



A Study of Paul's Letter to Philemon

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Preface

The letter to Philemon is often glossed over quickly due to its short length. I have been guilty of merely “speed-reading” the letter. When I decided to study Philemon with a more critical eye, I was amazed to see all of the important lessons that the letter packs into such few verses. It is my sincere hope that, through this commentary, I am able to convey those lessons to the reader.

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I also want to thank my friend and brother, Shane Pack, who taught a class on Philemon at East Albertville around the same time that I was putting the finishing touches on this commentary. Shane is an excellent Bible class teacher. I believe he is one of the very best teachers in our brotherhood at making practical real-life applications while examining texts in a verse-by-verse setting. The way Shane approached the letter helped me see things I would have otherwise missed had I not been a student in his class. I appreciate you so much, my brother, and am thankful I had the chance to sit under your learning tree for a few weeks as you taught from this important piece of God-breathed literature.

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The Reason for Paul's Writing

The letter to Philemon is the shortest of all of Paul's writings contained within the New Testament canon. Paul wrote this brief letter to request that his brother in Christ, Philemon, would forgive and welcome back, Onesimus, his runaway slave and new brother in Christ (**Phile. 10-17**). Paul's request would surely test the sincerity of Philemon's love and faithfulness to Christ. Yet, as the letter reveals, Paul was confident that Philemon would exemplify the attitude demanded of Christ (**Phile. 21**) by accepting back his slave who was now on equal spiritual footing with his earthly master (**Gal. 3:28**).

Throughout the letter, Paul shows great delicacy and tact in handling what could potentially become an explosive situation. Marshall Patton observed:

"While the other books of the New Testament are indeed precious treasures in the heart of every Christian, here is a little book, involving a personal and private matter between two friends and brethren in the Lord, that rises to a position of unsuspected significance, so that it sparkles like a gem of great price in the midst of other valuable treasures. This is so because of the principles of religion of our Lord exemplified in the area of human relations" (*Truth Commentaries – The Books of 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, 317*).

Not only should readers carefully examine the overall meaning of Paul's words in this short letter, but we also should equally consider and learn from the lengths Paul went to as he strived to be careful with his speech while handling the uniquely difficult circumstances which prompted him to contact Philemon (**Col. 4:6**). Throughout the letter, Paul perfectly exemplified the words of another inspired writer: "*A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger*" (**Prov. 15:1**).

Onesimus – A Runaway Slave Converted to Christ

Onesimus was a runaway slave who escaped the service of his master, Philemon. Paul and Onesimus evidently met at some point while the apostle was in Rome. What exact circumstances brought the two together is unknown. Whatever the direct cause that brought them together, at some point Paul converted Onesimus to Christ, seemingly while the former was under house arrest (**Phile. 10**).

Although the letter shows how deeply Paul cared for Onesimus, Paul still recognized it was important for his son in the faith to go back to his master and, thus, fulfill his obligations in serving Philemon. That would mean, Onesimus, a man who successfully escaped slavery, would voluntarily return to servitude. Robert Harkrider explained:

“This runaway slave was returning under his own free will. Under ordinary circumstances, a fugitive slave who was caught and returned to his master could expect the penalty of death, or a severe beating at least. However, Onesimus had the courage to return because of his faith in the Lord and belief that the gospel would so affect the heart of Philemon that he would forgive as the Lord had done” (*Truth Publications – Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, 148*).

Onesimus being willing to voluntarily return to Philemon's service speaks volumes of this new convert's humility and desire to obey the Lord's will even though doing so would cost the runaway slave his freedom. Onesimus provides a great example of self-sacrifice in obeying the Lord (**Luke 9:23-25**).

Philemon – A Christian Slave-Owner

It is widely assumed that Philemon was a wealthy man since he was a slave-owner. While the letter itself does not reveal any specific information about Philemon's financial circumstances, it seems warranted to assume Philemon was not poor since he was a slave-owner and likely had more slaves than just Onesimus. As was the case with Onesimus, Philemon was likely a convert of Paul (**Phile. 19**). Exactly when and where this conversion took place is unknown. S.J. Eales noted:

“It would seem that St. Paul himself had never been to Colossae, and that his meeting with Philemon, and the conversion of the latter, must have taken place elsewhere” (*The Pulpit Commentary Volume 21, i*).

Although we do not know for certain where the two first met, scholars have speculated that Philemon was converted by Paul in Ephesus, given its close proximity to Colossae.

In this letter, Paul called upon Philemon to not merely accept back his runaway slave. Rather, Paul requested for Philemon to receive Onesimus “*no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother . . . both in the flesh and in the Lord*” (**Phile. 16**). The apostle further requested for Philemon to receive Onesimus in the same way that he would receive Paul himself (**Phile. 17**). This simple yet powerful appeal reveals much about the nature of slavery for those professing to be followers of Christ.

The New Testament and Slavery

Although some are uncomfortable in admitting it, the Bible has much to say regarding the subject of slavery while never outright denouncing it. The Law of Moses permitted slavery (**Exod. 21; Lev. 25; etc.**). Even under the Law of Christ, slavery is never condemned. Slavery itself was not abolished by the gospel of Christ. The commencement of the New Covenant did, however, introduce changes in the attitudes of both servants and masters (**1 Tim. 6:1-3**).

Col. 3:22 teaches that “*bondservants*” are commanded to “*obey*” their earthly “*masters*.” For Paul to provide this instruction, it is necessary to assume there were “*bondservants*” in the church at Colossae, as was the case in other churches (**Eph. 6:5-9; 1 Cor. 7:20-24; 1 Pet. 2:18**). Yet, **Col. 4:1** provides undeniable proof that cruel and enforced slavery is not supported by the Law of Christ. An earthly master is not permitted to act as an unjust tyrant towards his servants (**Phile. 8-17**). Instead, **Col. 4:1** demands masters to act in “*just and fair*” ways toward their servants. Examining this command, John Gill explained:

“That which is just and equal: proper food and raiment, which is sufficient and fitting for them; the wages due unto them by law or contract; using them with gentleness and humanity, taking care of them when under affliction, and in sickness; encouraging the diligent and laborious by an addition to their salaries; correcting the disobedient within just bounds, not with too much rigour and severity; and carrying it with an even hand to all, not preferring or indulging one before another, without any reason” (*Gill’s Exposition of the Entire Bible, Colossians, 114*).

