

Philemon

I. Paul's greeting (1-3).

Note: This is a private letter (the fourth one in a row, the letters to Timothy and Titus, preceding it) and one of four one-chapter books in the New Testament.

A. Paul, the writer of this letter (vss 1, 9, 19), classified himself as a "prisoner" (Eph 3:1; 4:1; 2 Tim 1:8).

1. He was a political prisoner, held against his will. There is no specific biblical evidence he was ever actually in a prison at any time, with the exception of Acts 16:24, in the city of Philippi.

Note: Paul does mention imprisonment (same Greek word as in Acts 16:24) in 2 Cor 6:5 and 2 Cor 11:23.

Note: Paul typically starts his letters with establishing his apostleship. In this letter he begins with "a prisoner" because he wants a friend to hear his impassioned plea for another Christian. Philemon would have to muster substantial strength and charitable character to follow Paul's requests.

- a. He was held in Jerusalem, in the Roman garrison, for his own protection (cf Acts 21:31-34).
 - b. He was transported to Caesarea and was confined, with liberty, for a period of approximately two years (cf Acts 23:33; 24:23, 27).
 - c. He appealed to Caesar and was subsequently moved to Rome, where he stayed in his own hired house for another two years (cf Acts 28:30).
Note: Most scholars write about a "second imprisonment" based on the last half of 2 Timothy 4. Again, since there is no solid biblical evidence, this "second imprisonment" appears to be based on inference.
2. A Roman centurion may have been the one who held the key to Paul's chains, but he was "a prisoner of Jesus Christ." He became a prisoner for standing strong for his convictions and for preaching the truth.
 - a. The Roman government had nothing against this man. He had broken none of their laws (cf Acts 26:31, 32).
Note: He was protected by Roman officials on several occasions.
 - b. It was the leaders of the Jews (and sometimes the Jewish mobs) who were his enemy.
 - c. In the four letters we commonly refer to as the "prison epistles" Paul mentions either "chains" or "bonds" in each of them (cf Eph 3:1; Phil 1:13, 14; Col 4:18; Philemon 13).

B. Paul includes Timothy in his greeting.

1. A "brother" because they belonged to the same spiritual family. Another wonderful example of our relationship in Christ
 - a. Acts 16 reveals Timothy joined the apostle on his 2nd evangelistic journey and in verse 6 of that chapter it says "they had gone throughout Phrygia and the region of Galatia." Colosse was located in Phrygia.
 - b. His name was recorded at the greeting because the people in Colosse knew him (cf Col 1:1).

2. Paul refers to Philemon as “our” dearly beloved. There was a deep relationship between these three men.
 - a. The genuine love these men held for each other was based on the scriptures.
 - 1) Some religious people today compromise the truth of the gospel and call it love.
 - 2) They embrace those who embrace the devil, and then force their ideas under an umbrella of pseudo-love.
 - b. Real Bible love is based on scripture. Obeying, following, and promoting the scriptures (cf Jn 14:15; 15:14).
 3. “[F]ellowlabourer” because they labored in the same cause, for the same purpose, promoting Christ and His kingdom (cf Phil 4:3; 1 Thess 3:2).
 - a. Are we “fellowlabourers?” Are we working together, like Paul, Timothy and Philemon to promote the gospel?
 - b. Or, have we been caught up in the denominational concept of “it is the preacher’s job?”
- C. Paul then mentions a woman by the name of “Apphia.” The name means “fruitful.”
1. Many assume Apphia is Philemon’s wife.
Note: With no additional information it is impossible to know for sure, it is certainly a possibility.
 2. “Archippus our fellowsoldier.” The same people that assume Apphia was Philemon’s wife, assume that Archippus was their son.
 - a. Archippus had a “ministry” in the local church at Colosse, and he was to “[t]ake heed” to it (cf Col 4:17).
 - b. Those who received the letter to the Colossian church were to use words of encouragement and exhortation toward Archippus.
 - c. Imagine the emotional lift Archippus would receive if all the brethren at Colosse showered him with encouragement (cf 1 Tim 4:16; 6:11-14).
- D. “[A]nd to the church in thy house.”
1. It is possible the church of Christ at Colosse gathered at Philemon’s house to worship (cf Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15).
Note: If not, then another congregation at Colosse gathered at Philemon’s house who were in close connection to the other congregation.
 - a. Church buildings are a relatively modern concept.
 - b. The building is nothing more than an expedient. When the building becomes the focal point then we have lost our true focus.
 - c. We spend millions of the Lord’s dollars to build nice buildings to please ourselves and to draw the community.
 - d. The mind-set of some is, ‘if we build it, they will come.’
 - e. What it should be is, ‘if we preach it, they will be saved.’

