

Resources Referred to in This Study (referred to by author's last name)

Titus and Philemon by D. Edmond **Hiebert** (1957)

“Philippians, Colossians and Philemon” by William **Hendriksen** in *New Testament Commentary* (Colossians and Philemon 1964)

Treasures of Wisdom: Studies in Colossians & Philemon by Homer **Kent** (1978)

“Philemon” by Arthur **Rupprecht** in volume 11 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (1978)

Colossians, Philemon by Peter **O'Brien** in *Word Biblical Commentary* (1982)

“Philemon” by Edwin **Deibler** in volume 2 of *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (1983)

The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians by F. F. **Bruce** in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (1984)

Colossians and Philemon: The Supremacy of Christ by R. Kent **Hughes** in *Preaching the Word* (1989)

Colossians & Philemon by Murray **Harris** (1991)

Colossians & Philemon by John **MacArthur** in *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (1992)

The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text by James **Dunn** in *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (1996)

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scriptural citations are from the
New American Standard Bible (NASB).

Introduction to Philemon (with corresponding discussion questions)

The book of Philemon is found among the Epistles of the New Testament.¹ More specifically, it is one of the Pauline Epistles.² Yet more specifically, it is one of the "Prison Epistles" (along with Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians).³ The Prison Epistles were written while Paul was under house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:14-31; cf. Philemon 1, 9, 10, 13, and 23) for two years (Acts 28:30) in the early 60s A.D. awaiting trial before the Roman Supreme Court.⁴ While under house arrest, Paul was chained to a different Roman guard every 6 hours (Acts 28:16), lived in his own rented residence (Acts 28:30), received visitors (Acts 28:17-30), and freely preached the gospel (Acts 28:31). Paul's second Roman imprisonment (of the more conventional variety) in the "Mamertime dungeon" in the mid-60s A.D. resulted in his martyrdom.

The Author of the Book

As already indicated, the author of the epistle of Philemon was clearly the apostle Paul (Philemon 1, 9, and 19).

¹The New Testament can be subdivided as follows: Gospels (Matthew-John), History (Acts), Epistles (Romans-Jude), and Prophecy (Revelation).

²The Epistles can be subdivided as follows: Pauline Epistles (Romans-Philemon) and General or Non-Pauline Epistles (Hebrews-Jude).

³Hiebert (*An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2:23) further subdivides the Pauline Epistles as follows: Soteriological Group (Romans-Galatians), Christological Group (Ephesians-Colossians and Philemon), Eschatological Group (1 & 2 Thessalonians), and Ecclesiological Group (1 Timothy-Titus).

⁴At the end of his third missionary journey (mid 50s A.D.), Paul was arrested in Jerusalem on the trumped-up charge that he had brought a Gentile into the "inner court" of the temple, an area that Gentiles were forbidden to enter (Acts 21:27ff). After spending over two years (Acts 24:27) imprisoned in Caesarea (Acts 23:23) over this issue, Paul appealed his case to Caesar (Acts 25:11-12). After arriving in Rome, he was placed under house arrest (Acts 28:16) for two years (Acts 28:30). It is this imprisonment (his first of two Roman imprisonments) of which he speaks in the "Prison Epistles."

The Recipient(s) of the Book

The epistle of Philemon is so called because verse 1 identifies Philemon as the book's *primary* recipient. *Secondary* recipients of the book include Apphia (verse 2; believed by most interpreters to be Philemon's wife); Archippus (verse 2; possibly Philemon's son; possibly the one temporarily in charge of the local church at Colossae at the time⁵; cf. Colossians 4:17); and "the church in [Philemon's] house" (verse 2; believed by most interpreters to be the local church at Colossae⁶ or a segment of it; cf. the plural "you" in verse 3, the plural "your" and the plural "you" in verse 22, and the plural "your" in verse 25).

It may be that Paul had personally led Philemon to the Lord (Philemon 19), perhaps during Paul's 3-year (Acts 20:31) ministry in Ephesus in the mid-50s A.D. recorded in Acts 19 (Ephesus was approximately 100 miles to the north and west of Colossae).

