

# PHILEMON

## Introduction

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*Philemon* is a letter written by the apostle Paul to a Christian slave owner who lived in the Lycus Valley of Asia Minor. In it the apostle asks that the converted runaway slave, Onesimus, be received back into the household without punishment. There is also a hint that he should be loaned to Paul or granted his freedom so that he could help the apostle.

### 1. Authorship

Few, if any, dispute that *Philemon* is a letter written by the apostle Paul. It appeared early, in the Muratorian Fragment and in Marcion's canon. Only the Tübingen School of the nineteenth century questioned its authenticity. F.C. Baur claimed that the letter was written in the second century to instruct the church in handling the slavery question.

On the basis of the similarity of the final greetings in *Philemon* and *Colossians*, as well as on certain literary and theological considerations, some modern commentators have concluded that *Colossians* is "deutero-Pauline."<sup>1</sup> However, this is an unwarranted conclusion.

### 2. Date and Place of Origin

Those who hold that *Colossians* and *Philemon* were written at the same time, while Paul was in prison at Rome, date it c. A.D. 58–60. If it was written from Ephesus, as Duncan has suggested, a date c. A.D. 56 would be likely.<sup>2</sup> Duncan's argument that the appeal for lodging (v.22) demands an imprisonment in a place closer than Rome has real validity. Dodd answered him on the assumption that Onesimus would seek anonymity

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<sup>1</sup>Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 187.

<sup>2</sup>G.S. Duncan, *St. Paul's Ephesian Ministry* (London: Hodder and Staughton, 1929), pp. 72 ff.

at Rome.<sup>3</sup> The evidence suggests, however, that runaway slaves were apt to seek asylum almost anywhere. Until further evidence is found the question of the date will remain open to dispute.

### 3. Destination

The traditional view is that the letter was written to Philemon, a resident of the Lycus Valley in Asia Minor. As an alternative to this, Goodspeed suggested that Philemon is the lost letter to the Laodiceans (Col 4:16) on the ground that a letter referred to in this way would not have been lost. He identifies Onesimus with the bishop of Ephesus of the same name who put together the Pauline corpus. Goodspeed argued further that there is little likelihood that there would have been a third letter written at the same time as Colossians and Philemon.<sup>4</sup> To support his claim, however, it must be shown that Philemon was really a letter to the church and not to an individual. Knox follows Goodspeed, but claims that Archippus, who lived at Colosse, was the owner of the slave and the recipient of the letter.<sup>5</sup>

The letter is addressed to Philemon of Laodicea, who was to pass it along to Colosse and exert influence on Archippus to "complete the work" (Col 4:17), which may be Paul's request in behalf of Onesimus. The only questions have to do with which of the two cities in the Lycus Valley, Colosse or Laodicea, the letter was sent to and which of the two individuals Philemon or Archippus, the request was intended for. The evidence favors Philemon of Colosse as the recipient.

### 4. Occasion and Purpose

Paul wrote the letter to Philemon in typical epistolary form. He wanted to intercede in behalf of the latter's runaway slave, Onesimus. The apostle's suggestions for the handling of the matter are difficult to determine because of his obscure and deferential words. At a minimum he asked that Onesimus be reconciled to the household without harsh punishment. He also strongly hinted that the slave would be useful to him in the work of evangelism. Nowhere does Paul openly state that Philemon should set Onesimus free. Nor is it necessary to assume that Onesimus would be freed if he were to join Paul in his missionary work.

Brief and intensely personal, the letter is addressed to one person, Philemon,<sup>6</sup> but other interested parties are mentioned in the salutation. Apphia, his wife, would have had daily responsibility over the slaves of the household. Archippus, perhaps Philemon's son and possibly also a local pastor ("fellow soldier"), would look after the interests of the church, which is also mentioned in the salutation. No doubt the church at Colosse would find very significant the reconciliation of a runaway slave on the intercession of no less a person than the apostle Paul.

<sup>3</sup>C.H. Dodd, "The Mind of Paul: Change and Development," in *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 18 (1934): 69-80.

<sup>4</sup>E.J. Goodspeed, *The Key to Ephesians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), pp. xiv-xvi.

<sup>5</sup>John Knox, *Philemon among the Letters of Paul* (New York: Abingdon, 1959), pp. 91-108.