2. It took several centuries for meeting houses to become popular. In the beginning Christians met wherever they could; synagogues, houses, catacombs, etc.
 - a. In some places the church building has become where most of God's money is spent.
 - b. Could we meet out under the trees? How many would?
 - c. Would it be too hot? Too cold? Too windy? Is it about our comfort?
 - d. A comfortable building makes worship pleasing to us.
 - e. But, what about the evangelists that cannot get the money to preach and teach the gospel?
 - f. What about the young man who cannot get the necessary funds to attend school in order to gain preaching knowledge?
 - g. What about the family working overseas or unevangelized locations in this country that cannot stay there because of the lack of funds?
- E. It was common for Paul to include "grace" and "peace" (vs 3) at the beginning of his letters (cf Rom 1:7; Eph 1:2).
 1. Grace was the common Greek manner of salutation.
 2. Peace was the Hebrew equivalent.
 - a. Colosse was a mixed congregation, so Paul included both words.
 - b. Grace and peace come from God and our Lord Jesus Christ (cf 2 Cor 1:2).
- II. The love and faith for Philemon is commended (4-7).
 - A. "I thank my God" (vs 4) are words of encouragement.¹
 1. Paul's prayer life was two-dimensional.
 - a. His prayers went up to God, thanking Him
 - b. They also went out for his brethren, thankful for them.
Note: No doubt, his prayers included himself. But, prayers for himself were less significant than his thankfulness for God and his brethren.
 2. Emulating Paul's prayer life will benefit all of us.
 - B. It was Paul's habit to make mention of individuals in his private prayers (cf 2 Tim 1:3).
 1. It is never wrong to mention people, specifically, in our prayers.
 - a. However, some amount of caution should be exercised in our public prayers.
 - b. If we mention some and neglect others, feelings can be hurt.
 - c. We, like Paul, should save most of the specifics in our prayer life for our private prayers (cf Eph 1:16; Phil 1:3).
 - d. Paul always mentioned Philemon in his prayers. I am sure each of you pray similarly (cf Col 1:9).
 2. Notice the words, "making mention of thee always" (vs 4).

¹ Robert R. Taylor Jr wrote, "The words THINK and THANK are nearly alike in the English spelling save for one letter's difference. In reality if a person thinks, he will be thankful. Those not thankful have not done enough real thinking!" The Living Way Series, page 98

- a. Paul was a prisoner, probably chained to Roman guards. Yet, he was praying for Philemon “always.”
 - b. His prayer life was active, but it was also without privacy. Strangers were always around. Would we offer fervent prayers, or wait for a more convenient time to approach God in prayer?
 - c. Because Paul did not falter in his petitions to God, some of Caesar’s own household became Christians (cf Phil 1:12, 13; 4:22).
 - d. His example should inspire us to allow people to see our Christianity.
- C. Information had traveled to Rome about the deep love and faith of Philemon.
- 1. It is probable that Epaphras was the one that brought Paul this news (cf Col 4:12; Philemon 23).
 - 2. Philemon is said to have “love and faith.” Most likely, this refers to his faith in Christ Jesus, and his love for the brethren (the construction of the sentence is admittedly difficult).
 - a. It is impossible for a Christian to love Jesus and not love the brethren (cf 1 Jn 4:20, 21; 5:2).
 - b. Jesus Himself, gave the “new commandment” (cf Jn 13:34).
 - c. By the same token, we cannot be pleasing to God without proper faith (cf Heb 11:6).
 - 1) First, our love is vertical, towards God, then horizontal, toward the brethren.
 - 2) If there is no vertical love, there can be no horizontal love. If no horizontal love, then there can be no vertical love (cf 1 Jn 3:23).
 - d. “[A]nd toward all saints” indicates no partiality, no prejudice and no favoritism in our love for the brethren (cf Eph 6:18; Heb 13:24).
- D. In verse 6 “the communication of thy faith” (the sharing of your faith, NKJ) literally means to make Philemon’s faith known to others.
- 1. His good works should be made known (cf Matt 5:16).
 - 2. The word “effectual” (effective, NKJ) means *energetic* or *active*.²
 - 3. Paul wanted Philemon’s faith to be expressed by good fruits.
 - 4. How did Paul desire this to be done? “[B]y the acknowledgement of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus” (cf 1 Pet 2:12).
 - a. This is a beautiful statement, made by inspiration, on Philemon’s behalf (cf Phil 4:8).
 - b. By effectively sharing his faith the seed would be planted and fruit would grow unto Christ (cf 1 Pet 1:23).
 - 5. The Christian’s good deeds need to be done in such a fashion as to give glory and honor to Christ, through the church.
 - a. Man-made institutions and organizations cannot, and do not, glorify Christ (cf Eph 3:21; 2 Thess 1:4).