⁵The belief is that Epaphras was the pastor of the church at Colossae, went to visit Paul in Rome, was imprisoned with Paul when he got there (see Colossians 1:7-8 and 4:12), and was succeeded by Archippus.

⁶That Philemon was from Colossae can be surmised from both Colossians 4:9 (where it is implied that Onesimus, Philemon's slave, is from Colossae) and Colossians 4:17 (where it is implied that Archippus, mentioned alongside Philemon in Philemon 2, is in Colossae).

The Date of Writing

Being one of the Prison Epistles, the epistle of Philemon was written in the early 60s A.D. Paul sent the epistle, along with Onesimus (Philemon 12) and the epistles of Ephesians (Ephesians 6:21) and Colossians, by way of Tychicus (see Colossians 4:7-9).

The Occasion for Writing

A Colossian, Christian slave holder named Philemon had a slave named Onesimus, who had run away from Colossae to Rome (Rome was approximately 900 miles to the north and west of Colossae). While in Rome, Onesimus met the apostle Paul⁷, who led Onesimus to the Lord (Philemon 10). Paul thought it only right to send Onesimus back to his rightful owner, Philemon. Since Paul was going to be sending Tychicus to Colossae with the epistle to the Colossians (Colossians 4:7-8), he sent Onesimus along with Tychicus (Colossians 4:9), and wrote the epistle of Philemon as a “cover letter” of sorts.

The Purpose for Writing

Paul wrote the epistle of Philemon to persuade Philemon to gladly receive his runaway slave, Onesimus, back (see especially Philemon 17 and 21).

Outstanding Features of Philemon

1. Its brevity. Philemon is the shortest of all Paul’s epistles. It is one of only five⁸ books in the Bible that are one chapter long. *The New Open Bible* calls the epistle of Philemon a “postcard” from Paul to Philemon.
2. Its tone. Like another Prison Epistle, Philippians, the tone of Philemon is engaging, endearing, effusive, etc. (see, for example, “beloved” in verse 1, “brother” in verses

⁷Under what circumstances Onesimus met Paul, we can only speculate. O’Brien (p. 266) is one of several interpreters who postulate that Onesimus actively sought Paul out once he got to Rome. It is not unreasonable to think that Onesimus had heard his master, Philemon, speak fondly of Paul on many an occasion.

⁸The other four are Obadiah, 2 John, 3 John, and Jude.

7 and 20, and “my very heart” in verse 12).

3. Its tact. Hiebert (p. 84) calls the epistle of Philemon “a masterpiece of Christian tact.” Commenting on Paul’s tact in Philemon, Kent (p. 153) states: “Paul’s tact and delicacy reveal an aspect of his character that many would not have suspected from the forceful and authoritative apostle.”
4. Its slavery setting. Slavery was a major socioeconomic phenomenon in the Roman world. It was not uncommon for Christians, such as Philemon, to be slave owners (see Ephesians 6:9 and Colossians 4:1, both written to Christians, as well as 1 Timothy 6:2). One should not, however, equate slavery in Bible days with the slavery practiced in our nation during the Civil War era. The first was much more voluntary in nature than the second. While the epistle of Philemon does not explicitly discourage the institution of slavery⁹, it does seem to implicitly do so. “Although [the epistle of Philemon] does not in so many words condemn the institution of slavery it strikes at its very spirit” (Hendriksen, p. 27). “What [the epistle of Philemon] does is to bring us into an atmosphere in which the institution [of slavery] could only wilt and die” (F. F. Bruce, quoted in O’Brien, p. 270). “While it is true that the words of the Apostle here [in the epistle of Philemon] cannot be construed to advocate the abolition of slavery, yet the spirit of the epistle has definitely supported that position” (Hiebert, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2:248).

Other¹⁰ Sources for Further Study

An Introduction to the New Testament by D. A. Carson, Douglas Moo, and Leon Morris

An Introduction to the New Testament (Volume 2: The Pauline Epistles) by D. Edmond Hiebert

New Testament Survey by Robert Gromacki

The New Open Bible, Study Edition

The Zondervan NASB Study Bible

⁹Scriptures that condemn the institution of slavery, at least in principle, include Exodus 21:16 and 1 Timothy 1:10 (notice how the NIV translates the second). These passages condemn slavery that is coercive in nature.