A master must not demand anything from a servant beyond what he would be willing to do himself if the roles were reversed (**Matt. 7:12**). Elsewhere, we learn that a master must possess the same characteristics as his servants (**Eph. 6:5-8**). Such is logical since an earthly master, though he has a position of rank on earth, is just like his servants in being subject to the Master in heaven. Just as the servant will stand before the Lord to answer for how he performed his role of servitude, so too will a master stand before the Lord to answer for how he ruled over his servants (**2 Cor. 5:10**).

The letter to Philemon provides valuable information on the issue of slavery. The fact that Onesimus was a slave and Paul did not demand or even request Philemon to release him from those bonds in no way serves as an approval for the types of cruel and forced slavery evident in the United States for centuries and still existing in some countries today. This type of forced slavery violates the attitude required by slave masters in **Col. 4:1** and **Eph. 6:9**. This type of slavery and other similar forms of slavery are necessarily condemned due to what the Lord and His apostles taught on love, kindness, and compassion that God’s people must possess toward all men. When we harmonize the letter to Philemon with other New Testament passages that directly address slavery or principally to the discussion, it is clear that if Philemon continued owning slaves, he would stand in total contrast to the cruel and wicked slave-owners around him.

Paul’s Relationship with Colossae

Internal evidence suggests that Philemon was a resident of Colossae (**Phile. 2, 22; Col. 4:9**). Therefore, it is likely that Philemon was a member of the Colossian church to whom Paul also wrote an epistle (**Phile. 1, 10, 23; Col. 4:7-9**). Depending upon how one interprets the phrase, “*church in your house*”

(**Phile. 2**), either Philemon's home was the meeting place for the church, or several people in Philemon's home were members of the Colossian church.

As was the case with his Colossian epistle, the letter to Philemon was written while Paul was imprisoned (**Col. 1:24, 4:3, 10; Phile. 1**) and was delivered by Tychicus and Onesimus (**Col. 4:7-9**). It is believed that both letters were written during Paul's Roman imprisonment (**Acts 28**) in approximately 62 AD. This would date the letter approximately 23-32 years after the death of Christ (We do not know for certain that Jesus died in 33 AD. Historians and scholars believe He could have died as early as 30 AD or as late as 39 AD). Examining the date of the letter, A.R. Fausset stated:

"This Epistle is closely linked with the Epistle to the Colossians. Both were carried by the same bearer, Onesimus, with whom, however, Tychicus is joined in the Epistle to the Colossians (Col 4:9). The persons sending salutations are the same, except one, Jesus called Justus (Col 4:11). In both alike Archippus is addressed (Phm 2; Col 4:17). Paul and Timothy stand in the headings of both. And in both Paul appears as a prisoner (Phm 9; Col 4:18). Hence it follows, it was written at the same time and place as the Epistle to the Colossians (which was about the same time as the Epistle to the Ephesians), namely, at Rome, during Paul's first imprisonment, AD 61 or 62" (*A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*, 437).

Ultimately, the precise date of the letter is not important. God did not deem it necessary to reveal this information to us. Therefore, not knowing an exact date does not affect our ability to understand the truth of either epistle.

We do not know for certain if Paul ever set foot in Colossae. Some suggest Epaphras first taught the gospel there, and internal evidence within the Colossian letter lends credence to this theory (**Col. 1:7, 2:1, 4:12-13**). Epaphras was a Gentile who lived in Colossae (**Col. 4:12**). Paul viewed Epaphras as a faithful servant of the Lord (**Col. 1:7, 4:12**), hard worker who was zealous for the cause of Christ (**Col. 4:13**), and a fellow prisoner (**Phile. 23**). Although the name Epaphras is a form of Epaphroditus, the two people named Epaphras and Epaphroditus in the New Testament are distinct persons.

Some suggest that Paul, at some point, did set foot in Colossae due to its close proximity to areas that we know he visited. For example, Paul traveled through Phrygia (**Acts 18:23**), and Colossae was located within this ancient kingdom. Colossae was also a city in Asia Minor, located about 100 miles east of Ephesus, a city where he spent the better part of three years laboring (**Acts 20:31**). Additionally, Colossae was near Laodicea and Hierapolis, which were two cities established along the banks of the Lycus River that were located within 6-12 miles of Colossae and mentioned by name in the Colossian letter (**Col. 4:13-14, 16**).

Ultimately, it is not important that we know if Paul did or did not set foot in Colossae; the apostle clearly had a relationship with the church there and played an integral part in its foundation (**Acts 19:10**), and he especially had a close relationship with Philemon, as revealed throughout this letter.

General Lessons

When we boil this letter down to its most basic premise (a conflict between a slave owner and his runaway slave), many people may question if the book has any applicability or usefulness to us today. Brent Kercheville explained:

“Carefully read verse 2 and you will see that not only is this letter written to Philemon, but also Apphia, Archippus, and ‘the church in your house.’ This letter was read to the church. So, though this situation is a personal matter regarding Philemon and Onesimus, its message is important and practical for us today” (*Philemon, the Need for Forgiveness*).¹

Although the letter is very brief and although the situation which necessitated it being written is unique, there are several important lessons that we can learn from studying Paul’s inspired message to his friend. Some lessons include:

- The gospel is for all (**Rom. 1:16; Mark 16:15-16**).
- One’s position in society is not indicative of his spiritual condition (**Luke 16:19-31**).
- Sincere obedience to the gospel changes people (**1 Cor. 6:9-11; 2 Cor. 5:17**).
- Spiritual equality in Christ (**Gal. 3:28**).
- Tactfulness in handling potentially explosive situations (**Col. 4:6**).
- Baptism does not negate the necessity of repentance (**Rom. 6:1-4, 11-23; Eph. 4:20-24**).
- The necessity of forgiving those who repent (**Luke 17:3-4; Eph. 4:32; Matt. 6:15**).
- How to forgive those who repent, i.e. full restoration (**2 Cor. 2:3-11**).

