mission. The phrase 'separated from you' (v. 15) is more neutral than 'ran away.'*

Connections: *Onesimus and the other figures appear in Colossians 4:9-17, linking these two letters. The reconciliation theme echoes 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 — God's ministry of reconciliation is now applied horizontally between master and slave. Paul's offer to absorb Onesimus's debt (v. 18) mirrors Christ's substitutionary work. The letter's rhetorical structure parallels ancient letters of intercession (e.g., Pliny's letters to Sabinianus on behalf of a freedman).*

¹Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved fellow worker, ²To our dear Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in your home: ³From god our father and the lord Jesus Christ, grace to you, and peace. ⁴I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, ⁵Listening of your love and faith, which you have toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints. ⁶I pray that your partnership in the faith will become effective as you come to understand every good thing we share in Christ Jesus. ⁷For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you. ⁸Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, ⁹Yet for love's sake I instead beseech you, being these people an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ. ¹⁰I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. ¹¹Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me. ¹²I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. ¹³I 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, ¹⁴However, without your mind would I do nothing. That your benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly. ¹⁵For this perhaps is why he was separated from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶Indeed, not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother dear, specially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh, and in the Lord? ¹⁷So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. ¹⁸If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it — to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. ²⁰Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. ²²At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you. ²³Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings, ²⁴Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers. ²⁵The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. Paul identifies himself not as an apostle but as a 'prisoner' (desmios) — a deliberate rhetorical choice. The appeal that follows will be made from the position of one who has already sacrificed his freedom for the gospel, not from a position of institutional authority. Philemon is called 'beloved' (agapētō) and 'fellow worker' (synergō) — terms that establish the relationship as one of mutual respect and shared mission before the request is made.
2. Apphia is likely Philemon's wife and Archippus possibly their son (cf. Colossians 4:17). By addressing the letter not only to Philemon but to his household and the entire house church, Paul ensures that the appeal is not merely private — the community will hear it and hold Philemon accountable. The 'church in your house' (tē kat' oikon sou ekklēsia) confirms that early Christian assemblies met in private homes.
3. The standard Pauline greeting. The plural 'you' (hymīn) addresses the entire group named in verses 1-2, though the letter's content primarily concerns Philemon.
4. The thanksgiving section (vv. 4-7) is the rhetorical foundation for the appeal. Paul establishes Philemon's character as generous and faithful before asking him to live up to that reputation. The phrase 'my God' (tō theō mou) is warmly personal.
5. Paul has heard reports of Philemon's love and faith — the two qualities that the forthcoming appeal will test. The structure may be a chiasm (ABBA): love—faith—Lord Jesus—all the saints, yielding faith toward the Lord Jesus and love toward all the saints. This reading connects the appeal: if Philemon loves 'all the saints,' that must now include Onesimus.
6. This verse is notoriously difficult to translate. The word koinōnia ('sharing, partnership, fellowship') may refer to Philemon's generosity, his evangelistic witness, or the mutual participation of faith. Paul prays that this koinōnia will become 'effective' (energēs, 'active, productive') through recognition (epignōsei) of every good thing in the community. The prayer subtly sets up the appeal: if Philemon can recognize the good that Christ produces in people, he will see that good in Onesimus.
7. The word splanchna ('hearts,' literally 'inner organs, intestines') appears three times in this short letter (vv. 7, 12, 20), forming a verbal thread. Philemon has 'refreshed' (anapepautai, 'given rest to, renewed') the hearts of believers — Paul will soon ask him to refresh Paul's own heart (v. 20) by receiving Onesimus. The affectionate address 'brother' (adelphē) at the end of the sentence sets the emotional tone for what follows.
8. Paul's rhetoric is masterful: he mentions his right to command (epitassein, 'to order, to give authoritative instructions') precisely so he can renounce it. By stating what he could do but choosing not to, he makes the appeal more powerful — Philemon's response will be a free act of love rather than coerced compliance. The word anēkon ('what is fitting, what is proper, what is required') implies that what Paul asks is not optional but morally necessary.