¹⁰Besides the resources listed earlier.

Discussion Questions for Introduction to Philemon

1. How is the story of the book of Philemon a picture of salvation?

Possible answer: Philemon is a picture of God the Father, who has been sinned against; Onesimus is a picture of us, who have sinned against God the Father, are liable to death, and are in need of being reconciled to Him; Paul is a picture of God the Son, who reconciles us to God the Father by interceding for us and by having our wrong imputed to Him.

2. Martin Luther once said that "All of us are Onesimuses." How so?

Possible answer: All of us have run away from God, Isaiah 53:6; are deserving of death, Romans 6:23; and are in need of being reconciled to Him, 2 Corinthians 5:20; by an intercessor, 1 Timothy 2:5; who is willing to have our wrong imputed to Him, 2 Corinthians 5:21.

3. How is the story of the book of Philemon like the story of the Prodigal Son?

Possible answer: Onesimus was like the Prodigal Son in that he ran away, Luke 15:13; was regenerated, Luke 15:17; returned, Luke 15:20; had his wrong remitted [forgiven] and his relationship reconciled, Luke 15:20-24.

4. How did Christianity regulate and reform the institution of slavery in Paul's day?

Possible answer: by calling for the humane treatment of slaves, Ephesians 6:9 and Colossians 4:1

How does Christianity undermine it, ultimately leading to its removal?

Possible answers: by considering coercive slavery a sin, 1 Timothy 1:10 and by teaching that there is an equality of essence among all men, regardless of status, 1 Corinthians 12:13 and Galatians 3:28

Philemon Verse-by-Verse (with corresponding discussion questions)

1: Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker,

Paul begins the book of Philemon in typical fashion with a salutation (verses 1-3). The Jewish letter typically¹¹ began with a salutation consisting of 3 elements: 1) naming of the author of the letter (verse 1a); 2) naming of the recipient(s) of the letter (verses 1b-2); and 3) a greeting (verse 3).¹² Timothy is mentioned alongside Paul (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:1, Philippians 1:1, Colossians 1:1, 1 Thessalonians 1:1, and 2 Thessalonians 1:1), potentially leaving the impression that he co-authored the epistle with Paul. However, it is clear that the book was written by Paul alone (the book is written in the first person *singular*, not the first person *plural*). Why is Timothy's name listed alongside Paul's? Perhaps because 1) Timothy was Paul's "amanuensis," a secretary of sorts who wrote down the contents of the book as Paul conveyed them to him (cf. Romans 16:22)¹³; perhaps because 2) Timothy was with Paul in Rome at the time of writing (cf. Philippians 1:1 and Colossians 1:1, two other "Prison Epistles"; cf. Galatians 1:2); or perhaps because 3) adding Timothy's name alongside Paul's added weight to Paul's appeal to Philemon (Hiebert, p. 89).¹⁴ We can only speculate. Timothy was not only Paul's "son" (1 Corinthians 4:17, Philippians 2:22, 1 Timothy 1:2, 18, 2 Timothy 1:2, and 2:1), having been led to the Lord and/or disciplined/trained for the ministry by Paul, but also Paul's "brother," one of his spiritual siblings. Paul calls himself a "prisoner of Christ Jesus" (cf. Ephesians 3:1, 4:1, 2 Timothy 1:8, and Philemon 9), "prisoner" being an allusion to his current

¹¹Hebrews and 1 John are exceptions.

¹²See Ezra 7:12, Daniel 4:1, Acts 15:23, and Acts 23:26.

¹³Even when Paul did use an amanuensis, he himself would "sign" the letter with his own hand (see 1 Corinthians 16:21, Colossians 4:18, 2 Thessalonians 3:17; cf. Galatians 6:11 and Philemon 19).