<sup>6</sup>In the phrase "the church that meets in your home" (v.2), "your" is singular and refers to Philemon as the recipient of the letter. C.F.D. Moule (*The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957], pp. 16, 17) argues that this reference has to be to Philemon whose name is first in the list. This fact is "fatal to the theory [Knox's] that Archippus is primarily the one addressed."

Some of the events that led to the composition of the letter. On the other hand, many scholars believe that Paul was in contact with Paul while the letter was probably in Rome, though Colossians (Col 4:16) to Colossians)—and was converted, but oddly he does not mention this contact. It is not likely that Paul made Onesimus was a prisoner with the return of a fugitive slave was at the same time. Certainly a prisoner of war. The best assumption is that Paul made unofficial contact and that Paul made unofficial contact.

The traditional interpretation of the time of the writing of the Epistle to the Colossians and Philemon is that Paul made unofficial contact. Dodd.<sup>7</sup>

A better explanation of the time of the writing of the Epistle to the Colossians 4, Tychicus and Onesimus, "tell all that is happening here to the runaway Onesimus. But if so, Paul usually reserved the word 'prisoner' for a 'trusted agent' or 'co-worker'." Yet the description of Onesimus as a "faithful and true servant" Paul had undoubtedly led to the conclusion that Onesimus became my son while I was in prison. Following his conversion, Paul was long enough for him to become a trusted agent and lead to the affectionate relationship.

Yet the description of Onesimus as a "faithful and true servant" Paul had undoubtedly led to the conclusion that Onesimus became my son while I was in prison. Following his conversion, Paul was long enough for him to become a trusted agent and lead to the affectionate relationship.

There are two other considerations separated in time. Philemon is a letter to Philemon. It is difficult to understand how it could be restored to you," can be interpreted as a conclusion that Onesimus of Colossians the apostle is greater than you. Yet he only says, "Pray for him, he is expected to be released from prison. This to the Colossians also."

As for the traditional view of the time, two considerations support it.

<sup>7</sup>*New Testament Studies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1956), p. 22 et passim.

<sup>8</sup>See BAG, p. 670; TDNT, p. 20. The conclusion that Onesimus of Colossians is the slave of Philemon, (Calvin's Commentaries: the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon [Edinburgh, 1965], p. 359.)

Some of the events that led to the writing of the letter can be stated without qualification. On the other hand, many of the tantalizing details are lost to us. Onesimus came in contact with Paul while the latter was in prison somewhere in the Roman world—most probably in Rome, though Caesarea and Ephesus are also possibilities (cf. Introduction to Colossians)—and was converted. Paul intimates that he had robbed his master in some way, but oddly he does not mention the details, possibly because of his sensitivity and tact. It is not likely that Paul did not know the details. Nor do we know whether or not Onesimus was a prisoner with Paul. It is most likely, however, that he was not, since the return of a fugitive slave was a complicated, technical procedure in Roman law by this time. Certainly a prisoner could not directly send back a runaway slave and fellow-prisoner. The best assumption is that the authorities were unaware of Onesimus's status and that Paul made unofficial arrangements for his return.

The traditional interpretation has been that Paul sent him back with Tychicus at the time of the writing of the Epistle to the Colossians. "If there is one thing certain, it is that Colossians and Philemon were written at the same time and place," said C.H. Dodd.<sup>7</sup>

A better explanation of the circumstances of the writing of Philemon may be that it was composed at a time prior to Colossians. The evidence for this is striking. According to Colossians 4, Tychicus and Onesimus were returning to Colosse together and would "tell all that is happening here" (v.9). It is usually assumed that this is the return of the runaway Onesimus. But if so, why is he described as a "faithful . . . brother" (v.9). Paul usually reserved the word *pistos* ("faithful") for fellow workers who showed great determination and endurance in the work of the gospel. It is a frequent word in inscriptions for a "trusted agent" or "commissioned one."<sup>8</sup>

Yet the description of one who had doubtless stolen from his master upon his illegal departure as a "faithful and dear brother" is not so serious as it seems. While in prison, Paul had undoubtedly led Onesimus to Christ, as the words "my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains" (v.10) show. We do not know how long Onesimus, following his conversion, spent with Paul before going back to Colosse. Evidently it was long enough for him to become helpful to Paul (v.11) and to serve him in such a way as to lead to the affectionate expressions in vv.12, 13.