² Strong’s #1756

- b. He died for one and only one institution, the church of Christ (Rom 16:16). Our good deeds and efforts must be done “in Christ” (cf Gal 3:26-29).
- c. A saving faith begins in the heart, changes our earthly direction and is expressed in actions that honor Christ Jesus (cf James 2:14, 17).
 - 1) Soup kitchens, the Good Will, the Salvation Army, the Shriners, etc. all serve a need, in one form or another, but as unauthorized religious organizations, they do not glorify Christ.
 - 2) Christians need to do good works through the church, the authorized organization by which Christ can be glorified.
- 6. Notice that Philemon’s name has not been used in this section of scriptures (vss 4-7). Yet, it is clear that Paul is pulling the mind of Philemon in a specific direction with this instruction.
 - a. Philemon’s salvation had come from an obedient faith in Jesus Christ (cf Eph 2:8).
 - b. He had received mercy and grace which was extended by the Savior (cf 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2).
 - c. Paul is laying the foundation to get Philemon to do something unprecedented in ancient Rome.
 - d. To take back a runaway slave and then to treat him like a brother.
- E. That which fills a person’s heart with joy is a true measure of their character.
 - 1. Paul, and those with him, would have joyful hearts when thinking of Philemon and the others receiving this letter (vss 1, 2).
 - a. What did Paul have great joy in? Philemon’s love, his conduct and his attitude toward the saints (cf Phil 1:4).
 - b. They had joy in others doing well.
 - c. Our joy should be great in our brothers’ and sisters’ accomplishments.
 - 2. The second half of verse 7 reads, “because the bowels (hearts, NKJ) of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.”
 - a. “Bowels” is a word which means *spleen* or *intestine*³ (always used in the plural) and is translated “inward affection” in 2 Cor 7:15.⁴
 - b. Paul is saying that the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by Philemon (cf 2 Tim 1:16).
 - c. Obviously, the love Philemon had for the brethren found a way of being expressed. He did not simply say it, he showed it (2 Cor 7:13).
 - 3. Paul ends the verse with the term “brother.” He and Philemon were members of the same family.
 - a. It is not only wrong, but unscriptural, to use this family term for anyone outside the body of Christ.

³ Vine’s page 144, Vol 1

⁴ “The internal parts of a person. Symbolically, the bowels were considered the seat of emotions and feelings, much like the word “heart.” Nelson’s Bible Dictionary.

b. If a person has not put on Christ in baptism (Gal 3:27) and been added to the one true church of the Bible (Acts 2:47) they are not part of God's spiritual family.

4. Paul is now ready to set an appeal before Philemon. That appeal is for Onesimus. The next section, in its entirety, is that appeal.

Note: One 16th century commentator wrote that Paul was softening Philemon up (Scipio Gentilis).

III. Paul's plea for Philemon's love needed to be applied to Onesimus (8-22).

A. "Wherefore" indicates that Paul is now done plowing the field. He is ready to plant the seed.

1. Paul's position as an apostle gave him much boldness in Christ (cf 2 Cor 3:12; 1 Thess 2:2).

a. Could Paul have not just ordered Philemon to take Onesimus back?

Note: The NKJ renders this verse, in part, "...I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting" (emphasis added, jb).

b. Yes, it is possible. I imagine that Philemon would have complied and not questioned the apostle's demand or authority (cf Heb 13:22).

c. Why then does not Paul just make a blanket statement that all slave owners must take their delinquent slaves back, no questions asked?

d. God's wisdom plays a vital role in this letter (cf James 3:17; 2 Pet 3:15).

e. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not about social anarchy. If such an edict were declared, slaves would flock to the church for the wrong reason.

f. The government of Rome would be forced to place harsh sanctions on the church of Christ and the cause of Christ would suffer.

g. God always knows best.

h. The great persecution of the church was just on the horizon at the time of this writing (possibly only a year or two away) and it needed no accelerant.⁵

2. This section of scripture not only presents a model of effort to lead a person on the right path, but also unveils the proper spirit of Christian conduct.

a. A gentle love and persuasive demeanor will do much for defusing a possibly volatile situation.

b. What right did Paul have to come between a man and his slave? None, according to the Roman law. His authority was only "in Christ."