¹⁴Especially if Philemon was personally acquainted with Timothy, a reasonable assumption since Philemon was personally acquainted with Paul, and Timothy was Paul's leading associate.

condition as one under house arrest (see introduction to the book of Philemon for further details regarding his house arrest). Interestingly, Paul does not call himself a prisoner of Rome, but a prisoner of Christ Jesus. Paul's imprisonment was a consequence (cf. footnote 4) of his obedience to (Acts 26:19) the commission given to him by Christ (Acts 9:15). Paul names Philemon as the primary recipient of the epistle bearing the latter's name. He calls Philemon "beloved" ("brother" has been supplied by the NASB translators and is, thus, italicized), a term of endearment common to Paul (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:14, 15:58, 2 Corinthians 7:1, 12:19, Philippians 2:12, 4:1, Colossians 4:7, 9, and 1 Thessalonians 2:8), and a "fellow worker" (cf. Romans 16:3, 9, 21, 1 Corinthians 3:9, 2 Corinthians 1:24, 8:23, Philippians 2:25, 4:3, Colossians 4:11, 1 Thessalonians 3:2, and Philemon 24), meaning that he and Philemon were co-workers in the cause of Christ.

2: and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

In verse 2, Paul lists the "secondary" recipients of the epistle. Apphia is commonly believed to have been Philemon's wife. Apphia, like Philemon, was a believer and, thus, a spiritual sibling of Paul (a "sister"; cf. Romans 16:1, 1 Corinthians 7:15, and James 2:15). It has been postulated that Archippus was the son of Philemon. More likely, he was the current leader of the church at Colossae, filling the void left by the founder of the church, Epaphras, who after going to see Paul in Rome had become a fellow prisoner with him (see Colossians 1:7-8, 4:12, 17, and Philemon 23 in regards to all of this). Paul calls Archippus a "fellow soldier" (cf. Philippians 2:25), meaning Archippus was a ministerial colleague of Paul (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:7 and 2 Timothy 2:3-4). The church at Colossae met in the home of Philemon. House-churches were the norm in the early centuries of the church (cf. Acts 16:40, Romans 16:5, 23, 1 Corinthians 16:19, and Colossians 4:15).¹⁵ It is interesting to note that in a letter whose primary recipient was an individual and whose subject matter was seemingly a private issue, the local church is still brought into the equation.

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

Paul gives his typical greeting (cf. Romans 1:7, 1 Corinthians 1:3, 2 Corinthians 1:2, Galatians 1:3, Ephesians 1:2, Philippians 1:2, 2 Thessalonians 1:2, and Titus 1:4), though it was an atypical one for his day. The typical greeting was *chairen* ("greetings"—Acts 15:23, 23:26, and James 1:1). Paul, however, was fond of using *charis* ("grace") instead¹⁶, coupled with "peace" (Romans 1:7, 1 Corinthians 1:3, 2

¹⁵It was not until the early 3rd century A.D. that churches began to meet in public buildings, instead of in private homes.

¹⁶Gordon Fee, on page 70 of his commentary on Philippians, commenting on Paul's identical greeting to the church at Philippi, states: "Here is a marvelous example of Paul's 'turning into

Corinthians 1:2, Galatians 1:3, Ephesians 1:2, Philippians 1:2, Colossians 1:2, 1 Thessalonians 1:1, 2 Thessalonians 1:2, and Titus 1:4) or “mercy” and peace (1 Timothy 1:2 and 2 Timothy 1:2). Commenting on the connection between grace and peace, William Hendriksen, on page 71 of his commentary on Ephesians, states: “Grace is the fountain. Peace belongs to the stream of spiritual blessings which issues from this fountain.” Deibler (p. 771) concurs: “The word ‘peace’ expresses a spiritual state denoting a proper relationship between God and man; it is the effect of only one cause: the ‘grace’ of God. There can be no peace apart from grace.” The believer is positionally at “peace *with* God” (Romans 5:1). He experiences the “peace *of* God” (Philippians 4:7). The significance of the conjoining of “God our Father” with “the Lord Jesus Christ” is aptly pointed out by Harris (p. 246): “Of no mere human being could it be said that, together with God, he was a fount of spiritual blessing; the deity of Christ is thus implicitly affirmed.”

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

gospel’ everything he sets his hand to.”