There are two other considerations that suggest that Colossians and Philemon were separated in time. Philemon 22 states clearly that Paul expects to be in Colosse soon. It is difficult to understand how "prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you," can be interpreted as a figure of speech. On the other hand, in writing Colossians the apostle is greatly distressed at the direction in which the church has gone. Yet he only says, "Pray for us also, that God may open us a door for the word." If he had expected to be released from imprisonment soon, he would probably have mentioned this to the Colossians also.

As for the traditional view that Colossians and Philemon were written at the same time, two considerations support it—the geography and the final greetings. The geogra-

<sup>7</sup> *New Testament Studies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1953), p. 90. Also, Moule, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 22 *et passim*.

<sup>8</sup> See BAG, p. 670; TDNT, p. 204. Onesimus was a common slave name. Calvin could not bring himself to the conclusion that Onesimus of Colossians was the same as the runaway slave of Philemon. "For it is scarcely credible that this is the slave of Philemon, for the name of a thief and a fugitive would have been liable to reproach." (*Calvin's Commentaries: the Epistles to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, trans. Parker [Edinburgh, 1965], p. 359.)



phy of both letters is the same. They are sent to a city or cities of the Lycus Valley. The names in the greetings at the end of both Epistles are very similar. Epaphras, Mark, Demas, and Luke appear in both. This coincidence has prompted a number of scholars to conclude that a Paulinist of the first century borrowed heavily from the setting of the Epistle to Philemon to give authenticity to his letter that we know as Colossians.

A final similarity in both Epistles is that Onesimus comes back. Note carefully, however, that he accompanies Tychicus in Colossians, but Tychicus is nowhere mentioned in Philemon. That Tychicus accompanied Onesimus when the latter returned as a runaway is only an assumption.

John Knox, following Goodspeed's suggestion that Philemon is the lost letter to the Laodiceans, interprets the events very differently. He sees Archippus as the intended recipient of the letter and Onesimus as his slave. Philemon is, therefore, the lost letter to the Laodiceans mentioned in Colossians 4:16, and the work Archippus was expected to complete (v.17) was the release of Onesimus for Paul's sake. Philemon, then, was a prominent member of the church at Laodicea who was expected to intercede with Archippus upon receipt of the letter. Knox based his hypothesis on Onesimus's becoming the bishop of Ephesus mentioned by Ignatius (*Eph* 1:3; 2:1; 6:2) and later being responsible for the collection of the Pauline Epistles. For this reason, Knox contends, Ephesians is at the beginning of the Pauline corpus and Philemon was uniquely preserved because of its importance to the bishop.<sup>9</sup> It must be said, however, that this theory can neither be proved nor disproved. There is no clear evidence that the bishop of Ephesus was, in fact, Onesimus, the runaway slave. Nor does the exegetical evidence actually support the contention that Archippus and not Philemon was the master of Onesimus.

## 5. Literary Form

The letter is unique in the Pauline corpus because it is a personal letter of commendation and recommendation. There are innumerable examples of similar letters, both pagan and Christian, from the Graeco-Roman world. Among these, Philemon belongs to the kind of letter written to intercede for a delinquent slave. A well-known parallel is the beautiful letter the younger Pliny wrote to Sabinianus on behalf of a slave of the latter (quoted by Lightfoot, *in loc.*). But even more beautiful is this page from Paul's personal correspondence—a true little masterpiece of tact and sensitivity.

It begins with a salutation, followed by expressions of thanks and petition, the principal subject matter, a conclusion, and greetings. Most of the Pauline Epistles follow this format, even when they are more in the nature of theological treatises.

## 6. Theological Values

Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus are *dramatis personae* in a real-life drama of profound social significance. Each has heard the claims of Christianity from totally different backgrounds. Paul was once a rigorous Jew of the Dispersion who advanced in Judaism beyond all his contemporaries. Philemon was a wealthy Asiatic Gentile. Onesimus was the most despicable of all creatures, a runaway slave. They find themselves united in the

gospel of Christ. Here is a living man, not Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. It was in this oneness that Paul found the relationship of Onesimus to himself.

Neither Paul nor the other apostles had a new religion to do so would have required repeated appeals for Christian liberty. He is to be motivated by the love of God, should come more than mere freedom. "I ask" (v.21). Freedom of slave and master inspired men. Under this compulsion so long for it to do so, that slavery during the Civil War ended it, that it is humbling facts show the tenacity of man to deal with it. While all men are rather than regulation or constraint in practice.