B. Verse 9 reveals he, for love's sake, beseeched Philemon (appeal, NKJ) to hear his plea (cf Eph 4:1).

1. Not by command, not by force, but by common sense and Christian love.

2. The Greek word Paul uses here for love is "agape," the highest form of love.

a. Love is grossly misused and misapplied in modern vernacular.⁶

⁵ The Roman persecution of the church, under Nero's government, started in 64 AD, after the great fire in Rome, and lasted, in various forms, until 313 AD.

⁶ Thayer defines love as affection, good will, benevolence. Usually defined as seeking the best for another.

- b. It is fascinating that the word translated “beseech” is often translated as “comfort” or “comforted,” e.g., Col 4:8; 1 Thess 3:2, 7.
3. “Paul the aged” are the next words in Verse 9.
- a. We have no idea exactly how old Paul was when he penned these words, but he does classify himself as “aged.”
 - b. We do know that Jesus was born around 5 or 4 BC⁷, and the church was established about thirty-three years later, in approximately 29 AD (cf Luke 3:23).
Note: His earthly ministry lasted about three years, which can be established by the number of Passover Feasts He attended after His baptism, i.e., John 2:13; 6:4; 11:55.
 - c. The church had been in existence for a few years when Saul of Tarsus is introduced in Acts 7:58 as an influential member of the Jewish society (cf Acts 26:4, 5).
Note: It appears that the Hebrew priests were considered to be a man at thirty years of age, e.g., Num 4:3, 23, 30, 35; 1 Chron 23:3, etc.
 - d. If this age is the standard then Paul would have been born at approximately the same time as Jesus and John the baptizer (cf Lk 1:36).
 - e. If this speculation is true, that would make the apostle somewhere in his mid to late 60’s.⁸
Note: When the angel Gabriel came to Zacharias in the temple to tell him he was going to become a father (of John the baptizer), Zacharias disputed with him by reasoning he was “an old man” (Luke 1:18); it is the same Greek word Paul uses to describe himself.⁹
 - f. The argument of being aged is designed to sway Philemon’s heart to listen to the impassioned plea of Paul for Onesimus.
4. He adds “a prisoner of Jesus Christ” to his “aged” plea.
- a. We have already discussed the point of him being a prisoner (see page 1 of this outline).
 - b. He was held captive, but was not in prison (cf Acts 28:30).
- C. In verse 10 Onesimus is mentioned for the first time in this letter.
Note: He is also mentioned in Col 4:9, the only other place in scripture.¹⁰
- 1. Paul begins with the word “beseech” (appeal, NKJ), which means *to call to one’s side* or *to call to one’s aid*.¹¹
 - 2. In this appeal to Philemon, Paul calls Onesimus his son, a reference to Onesimus being his spiritual child.

⁷ Use any search engine to establish this historical fact. An error in dating calculations was made by a Scythian monk named Diocletian Exiguus. By the time the error was discovered it was too late to make any corrections.

⁸ About 66 years after Jesus was born; approximately 62 AD (when the book was written) plus four years (4 BC).

⁹ The word “aged” is the same term from which we get “elder” (Greek= *presbuteros* or *presbutes*).

¹⁰ Ellicott (and others) suggested that Paul withheld Onesimus’ name until Philemon’s was completely engaged.

¹¹ Vine’s page 119, Vol 1

Note: It is the same word that Paul uses in reference to both Timothy and Titus (cf 1 Tim 1:2; Titus 1:4).

- a. “I have begotten” comes from a single Greek word which means *to procreate*,¹² and is used here, and in other places, metaphorically (cf John 3:3-8, the same word is used eight times in that passage, “born”).
 - b. Even in “bonds” (chains, NKJ) Paul was able to win this man for the cause of Christ.
3. It is not revealed how Paul came in contact with Onesimus, but there is always a special bond between a teacher of the gospel and the one that obeys the truth under their tutelage (cf 1 Cor 4:15).
- a. A soul has been saved from the fires of hell.
 - b. Joy as deep as bringing a child into this physical realm.
4. Onesimus was described as “unprofitable” to Philemon in the past (vs 11).
- a. If a slave ran away, he or she would indeed be unprofitable to the owner (cf Matt 25:30).
 - b. Conversely, now, as a Christian, Onesimus would be of great profit to Philemon (cf Titus 3:8).
Note: The name Onesimus means *profitable*, although the word used in verse 11 is a different word, where it means *useful*.¹³
 - c. Because of his conversion, Onesimus would now render a much greater service to his master. Not one of eye-service, but of service to Christ (cf Eph 6:7; Col 3:22).
 - d. There is a wonderful lesson for us all just under the surface of these verses. We all fall short of living as we should on occasion.
 - 1) We might give into temptation, or fail to hold up under the pressure of peers.
 - 2) Far too often we become unprofitable, or not as profitable as we should be. The power of the gospel can change the unprofitable into the profitable (cf 2 Tim 2:21).
 - e. John Mark is an example from Paul’s own life. He departed the work in Acts 13:13, and in Acts 15:38 Paul thought it “not good to take him with them, who departed from them...” He became unprofitable. Some twenty (or more) years later Paul wrote, “Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry”¹⁴ (2 Tim 4:11).
- D. Paul sends Onesimus back, and asks Philemon to receive him as his “own bowels” (heart, NKJ).
1. Why did Paul send him back? He was a Christian now. Some might ask, should not his baptism wipe away his former years?
 - a. Baptism has repentance as a prerequisite (cf Acts 2:38; 3:19).
 - b. Baptism washes away our former sins, but not our legal responsibilities.