Following the salutation of verses 1-3, Paul gives a “prayer report” in verses 4-7. Paul reports that he is praying for Philemon¹⁷ (verse 4b), that his prayers for Philemon are always accompanied by gratitude (verse 4a), and that such gratitude is due to Philemon’s love for the saints (verses 5 and 7) and faith in the Lord (verse 5)¹⁸. In verse 6, Paul tells Philemon what he is praying on his behalf. What Paul is saying here in verse 4 is that every time he prays for Philemon, he cannot help but thank God for him (Harris, p. 249). Whenever others pray for us, could they say the same? Praying for and thanking God for his readers was typical of Paul (cf. Romans 1:8-9, Ephesians 1:16, Philippians 1:3-4, Colossians 1:3, 1 Thessalonians 1:2, 2 Thessalonians 1:3, 11, and 2 Timothy 1:3).

5: because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints;

Paul gives the reason why he is grateful to God for Philemon.¹⁹ Paul had been told (“hear”), presumably by Epaphras (cf. Colossians 1:8) and/or Onesimus, about Philemon’s faith in Christ²⁰ and love for the saints, the first producing the second (see Galatians 5:6 in the NIV). The NASB’s rendering of this verse could probably be improved upon. Here we have an instance of the literary phenomenon known as “chiasmus” (named after the Greek letter, *chi*, which looks like an “x”). In a chiasmus, there are 4 elements, with the 1st and 4th elements corresponding to one another, and the 2nd and 3rd elements corresponding to one another. Thus, in this verse, the 1st element, “love,” corresponds to the 4th element, “toward all the saints,” while the 2nd element, “faith,” corresponds to the 3rd element, “toward the Lord Jesus.” Notice the NIV’s rendering of this verse. See also the parallels in two other Prison Epistles, Ephesians (1:15) and Colossians (1:4). Notice that Philemon’s love for the saints is indiscriminate (“all”). The significance of Paul’s pointing this out to Philemon is pointed out by Hiebert (p. 101): “In this picture of Philemon’s love toward all the saints Paul doubtless intends for him to understand that Onesimus is now included among them. He must allow his love to be operative toward him as

¹⁷“Paul must have had an extensive prayer list and presumably spent some time each day naming before God all his churches, colleagues, and supporters” (Dunn, p. 316).

¹⁸Paul thanks God for his readers’ faith and love often, for their faith in Romans 1:8 and 2 Timothy 1:5, and for their faith and love in Ephesians 1:15, Colossians 1:4, 1 Thessalonians 1:3, and 2 Thessalonians 1:3.

¹⁹Paul typically tells his readers the specific reason(s) why he thanks God for them (cf. Romans 1:8, Ephesians 1:15, Philippians 1:5, Colossians 1:4, 1 Thessalonians 1:3, 2 Thessalonians 1:3, and 2 Timothy 1:5).

²⁰Bruce (p. 208) suggests that the Greek would better be understood here as “faithfulness to Christ.”

well.”

6: and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ’s sake.

Paul now gives the content of his prayer for Philemon, a prayer “in Greek that is unusually difficult to understand” (Rupprecht, p. 459). The Greek noun translated “fellowship” has within its “semantic range” the idea of sharing (as in, for example, Galatians 6:6). In the context of the epistle, the sharing most likely is in reference to Onesimus. In other words, Paul is praying that Philemon might be magnanimous in his dealings with Onesimus. Such magnanimity would ultimately arise from Philemon’s faith (“of your faith”; cf. comments on verse 5). Such magnanimity would be activated (“may become effective”) as Philemon reflected on (“through the knowledge”) the goodness of Christ to him (“every good thing which is in you for Christ’s sake”; cf. a delineation of such in Ephesians 1:3-14).²¹ In other words, Paul is praying that Philemon would show the same magnanimity toward Onesimus as Christ had shown toward him (cf. Ephesians 4:32 and 5:2). “The more thoroughly Philemon recognizes how greatly he himself has been benefitted, the more inclined will he be to extend mercy and pardon to others, specifically to Onesimus” (Hendriksen, p. 215).

7: For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.

²¹Hendriksen (p. 212) translates: “that the sharing to which your faith gives rise may be energetically stimulated for Christ by the clear recognition of all the good that is ours.”