When viewing the letter to Philemon through the lens of these lessons that not only applied during the first century but will continue to apply for all generations, every reader should be able to gain much good from studying this short but powerful book. After all, God preserved the letter for a reason (**2 Tim. 3:16-17**).

¹ <https://westpalmbeachchurchofchrist.com/new-testament/philemon/philemon-the-need-for-forgiveness.html>

Verse-By-Verse Study

PAUL'S GREETING (1-3)

¹ *Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer,*
² *to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:*

Paul identified himself as a “*prisoner of Christ Jesus*.” Paul was certainly no stranger to being arrested and imprisoned. For instance, he was arrested in Jerusalem (**Acts 21**); he was imprisoned in Caesarea for about two years (**Acts 23; 24:27**); and he was imprisoned in Rome (**Acts 28**), which appears to be the occasion when he penned this letter.

In addition to identifying himself in this salutation, Paul also acknowledged the presence of Timothy. Evidently, Timothy was with Paul at the time of writing and, therefore, was included in this salutation as result. Though Paul mentioned Timothy by name here, there is no reason to assume that he co-authored the letter since Paul specifically stated near the end of the epistle that it was written “*with my own hand*” (**Phile. 19**). It is also worth noting that although we might view Timothy as a “big name” first century Christian and preacher, Paul did not elevate Timothy’s status beyond the position of “*brother*.”

Paul addressed the letter to the following people: Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the church in Philemon’s house. Philemon is identified as a “*beloved friend and fellow laborer*” of both Paul and Timothy; Apphia is also described as being “*beloved*,” and Archippus is identified as a “*fellow soldier*.” Outside of the information presented in these verses, we know basically nothing about the identities of the people named Apphia and Archippus. The former is nowhere else mentioned in the New Testament while the latter is only briefly mentioned in Paul’s closing remarks of the Colossian letter. We learn there that Archippus was a minister of the gospel (**Col. 4:17**), and the Colossians needed to encourage Archippus to “*finish the work the Lord called him to do*” (NLV), echoing the admonitions Paul gave Timothy (**1 Tim. 4:12-16; 2 Tim. 4:1-4**). Most scholars and Bible commentators presume Apphia and Archippus were the wife and son of Philemon, respectively. Charles Ellicott wrote:

“Of Apphia we know nothing, except that tradition, and the style in which the Epistle mentions her, both support the idea that she was Philemon’s wife. Archippus, a minister of the Church, either of Colossae or Laodicea . . . is on the same ground supposed to have been his son” (A Bible Commentary for English Readers).²

² <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/ellicott/philemon/1.htm>

However, such an assertion is pure speculation that simply cannot be proven. What we do know for certain is that Apphia and Archippus were Christians whom Paul greatly appreciated, which should be enough to suffice the reader.

Much debate exists as to the meaning of “*the church in your house*.” A similar expression is used in **Rom. 16:5**; **1 Cor. 16:19**; and **Col. 4:15**. Regarding what this phrase possibly means, Marshall Patton noted the following:

“It is generally thought that this refers to a local church that assembled in the house of the one specified . . . A possible meaning, and a very likely one, is that the word ‘church’ is used in the distributive sense (cf. Acts 8:3; Gal. 1:13) and includes other members of the church who made up the whole household of the one or ones specified, e.g. relatives, servants, et. al. (cf. Phil. 4:22)” (*Truth Commentaries – The Books of 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, 318-319*).

Personally, I see merit in both arguments and find nothing unscriptural or contradictory if a person holds either conclusion. I do not believe anyone can speak authoritatively as to what the phrase definitively means. As such, I encourage the reader to arrive at his own conclusion.

³*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

The “*grace*” and “*peace*” greeting that Paul used in this salutation is intentionally similar (**2 Thess. 3:16-18**) to the greeting he used in all of his other epistles that are contained within the New Testament canon (**Rom. 1:7**; **1 Cor. 1:3**; **2 Cor. 1:2**; **Phil. 1:2**; **Gal 1:3**; **Col. 1:2**; **1 Thess. 1:1**; **2 Thess. 1:2**; **1 Tim. 1:2**; **2 Tim. 1:2**; **Tit. 1:4**; **Phile. 1:3**). The fact that Paul began every letter with some version of this greeting tells us there is significance to the expression.

Paul stated that “*grace*” ³ and “*peace*” ⁴ are derived from both “*God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*.” ⁵ Peace is conjoined with grace in this text, indicating how true peace comes from being in God’s grace (**John 14:27, 16:33**; **Phil. 4:4-7**; **James 1:17**). Jesus is how God delivers “*grace*” to man in these last days (**John 1:14, 17**; **Heb. 1:1**).

³ “*Grace*” – Good-will, loving-kindness, favor (Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible).

⁴ “*Peace*” – The tranquil state of a soul assured of its salvation through Christ, and so fearing nothing from God and content with its earthly lot, of whatsoever sort that is (Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament).

⁵ “Peace is the harmony and satisfaction which comes into a life that has accepted God’s grace, is reconciled to God, and rests in assurance of the forgiveness of sins” (J.W. Shepherd, *Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, **249**).