¹² Strong’s #1085

¹³ Vine’s, page 218, Vol 3.

¹⁴ Paul uses the same Greek word for *useful* when referring to John Mark as he did for Onesimus.

- c. Onesimus was a slave under the Roman government. As a Christian, he was obligated to obey God's laws and Rome's laws (cf Rom 13:6, 7).
- 2. Baptism does not undo a sinful situation or sinful circumstances in our lives.
 - a. A baptized bank robber cannot keep the money.
 - b. A baptized adulterer cannot continue to live in adultery.
 - c. A baptized man, with multiple wives, cannot keep those wives.
 - d. A baptized homosexual cannot continue in that sinful life-style.
 - e. Baptism does not sanctify unscriptural relationships.
 - f. Onesimus was now a baptized believer, but he was still Philemon's slave, and had legal obligations as a Christian (cf Rom 13:1).
 - g. How do we know it was right for Onesimus to return to Philemon? Because the Holy Ghost inspired Paul to pen these words. That should settle the matter (cf 2 Tim 3:16).
- 3. Onesimus can, and should, be a monumental example for twenty-first century Christians.
 - a. He knew it was the law of the land and that he must return to his former master (cf Lk 20:25).
 - b. Paul could not force him to comply, but I am convinced he encouraged Onesimus to do what was right (cf 1 Pet 2:13).
 - c. It would be difficult, dangerous and potentially deadly, but it was right (cf Rom 13:5).
 - d. Sometimes we have decisions to make about our lives. Even when those hard decisions are made we must make them based on what is right.
- 4. It seems clear that the mighty apostle exercised extreme prudence by sending Onesimus and Tychicus together with the letters (cf Col 4:7-9).
 - a. There would be safety, companionship and encouragement for Onesimus in such an arrangement.
 - b. It was not only a benefit for Onesimus to have the godly Tychicus with him in his travels, but Tychicus could then return to Paul with news of how Onesimus was received by Philemon.
- E. According to verse 13, if Paul would have done what he wanted to do instead of what was right, Onesimus would have stayed with him in Rome.¹⁵
 - 1. Onesimus had become profitable to Paul.
 - 2. It appears Paul is saying that if Philemon would have been in Rome he would render service to Paul as Onesimus was doing, "in thy stead."
 - 3. It was a sacrifice for the "aged" Paul to send him away.
 - a. Christianity is our willing sacrifice and service (cf Eph 6:5-8).
 - b. There is nothing forced about it.
 - c. If a Christian feels forced in rendering service to God there is either a lack of commitment in their lives, or Satan is at work in them (cf Rom 12:1).

¹⁵ The literal translation of this verse could have been, "Whom I did wish to retain to myself, that in thy behalf he might minister to me in the bonds of the good news."

