1. **Purposes of Philemon** [H. M. Carson, *Colossians and Philemon* 18-21; Deibler, *BKCNT* 769-70; Guthrie, *NBCR* 1187; Hendriksen, *Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon* 2:23-28; Picirilli, *Paul* 212-13; Ruprecht 2:935-36; Smith, *NTS II* 118-21; Wilkinson and Boa, *TTB* 444; **MMC** Some of these resources belong above, under Occasion; double-check with notes there]: It is clear that Paul writes this epistle on behalf of Philemon’s slave Onesimus. But what exactly is Paul requesting of Philemon? That the latter would *forgive* Onesimus (the traditional view)? Or *free* Onesimus (the alternative view)? Or possibly both (since these two concepts are not mutually exclusive)? Was Paul’s request granted? And why was this little epistle preserved?[[1]](#footnote-1)
   1. ***Traditional view***.[[2]](#footnote-2) Paul writes to commend Philemon for his Christian compassion toward the needs of fellow believers (1-7); to effect the forgiveness and restoration of Onesimus by Philemon (8-21); to announce plans of a future visit, based on his hopes of an imminent release (22); and to send greetings from many of Paul's associates who were probably known to Philemon (23-25).

In this connection it would be good to include a brief theology of forgiveness.[[3]](#footnote-3) The Bible clearly teaches that our God is a forgiving God (Cf. Exodus 34:6-7),[[4]](#footnote-4) and this theme runs throughout Scripture (cf. Pss. 32:1; 130:3-4; Isa. 43:25; 55:7; Jer. 33:8; Eph 1:7; Col 1:14; 1 John 1:9; 2:12).

It is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). A father had two sons, one of whom took his share of the inheritance and left home (vv. 11-12). After living a debauched life until his money ran out, the one son was forced to take a menial job (vv. 13-16). He finally came to his senses and exclaimed, “How many of mt father’s hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying with hunger!” (v. 17). He decided to return to his father (v. 18), but apparently did not expect forgiveness . He hoped merely to be tolerated (v. 19). But the father did not wait for his sinning son to reach him. While his son was still a long ways away, he ran to him and embraced him (v. 20). Later, he threw a party to celebrate his son’s return (vv. 22-24). That story illustrated how God, represented in the story by the father, forgives: eagerly, totally, lavishly. We could say, in a sense, that God is never more like Himself than when He forgives. There are two extremely important corollaries to that truth.

First, if God is never more like Himself than when He forgives, man is never more like God than when he forgives. Proverbs 19:11 says, “A man’s discretion makes him slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook a transgression.”

Second, God’s forgiveness of us is based on our forgiveness of others. James wrote, “Judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy” (James 2:13). Jesus stated that truth positively in Matthew 5:7 (“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy”). He taught His disciples to pray, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt 6:12). Then He warned, “If you forgive men their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions” (Matt 6:14-15).

The forgiveness envisioned in the above-mentioned passages is not the complete and comprehensive forgiveness that accompanies the event of salvation, because that is already done. It is rather God’s relational, continual forgiveness that accompanies the process of sanctification of believers. Paradoxically, Christians are already fully forgiven (cf. Eph 1:7), but still need ongoing forgiveness (cf. 1 John 1:9). It is a sobering truth that believers will forfeit God’s blessing and invite His chastening in their lives if they fail to forgive others.

* 1. ***Alternative view***. Paul is not specifically asking Philemon to *forgive* Onesimus for some wrong done to his master (the word “forgive[ness] appears nowhere in this epistle). Rather, he is asking Philemon to receive Onesimus back on a new footing— no longer a slave but a brother. And he asks Philemon to free Onesimus so that the latter can return to aid Paul in his ministry. With this understanding of the book of Philemon, the epistle becomes a very strong tractate against the entrenched institution of slavery, which Paul could not attack directly, but could undermine its foundations by calling upon Christian masters to treat their slaves with fairness and dignity (as in Ephesians and Colossians) or even freedom (as in Philemon).

1. **Theme of Philemon**:[[5]](#footnote-5) As Philemon is a personal letter, there is really no theme as such. The main point of the epistle depends upon the decision one makes regarding its purpose.
   1. ***Traditional***: Forgive your brothers in Christ
   2. ***Alternative****:* In Christ, there is neither bond nor free.

On either view, Philemon develops the transition from bondage to brotherhood that is brought about by Christian love and/or forgiveness. Paul wrote this letter as his personal appeal that Philemon receive Onesimus even as he would receive Paul. The letter was also addressed to other Christians in Philemon’s circle, because Paul wanted it to have an impact on the Colossian church as a whole.