PAUL'S THANKSGIVING AND PRAYER (4-7)

⁴ I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers,

Paul expressed thanks for his brother in Christ. It is notable that Paul was not simply grateful for Philemon; his thanksgiving prompted him to regularly pray for his beloved friend and fellow laborer. Albert Barnes commented:

“It would appear from this that Paul, in his private devotions, was in the habit of mentioning churches and individuals by name . . . Although encompassed with many cares and sorrows, and about to be put on trial for his life, he did not forget to remember a Christian brother though far distant from him, and to bear him on his heart before the throne of grace. To remember with affectionate concern these churches and individuals, as he did, Paul must have been a man of much prayer” (*Barnes’ Notes on the New Testament – Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, 299).

Paul frequently gave thanks for fellow members of the kingdom of Christ (**Col. 1:3, 9; Rom. 1:8; Phil. 1:3; 1 Thess. 1:2, 2:13; 1 Cor. 1:4; 2 Tim. 1:3**). Therefore, Christians today should follow Paul’s example in regularly giving thanks and praying for fellow Christians (**2 Thess. 2:13**).

⁵ hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, ⁶ that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. ⁷ For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.

The reason for the apostle’s prayers is explained here. Paul stated that he had been “*hearing*” of Philemon’s “*love and faith*” which was manifested “*toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints.*” Paul likely had been “*hearing*” of Philemon’s love and faithfulness either from Onesimus or Epaphras, the latter of whom provided updates on the Colossians’ welfare while he was with Paul in Rome (**Col. 1:7-8**).

Love for Jesus will prompt a person to love others (**1 John 4:20**). With Onesimus now a saint himself, it would be imperative that Philemon love his new brother in Christ just the same as he loved all other saints. The translators of the New English Translation state the following in their footnotes on **Phile. 5**:

“Although Paul’s comment here may appear as a stock expression to the casual reader, praising Philemon for his track record of faithfulness to Christ demonstrated in love for the saints is actually integral to the author’s argument in this short but pithy letter. Paul will soon ask Philemon to demonstrate this love toward Onesimus, his runaway slave” (*NET Footnotes, Phile. 5*).

The fact that both Philemon's faithfulness and care for the saints were publicly known indicates that he did not love merely in word but actively in deed via good works (**1 John 3:18; James 2:14-27; Matt. 5:16**), and Paul prayed that his friend's dedication would continue. Philemon needed to ensure that he would not grow weary in doing good (**Gal. 6:9-10**). Matthew Henry concluded:

"The good which Philemon did, was matter of joy and comfort to him and others, who therefore desired that he would continue and abound in good fruits, more and more, to God's honour" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible, Vol. VI, 881*).

Specifically, Paul wished Philemon would be effective in sharing his faith and in the "*acknowledgement of every good thing*" he received from Christ. Paul and Timothy took "*great joy and consolation*" in Philemon's love, knowing the good that was being accomplished as a direct result of that love – "*the hearts of the saints have been refreshed*." Examining this clause, John Calvin contended:

"An expression used by Paul to mean, to give relief from distresses, or to aid the wretched in such a manner that, having their minds composed, and being free from all uneasiness and grief, they may find repose. 'The bowels' ['hearts,' NKJV] mean the affections, and ['refresh'] denotes tranquility; and therefore they are greatly mistaken who torture this passage so as to make it refer to the belly and the nourishment of the body" (*Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, 352*).

What a blessing it is to have people within the body of Christ who, because of their great love and kindness, constantly minister to the needs of the saints, including the emotional, spiritual, and any other needs that extend beyond the physical necessities of life.

PAUL'S PLEA FOR ONESIMUS (8-21)

⁸ Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, ⁹ 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—

Paul had apostolic authority to command Philemon to receive back his runaway slave. Such a command would have been "*fitting*" to the situation and appropriate with the Lord's teachings on principles that govern such matters. Yet, Paul did not exert that authority here. Albert Barnes explained:

"The apostle implies here that what he was about to ask was, was proper to be done in the circumstances, but he does not put it on that ground, but rather asks it as a personal favour. It is usually not best to command a thing to be done if we can as well secure it by asking it as a favor" (*Barnes' Notes on the New Testament – Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, 300*).

Elsewhere, in addressing his authority as an apostle, Paul spoke about various rights he possessed (**1 Cor. 9:3-6**). Paul, however, did not always assert these rights (**1 Cor. 9:12, 15**). Regarding the matter of Philemon and Onesimus, Paul could have used his authority (rights) as an apostle to demand Philemon accept back his slave. Yet, instead of commanding Philemon to accept back Onesimus, Paul appealed to his friend on the basis of love. Paul had already commended his brother for the love he had for all saints (**Phile. 5**). Now, that love would be put to the test with Paul's request.

There is an important lesson to be learned here in Paul voluntary forgoing his apostolic right to command Philemon to receive Onesimus and, instead, electing to request that his friend would take back his runaway slave. Herschel Patton stated:

"Trouble has often come because some insist upon their right to do or say certain things, which may, indeed, be a lawful right. But, a Christian also has the right to give up his lawful right, and often does, in order to preserve peace and promote the welfare of others. Of course, a Christian is never justified in giving up his right (obligation) to stand for truth (the faith), but in our dealings with one another in numerous matters, Christians need to exercise their Christian liberty to give up certain rights for the sake of love and peace. This is the thing Paul did in this text and was asking Philemon to do" (*Truth Publications – 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, & Philemon, 75*).

Many problems could be avoided among God's people if we would follow Paul's pattern in forgoing our own rights and liberties to obtain/maintain peace (**1 Cor. 6:7, 8:9-13; Rom. 15:2-3**).

During this appeal, Paul described himself again as a "*prisoner of Jesus Christ*," but also added that he was "*aged*." Paul's exact age at the time of writing is unknown, but we can make some educated inferences. Luke described Paul as being a "*young man*" during the stoning and subsequent murder of Stephen (**Acts 7:58**). According to Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, the word translated as "*young man*" was used in reference to men ages 24-40 years old. Given the probable date of Stephen's murder and the probable date of the letter to Philemon (62 AD), scholars estimate that Paul was likely somewhere between 55-65 years old when he penned the letter. Albert Barnes noted:

"It will accord well with the usual meaning of the words to suppose that Paul was in the neighborhood of thirty when he was converted, and that he was now not far from sixty. We are to remember, also, that the constitution of Paul may have been much broken by his labours, his perils, and his trials" (*Barnes' Notes on the New Testament – Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, 301*).