4. When Paul pens, “without thy mind would I do nothing” (vs 14) it means nothing would be done without Philemon’s knowledge and blessings.
 - a. Remember, Philemon did not know where Onesimus was at this point.
 - b. Paul and Onesimus could have just kept their mouths shut about this runaway. Many in our world would do just that.
 - c. To do so was not right and Christians do right (cf 1 Tim 6:2).
 - d. Paul could not violate one brother to help another brother and be right before God.
 - e. To properly understand the last phrase of verse 14 we need to know that the word “necessity” means *distress*¹⁶ (compulsion, NKJ).
 - f. This same word is translated by “distress in Lk 21:23, 1 Cor 7:26 and 1 Thess 3:7.
 - g. The Christian life is not one of distress. Our lives should be characterized by willingness (cf 1 Cor 9:17; 2 Cor 8:12).
- F. It seems that in Verse 15 Paul is trying to get Philemon to see Onesimus’ running away as a case of divine providence.
 1. We never know if God’s providence is at work while we are in the midst of it, e.g., Joseph and Esther.
 - a. No doubt, Philemon did not think of a runaway slave as anything good.
 - b. Paul could see a good outcome in the situation, and was bringing it to Philemon’s attention.
 2. “For perhaps he therefore departed for a season” means Onesimus was gone for an unknown period of time.
 - a. There can be little doubt that his “season” was quite long. Sufficient time had to pass that Onesimus was able to travel to Rome (most likely on foot, and as out of sight as possible), be converted and end up in Paul’s service.
 - b. Paul contrasts “a season” (how long he had been gone from his service) with “for ever” (how long he would have him as a friend and brother in the next life).
 - c. Philemon could receive Onesimus anew, and it would be an act that would last throughout eternity (cf 2 Thess 2:16).
Note: With the words, “[f]or perhaps” Paul claims no divine insight as to whether this is God’s providence or not.
 3. “Not now as a servant, but above a servant” (vs 16) does not mean Onesimus’ legal responsibility was removed (cf Eph 6:5-7).
 - a. It may help our understanding to insert a word just before the comma in this verse. “Not now as a servant *only*, but above (more, NKJ) *than* a servant...” (words in italics and emphasis added, jb).
 - b. Because Onesimus was now a Christian he was more than just a slave (cf 1 Tim 6:2).

¹⁶ Strong’s #318

- c. “[S]pecially to me” indicates the special interest Paul had in this man and in the outcome of this unusual relationship.
 - d. It is possible that Paul had taught both of these men and led them to the Lord through obedience.
 - e. There is often a close connection between teacher and student.
 - f. The last half of verse 16 is powerful information that should draw Christian people together.
 - g. No matter what our personal feelings or differences might be, we have a common cause that should/must unite us (cf Jn 15:15).
- G. Paul starts verse 17 with the word “[i]f.” This is a very strong argument for Paul to make.
1. Were Paul and Philemon spiritual partners? Absolutely. (vss 1, 5, 7, 21, 22 all show partnership).
 - a. All Christians are in spiritual partnership. The common goal of edification and of spreading the good news to the lost.
 - b. The same word is translated by “partakers,” (1 Cor 10:18) “fellowship,” (1 Cor 10:20) and “companions” (Heb 10:33).
 - c. We are all in this together (cf 2 Cor 8:23; 2 Pet 1:4).
 2. Paul then cements Philemon and Onesimus’ partnership with the words, “receive him as myself.”
 - a. Refusing Onesimus would be the same as refusing Paul.
 - b. There was simply no way Philemon would turn Paul away (cf vs 12).
 - c. Picture the most respected member of the brotherhood, in your opinion. Then picture turning that person away if they came to your door.
 3. Paul tries to soften feelings with the word “[I]f” at the beginning of verse 18. Of course, Onesimus had “wronged” Philemon. He ran away from his service.
 - a. The situation had to be defused, it had to be made better, it had to have a Christian direction. We can do great things in our world by approaching situations with the mind set of “I am going to make this better, not worse.”
 - b. The phrase, “or oweth thee ought” (or owes anything, NKJ), may refer to the neglected service Onesimus could not do because he ran away. Philemon may have been out additional money in having to hire (or buy) someone to fill the place of Onesimus.¹⁷
 - c. In an effort to sooth the circumstances, Paul offers to pay whatever amount Philemon felt was fair to put Onesimus back in his good graces.
 - 1) Paul was not guilty, or blameworthy; in any sense, but was willing to bear the consequences for Onesimus to create peace between these two brethren. (cf 2 Pet 3:14) There is a lesson there for us.

¹⁷ Many commentators feel that Onesimus may have robbed Philemon before he ran away. There is no evidence to support this.