1. **Keys to Philemon**:[[6]](#footnote-6)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Author** | Paul (1, 9, 19) |
| **Date** | 60 or 61 (depending on date of Paul's first Roman imprisonment) |
| **Recipients** | Philemon, a member of the Colossian church. |
| **Purpose** | To request that he forgive (or, free) Onesimus |
| **Message** | Forgive your brothers in Christ, or Receive him as you would me (17) |
| **Key Verses** | “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. If then you regard me a partner, accept him as *you would* me” (16-17). |

1. **Distinctives (Characteristics) of Philemon**.[[7]](#footnote-7)

* 1. ***Charm***. The beauty and charm of this letter have been universally recognized. It has been called the "polite epistle," and yet there is nothing of insincere compliment, miscalled politeness by the world. It is manly and straightforward, without misrepresentation or suppression of facts; at the same time it is most captivatingly persuasive. It is a model handling of a delicate situation, neither infringing the rights of others nor compromising his own convictions. Paul must write a letter that will win the favor and desired response of Philemon, while yet truthfully presenting the case of “guilty” Onesimus without offending him. This epistle presents Paul not as the Apostle, but as the Christian man, so able to identify himself with a truant slave as to call him "my own heart."[[8]](#footnote-8)

In its revelation of Paul’s devoted love to individual souls we may discover one of the secrets of the apostle’s success as a missionary. It was because of Paul’s affectional personal interest in men wherever he went that the Apostle was able to exercise such a powerful grip upon the hearts of his friends.

* 1. ***Contents***.[[9]](#footnote-9)
     1. The letter to Philemon is one of the two truly personal letters in the NT (cf. 3 John to Gaius), and the only one in the Pauline corpus (though the wider community is also in view, explicitly in vv. 2, 22, 25). With the probable exception of Galatians (see 6:11), Philemon is the only epistle Paul wrote entirely in his own hand (v. 19), apparently to emphasize the urgency and personal nature of the request.
     2. It is the only Pauline epistle which contains no doctrine (at least not explicitly), although Philemon’s receiving Onesimus back illustrates God’s reception of the repentant sinner, and Paul’s willingness to assume Onesimus’ debt illustrates in a limited sense the doctrines of imputation and justification (cf. 2 Cor 5:19-21).
     3. On the other hand, the epistle definitely *applies* doctrine in such a way that the life-changing effects of Christianity would have an impact on social conditions. The power of the gospel overcomes sociological barriers (“neither slave nor free,” Gal 3:28; cf. Col. 3:11), and Paul himself is a vivid illustration of this truth. This once self-righteous Pharisee now refers to a gentile slave as “my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten” (10). Philemon is not a direct attack upon the institution of slavery, but its Christian principles would ultimately lead to the renunciation of slavery.
     4. *Forgiveness* (on the traditional view) is masterfully illustrated in this book, as evidenced by the following elements:[[10]](#footnote-10)
        1. The Offence (11, 18)
        2. Compassion (10)
        3. Intercession (10, 18, 19)
        4. Restoration (15)
        5. Elevation (16)
        6. Identification (v. 17)---"receive him as myself"
        7. Imputation (v. 18; cf. 2 Cor. 5:19-21)---"charge that to my account"
        8. Substitution (v. 19)---"I will repay it"

Luther noted that "What Christ has done for us with God the Father, that St. Paul does for Onesimus with Philemon. . . . For we are all his Onesimi, if we believe."[[11]](#footnote-11)

* + 1. Notwithstanding its briefness as the shortest of all of Paul's epistles [335 words in the original Greek], it contains no less than eight words which occur nowhere else in Paul's epistles, and five of these do not occur elsewhere in the NT.
    2. No less than eleven persons are mentioned in this short letter, five in the salutation (vv. 1-2), five in the greetings at the close (vv. 23-24), and Onesimus the central figure.
    3. Twice in the letter the Apostle makes a word-play on the name of Onesimus, which means "profitable" (vv. 11, 20).
    4. The structure of the letter is the same as that employed elsewhere in his letters. The thanksgiving paragraph (4-7) prepares the ground for the request that is to follow, a point that comes out in its general emphasis and in the repetition of specific words which the thanksgiving anticipates. The body of the letter (8-20), in which the intercession for Onesimus is made, is carefully structured so that the reader is gradually led to the actual request (17-20).
  1. ***Value***. Scroggie has summarized its value succinctly in the following paragraph:

Its Personal value consists in the light which it throws upon the character of Paul. Its Ethical value consists in its balanced sensitiveness to what is right. Its Providential value consists in its underlying suggestion that God is behind and above all events. Its Practical value consists in its application of the highest principles to the commonest affairs. Its Evangelical value consists in the encouragement it supplies to seek and to save the lowest. Its Social value consists in its presentation of the relation of Christianity to slavery and all unchristian institutions. And its Spiritual value consists in the analogy between it and the Gospel Story.[[12]](#footnote-12)