Paul likely reiterated his imprisonment and mentioned his age to motivate his friend to accept his appeal. If we were in Philemon's shoes, would we not be motivated to grant Paul's request knowing what all he had endured as a minister of the gospel and was continuing to endure at the time of writing, even as an old man?

¹⁰ I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, ¹¹ who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.

Here, we see the root of Paul's appeal. Paul wrote to Philemon because of Onesimus, who, like Timothy, he considered a "son" in the faith (**1 Tim. 1:2**). Onesimus was not a physical "son" to Paul but a spiritual one due to the role the apostle played in converting him (**1 Cor. 4:15**). Onesimus was "begotten," or born again (**John 3:3-5**), during Paul's imprisonment. We do not know any details about Onesimus's conversion beyond what is stated here. Yet, we can learn much from the fact that a person as lowly as a runaway slave was worthy of the gospel call.

Onesimus's conversion demonstrates how the gospel message renders social statuses irrelevant, with all people, regardless of their background or social standing, able to become equal recipients of God's grace and forgiveness (**Acts 10:34-35; Tit. 2:11-14; John 3:16**). Jesus died for the poor and "unprofitable" slave just the same as He died for the slave-owner. Indeed, the gospel is for all (**Rom. 1:16; Mark 16:15-16**). Neither Philemon nor Onesimus (nor Paul, for that matter) were worthy of Christ's sacrifice, but they could equally receive the blessings of it and become equal partners in the kingdom (**Gal. 3:28**).

Evidently, Philemon once viewed Onesimus as "unprofitable," or "useless" (ESV, NASB, RSV, NIV, etc.). There are numerous possibilities as to why Philemon could have viewed Onesimus as "unprofitable." For example, this feeling might have been derived from Philemon strictly viewing Onesimus as a slave and nothing more; the feeling may have been caused by Onesimus not being diligent in his service; or this descriptor may be a reference to the fact that Onesimus did not produce any profit for Philemon due to his escape. Whatever the reason, since Onesimus became a new creature in Christ (**2 Cor. 5:17**), Paul recognized that this new convert's value had become immense. Onesimus was greatly valuable to Paul, and the apostle wished for his friend to recognize that same value in his new brother in Christ.

¹² I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, ¹³ whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel.

Paul considered Onesimus as his "own heart." During their time together, the two had obviously become very close. They were more than just brothers in Christ; they were father and son in a spiritual sense.

Yet, as much as he loved Onesimus and wished for him to remain in Rome ministering to him, Paul recognized that Onesimus needed to right his wrong and return to his earthly master. Robert Harkrider observed:

“Onesimus was so precious to Paul, it was like tearing his heart out to return him. Paul would rather have kept him so that Onesimus could continue to minister to his own needs. But without the reconciliation with Philemon and his approval, Paul would not keep Onesimus” (*Truth Publications – Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, 150*).

Undoubtedly, Paul needed all the help he could receive, given his predicament. Yet, the apostle did not put his own needs above Onesimus's need to reconcile with his master (**2 Cor. 7:10-11**).

It is worth noting that the text does not imply that Onesimus was forced against his will to return to his master. The language in **Phile. 12** is very similar to the language Paul used **Phil. 2:25** and **Col. 4:7-8**. In these passages, Paul explained to the recipients of each letter how he sent people to them, and it is nowhere implied that these people were sent against their will. Therefore, we have no reason to believe Onesimus was forced to return against his will either. Matthew Henry concluded:

“In his unconverted state he had . . . withdrawn himself, to his master's injury; but, now that he had seen his sin and repented, he was willing and desirous to return to his duty, and Paul would not hinder this, but rather further it” (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible, Vol. VI, 883*).

It seems not only proper but necessary to conclude that Onesimus voluntarily, not under compulsion, returned to Colossae to reconcile with Philemon because he recognized the necessity of bringing forth fruit in keeping with repentance over a matter which he had not yet corrected (**Matt. 3:8**).

The fact that Onesimus needed to repent by righting a wrong which occurred prior to his conversion is an important lesson all potential converts must understand. Baptism for forgiveness of sins does not negate the need for bringing forth fruits of repentance over wrongs we committed prior to baptism (**Acts 2:38**). To some Christians, baptism has become so important that it somehow overrides the need for repentance even though **Acts 2:38** clearly identifies the two as distinct but equally important actions that are required for entering the family of God. This attitude has caused many Christians to believe sins like adulterous marriages that were entered into prior to baptism do not need to be repented of (terminated) upon conversion. These people believe that baptism (the blood of Christ [**Acts 22:16**]) automatically washes that sin away, rendering termination of the sinful activity unnecessary. However, I implore the reader to examine **1 Cor. 6:9-11**, then ask yourself what difference does it make if an adulterer, idolater, thief, homosexual, etc. is baptized unless he is also willing to cease his sinful activity? Answering that question truthfully should resolve this issue, as

well as help us to see why it was necessary for Onesimus to return to his master – he needed to cease being a runaway slave. Baptism did not change the fact that Onesimus was a slave who violated **Col. 3:22** when he ran away from his master; only his repentance could change that (**Eph. 4:20-24**).

¹⁴ But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.

Although Paul desired for Onesimus to remain with him, Paul would not encourage Onesimus to stay without Philemon's "consent." In order for Onesimus to remain with Paul, he would need his master's "voluntary" approval. S.J. Eales explained:

"Had St. Paul kept Onesimus . . . and merely written to inform [Philemon] . . . his consent might then fairly have been said to be extorted, not freely given" (*The Pulpit Commentary Volume 21, 3*).