In verse 5, Paul let Philemon know that he was grateful to God for Philemon's love for all the saints. In verse 6, he prayed that such love would be shown toward Onesimus. Here in verse 7, he lets Philemon know the positive effects his love has had upon Paul in particular (verse 7a) and upon believers in general (verse 7b). Philemon's love for the saints brought Paul much joy and comfort (cf. 2 Corinthians 7:4, 6-7, and 13).²² Philemon's love for the saints had had (and was continuing to have²³) a refreshing (cf. the same Greek verb, translated "rest"²⁴ in Matthew 11:28) effect upon them (as Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus had had upon Paul and the Corinthians—1 Corinthians 16:17-18, as the Corinthians had had upon Titus—2 Corinthians 7:13, and as Onesiphorus had had upon Paul—2 Timothy 1:16). Are we refreshing to those around us? "Brother" is another (cf. "beloved" in verse 1) term of endearment Paul uses in reference to Philemon (cf. verse 20).

8: Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper,

Verses 1-7 form the introduction to the epistle, verses 8-22 the body, verses 23-25 the conclusion. Paul begins verse 8 with a "therefore." Why is it there for? It is there to show that the appeal Paul is about to make in behalf of Onesimus in the verses to follow is based upon something he has said in the verses preceding. The connection seems to be Philemon's character. Though Paul could have taken a heavy-handed approach to the situation²⁵, he instead takes a softer, kinder, gentler approach, since he is dealing with a man known for his magnanimity (cf. verses 5 and 7).

²²You might say that Paul's words in verse 7a is Paul's way of bringing Philemon "tidings of comfort and joy."

²³"Refreshed" is in the Greek perfect tense, which describes a past action with ongoing effects. Philemon's love had a "ripple effect" in the lives of its recipients.

²⁴According to MacArthur (p. 215), the word was a military one, used of an army resting from a march.

²⁵Hughes (p. 163) writes: "In light of the magnitude of Paul's apostolic office, he could have assumed a Jimmy Cagney stance: 'See here, Phil, this is Paul writing, the Boss Apostle. I've got this guy here, Onesimus, and he's converted and he's swell. So don't give him any trouble, see. If you do, I'll be over to see you. We have a little Latin saying here in Rome for people who don't go along with the program. It begins with *Jerkus*. You can fill in the rest. Now you wouldn't want that said about you, would you? So get with the program. So long, pal. Paulus Maximus.'"

9: yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you—since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—

Paul’s appeal to Philemon in behalf of Onesimus is one based, not on law, but on love (“for love’s sake”; cf. Paul’s use of the same tact in 2 Corinthians 8:8), specifically the love of Philemon.²⁶ To strengthen his appeal, Paul makes reference to his age. It is believed that Paul was approximately 60 years-old when he wrote these words. Though this does not seem very old, it must be remembered that though Paul may have been 60 chronologically, he was probably much older physically, having aged prematurely due to suffering (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:23-28 and 12:7), part of which was his current imprisonment (“a prisoner of Christ Jesus”; cf. verse 1). Dunn (p. 327) calls Paul’s words here in verse 9 a “tug to the heartstrings” of Philemon. In this regard, Beet (quoted in Hiebert, p. 110), commenting on the word “imprisonment” in verse 10, states: “Thus for the third time [once each in verses 1, 9, and 10] Philemon is made to hear the clanking of the prisoner’s chain.”

Discussion Questions for Philemon 1-9

²⁶The Greek literally reads “the love,” the definite article (“the”) indicating that a specific love is being alluded to, which contextually is that of Philemon (verses 5 and 7).

1. (based on verse 4) Why does Paul thank God and not Philemon?

Answer: because God is ultimately the One who deserved the credit for the faith and love of Philemon, as Philemon's love was derived from his faith, and his faith was a gift of God, Acts 14:27, Ephesians 2:8 and Philippians 1:29.

2. (based on verse 5) Why would faith in Christ produce love?

Possible answer: because our faith is in the One who is the essence, 1 John 4:8b and epitome, John 15:13 of love.

3. (based on verse 7) What are some ways we can be refreshing to a fellow believer?

