

# Olivet Baptist Church

3500 Edmondson Avenue, Baltimore, MD 21229

Wednesday Night Bible Study (7:00 pm)

Book of John – Facilitator: Rev. Alex O. Stone

**Overall Theme: The Bond Created by “Brotherly Love” (1:1–1:25)**

- I. The Prayer of Thanksgiving for Philemon (Philemon 1:1-1:7)
- II. Intercession/Petition For Onesimus (Philemon 1:8-1:16)
- III. Confidence in Philemon’s Obedience (Philemon 1:17-1:25)

**CURRENT FOCUS: “FINDING FORGIVENESS IN CHRIST” (PHILEMON 1:1–1:25)**

## ***Greeting***

<sup>1</sup> Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy *our* brother, To Philemon our beloved *friend* and fellow laborer, <sup>2</sup> to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: <sup>3</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

## ***Philemon’s Love and Faith***

<sup>4</sup> I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, <sup>5</sup> hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, <sup>6</sup> that the sharing of your faith may become effective by *the acknowledgment of every good thing* which is in you in Christ Jesus. <sup>7</sup> For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, *brother*.

## ***The Plea for Onesimus***

<sup>8</sup> Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, <sup>9</sup> *yet* for love’s sake I rather appeal *to you*—being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ—<sup>10</sup> I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten *while* in my chains, <sup>11</sup> who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.

<sup>12</sup> I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart,  
<sup>13</sup> whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. <sup>14</sup> But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.

<sup>15</sup> For perhaps he departed for a while for this *purpose*, that you might receive him forever, <sup>16</sup> no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

### ***Philemon's Obedience Encouraged***

<sup>17</sup> If then you count me as a partner, receive him as *you would* me. <sup>18</sup> But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. <sup>19</sup> I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay—not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides. <sup>20</sup> Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.

<sup>21</sup> Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. <sup>22</sup> But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.

### ***Farewell***

<sup>23</sup> Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, <sup>24</sup> *as do* Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers. <sup>25</sup> The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with your spirit. Amen.

## **Commentary: PAUL'S TEACHING ON LOVE AND FORGIVENESS (CHAP. 1:1-1:25)**

### **I. The Salutation of the Letter (vv. 1–7).**

#### **A. The writer**

**V.1a.** This is the only one of Paul’s epistles in which he referred to himself in the salutation as **a prisoner of Christ Jesus**. In seven of his epistles he called himself “an apostle”; in two of them (1 and 2 Thes.) he used no appellation, and in three he referred to himself as Christ’s “servant.”

Probably Paul refrained from calling himself an apostle here because this epistle is one of entreaty and request, not one of commands that would necessitate its readers’ awareness of his apostolic authority. Paul was a prisoner of the Roman Empire, but actually his imprisonment was because of his witness for the Savior. Paul called himself “a prisoner of Christ Jesus” (Phile. 9). Epaphras was his “fellow prisoner” (v. 23).

Adding the words **and Timothy our brother** strengthened the weight of Paul’s sympathy and love. Timothy’s name was also joined with Paul’s in the salutations to five of Paul’s other epistles (2 Cor., Phil., Col., 1 and 2 Thes.).

### **B. The readers (v. 1b–2).**

**V.1b.** About all that is known of Philemon in the New Testament is disclosed in the words, **To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker**. He was loved by Paul (“dear friend” is the rendering of *agapētō*, lit., “loved” or “beloved”; cf. v. 16); and Paul considered Philemon on his level as a “fellow worker” (cf. the pl. “fellow workers,” v. 24). Philemon was a well-to-do Christian of the Apostolic Age, in whose home at Colosse the church met. “Fellow worker” does not necessarily suggest that Paul and Philemon labored together; more likely, Philemon worked to build up the church in Colosse while Paul served in nearby Ephesus (see “Destination” under the

Book of Philemon's *Introduction*). Paul also addressed Philemon as "brother" in verses 7 and 20.

**V. 2. Apphia our sister** was most likely the wife of Philemon. She may have possibly served in a semi-official position in the church in their home. "She is as much a part of the decision as her husband, because according to the custom of the time, she had day-to-day responsibility for the slaves" (Arthur A. Rupprecht, "Philemon," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 11:458).