* 1. ***Social Impact***.[[13]](#footnote-13) This epistle has figured prominently in the controversy about slavery, being confidently appealed to both by those who sanctioned slavery as well as those who advocated its abolition. Carson draws a parallel between slavery in biblical times and any two individuals who enter into a contract relationship today, and that what Paul did was in effect strip it of its abuses, which were also all too common in the day of the Romans.[[14]](#footnote-14) Certainly biblically sanctioned slavery was different from the man-stealing of slavery in more recent centuries. Paul's mind on the subject finds clearest expression in incidental remarks in 1 Cor. 7:20-24. That there is no frontal attack on slavery was not due to fear of opposition, but such a method might well have had prejudicial results then for the slaves themselves, as well as precipitating an immediate conflict between Rome and Christianity, thus stigmatizing Christianity as being anti-social.[[15]](#footnote-15) Instead, principles for the humane treatment of slaves are found everywhere (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1; 1 Tim. 6:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:18-25). Paul demonstrates that the best way to prevent evil is to apply a positive principle, and brotherly love on both sides must, and ultimately did undermine slavery (16). Indeed the expression "more than I say" (21) suggests that Paul hoped that Philemon would release Onesimus from bondage. The principle is clear: If God our heavenly master freed us who were slaves to sin, should we not also release men from human slavery if it is within our power to do do? Paul does not deny the master-servant relationship; rather it is caught up into a new relationship which transmutes the former. The reality of Galatians 3:28 becomes evident here in Philemon: "There is neither . . . slave nor free . . . in Christ Jesus," as Paul the rigorous Jew, Philemon the wealthy Asiatic Gentile, and Onesimus, the despicable runaway slave find themselves united in the Gospel of Christ

1. **Christ in Philemon**:[[16]](#footnote-16) On the traditional view of Philemon as a *forgiven* slave, this book provides a beautiful analogy to the forgiveness that the believer finds in Christ. Onesimus, guilty of a great offense (11, 18), is motivated by Paul’s love to intercede on his behalf (10-17). Paul lays aside his rights (8) and becomes Onesimus’ substitute by assuming his debt (18-19). By Philemon’s gracious act, Onesimus is restored and placed in a new relationship (15-16). In this analogy, we are as Onesimus. Paul’s advocacy before Philemon is parallel to Christ’s work of mediation before the Father. Onesimus was condemned by law but saved by grace.

On the alternate view of Philemon as a *freed* slave, this book also greatly pictures the freedom from the bondage of sin that we have through Christ, who made himself a servant to redeem us (cf. Phil 2:5ff).[[17]](#footnote-17) It also illustrates the unity that binds all believers — regardless of social status — together “in Christ” (cf. Gal 3:28).

**Outline of Philemon**

The following outline of Philemon is adapted from a number of sources.[[18]](#footnote-18)

1. **The Prayer of Thanksgiving for Philemon (1-7) [Focus on Philemon’s Character]:**
   1. **Greetings** (1-3).
      1. ***To Philemon***
      2. ***To Philemon’s Family***.
      3. ***To Philemon’s Church***.
   2. **Thanksgiving for Philemon's Spiritual Character** (4-7). Philemon had . . .
      1. ***A Concern for the Lord*** (4-5a)
      2. ***A Concern for People*** (5b)
      3. ***A Concern for Fellowship*** (6a)
      4. ***A Concern for Knowledge*** (6b)
      5. ***A Concern for Glory*** (6c)
      6. ***A Concern to Be a Blessing*** (7)
2. **The Petition of Paul for Onesimus** (8-17) [Focus on Onesimus’ Conversion]:
   1. **The Basis of the Appeal: *Love*** (8-9)
   2. **The Object of the Appeal: *“Receive Him as You Would Me”*** (10-17)
      1. ***Present Relationship***: *between Paul and Onesimus* (10-13)
         1. *Onesimus’ relation to Paul* (10)
         2. *Onesimus’ transformed life* (11)
         3. *Onesimus’ return to Philemon* (12-13)
      2. ***Past Relationship***: *between Paul and Philemon* (14)
      3. ***Future Relationship***: *between Onesimus and Philemon* (15-17)
         1. *Temporary departure bringing permanent fellowship* (15)
         2. *Spiritual gain out of temporal loss* (16)
         3. *Welcoming a brother* (17)
3. **The Promise of Paul to Philemon** (18-25) [Focus on Paul’s Confidence].
   1. **To assume Onesimus' debt** (18-21)
      1. ***Paul’s commitment*** (18-19)
      2. ***Paul’s confidence*** (20-21)
   2. **To visit** (22)
   3. **Conclusion** (23-25)
      1. ***Greetings*** (23-24)
      2. ***Benediction*** (25)