Possible answers: being exceptional in example; meeting a need, physical or emotional; praying for another, and letting him or her know so, as well as praying with another

10: I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment,

Paul's appeal to Philemon is in behalf of Onesimus²⁷, whom Paul calls his "child" because Paul had "begotten" Onesimus, i.e., had led him to the Lord (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:15 and Galatians 4:19). Paul had done so even though imprisoned ("in my imprisonment"; cf. Philippians 1:12 and 2 Timothy 2:9). See footnote 7 for one possible explanation as to how Paul and Onesimus had met. Unknown to the English reader is the fact that, in the original, Paul strategically withholds the name, "Onesimus" until the last word in verse 10.²⁸ "In a delicate touch, Paul makes clear to Philemon the new status of Onesimus as a Christian *before* he mentions his name" (Harris, p. 261).

11: who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me.

Colossae was located in the Roman province of Phrygia, thus making Onesimus a Phrygian (Onesimus was from Colossae—Colossians 4:9). Phrygian slaves were notorious for their poor quality (O'Brien, p. 292). Onesimus, in his unconverted state, lived up (or, should we say, lived down) to the Phrygian benchmark ("useless"). His conversion ("formerly" ⇔ "but now"; cf. 1 Corinthians 6:11, Ephesians 2:2-4, 13, and Colossians 1:21-22), however, caused him to start living up to something else, his name. The name "Onesimus" means "useful." Thus, in a masterful word play (the literary term is *paranomasia*), Paul informs Philemon that Onesimus is worth retaining. Onesimus' usefulness to Paul is spelled out in verse 13.

12: I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart,

²⁷Hiebert (p. 88) perceptively points out that Paul's appeal in behalf of Onesimus is one bondsman pleading for another bondsman.

²⁸According to Hughes (p. 163), Paul waits until the 145th word of the book to mention the name, Onesimus.

Though Onesimus had become very dear to Paul²⁹ (cf. Colossians 4:9 and Philemon 16), Paul knew that, under the circumstances, sending him back to Philemon was the best thing to do. The Greek word translated “heart” (cf. the same word in verse 7, as well as in 2 Corinthians 6:12, 7:15, Philippians 1:8, 2:1, and Colossians 3:12) is an interesting one. It “denoted literally the visceral organs [“intestines” in Acts 1:18], which were the part of the body to which the seat of emotions were ascribed. The comparable English metaphor is ‘heart’” (Kent, p. 122). In sending Onesimus back to Philemon, it was as if Paul was sending his very self.

13: whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel;

Onesimus was so useful to Paul (cf. verse 11) that Paul seriously considered keeping Onesimus with him in Rome so that Onesimus could render service³⁰ to him in Philemon’s stead. Paul, however, selflessly sent Onesimus back to Philemon (Paul would do likewise with Epaphroditus, selflessly sending him back to the Philippians in Philippians 2:25-30).

14: but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will.

Paul wanted Philemon to make an uncoerced decision regarding Onesimus, one out of love, not law; out of delight, not duty. By severing the string of his relationship with Onesimus geographically, Paul gave Philemon the chance to make a decision with no strings attached.

15: For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever,

²⁹“A special bond of Christian affection exists between a believer and the person God used to bring him to Christ” (Deibler, p. 772).

³⁰The Greek verb rendered “minister” in the NASB is *diakoneo*, from which we get our English word, “deacon.”

Paul interjects a theological factor into the Onesimus equation, suggesting (“perhaps”) that God in His providence had allowed Onesimus’s flight in order to accomplish His purpose of saving Onesimus’s soul. The Greek verb translated “separated” is significant for a couple of reasons: 1) it is in the passive voice, implying God’s overruling providence in the matter and 2) it graciously downplays Onesimus’s offense; Paul does not say “fled” or “ran away.”³¹ God in His providence can and does use sinful choices to accomplish His good purposes (cf. Genesis 45:4-8 and 50:20). Had Onesimus not run away (a sinful choice), Paul would not have had opportunity to lead him to the Lord (God’s good purpose). To further soften Onesimus’s offense in the eyes of Philemon, Paul points out that his departure was, on a chronologically-relative scale, only “for a while” (the Greek literally reads “for an hour”). Though their master-slave relationship had been temporarily severed, their new brother-brother relationship (cf. verse 16), an indirect result of the severance, never would be (“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.