It is important to note, however, that Paul did not make any request asking permission for Onesimus to stay in Rome because reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus was far more important. It was Onesimus's duty to go back to his master and it was Paul's duty to encourage his spiritual son to return to Philemon. Some commentators have suggested that once Philemon read this letter and recognized that Paul wished Onesimus could stay in Rome, Philemon would, after reconciling, free Onesimus to return to Paul. While there is some merit to this speculation, I find it unlikely that Philemon would send Onesimus back to Paul since the latter voiced his intentions to return to Colossae (**Phile. 22**).

Additionally, there is a second perspective on this verse that is worth considering. Although Paul wished for Philemon to openly receive Onesimus, he would not force Philemon to accept him. Philemon needed to voluntarily take back Onesimus rather than do so "by compulsion." A form of the Greek word translated as "compulsion" in this verse also appears in **2 Cor. 9:7**: "Each one must do just as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (NASB). If Philemon received Onesimus, he would be performing a "good deed." However, compulsory good deeds that lack earnest willfulness and are performed solely because "it's the right thing to do" are spiritually unproductive. This principle also helps further prove that Onesimus willingly, not by "compulsion," returned to his master.

¹⁵ For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, ¹⁶ 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.

Initially, Onesimus's escape would have been greatly damaging to Philemon. Yet, here, Paul stressed how, out of this evil that Onesimus committed (and was now in the process of correcting), much eternal good

occurred in the end. This passage in no way serves to justify “situation ethics.” It is always wrong to violate God’s laws in order to accomplish a perceived good (**1 Sam. 15**). The Bible clearly teaches that no one should ever have the attitude of “*let us do evil that good may come*” (**Rom. 3:8**). Therefore, the passage at hand does not serve as an approval of Onesimus’s evil that he committed against his master due to the good which eventually came as result. Instead, the implication seems to be that God’s providence was at work in accomplishing good during what was initially a disastrous circumstance. Albert Barnes concluded:

“The meaning is, that it was possible that this was permitted in the Providence of God in order that Onesimus might be brought under the influence of the gospel, and be far more serviceable to Philemon as a Christian, than he could have been in his former relation to him. What appeared to Philemon, therefore, to be a calamity, and what seemed to him to be wrong on the part of Onesimus, might have been permitted to occur in order that he might receive a higher benefit” (*Barnes’ Notes on the New Testament – Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, 304).

The relationship that Onesimus and Philemon had before the former “*departed*” was far different from the relationship the two would have after God’s providence brought Paul and Onesimus together, resulting in the runaway slave’s conversion.

The expression “*receive him*” carries a dual meaning. First, it refers to Philemon receiving Onesimus as a slave. Secondly, and the primary application Paul was emphasizing, it refers to Philemon receiving Onesimus as a “*beloved brother*” in the Lord. Unlike the relationship of slave and slave-master, the relationship of brothers in Christ would extend “*forever*” through eternity. John Gill explained:

“But how much more unto thee, both in the flesh and in the Lord’ [means] both in a natural and civil sense, as being of the same nation and country, and as being part of his family, his servant, and now become an useful and profitable one; and, in a spiritual sense, being in the Lord, belonging to the Lord Jesus, to that family which is named of him, being a fellow citizen with the saints, and of the household of God, and therefore must be doubly dear to him” (*Gill’s Exposition of the Entire Bible, Philemon*).⁶

To Philemon, Onesimus should have been even more “*beloved*” because of the relationship they would share not just in the flesh (slave/slave-master), but also in the Lord (brothers).

⁶ <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/gill/philemon/1.htm>

¹⁷ *If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me.*

Ultimately, Philemon needed to decide whether or not he would “receive” Onesimus; Paul would not force Philemon to accept back his runaway slave. “If” Philemon counted Paul as a “partner” ⁷ in the kingdom, then Philemon would accept Onesimus just as he would accept Paul. After all, the three men, regardless of their financial circumstances, positions in society, etc., were equal partners in the kingdom and deserving of the same reception (**Gal. 3:28**). The request to receive Onesimus just as he would receive Paul would be a test of Philemon’s love, which the apostle earlier praised (**Phile. 5**), and would demonstrate how Godly love “covers a multitude of sins” (**1 Pet. 4:8**).

¹⁸ *But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. ¹⁹ 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.*

Due to Paul saying “if he has wronged you or owes you anything,” most Bible commentators and scholars have concluded that Onesimus robbed or defrauded Philemon. For example, S.J. Eales made the following observations:

“If Onesimus had, at the time of his flight, appropriated funds or property belonging to his master, and it is not altogether clear how he could have made his way from his home in or near Colossae to Rome – a journey of probably a thousand miles – without any funds at all, or even by the help of any peculium which he might have acquired . . . As a slave, he could not, indeed, in strict law, owe anything to his master, as the master could not owe anything (even the peculium) to his slave . . . But he might, of course, steal from him, and then would be liable for the theft” (*The Pulpit Commentary Volume 21, iv-v*).

While it is possible that Onesimus robbed or defrauded his master before fleeing, Paul’s language does not demand that such an inference is absolutely necessary. I share Marshall Patton’s sentiments:

“Some think that our text implies theft on the part of Onesimus, perhaps, to aid himself in his flight to Rome. However, I see no proof of such. I rather think the doubt in Paul’s mind, expressed by the ‘if’ in his statement, had to do with Philemon’s own state of mind which Paul did not fully know” (*Truth Commentaries – The Books of 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, 325*).

Paul did not say that Onesimus had, indeed, robbed or defrauded Philemon. He simply stated that “if” there were any debts owed by Onesimus that he would personally account for it by making good on any potential

⁷ The Greek word translated as “partner” is also translated as “companion” (**Heb. 10:33**) and “partaker” (**2 Pet. 1:4**).

debts or damages. “If” Onesimus owed Philemon in any way, Paul would personally clear whatever debts might have existed.