9. The word *parakalō* ('I appeal, I urge, I encourage') replaces the command language of verse 8. Paul grounds his appeal in love (*agapēn*), not authority. He adds two qualifications designed to evoke compassion: he is a *presbyteros* ('old man' or possibly 'ambassador' — the words *presbyteros* and *presbutēs* differ by one letter, and some manuscripts read the latter) and a prisoner (*desmios*). The em-dashes set off this self-description as an emotional aside.
10. Paul delays naming Onesimus until the end of the sentence — a deliberate rhetorical strategy. Before Philemon hears the slave's name, he hears 'my child' (*tou emou teknou*), establishing the relationship. The verb *egennēsa* ('I fathered, I begot') indicates Paul led Onesimus to faith during his imprisonment. The name *Onēsimon* ('useful, profitable') will be punned on in the next verse.
11. Paul plays on Onesimus's name (*Onēsimos*, 'useful, beneficial'): the one whose name means 'useful' was once *achrēston* ('useless') but is now *euchrēston* ('very useful'). There may also be a further pun: *achrēstos* sounds like a-Christos ('without Christ'), and *euchrēstos* sounds like eu-Christos ('good in Christ'). The transformation from useless to useful encapsulates the gospel's power to change a person's identity and value.
12. The second use of *splanchna* ('heart, inner being') is the most emotionally charged: in sending Onesimus back, Paul is sending his own heart. The identification is complete — Onesimus is not merely a protege but an extension of Paul's own person. Any treatment of Onesimus will be experienced by Paul himself. The SBLGNT does not include 'receive him' (*proslabou*), which appears in some manuscripts.
13. Paul states his preference — he wanted to keep Onesimus — but immediately subordinates it to Philemon's rights. The phrase 'on your behalf' (*hyper sou*) is significant: Onesimus's service to Paul would have been a proxy for Philemon's own service. Paul frames Onesimus's presence as a gift from Philemon, not as his own possession.
14. The contrast between *anankē* ('compulsion, necessity') and *hekousion* ('voluntary, of one's own accord') is the letter's ethical crux. Paul could have kept Onesimus and presented Philemon with a *fait accompli*. Instead, he preserves Philemon's moral agency — the right response must be freely chosen to have moral value. This principle reflects Paul's broader theology of grace: God does not coerce love but invites it.
15. The verb *echōrīsthē* ('he was separated') uses the divine passive — avoiding the harsh 'he ran away' and suggesting that God's providence was at work in the separation. The adverb *tacha* ('perhaps') shows appropriate tentativeness about reading divine purpose into events. The contrast between 'for a while' (*pros hōran*, literally 'for an hour') and 'forever' (*aiōnion*) reframes the entire episode: a temporary loss has become an eternal gain.
16. This is the letter's theological climax. Onesimus returns to Philemon's household with a transformed identity: 'no longer as a slave' (*ouketi hōs doulon*) but 'more than a slave — a beloved brother' (*hyper doulon, adelphon agapēton*). The phrase 'both in the flesh and in the Lord' (*kai en sarki kai en kyriō*) means that the brother-relationship is not merely spiritual ('in the Lord') but also operates in the everyday, physical realm ('in the flesh'). Paul does not formally command manumission, but the logic is clear: you cannot own your brother. The phrase 'how much more to you' (*posō de mallon soi*) argues that if Onesimus is precious to Paul, he should be even more so to Philemon, who will have him present daily.
17. The word *koinōnon* ('partner, one who shares in common, associate') echoes the *koinōnia* of verse 6. Paul draws on the established partnership to leverage the appeal: if Philemon and Paul are partners, then Onesimus — who is Paul's 'very heart' (v. 12) — must be welcomed as Paul himself. The verb *proslabou* ('receive, take to yourself, welcome') is a hospitality term implying full acceptance into the household.
18. The conditional 'if' (*ei*) is diplomatic rather than doubtful — Onesimus likely did wrong Philemon or incur a debt (perhaps by stealing to fund his flight). The verb *elloga* ('charge to my account, reckon to me') is an accounting term — Paul creates a formal IOU. This is substitutionary language: Paul absorbs Onesimus's debt, just as Christ absorbed humanity's debt (Colossians 2:14). The parallel is unmistakable and intentional.
19. Paul signs the IOU in his own handwriting, making it legally binding. Then, in one of the most brilliantly ironic sentences in ancient literature, he adds: 'to say nothing of your owing me even your own self' (*hina mē legō soi hoti kai seauton moi prosopheileis*). The phrase 'to say nothing of' (*hina mē legō*) is a rhetorical device called *paralipsis* — saying something by claiming not to say it. The effect is devastating: Onesimus may owe Philemon money, but Philemon owes Paul his very soul (presumably Paul led Philemon to faith). The larger debt swallows the smaller one.
20. The verb *onaimēn* ('may I have benefit, may I have profit') is another pun on the name *Onesimos* ('beneficial, profitable'). Paul asks Philemon to be an 'Onesimus' to Paul — to live up to the very quality that Onesimus's name represents. The third appearance of *splanchna* ('heart') closes the literary frame opened in verse 7: Philemon has refreshed the hearts of the saints; now Paul asks him to refresh Paul's own heart by welcoming Onesimus.
21. The word *hypakoē* ('obedience') is striking — Paul has insisted on appealing rather than commanding, yet he describes Philemon's response as 'obedience.' The gospel appeal carries its own authority: to refuse love's request is a form of disobedience. The phrase 'even more than I say' (*hyper ha legō poiēseis*) leaves open the possibility that Paul hopes for manumission, or even that Philemon will send Onesimus back to Paul. By not specifying, Paul leaves room for Philemon to exceed expectations.
22. The request for lodging adds gentle pressure: Paul plans to visit and will see firsthand how Philemon has responded. The verb *charisthēsomai* ('I will be graciously given, I will be granted as a gift') uses the *charis* root — Paul's release from prison will be a gift of grace mediated through the Colossians' prayers. The request also expresses optimism about his release.
23. In Colossians 4:10, Aristarchus is the 'fellow prisoner' while Epaphras is not; here the designation is reversed. Paul may use the term *synaichmalōtos* ('co-prisoner of war') loosely for anyone who shares his captivity, whether literally imprisoned or voluntarily present. Epaphras, as founder of the Colossian church, has a personal connection to Philemon.

- 24.** The same names appear in Colossians 4:10-14, confirming that both letters were sent at the same time. All four are called synergoi ('fellow workers, co-laborers') — an egalitarian designation that includes both Jews (Mark, Aristarchus) and Gentiles (Demas, Luke) in the shared work of the gospel.
- 25.** The closing benediction matches Philippians 4:23 almost exactly. The plural 'your' (hymōn) addresses the entire community, not just Philemon. Grace — the undeserved generosity of God — is the letter's final word, as it was the first (v. 3). The entire letter is framed by grace: the same grace that freed Onesimus from sin now calls Philemon to free Onesimus from slavery. The SBLGNT omits the final 'Amen' of the Textus Receptus.