Some have surmised that **Archippus our fellow soldier** was Philemon's son. He may likely have been a mission-pastor in Colosse, for Paul gave a brief instruction for the Colossians to pass on to Archippus (Col. 4:17). Perhaps Archippus, because of his position, could have exerted additional influence on Philemon.

**The church that meets in your home** could also put pressure on Philemon to heed Paul's request. If Paul had not included this church in his salutation, they might have gossiped when they saw Onesimus had returned. The practice of churches meeting in private homes for worship was common up to A.D. 200. Not until the third century did churches meet in separate buildings. Home churches were also mentioned by Paul in Romans 16:5 and Colossians 4:15. The words "your home" may refer, some say, to Archippus' home ("your" is the sing. *sou*), but it is better to take it as referring to Philemon's home since he is addressed first in the salutation. The singular "you" in Philemon 4, 6–8, 10–12, 16, 18–21, 23 obviously refers to Philemon. "You" and "your" is plural only in verses 22 and 25.

### C. The salutation (v. 3).

V. 3. This salutation—**Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**—is the usual Pauline greeting. It is almost identical in wording to the greeting in six of his other epistles (Rom., 1 and 2 Cor., Gal., Eph., Phil.); the salutation in Paul's six other epistles have only slight variations (Col., 1 and 2 Thes., 1 and 2 Tim., Titus). (See chart, "Paul's Introductions to His Epistles" at Rom. 1:1.)

It is important to note the word order. The word "peace" expresses a spiritual state denoting a proper relationship between God and man; it is the effect of only one cause: the "grace" of God. There can be no peace apart from grace. Peace *with* God, a judicial matter, comes by means of faith (Rom. 5:1). The peace *of* God, an experiential condition, results from the infilling ministry of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18; Gal. 5:22–23). Paul concluded the letter with a similar prayer regarding the "grace of the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phile. 25).

### D. The commendation (vv. 4–7).

#### 1. THANKSGIVING (vv. 4–5)

V. 4. Every letter of Paul's except Galatians includes an expression of thanksgiving in the opening. This follows the custom, in both pagan and Christian first-century correspondence, of including a word of thanks in the salutation. The words **I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers** are almost the same ones Paul used in his other prison epistles (see Eph. 1:15–16; Phil. 1:3–4; Col. 1:3–4). Paul told *when* he gave thanks ("always"), and *to whom* ("God"), and *for whom* ("you," i.e., Philemon).

V. 5. Paul also told *why* (**because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints**). The coupling of faith in Christ and love for the saints was also true of the Ephesians (Eph. 1:15), the Colossians (Col. 1:4), the Thessalonians (1 Thes. 1:3; 2 Thes. 1:3).

Paul may have heard about Philemon's faith in Christ and love for the saints from Onesimus and Epaphras. Philemon's faith in Christ produced love for all the saints. Since Philemon loved "all" the saints, he surely should include Onesimus, now a saint, in his love!

## 2. PRAYER (v. 6)

V. 6. Having commended Philemon's faith and love (v. 5) Paul expanded on Philemon's faith (v. 6) and his love (v. 7). Paul's prayer was that Philemon (**you** is sing.) would be **active in sharing his faith** (lit., "active in *the* sharing," *hē koinōnia*). The relationship of the second clause to the first is difficult to translate. The NIV suggests that the second is a *result* of the first: **so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ**. Philemon's sharing of his faith would then lead to a full understanding of his spiritual blessings. However, the NIV words "so that you will have" are simply the one Greek word *en* ("in"). This hints that the first clause results from the second. As Philemon would gain a fuller understanding of his blessings in Christ he would become more active in sharing Him. He would share Christ *in* (i.e., in the sphere of) his full understanding of his blessings. The more a believer comes to comprehend all he has in Christ the more eager he is to share Him with others. The "full understanding" is *epignōsei*,

mentioned in Paul's prayers in each of the other prison epistles (Eph. 1:18; Phil. 1:9; Col. 1:9).