- 2) Jesus was not guilty, or blameworthy; when He went to the cross, but He was willing to bear the consequences of our sins to make it possible for us to be at peace with the Father (cf Heb 4:16; 1 Jn 3:5).
 - 3) Peace is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22); and is what Paul requested for the Colossian brethren (cf Col 3:15).
 - 4) Peace is the “fruit of righteousness” (cf James 3:18).
4. Then Paul skillfully, (via the Holy Ghost) reminds Philemon of a much greater debt (vs 19).
 - a. For Paul to write this letter “with mine own hand” is unusual. He commonly used an amanuensis (cf Rom 16:22; 1 Cor 16:21, etc.).
 - b. “I will repay *it*,” (vs 19) means Paul will be the security for anything that is owed, as a promissory note or co-signer.¹⁸
 - c. Paul was removing the possibility of any ill-will for financial loss Philemon might be holding.
 - d. The last half of verse 19 reveals that Philemon owed his own self, his new self, to Paul, who had converted him (cf James 5:20).
 - e. As Robertson states, “He used every available argument to bring Philemon to see the higher ground of brotherhood in Christ about Onesimus.”¹⁹
 5. Philemon is again called “brother” in verse 20. Why a brother? Because he has the same Father and the same brother, therefore the same family (vs 3, 7).
 - a. The new birth puts us in the family of God (cf Jn 3:3, 5). Continued obedience will allow us to remain in that family forever (cf Matt 24:13).
 - b. These biblical terms are often misused today. A person is not a Christian unless they are part of the body of Christ, a member of the church of Christ (cf Rom 16:16). By the same reasoning, a person is not a brother/sister unless they are in the same family (cf Eph 3:15).
 - c. We all get “in Christ” the same way, by being baptized into Him (cf Gal 3:16, 27-29).
 - d. It has always been intended that the use of brother/sister be considered an exalted and discriminating privilege.
 - e. In verse 20 Paul pleads with Philemon for a specific outcome.
 - 1) What would bring “joy” to the apostle? For Philemon to receive the runaway slave in the grand fashion he had outlined in these verses.
 - 2) Paul wanted this account to have a happy ending.
 - 3) It could end happily, but it depended on Philemon’s disposition (cf Phil 2:2; 3 Jn 4).
 - 4) How often are we in control of another’s happiness (cf 1 Thess 2:19, 20; 3:7, 8)?

Note: This is the third time in this letter Paul has mentioned “bowels” (heart, NKJ, vss 7, 12, 20). There was a deep, earnest longing within

¹⁸ The Greek word is used only here in the NT, and has a meaning of *to pay off, as a fine*. Vine’s, page 279, Vol 3.

¹⁹ Robertson’s NT Word Pictures.

Paul that Philemon could “refresh” him, which means *to free from sorrow or care*.²⁰ Philemon could remove any anxiety Paul felt.

6. The marvelous confidence Paul had that Philemon would conduct himself correctly is evident in verse 21.
 - a. Writing this letter demonstrates that confidence.
 - b. The second half of this verse draws to mind some interesting possibilities: what could be meant by “that thou wilt also do more than I say” (more than I ask).
 - 1) What could be more than what has already been asked?
 - 2) Receive him as my “own bowels” (vs 12)?
 - 3) Receive him “above a servant” (16)?
 - 4) Receive him as “a brother” (vs 16)?
 - 5) Receive him as if he were the apostle himself (vs 17)?
 - c. It is impossible to know the answer to this question this side of heaven, but it is interesting to ponder.
 - 1) Some think that this is a veiled attempt to influence Philemon to free Onesimus from servitude. There is no evidence to that end.
 - 2) The context inclines toward even greater kindness than that expressed by Paul’s words (cf 2 Thess 3:4).
7. “But withal” (But meanwhile, NKJ) Philemon was asked to prepare lodging for the apostle.
 - a. Paul wanted Philemon to prepare the ‘guest room,’ or a place of lodging, for him.
 - b. The only other place this word “lodging” is used in scripture is in Acts 28:23, where it refers to Paul’s “own hired house” (Acts 28:30) in Rome.
 - c. Paul knew that Philemon, and others, had been praying for his release. He felt confident (trusted) that these prayers would be granted (cf 2 Jn 12; 3 Jn 14). Similar to his declaration to the church of Christ in Rome (cf Rom 15:24).

Note: There does not appear to be any divine insight to his release, just calm confidence and comfort that “[t]he effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (James 5:16).
 - d. Paul was preparing Philemon to see him face to face (cf Phil 2:24).
 - 1) This is a marvelously persuasive argument for Philemon to accept Onesimus.
 - 2) If Paul is planning to visit Philemon there is no way he can refuse to grant Onesimus full fellowship.
 - 3) What a wonderful advantage to have the Holy Ghost guiding the pen of the apostle. This difficult situation could not help but to work out to God’s glory.

²⁰ Albert Barnes’ NT Commentary.

- e. We know that Paul was released from his Roman captivity after two years (cf Acts 28:30).
 - 1) We do not know where he went or who he visited after his release.
 - 2) It is very possible he took advantage of Philemon's 'guest room' and revisited his close friend upon release, but it is undocumented.

