

# A Gospel Appeal

## Philemon

Context:

- Paul in prison
- Written around the time of Colossians (approximately 60-61 AD in Rome)
- Philemon lives in Colossae; Onesimus apparently is his runaway slave
  - o Did he run to Paul?
  - o Did he run *into* Paul?

### Opening Greeting (1-3)

Identifies himself and his situation

Paul, prisoner for Christ

Timothy is with him, but the letter is clearly from Paul

Reveals intimacy with Philemon

Our beloved fellow-worker

Lit. “our beloved and fellow-worker”

Apphia and Archippus

Could be Philemon’s wife and son

Archippus found also in Colossians 4:17; some sort of leader in the church

House used for the gathering of believers

### Paul highlights Philemon’s Gospel-centeredness (4-7)

[Reminds Philemon of who he is, *the indicative*, in Christ]

Philemon’s love and faith

Faith in Christ

Love for all the saints

*Commonly used by Paul as gauge of one’s spiritual maturity* (cf. Col. 1:4)

“Sharing of faith” or “fellowship based on faith”

Koinonia that comes from having faith with those who are in the faith

Key thought from Doug Moo: “When people believe in Christ, they become identified with one another in an intimate association and incur both the *benefits* and *responsibilities* of that communion . . . (*emphasis added*)”

Paul’s implicit exhortation: *see all the different ways the Gospel-obtained communion ought to show itself.*

An example of this Gospel-led communion → *Philemon refreshed the hearts of the saints*

## **The Body of the Letter—*Paul’s Appeal for Onesimus (8-20)***

Love governs all the relationships in this letter (8-9)

Paul is an apostle and can command, but their koinonia leads him instead to appeal

The requirement is not a simple command, but an obligation of love

Paul, as prisoner, is an example of how the Gospel transforms our values

Onesimus has been changed (10-14)

While Paul was in prison and somehow came in contact with Onesimus, the Lord used Paul to reach Onesimus with the Gospel

Play on words: Onesimus means “useful”

He used to be useless (he was a runaway slave, probably not easy to deal with)

Now he is useful

For Paul, he became an asset, helping him in his imprisonment

For Philemon, his transformed life will now be useful (for the Gospel?)

Notice the kind of relationship Paul and Onesimus must have enjoyed (‘my very heart’)

“Only if Philemon has sincerely in his own mind decided on the appropriateness of what Paul is recommending will his act be truly voluntary and loving.” Doug Moo

God’s mysterious ways (15-16)

For whatever reason Onesimus left... but God’s intention was to save him

Now the relationship has changed. Now they are no longer master/slave; now they are brothers.

Was Paul telling Philemon to let Onesimus free from slavery?

The answer is that this is likely what Paul is doing

Slavery at the time was somewhat complicated. Sometimes it was worse for a slave to be set free since he would have nothing and nowhere to turn.

At the very least, Paul foresees a profoundly different kind of relationship between the two, moving forward.

Paul’s Christ-likeness (17-20)

Emphasis on Gospel-partnership—

Welcome this slave like you would welcome me!

Some key references—identifying with His people

- Matthew 10:40—“Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.”
- Acts 9:4—“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

Charge it to my account  
I will repay it  
I've already paid  
*Christ has already paid it*

Barclay—Philemon turns from creditor to debtor

### **Because the Gospel is at work in you... (21-22)**

Obedience here is referring to the Gospel

“The fellowship that is created among those who have faith in Christ (v. 6) brings with it obligations to one another.”

You will do more, because it is the Gospel overflowing from your heart

### **Final Greetings (23-25)**

Unity of the Body, fellowship in the cause of Christ

Your (plural) spirit—not just for Philemon

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