Through Paul’s example of bearing the responsibility of possible debts incurred by Onesimus, we can learn much about imputation. The entire Calvinist doctrine is built upon a misunderstanding of imputation. The Greek phrase translated “*my account*” means to “reckon in, set to one’s account, lay to one’s charge, impute” (Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament). This word is the same term that is translated “*imputed*” in **Rom. 5:13**, where Paul discusses the imputation of Adam’s sin that spread to all men (**Rom. 5:12-21**).⁸ Drawing a parallel between Paul, Adam, and Christ, Albert Barnes astutely observed the following:

“In this case, it would have been manifestly unjust for Philemon to charge the wrong which Onesimus had done, or what he owed him, to the apostle Paul without his consent; and it cannot be inferred from what Paul says here that it would have been right to do so. The steps in the case were these: (1) Onesimus, not Paul, had done the wrong. (2) Paul was not guilty of it, or blameworthy for it, and never in any way, or by any process, could be made to be, or conceived to be. It would be true forever that Onesimus and not he had done the wrong. (3) Paul assumed the debt and the wrong to himself. He was willing, by putting himself in the place of Onesimus, to bear the consequences, and to have Onesimus treated as if he had not done it. When he had voluntarily assumed it, it was right to treat him as if he had done so; that is, to hold him responsible. A man may assume a debt if he pleases, and then he may be held answerable for it . . . The same principle prevails in imputation everywhere. (a) What we have done is chargeable upon us. (b) If we have not done a thing, or have not assumed it by a voluntary act, it is not right to charge it upon us. (c) God reckons things as they are. The Saviour voluntarily assumed the place of man, and God reckoned, or considered it so. He did not hold him guilty or blameworthy in the case; but as he had voluntarily taken the place of the sinner, he was treated as if he had been a sinner. God, in like manner, does not charge on man crimes of which he is not guilty. He does not hold him to be blameworthy, or ill-deserving for the sin of Adam, or any other sin but his own. He reckons things as they are . . . He never reckons those to be guilty who are not guilty; or those to be ill-deserving who are not ill-deserving; nor does he punish one for what another has done. When Paul, therefore, voluntarily assumed a debt or an obligation, what he did should not be urged as an argument to prove that it would be right for God to charge on all the posterity of Adam

⁸ Despite the Bible teaching otherwise (**Ecc. 7:29; Ezek. 18:20**), Calvinists argue that every person is born a sinner having inherited the sin of Adam. Ironically, their “go-to” verse (**Rom. 5:12**) makes it abundantly clear that man is not a sinner due to inheriting the transgressions of Adam (**Rom. 5:14**); instead, man is guilty of sin because “*all have sinned*.”

the sin of their first father, or to hold them guilty for an offence committed ages before they had an existence. The case should be adduced to demonstrate one point only - that when a man assumes a debt, or voluntarily takes a wrong done upon himself, it is right to hold him responsible for it" (*Barnes' Notes on the New Testament – Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, 308*).

More pertinent to our text, any potential debts of Onesimus that were imputed to Paul did not make the latter guilty of any wrongdoing that the former may have committed. Paul simply bore the consequences, voluntarily so, that came as result of Onesimus's potential wrongdoings.

The apostle stated that he wrote the letter by his "*own hand*." This statement was likely included to serve a twofold purpose. First, the expression indicated that Paul personally penned the letter. Second, it served as assurance that Paul would do what he just stated in the prior verse – that is, pay back any debts incurred by Onesimus against Philemon. A man of Paul's character did not need to use phrases like "I promise," "You can trust me," "I'm not lying," etc. (**Matt. 5:33-37**). Instead, Paul said he would do something, then assured Philemon that the offer came directly from him, and Philemon would have known that Paul, having written the letter himself, would be true to his word. Philemon could know assuredly that Paul would "*repay*."

Paul provided an additional motivating factor for Philemon to accept the aged apostle's request: "*You owe me even your own self besides*." While some have wondered if Paul was speaking about physical aid that Paul brought Philemon at some point in time, it seems much more likely that Philemon was in debt spiritually to Paul. That is to say, Paul was almost assuredly responsible for Philemon's conversion. The translators of the New English Translation likewise concluded:

"'You owe me your very self' means that Paul was responsible for some sort of blessing in the life of Philemon; though a monetary idea may be in mind, it is perhaps better to understand Paul as referring to the spiritual truth (i.e., the gospel) he had taught Philemon" (*NET Footnotes, Phile. 19*).

Considering Philemon likely owed his soul's salvation to Paul, how could he reject the apostle's humble request to accept back Onesimus?

²⁰ *Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.*

Philemon had already been refreshing the hearts of the saints (**Phile. 7**). If Philemon accepted Paul's request to welcome Onesimus back, then he would also "*refresh*" Paul's heart and, thus, bring joy to his aged friend and brother. Not only would Paul have "*joy*," but the Lord Himself would also be pleased with Philemon

for exemplifying the forgiving attitude He emphasized during His earthly ministry (**Matt. 18:21-35**). Marshall Patton noted:

“Paul’s use of the expression ‘in the Lord’ reminded Philemon . . . that granting this request reaches beyond fulfilling Paul’s personal joy. It is commensurate with the demands of the gospel of Christ itself . . . Therefore, both Paul and the Lord rejoice” (*Truth Commentaries – The Books of 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, 326).

If Philemon wanted to satisfy the Lord, he needed to forgive Onesimus. The latter was clearly penitent since he was voluntarily returning to his master. Therefore, Philemon was obligated to not just forgive his new brother in Christ (**Luke 17:3-4; Eph. 4:32; Matt. 6:15**), but forgive him fully by offering complete restoration (**2 Cor. 2:3-11; Luke 15:11-22**).