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## 8. Outline

- I. Salutation (1-3)
- II. Thanksgiving (4-7)
- III. Plea for Onesimus (8-10)
- IV. Greetings and Farewell (11-13)

<sup>9</sup>Philemon among the Letters of Paul.



gospel of Christ. Here is a living example of Paul's statement that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). It was in this oneness that Paul sought a solution to the problem presented by the relationship of Onesimus to Philemon.

Neither Paul nor the other authors of the NT ever call for the abolition of slavery. For a new religion to do so would have been suicidal in the ancient world. Instead, he makes repeated appeals for Christian love. Philemon is not to act out of obligation to the apostle. He is to be motivated by the love of Christ within himself. Out of that, Paul suggests, should come more than mere reconciliation, "knowing that you will do even more than I ask" (v.21). Freedom of slaves, like all freedom, must come from the heart of Christ-inspired men. Under this compulsion, slavery must ultimately wilt and die. That it took so long for it to do so, that slavery was practiced by many Christians in America until the Civil War ended it, that it is still, in one form or another, in the world today—these humbling facts show the tenacity of socially entrenched sin and the failure of Christendom to deal with it. While all ethical behavior for Christians should arise out of love, rather than regulation or constraint, yet it takes fully committed disciples to put it into practice.

## 7. Bibliography

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## 8. Outline

- I. Salutation (1-3)
- II. Thanksgiving and Prayer (4-7)
- III. Plea for Onesimus (8-22)
- IV. Greetings and Benediction (23-25)

## Text and Exposition

## I. Salutation

1-3

<sup>1</sup>Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archip-  
pus our fellow soldier, and to the church that meets in your home:

<sup>3</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The salutation is significant for its departures from Paul's other salutations. The Epistle is in the form of an ancient letter of commendation, and Paul's opening words are calculated to suggest that his appeal for Onesimus should be favorably received.

Paul is a prisoner of Jesus Christ and therefore suffers for the sake of the gospel. His suffering is a mark of his apostleship, which in turn lends weight to any suggestion he might make. Furthermore, Timothy, a well-recognized young steward of the gospel, joins him in the appeal. Finally, Paul not only greets Philemon, the owner of Onesimus, but also his wife Apphia. She is as much a party to the decision as her husband, because according to the custom of the time, she had day-to-day responsibility for the slaves.

As for Archippus and the church, Paul includes them in the salutation with good reason. Archippus, one of the leading figures in the community (perhaps a pastor), and the church will bring appropriate pressure to bear on Philemon should he fail to fulfill the great apostle's request. Philemon would have had to have been a very strong-minded individual to resist the plea of Paul and his protegee Timothy.

## Notes

- 2 In the phrase *κατ' οἶκόν σου* (*kat' oikon sou*, "in your home"), *σου* (*sou*, "your") is singular. A few have taken these words as a reference to Archippus's home, but the most logical understanding would be that this is a reference to the home of Philemon, since he is the first-mentioned in the greeting. This is not the only time Paul mentions a church in a private home; in *Romans* 16:5 he refers to the church in the house of Priscilla and Aquila and in *Colossians* 4:15 to the church in the house of Nympha. The early Christian Churches often met in homes. Not until about the third century do we have records of separate church buildings.

“Our fellow soldier” (τῷ συστρατιῳτῇ ἡμῶν, *tō sustратиōtē hēmōn*) means nothing more than “fellow worker” in Pauline usage (cf. Phil 2:25).

Lohse (in loc.) cites examples of ancient letters in which additional names are listed alongside that of the recipient.

## II. Thanksgiving and Prayer

4-7

4I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, 5because I hear about your love and faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. 6I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. 7Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.

**4,5** In both pagan and Christian salutation was followed by the fuller form of his thanksgiving prayers"—and also tells us that in Romans 1:8-10; 1 Thess.

"I remember you" (v.4)  
conclusion that the recip

6 At this point, the prayer is in the context. The prayer is in the certainty one might suggest that it will be made effective by God for them; or, 2) he prays that they have a full understanding of God, which is more attractive than the law, which precedes good works (cf.