### 3. TESTIMONY (v. 7)

V. 7. Philemon's **love** (cf. vv. 5, 9) resulted in **joy and encouragement** for Paul, for Philemon had **refreshed the hearts of the saints**. "Refreshed" (*anapepautai*, cf. v. 20) is the word the Lord used in Matthew 11:28, "Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (*anapausō*, "I will refresh you"). Philemon, having been spiritually "refreshed" by Christ, could refresh others. "Hearts" is not the normal Greek word *kardia* for heart, but is *splanchna* (lit., "inner parts of the body"). The emotions stemmed from the inner parts, according to some Greeks. Thus this is a deep emotional term. Paul used it again in Philemon 12 and 20 (cf. Phil. 2:1, KJV).

## II. The Body of the Letter (vv. 8–21).

### A. The plea (vv. 8–12, 17)

Paul then gave his recommendations regarding the runaway slave Onesimus. Throughout this plea the apostle's words were courteous, and yet they bore a note of authority and earnestness. He revealed a double truth. Onesimus was now a *son* in the faith to Paul (v. 10), and Onesimus was now a *brother* to Philemon (v. 16). The latter forms a Christian reply to the horrible institution of slavery. Onesimus,

in the lowest social status in the Roman world—a slave with no rights—was on a spiritual plane equal with his owner Philemon and with the leading apostle!<sup>1</sup>

### 1. A PLEA, NOT A COMMAND (v. 8)

V. 8. **Therefore**, introduces the application of Paul’s prior words (vv. 4–7). Philemon’s love, demonstrated to all the saints, should now include Onesimus. As an apostle Paul said he **could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do**, but he refrained. The word “bold” is *parrēsian*, rendered “courage” and “confidence” in Hebrews (3:6; 10:19, 35).

### 2. A PLEA FOR LOVE’S SAKE (v. 9)

V. 9. Paul’s **appeal** was **on the basis of love**, probably Philemon’s love (cf. vv. 5, 7). To receive back and forgive Onesimus would be a laudable expression of Philemon’s love to both Onesimus and Paul. Further motivation for heeding Paul’s plea was that Paul was both **an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus** (cf. v. 1). Being an “old man” (*presbytēs*) meant that Paul had authority (since older men in those days were considered wise and thus authoritative) and also that Paul’s position as an *imprisoned* old man greatly restricted what he himself could do for Onesimus. Also, the reminder that Paul was imprisoned might appeal to Philemon’s sympathy. Thus Onesimus’ restitution depended on Philemon. Paul’s calling himself an old man undoubtedly was in contrast to Onesimus rather than to Philemon.

---

<sup>1</sup> Deibler, E. C. (1985). [Philemon](#). In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, pp. 770–772). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.



### 3. A PLEA FOR A SPIRITUAL SON (vv. 10–11)

V. 10. The verb **I appeal** (*parakalō*) was repeated from verse 9, thus giving it special force. This plea was for Paul's **son** (*tou emou teknou*, lit., "my own child"), a term of endearment, which Paul used elsewhere only of Timothy and Titus (1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; Titus 1:4). Onesimus, having escaped from his owner, somehow met Paul in Rome. Led to the Savior by Paul, Onesimus **became** Paul's **son while he was in chains**. Since the slave was converted while Paul was in prison, their relationship was probably stronger. What an encounter it must have been between that slave and that prisoner! But the slave-prisoner relationship became spiritually a son-father relationship. Paul thought of himself as a father to those he won to the Lord (1 Cor. 4:15; cf. 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2). A special bond of Christian affection exists between a believer and the person God used to bring him to Christ.

In Greek, the word **Onesimus** is last in Philemon 10, evidently withheld deliberately in order to render Philemon's heart more tender.

V. 11. Onesimus, a common name for slaves, means "useful." But this slave, by running away, had become the opposite of his name. He was then of no use to his owner. The words **but now** suggest a change resulting from his new birth. He who **was useless** (*achrēston*) had **become useful** (*euchrēston*) **both to you and to me**. "St. Paul seems to say, 'He belied his name in days past; he will more than deserve it now' " (Alfred Barry, "The Epistle to Philemon," in *Ellicott's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 4:273). Onesimus was then doubly useful, to Paul as well as Philemon. This clever play on words on the slave's name no doubt strengthened the force of the apostle's request.