Note: Everything about Paul's life, after his release from Rome, is shrouded in mystery, tradition and speculation.
- IV. Paul's closing wishes (23-25).
- A. Epaphras is a man we encountered twice in the study of Colossians (cf Col 1:7, 8; 4:12, 13).
 - 1. He received high praises from Paul through inspiration, therefore, high praises from the Holy Ghost.
 - a. This man was one of the true 'unsung heroes' of the scriptures.
 - b. He is described as a "fellowservant" and a "faithful minister" (Col 1:7) and here a "fellowprisoner" from Colosse.
 - c. It is not known if he was an actual prisoner or if this word is used in a metaphorical fashion. Both concepts are possible.
 - d. He was the selected individual who traveled from Colosse to Rome to report the condition of the church there. Obviously, he was well respected by the local brethren.
 - B. In addition to Epaphras, Verse 24 contains a quartet of "fellowlabourers" who also send greetings.
 - 1. "Marcus" is John Mark (cf Acts 12:12).
 - a. He went on the first evangelistic tour with Barnabas, his cousin, and Saul (Paul) (cf Acts 12:25).
 - b. This is the same man who deserted them just one chapter later (cf Acts 13:13).
 - c. He is the source of the great confrontation between Barnabas and Paul (cf Acts 15:37-39).
 - d. We see that the problem was fixed and fellowship was restored, as it always should be (cf 2 Tim 4:11).
 - e. While Paul is confined at Rome, John Mark was at his side.
 - 2. "Aristarchus" was from Macedonia (cf Acts 19:29).
 - a. It is evident that he was a well trusted brother because he was selected to accompany the relief funds being sent across the Roman Empire for the needy saints in Jerusalem.
 - b. As more than two full years in Jerusalem and Caesarea passed with tension, trouble and tumult in the apostle's life, Aristarchus was still with him as he begins the journey to Rome.

Note: That means he was numbered with the 276 souls that were shipwrecked with Paul (cf Acts 27:1, 2, 37).
 - c. He was still with Paul as this letter was written, and is called a "fellowprisoner" in Col 4:10.

- d. Aristarchus is the epitome of dedication to the cause of Christ.
- 3. “Demas” is also mentioned in Col 4:14 and 2 Tim 4:10.
 - a. As Paul writes these epistles from Rome he has good things to say about this man. He is grouped with the “fellowlabourers” here.
 - b. He seemed to be well known by the brethren in Colosse, as referenced in this passage and Col 4:14.
 - c. At some point he made the arduous journey to Rome to be with the apostle.
 - d. At some later point, we know that Demas took a turn toward “the weak and beggarly elements” (Gal 4:9) of this world (cf 2 Tim 4:10).
 - e. If we compare the spiritual paths of John Mark and Demas we see men headed in very different directions.
 - f. As time and opportunities pass us by, let us strive to be better (like John Mark) and not worse (like Demas), spiritually speaking.
- 4. “Lucas” whom we know better as Luke.
 - a. This giant of the faith was the writer of the book that bears his name and the book we know as Acts.

Note: It is not commonly known, but Luke is the one who wrote most of the New Testament.²¹

Note: The only Gentile writer of the New Testament wrote more than any of the other writers. Fittingly, more Gentiles were converted to Christianity than were Jews.
 - b. Luke becomes connected with Paul in Acts 16 just before they crossed over the Aegean Sea going to Macedonia (cf Acts 16:9, 10).
 - c. Acts 16:10 is the beginning of the famous “we” passages of Acts, indicating that Luke is traveling with Paul (cf Acts 16:10-13).
 - d. Jesus is commonly referred to as ‘the great physician,’ (the term is not used in scriptures) Luke is called “the beloved physician” (cf Col 4:14).

Note: The term ‘physician’ is used in reference to Jesus on four occasions, but never with the term ‘great,’ i.e., Matt 9:12; Lk 4:23.
 - e. His dedication to Paul is seen as he boards the ship bound for Rome with him, as did Aristarchus (see page 14, B, 2, this outline).
- 5. These four men would be a source of encouragement to Paul, but they would also serve as his feet, hands and voice to those who could not come to him in his confinement.
 - a. We need to always be alert to ways we can aide the advancement of the gospel.
 - b. If we cannot be the “eye” let us be the “feet” (cf 1 Cor 12:21).
 - c. There is work for all of us (cf 1 Cor 12:23-27).
 - d. Paul has high praise for his companions at Rome.

²¹ Paul wrote 2,031 verses of scripture while Luke wrote 2,358. Paul wrote 43,402 words while Luke wrote 50,194. For additional information see An Outlined Study of Acts, page 1, same author.

- C. It is common for Paul (through inspiration) to end his letters as he begins them, with the thought of grace (vs 3).
1. There is simply no better way to draw this short letter to a close than to wish God's grace on Philemon and his decisions.
 2. Something which is difficult to see in our English translations is the word "your" is in the plural.
 - a. Paul wants Philemon, and everyone else involved in Onesimus' return, to be filled with "[t]he grace of our Lord Jesus Christ."
 - b. He ends with "Amen." So be it.