7 Paul has been repeatedly brought him much joy and of the phrases "full under interpretation, he is praying is that this maturity will

## Notes

- 4 "In my prayers." *Ἐν ἐπι* (*epi*,  
of." It suggests that Paul st  
6 In other Epistles *ὅπως* (*hope*  
here.  
"We have" (NIV) is literal  
slightly better MS support th  
Metzger, *A Textual Comm*  
ies), p. 657, for the argument  
every good work"). The diff  
7 *Σπλάγχνα* (*splanchna*, "hea  
from this part of the body. I  
of his feelings in this situati  
does so from the heart.

### III. Plea for Onesimus

8-22

<sup>8</sup>Therefore, although  
to do, <sup>9</sup>yet I appeal to  
now also a prisoner of

4,5 In both pagan and Christian letters of the first centuries of the Christian era, the salutation was followed by an expression of thanksgiving and a prayer. Paul uses the fuller form of his thanksgiving. He tells when he gives thanks—"always . . . in my prayers"—and also tells why he does so—"because I hear about your love and faith." Cf. Romans 1:8-10; 1 Thessalonians 1:2-5; Philippians 1:3-11; Colossians 1:3-8.

"I remember you" (v.4). The singular "you" (*sou*) here and again in v.6 supports the conclusion that the recipient of the letter is Philemon.

6 At this point, the prayer begins though the verb "I pray" is understood from the context. The prayer is in Greek that is unusually difficult to understand. With equal certainty one might suggest that 1) Paul prays that Philemon's participation in the faith will be made effective because of his full understanding of God's goodness to both of them; or, 2) he prays that Philemon will be active in the faith so that he will develop a full understanding of God's goodness to both of them. The former interpretation is more attractive than the latter one because of Paul's repeated suggestion that knowledge precedes good works (cf. Col 1:9, 10).

7 Paul has been repeatedly impressed by the expressions of Philemon's love. They have brought him much joy and comfort. Verse 7 is intended to justify Paul's expansive use of the phrases "full understanding" and "every good thing" in v.6. According to this interpretation, he is praying for great Christian maturity in his brother. The implication is that this maturity will find expression in Philemon's treatment of Onesimus.

## Notes

4 "In my prayers." *Ἐπὶ* (*epi*, "in") with the genitive frequently had the meaning of "at the time of." It suggests that Paul still observed the formal times of prayer honored by Jews.

6 In other Epistles *ὅπως* (*hopōs*, "that") follows a verb of praying. Hence such a verb is understood here.

"We have" (NIV) is literally "in us" or "among us" (*en hēmin*) in Gr. "In you" (*en hymin*) has slightly better MS support than "in us," but the editors almost universally favor "in us." See B.M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies), p. 657, for the argument. Some MSS read *παντός ἔργου ἀγαθοῦ* (*pantos ergou agathou*, "of every good work"). The difficulty of the verse was felt early in the MS tradition.

7 *Σπλάγχνα* (*splanchna*, "hearts") literally means "bowels." To some Greeks, the emotions came from this part of the body. Paul's use of the word in v.12 and again in v.20 reveals the depths of his feelings in this situation. He does not argue rationally or theologically for Onesimus. He does so from the heart.

## III. Plea for Onesimus

### 8-22

<sup>8</sup>Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, <sup>9</sup>yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—<sup>10</sup>I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who



became my son while I was in chains. <sup>11</sup>Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

<sup>12</sup>I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. <sup>13</sup>I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. <sup>14</sup>But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. <sup>15</sup>Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—<sup>16</sup>no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

<sup>17</sup>So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. <sup>18</sup>If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. <sup>19</sup>I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. <sup>20</sup>I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. <sup>21</sup>Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

<sup>22</sup>And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.

The situation of both Paul and Onesimus is all-important to the understanding of this section of the Epistle. Paul's circumstances are just as significant as those of Onesimus—a fact often overlooked by commentators. Because he is in prison, he cannot do the things a free man might do to help the slave. He can do little more than write a letter asking for clemency for his new-found brother and he can suggest that he hopes to visit the Lycus Valley soon to put additional pressure on Philemon. Under more usual circumstances, a free man could have assumed custody of a runaway slave after he had given guarantees of his return to the public officials, and he could have suggested that the slave be formally assigned to him for a time. This was not uncommon. A slave teacher of T. Pomponius Atticus attended M. Tullius Cicero and his family as much as he did his owner and patron. When he was manumitted, he received Cicero's praenomen (the first of the usual three names of a Roman) and Atticus's nomen (the second of the three names). He became M. Pomponius Dionysius (A.A. Rupprecht, *Slavery in the Late Roman Republic* [diss. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960], pp. 91-94).