#### 4. A PLEA FROM THE HEART (v. 12)

V. 12. Paul passed the problem on to Philemon: **I am sending him ... back to you.** Philemon would not have opportunity to think over Paul's request before seeing Onesimus. Instead, facing Onesimus, the slave owner would need to decide right then. Since this converted slave was, as Paul wrote, **my very heart** (*splanchna*, "emotions"; cf. vv. 7, 20), how could Philemon refuse his friend Paul? The apostle certainly knew the art of friendly persuasion! This verse suggests that Onesimus himself was the bearer of the letter.

#### 5. A PLEA FROM A PARTNER (v. 17)

V. 17. Earlier Paul wrote that his appeal was "for" Onesimus (v. 10), and that Philemon could "have him back for good" (v. 15). But not until verse 17 did Paul explicitly state his request: **welcome him.**

Since Philemon considered Paul a **partner**, he certainly should welcome Onesimus as if he were welcoming Paul himself. The bond between the apostle and the slave owner was that kind of unity which draws fellow workers in the gospel to each other. "Partner" is *koinōnon*. This is from *koinōnia* ("fellowship or partnership"), which Paul used in verse 6. If Philemon rejected Onesimus, it would be like rejecting the apostle, his friend (v. 1), fellow worker (v. 1), brother (vv. 7, 20), and even partner (v. 17). Such would of course be unthinkable.

### B. THE RELATIONSHIP (vv. 13–16).

#### 1. THE PRESENT BROTHERHOOD BETWEEN PAUL AND ONESIMUS (v. 13)

V. 13. Paul's estimate of this Christian slave placed the latter on equal footing with Philemon. If Onesimus were kept by Paul—which Paul **would have liked**—Onesimus would have served in **place** of (*hyper*) Philemon. Both were equally capable of helping Paul. And being **in chains for the gospel**, incarcerated because of his testimony for Christ (cf. “prisoner” in vv. 1, 9), Paul could have used some assistance. But duty erased his wish. Knowing that a slave was his master's property, Paul had no choice but to send him back.

## 2. THE PAST BROTHERHOOD BETWEEN PAUL AND PHILEMON (v. 14)

V. 14. Retaining a slave could be done only with the owner's **consent**. Though Paul probably could have talked Philemon into letting him keep Onesimus in Rome, he did not want to take undue advantage of their relationship. Paul preferred that such permission would be **spontaneous** (*hekousion*, “voluntary,” used only here in the NT). No one knows whether Philemon freed Onesimus and sent him back to minister to Paul in Rome, but it is an interesting thought.

## 3. THE FUTURE BROTHERHOOD BETWEEN ONESIMUS AND PHILEMON (vv. 15–16)

V. 15. Philemon's temporary loss (**for a little while** is lit., “to an hour”) of his slave resulted in his having him returned permanently. Some slaves were able to stay undetected in large cities or isolated areas, never to be returned to their owners. The words **for good**, which translate *aiōnion* (normally rendered “forever”), may mean either permanently in this life or forever in heaven.

V. 16. Paul also contrasted Onesimus' status **as a slave** with his new relationship to Philemon **as a dear brother**, thus placing all three men on the same level. Paul also

called Onesimus “dear brother” in Colossians 4:9. The slave was dear to Paul but should be even more so to Philemon (cf. Phile. 11, “useful both to you and me”). For Philemon to take Onesimus back **no longer as a slave but better than a slave** may suggest emancipation (cf. v. 21). On the other hand some say that Philemon’s receiving him **as a man** (lit., “in flesh”) may point to a retaining of the master-slave relationship along with their new spiritual relationship **in the Lord**. Or these phrases may indicate just the opposite, with “as a man” referring to a person-to-person relationship, not a master-slave relationship.

(The commentary for v. 17 appears after that for v. 12).

### C. The pledge (vv. 18–21).

#### 1. PHILEMON TO CHARGE ONESIMUS’ DEBT TO PAUL (vv. 18–19a)

V. 18. Though Paul did not name Onesimus’ offense, it probably involved a monetary loss for Philemon. Onesimus may have stolen some money or goods when he escaped from his owner, or the absence of Onesimus’ services may have involved Philemon in financial loss. Paul did not castigate Onesimus for some crime; he simply wrote **if he has wronged you or owes you anything**.