²¹ *Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.*

Paul never dictated or commanded Philemon to receive Onesimus. Instead, he lovingly and gently made a humble request to Philemon to accept back his runaway slave. Paul provided various reasons as to why he wished his friend would openly Onesimus, and Paul had zero doubt that Philemon would comply with this request. In fact, Paul had great “*confidence*” in Philemon’s “*obedience*.” More than that, however, Paul, because he recognized the sincerity of Philemon’s faith and love, knew that his friend would do “*even more*” than requested.

Many have argued that the expression “*even more*” implies that Philemon would release Onesimus from his servitude. Charles Ellicott argued:

“‘*Do more than I say*’ . . . can hardly refer to anything except the manumission of Onesimus, and possibly his being sent back again to St. Paul” (*A Bible Commentary for English Readers*).⁹

While it is plausible that Philemon released Onesimus from his slavery, we cannot know assuredly. Therefore, we must not authoritatively assert that such occurred. Onesimus may have been released from his service since Philemon would have been at liberty to release him (**1 Cor. 7:21**), but he also may not have been released since Philemon was also at liberty to keep him if he so desired. If Onesimus ever was released from his bonds, such freedom likely would not have been offered immediately upon his return, especially since Paul indicated in the next verse that he hoped to visit soon.

⁹ <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/ellicott/philemon/1.htm>

PAUL'S FINAL REMARKS (22-25)

²² But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.

Paul expressed his desire to visit Philemon by making two specific requests. First, Paul asked that a “guest room” would be prepared for him. Second, he asked the recipients of the letter ¹⁰ to pray that this visit would be possible. As he often did, Paul exemplified how important it is to never make plans without putting those plans in God’s hands (**Acts 18:20-21; 1 Cor. 4:17-19, 16:5-7**). Paul would be boasting if he made these plans without acknowledging it was only by God’s will that such a trip could occur (**James 4:13-16**).

Though Paul wished to visit Philemon, we do not know if Paul was ever able to make that trip. Historical evidence seems to indicate that Paul never made it back to Colossae. Robert Harkrider noted:

“That Paul ever returned to Colossae is uncertain. Tradition says he was released in 63 AD soon after he wrote these letters. During approximately four years of freedom he visited churches in Macedonia, Asia, and Spain before he was arrested again and returned to Rome where he was beheaded in 68 AD. Whether or not he visited Philemon . . . he desired to do so” (*Truth Publications – Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, 151*).

Given Philemon’s hospitality and love for all the saints, we can only assume that Philemon would have welcomed his aged friend into his home with open arms if Paul ever did make the return trip.

²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, ²⁴ as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers.

While closing out the letter, Paul, on behalf of several fellow Christians, offered greetings to Philemon and the other recipients of this message.

First, Paul mentioned Epaphras, whom he described as his “fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus.” Elsewhere, Paul described Epaphras as a “bondservant of Christ” (**Col. 4:12**). He was likely a Gentile ¹¹ and a native of Colossae. We know for certain that Epaphras taught the Colossians (**Col. 1:7**). Therefore, it is very possible that Epaphras had a close relationship with Philemon since we are under the assumption that Philemon was

¹⁰ The Greek word translated as “you” is plural, which would point back to the people mentioned in **Phile. 1-2**.

¹¹ Given the fact that Aristarchus, Mark, and Justus were Paul’s only fellow workers who were Jewish at the time he wrote the Colossian letter (**Col. 4:11**), which was likely penned around the same time as the letter to Philemon, it is necessary to assume Epaphras was a Gentile.

a member of the church in Colossae. Epaphras brought reports to Paul on the condition of the Colossian church (**Col. 1:7-9**).

Then, Paul mentioned several other people, all of whom were described as his “*fellow laborers*.” These people include Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke. In **Col. 4:10**, Paul described Aristarchus as his “*fellow prisoner*.” Debate exists as to whether or not this expression means Aristarchus was literally under arrest like Paul. It is possible that Aristarchus was a figurative “*prisoner*” by voluntarily staying with Paul and providing assistance during the latter’s literal imprisonment in Rome (**Acts 27:1-2**). Whatever the case, although we know very little about Aristarchus, the scriptures show that he was an important figure in the first century church. He was with Paul during a riot in Ephesus (**Acts 19:29**) and he also traveled with Paul throughout Greece (**Acts 20:4**). Aristarchus was a valuable asset to Paul’s ministry.

Mark, whom scholars believe penned the Gospel of Mark, is most likely the same John Mark who played a key role in Paul’s ministry until, to the displeasure of Paul, he departed for reasons unknown to us (**Acts 13:2-13**). Differences in judgment regarding bringing Mark back eventually caused Paul and Barnabus to split their ministry into two separate efforts. Barnabus and Mark traveled and ministered together in Cyprus while Paul and Silas ministered throughout Asia (**Acts 15:36-40**). The positive references to Mark here and in **Col. 4:10** show the great value Paul saw in him as a minister in the kingdom, which was a sentiment Paul also expressed to Timothy (**2 Tim. 4:11**). Although Paul had once lost confidence in Mark, he clearly regained that confidence by the time he wrote this letter to Philemon.

The person named Luke here is most assuredly the same man who penned both the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. Luke traveled with Paul during his second and third missionary journeys (**Acts 16:10-12, 20:5-6, 21:18, 27:1**). Unlike so many others, Luke was a loyal supporter of Paul, having stood by him never to forsake him (**2 Tim. 4:11**). In contrast, Demas, although mentioned alongside Luke here and in **Col. 4:14**, later forsook Paul (**2 Tim. 4:10**).

²⁵ *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.*

Paul, as was his custom (**2 Thess. 3:17-18**), closed the letter with a version of his signature “*grace be with you*” salutation. Paul regularly ended his letters by wishing that the unmerited favor of “*our Lord Jesus Christ*” would be upon the people whom he addressed (**1 Cor. 16:23; Gal. 6:18; Phil. 4:23; 1 Thess. 5:25; 2 Thess 3:18; 2 Tim. 4:22**). It is only fitting that such a sincerely kind and loving statement would end such a graceful and loving letter.