Onesimus's status was the lowest that one could reach in the ancient world. Because he was a runaway slave, he was protected by no laws and he was subject to all manner of abuse. Fugitive slaves usually went to large cities, remote parts of the Roman state, or into unsettled areas. At this time, their capture and return was largely an informal arrangement between the owner and a provincial administrator. They were frequently beaten unmercifully or put to tasks in which their life expectancy was very short.

Cicero mentions three runaway slaves in his works. He remarks of one, Licinius, a slave of the tragic actor Aesop, that he was being held in a public prison or in a *pistrinum*, a grain mill. Cicero was unsure. If the latter, Licinius would have been blindfolded and forced to walk in a circle all day long to turn the millstone—a task usually assigned to horses or mules. Cicero asks his brother, Quintus, to bring this slave back to Rome (Q. Fr. 1.2.14).

Paul must have put Philemon in a precarious position indeed. In pleading for forgiveness and restitution for Onesimus without a punishment that was obvious to all, he was confronting the social and economic order head on. While he does not ask for manumission, even his request for clemency for Onesimus and hint of his assignment to Paul defied Roman tradition. By this plea Paul is also giving new dignity to the slave class.

8 Paul first reminds Philemon of his apostolic authority. *Parrēsia* usually has the idea of

"freedom" or "boldness" and order you." The subject of the appeals to love.

9 *Presbytēs* means "elder." Thus, in ancient Sparta, the *gerontes* were assumed to go with the young in their feeble condition by the

10 "I plead with you." The imagery is very strong and in the mystery religion of leader and convert. "For my son." *Peri* letters, Paul uses it in

11 There is a double use of "useful" or "profitable" ("useless") and *euchreia*. *Christos* that the Roman ancient reader would understand something of his expropriation of the custom of the law introduces this bit

12 Again we see Onesimus back." Paul adds, "his

13 The culmination of the already described as

14 The apostle has been in the world. But now, he remain with him, he Christian love rather

13,14 If Onesimus was to help, how could Philemon for Philemon's person

15 The contrast between the hand of God was at work referring to Onesimus as a prelude to

16 In similar fashion "brother"—an eternal

"freedom" or "boldness." Here it means "right" or "authority"—hence, "I could be bold and order you." The suggestion of authority was probably enough, coupled as it was with the appeals to love, old age, and imprisonment in v.9.

9 *Presbytēs* means "old age" but usually carries with it the connotation of authority. Thus, in ancient Sparta the ruling body was called a *gerousia* (from *gerōn* "old man"). Parallel to this was the Roman *senatus* (from *senex*). In antiquity, wisdom and authority were assumed to go with old age. Here, however, the stress is on the apostle's aged and feeble condition by the use of *toioutos hōs* ("such as I am").

10 "I plead with you for my son, Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains." The imagery is very strong. The figure of the father and child was often used in Judaism and in the mystery religions as an illustration of the relationship of teacher and student or of leader and convert (see Lohse, p. 200).

"For my son." *Peri* usually means "concerning," but in this place, as elsewhere in his letters, Paul uses it in the sense of *hyper* ("in behalf of").

11 There is a double play on words here. *Onesimus* was a common slave name. It meant "useful" or "profitable." This is also the meaning of *chrēstos*, which appears as *achrestos* ("useless") and *euchrēstos* ("useful") in this verse. *Chrēstos* in turn sounded so much like *Christos* that the Roman historian Suetonius (*Claud.* 25) takes this to be Jesus' name. An ancient reader would have thought this play on words much more clever and humorous than we would. That Paul uses it at the beginning of his plea for Onesimus shows us something of his exquisite sensitivity and tact. It is as if, realizing the radical nature (in view of the custom of the times) of what he was about to ask of Philemon, Paul deliberately introduces this bit of humor.

12 Again we see Onesimus as very dear to Paul. He is not simply the one "I am sending back." Paul adds, "him—who is my very heart."

13 The culmination of the appeal. Onesimus serves in place of (*hyper sou*) Philemon, already described as a man of great spiritual advancement (vv.6, 7).