Paul asked Philemon to **charge** (*elloga*, an accounting term) Onesimus’ financial obligation to Paul. This generous act compares in a small way with Christ’s substitutionary work on the cross. As Onesimus was in debt to Philemon, so sinners are in debt; they must pay for their sins against God. As Paul was not involved in any way with Onesimus’ guilt, so Christ was sinless, separate from sinners (Heb. 4:15; 7:25). And as Paul assumed Onesimus’ debt, so Christ took on Himself the sins of the world (Isa. 53:6; John 1:29; Heb. 7:27; 9:26, 28).

V. 19a. Paul stated that he was writing these words **with** [his] **own hand** (cf. Gal. 6:11), thus placing himself under legal obligation to carry out his commitment. His ability to **pay it back** may have come from the gifts sent to him from Philippi (cf. Phil. 4:14–19).

## 2. PHILEMON TO CONSIDER HIS OWN DEBT TO PAUL (v. 19b)

V.19b. **You owe me your very self** hints that Philemon may have been won to the Lord by Paul, and was thus obligated to him spiritually. If so, this was further evidence that Onesimus and Philemon were on the same spiritual plane; they had both been led to the Savior by the apostle. Such a debt could in one sense cover Onesimus' obligations. And yet Paul chose not to dwell on that fact.

## 3. PHILEMON TO REFRESH PAUL (v. 20)

V. 20. Receiving and restoring Onesimus would give **some benefit** to Paul **in the Lord** (cf. “in the Lord,” v. 16) and would **refresh** his **heart in Christ**. The words “some benefit” translate the Greek *onaimēn*, which is obviously related to the word “Onesimus.” Paul was saying in effect, “Let me find in you, as I have found in him, a true Onesimus.” “Refresh” (*anapauson*) and “heart” (*splanchna*) recall the words of verse 7. Philemon, who refreshed the hearts of other saints, could hardly refrain from doing the same for Paul.

## 4. PHILEMON TO GO BEYOND PAUL'S REQUEST (v. 21)

V. 21. Paul was sure that Philemon would heed his request. **Obedience** is stronger than Paul's other more tactful and less direct appeals. Paul was also confident that Philemon would do **even more than** he asked. What Paul had asked was that

Onesimus be welcomed and forgiven. What could be “more than” that? Onesimus’ freedom seems to be in mind (cf. v. 16, “no longer as a slave”). Or it may refer to Philemon’s returning Onesimus to Paul; but had he not asked already for that, though subtly? (v. 13) If Onesimus were released, this shows an effect of Christianity on slavery through a recognition of true brotherhood in Christ.

### III. The Conclusion of the Letter (vv. 22–25).

#### A. The comfort (v. 22).

V. 22. Paul then requested something for himself: **Prepare a guest room for me**, likely in Philemon’s home. The prospect of a visit from the apostle would comfort Philemon but would also spur him to respond quickly to Paul’s plea for Onesimus. The “guest room” points to Philemon’s financial status. Like Paul, many Christian workers have been encouraged and assisted in their ministries by such provisions.

Paul knew that many were praying for his release (cf. Phil. 1:25–26). (How could Philemon pray for Paul’s release and yet refuse to release Onesimus?) By using the plural **you** and **your**, Paul referred back to those mentioned in Philemon 1–2: Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and all the believers with them.

#### B. The fraternal greetings (vv. 23–24).

Vv. 23–24. Those who sent greetings to Philemon (**you** in v. 23 is sing.) are five of the six people also mentioned in Colossians 4:10–14, though in a different order: **Epaphras ... Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke**. In Colossians Paul also added “Jesus, who is called Justus.” In Colossians 4:12–13 Paul highly commended Epaphras, who in Philemon 23 is called **my fellow prisoner for Christ Jesus**.

### **C. The benediction (v. 25).**

V. 25. Paul concluded all 13 of his epistles with a one-sentence benediction similar to the one here: **The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.** “Your” is plural, pointing back to those addressed in verses 1–2. These believers were already enjoying the grace that brought them salvation, but here and in verse 3 Paul was concerned that they be encompassed with God’s enabling grace for their daily walk before others. “Spirit” (cf. “your spirit” in the Gal. 6:18 and 2 Tim. 4:22 benedictions) refers to one’s inner spiritual self. What a gracious way for Paul to conclude this touching intimate epistle.