1. Questions noted by Bruce. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Benware, *SNT* 218; Gromacki, *NTS* 315; Hiebert, *INT* 2:244-45; *Titus and Philemon* 84; Vos 1119. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Adapted from MacArthur, *Colossians and Philemon* 201-02. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. **MMC** Bring in material from Kohlenberger’s commentary on Jonah showing how Exod 34:6-7 regularly surfaces throughout the OT particularly. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Benware, *NTS* 219; Fee/Stuart; Halley 577; MacArthur, *Colossians & Philemon* 201-02; Wilkinson and Boa, *TTB* 444. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Minnick, “New Testament Messages;” Wilkinson and Boa, *TTB* 444. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ashby 1498; Benware 219; Bruce 197-98; Carson, *Colossians and Philemon* 21-24 (citing John Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 93ff); Carson, Moo, and Morris, *INT* 390; Deibler 769-70; Ellis 891; Gromacki, *NTS* 315-16; Guthrie, *NTI* 665-66; "Philemon" 1187-88; Harrison, *INT* 308; Hendriksen, *Philippians . . .,*, 2:27, 233-37; Hiebert, *INT* 2:240 (introduction), 245-49 (citing W. Graham Scroggie, *Know Your Bible* 2:201); Hiebert, *Philemon* 83; JFB 1391; MacArthur, *Colossians and Philemon* 201-02, 205-06; MacArthur, *MBC* 1827-28; O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon* 268-70; O’Brien, *NBC4* 1316 (introduction); Ruprecht 2:936; Tenney, *NTS* 317; Robert L. Thomas, "NTI;" Wilkinson and Boa, *TTB* 444-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ashby 1498; Carson, Moo, and Morris, *INT* 390; Harrison, *INT* 308; Hiebert, *INT* 2:245-47; JFB 1391. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Hiebert, *INT* 2:247-48; O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon* 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Gromacki, *NTS* 315; MacArthur, *Colossians and Philemon* 201-02; Tenney, *NTS* 317; Robert L. Thomas, "NTI." [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cited in Hiebert, *INT* 2:246. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Hiebert, *INT* 2:248 (citing W. Graham Scroggie, *Know Your Bible* 2:201). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ashby 1498; Bruce 197-98; Carson, *Colossians and Philemon* 21-24 (citing John Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 93ff); Carson, Moo, and Morris, *INT* 390; Deibler 769-70; Ellis 891; Gromacki, *NTS* 315-16; Guthrie, *NTI* 665-66; "Philemon" 1187-88; Harrison, *INT* 308; Hendriksen, *Philippians . . .,*, 2:27, 233-37; Hiebert, *INT* 2:248-49; *Philemon* 83; MacArthur, *Colossians and Philemon* 205-06; O' BRien, *Colossians and Philemon* 269-70; Ruprecht 2:936. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This is true also in the OT attitude toward slavery. See Hendriksen, *Philippians . . .*  2:234. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Yet H. M. Carson warns against placing too much stock in this last argument, stating: "It is not enough to say in reply that slavery was so much a part of the social fabric that to attack it would have been revolutionary doctrine, which would have called forth the opposition of the authorities. The apostles were not governed by expediency, but by truth. After all, idolatry was also part of the social cement of life in the Roman Empire, yet they attacked it unsparingly; and indeed it was this very attack which was the reason for much of the hostility which they incurred" (*Colossians and Philemon* 22). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Wilkinson and Boa, *TTB* 444. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. MMC Include Jay’s theodicy regarding slavery. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ashby 1498; Benware 218, 219-20 (skimmed); Bruce, *Colossians* 203; Carson, *Colossians and Philemon* 103; CMM 387; Deibler 770; Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon* 309; Ellis 891; Gromacki, *NTS* 316-17; Guthrie, *NBCR* 1188; Guthrie, *NTI* 666-67; Hendriksen, *Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon* 2:208; Hiebert, *INT* 2:249-50; Irwin, *IBC* 536; Kümmel, *INT* 245; MacArthur, *Colossians and Philemon* 211-16; MacArthur, *MBC* 1828; Mayhue, *Ordination Practicum* 103; O’Brien, *Colossians and Philemon* 270; O’Brien, *NBC4* 1317; Phillips, *Explooring the Scripture* 267; Picirilli, *Paul* 213; Smith, *NTS II* 121; Tenney, *NTS* 317; Vos, *ECB* 1119; Wilkinson and Boa, *TTB* 442, 445. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)