14 The apostle has been speaking as an urbane, deferential, educated man of the classical world. But now, after he has cited a number of reasons for allowing Onesimus to remain with him, he goes further and urges Philemon to make his decision out of Christian love rather than obligation.

13,14 If Onesimus was so dear to Paul the prisoner that he wanted the comfort of his help, how could Philemon refuse Paul's plea for him? And observe Paul's sensitive regard for Philemon's personality (v.14).

15 The contrast between "for a time" and "forever" shows Paul's conviction that the hand of God was at work in the whole situation. It also shows his tact: instead of bluntly referring to Onesimus as a runaway, he speaks of his temporary separation from Philemon as a prelude to permanent reunion with him.

16 In similar fashion he contrasts "slave"—a temporal and demeaning condition—with "brother"—an eternal relationship in the Lord. The innate problem of the slavery of



human beings always troubled the ancients. Onesimus was a slave, but in many of the ancient religions and in Greek and Roman law where religion was concerned, he would have been treated as an equal. Christianity was not unique in its claims of the enabling power of the love of Christ to break the economic and social barriers between people. In the ancient pagan religious experience men feared and appeased the gods. They did not, however, claim that they loved them or were loved by them as the motive for men to love one another. Paul loves Onesimus very much. Philemon will love him all the more because of long-standing human ties as well as their common faith.

Here, where Paul so sensitively suggests that Philemon take Onesimus back "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave," etc. (cf. also v.17), it almost seems as if emancipation is implied between the lines.

17 Now Paul uses a term from accountancy. "Partner" (*koinonos*), which is related to the common NT word *koinonia* ("fellowship"), here has the sense of "business partner"—a common meaning of the term in the papyri. No doubt Paul meant for the word to imply "fellowship" in the work of the risen Christ. Philemon is to receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul himself.

18 This wonderfully gracious offer to assume the financial obligation of Onesimus is an altogether astonishing statement. We can only speculate how Paul came to have such warm feelings toward him. Yet we cannot be certain the slave had robbed his master, though this was a common act of runaway slaves. It may be that Onesimus had confessed this to Paul. Or the loss may have been the result of the departure of a highly skilled slave from whose activities Philemon derived great income. In fact, slave prices in the Greco-Roman world were directly proportional to the skill and economic value of the slave. A common drudge brought only 500 *denarii* (a *denarius* was a laborer's ordinary daily wage), but skilled teachers, physicians, and actors were purchased for a hundred times as much.

Paul uses another accountant's word (*elloga*, "charge") to maintain the imagery. Observe Paul's tact in not saying that Onesimus had stolen, but he leaves that possibility open by his use of *adikeo* ("do wrong") and *opheilo* ("owe").

19 The subject is still the indebtedness of Onesimus. Now Paul says that he wrote these words himself. As in our own society, handwritten statements of obligation carried great weight and legal validity. So in v.19 Paul gives Philemon what amounts to a promissory note. Then in v.19b he shifts abruptly to another thought—viz., "not to mention that you owe me your very self." Preceding the "that" (*hina*) should be understood some phrase like "I am silent" (*sigo*), "so as not to mention," etc. In Paul's view, Philemon's spiritual indebtedness to him should easily cover all of Onesimus's wrongdoing. Again Paul's hint can hardly be missed: "I will repay it. Charge it to the bank of heaven."

What Paul did for Onesimus reflects the infinitely greater intercession and redemptive act of Christ for us, who because of our sin are all indebted to God in a way we cannot ourselves repay. As Luther said, "Here we see how Paul layeth himself out for poor Onesimus, and with all his means pleadeth his cause with his master, and so setteth himself as if he were Onesimus, and had himself done wrong to Philemon. Even as Christ did for us with God the Father, thus also doth Paul for Onesimus with Philemon. We are all his Onesimi, to my thinking" (*The New Century Bible*).

20 *Onaimēn* ("I do wish," "I would like") is the optative for expressing a wish and is

the most common survival element of ancient epistolary name Onesimus comes from

Paul now returns to the refreshed the hearts of many Gentiles? In its relationship reinforcement.

21 Paul has avoided giving expects "obedience." To suggest") may be an intimate He hints that Onesimus be never directly assaults the perceives in Christianity and nowhere states that slaves ment of slaves on the basis

22 Here the suggestion of requests. The hope expressed He expects to be released Imprisonment at Ephesus, A trip from Rome would take all but impossible during p

## Notes

- 14 The meaning of "consent" p. 162.)
- 16 *Μάλιστα* (*malista*, "especially dear"). *Πόσω* much." "Very dear" and
- 17 *Προσλαβοῦ* (*proslabou*, "kindly"). It always has a p helper."
- 18 Cicero (*Q. Rosc.* 28) remarks in value 35 times because and Martial (1.58.1) both *ἑλλόγα* (*elloga*) means *ellogao* instead of *ellogao* instances of this meaning
- 22 *Ξενία* (*xenia*) means "guest Classical and early Christian this verse.



the most common survival of the secondary mood of nonassertion. It was a regular element of ancient epistolary style. Its use here may be another play on words, since the name Onesimus comes from the same root.

Paul now returns to the vocabulary of v.7, where he told Philemon that he had refreshed the hearts of many. How, then, can he do less than that for the apostle to the Gentiles? In its relationship to v.7 this sentence is an excellent example of literary reinforcement.

21 Paul has avoided giving any commands to Philemon (cf. v.8), but he nonetheless expects "obedience." To what? The love of Christ? *Hyper ha legō*, ("beyond what I suggest") may be an intimation that Paul would like Onesimus set free from enslavement. He hints that Onesimus be loaned to him. Only emancipation could be beyond that. Paul never directly assaults the social and economic institutions of his day. Yet he clearly perceives in Christianity an ethic that reaches beyond human social institutions. Paul nowhere states that slaves should be set free, but he pleads for fair and gracious treatment of slaves on the basis of the love of Christ in the hearts of their owners.

22 Here the suggestion of an imminent visit lends more weight to Paul's hints and requests. The hope expressed in these words seems to imply that the apostle is nearby. He expects to be released soon and to see the outcome of his letter at first hand. Imprisonment at Ephesus, and perhaps, Caesarea, would best explain his circumstances. A trip from Rome would take weeks or even months in the best weather and would be all but impossible during periods of unsettled weather.

## Notes

- 14 The meaning of "consent" for γνώμη (*gnōmē*) is frequently attested in the papyri. (See BAG, p. 162.)
- 16 Μάλιστα (*malista*, "especially") is an old superlative form. Here it intensifies ἀγαπητός (*agapētos*, "dear"). Πόσω μάλλον (*posō mallon*) is dative of degree of difference, lit., "more by much." "Very dear" and "even dearer" tr. well Paul's emphatic words.
- 17 Προσλαβοῦ (*proslabou*, "welcome") is the middle of προσλαμβάνω (*proslambano*, "receive kindly"). It always has a positive meaning: "to welcome into a circle of friends," or "take as a helper."
- 18 Cicero (*Q. Rosc.* 28) remarks that a talented slave purchased for 3,000 *denarii* had increased in value 35 times because of the training given him by the comedian Roscius. Seneca (*Ep.* 27.5) and Martial (1.58.1) both mention 50,000 *d.* as the price of an accomplished slave.  
ἑλλόγα (*elloga*) means "charge [to my account]." The form of the verb appears to be from *ellogao* instead of *ellogeo* (the actual root form); cf. Rom 5:13. Lohse (p. 204) gives parallel instances of this meaning from later Gr.
- 22 Ξενία (*xenia*) means "guest room." It also often means "hospitality," one of the highest of Classical and early Christian virtues. It would be wrong to try to separate the two meanings in this verse.

#### IV. Greetings and Benediction

23-25

<sup>23</sup>Epaphras, my fellow prisoner for Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. <sup>24</sup>And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.

<sup>25</sup>The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

**23,24** The five co-workers who send greetings to Philemon are also mentioned in Colossians 4:10-14. A sixth co-worker, Jesus Justus, is mentioned only in Colossians. My conjecture that we should read here, "Epaphras my fellow prisoner in Christ, Jesus, Mark . . . send greetings." The question remains as to why the same greetings were given in two letters that were sent at the same time. Some see the unity of the greetings as evidence that Colossians is not Pauline (see Lohse, p. 176-183). Others see it as evidence that the letters were written at the same time to the same place, while Paul was in the company of the same co-workers. One should not discount the possibility that Philemon preceded Colossians (see Introduction).

**25** With his apostolic "grace," Paul ends this brief but unusually beautiful letter in which he reveals so much of himself.