Some have taken Paul’s words at the start of this verse (“no longer as a slave”) to mean that Paul is asking Philemon to emancipate Onesimus. However, Paul does not say, “no longer a slave,” but “no longer as a slave.” In other words, Paul is asking Philemon to view Onesimus in a new light. Philemon is not to view Onesimus just as his slave, but also as his “beloved brother” (cf. Colossians 4:9). Philemon and Onesimus were brothers in a two-fold sense: 1) they were saved and, thus, spiritual siblings and 2) they had the same “father,” Paul having led both Philemon (verse 19) and Onesimus (cf. verse 10) to the Lord. Though the bond between Paul and Onesimus had become strong (cf. verse 12), the bond between Philemon and Onesimus was stronger, as the tie of Paul and Onesimus was only heavenly, while the tie of Philemon and Onesimus was not only heavenly/brother-brother (“in the Lord”), but also earthly/master-slave (“in the flesh”).

³¹“ . . . [Paul’s] choice of the word ‘parted’ is full of tact and Christian consideration. He avoids the harsher word ‘fled.’ That would have awakened a feeling of resentment in Philemon and would have needlessly stressed the self-will of the now penitent slave. His choice of words is admirably suited to spare the feelings of both master and slave. It puts the offense of Onesimus as gently as human language can frame it” (Hiebert, pp. 114-115).

Discussion Questions for Philemon 10-16

1. (based on verse 10) In light of John 1:13, which says that God, not man, is the One who gives spiritual birth, how can Paul say that he had done so in the case of Onesimus?

Answer: Paul was the human instrument that God used to bring about the spiritual birth of Onesimus.

2. In verse 12, Paul calls Onesimus his own heart and, in verse 16, a beloved brother. Why do you suppose Onesimus had become so endearing to Paul?

Possible answers: because Paul had led Onesimus to the Lord, verse 10; because Paul had disciplined Onesimus; perhaps because Onesimus had already started ministering to Paul, verses 11 and 13 (note: have class members share their experiences of having such a relationship with those that led them to the Lord and/or disciplined them, as well as with those that they have led to the Lord and/or disciplined)

17: If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me.

Paul wants Philemon to “accept” Onesimus and to do so as if Onesimus was Paul himself (cf. verse 12). The Greek verb translated “accept” literally means “to take to”; Paul wants Philemon to take Onesimus back to himself. Paul prefaces his request with a reminder that it is coming from one who is a “partner,” i.e., co-worker (cf. 2 Corinthians 8:23, where the Greek words for “partner” and “fellow worker” are conjoined) of Philemon’s in the gospel (cf. Philippians 1:5).

18: But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account;

Slaves were notorious for stealing (Titus 2:9-10); thus, many interpreters believe that Onesimus had made matters worse by not only running away from Philemon, but also by stealing from him. “If” he had, Paul assumes responsibility for the debt. The Greek verb translated “charge to my account” is translated “imputed” in Romans 5:13. This verse is a beautiful illustration of a significant soteriological (soteriology is the doctrine of salvation) concept. When someone is saved, their sin debt is imputed to, i.e., charged to the account of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21a). Paul’s shouldering of Onesimus’s financial indebtedness to Philemon is illustrative of Christ’s shouldering of the believer’s spiritual indebtedness to God the Father. “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” (Martin Luther, quoted in Hiebert, p. 119).

19: I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well).

To affirm his offer in verse 18, Paul affixes his signature, so to speak, in the first half of verse 19. As mentioned in footnote 13, Paul typically did so at the end of his epistles, as a mark of authenticity (cf. 2 Thessalonians 3:17; cf. also Colossians 4:18). Rupprecht (p. 462) is one of many who call this Paul’s “promissory note” to Philemon. In the latter half of the verse, Paul very deftly reminds Philemon that his indebtedness to Paul, assuming that these words are an indication that Paul had led Philemon to the Lord, far exceeded any debt Onesimus might owe Philemon (cf. Romans 15:26-27). Thus, Paul is suggesting that any such debt be forgiven, that it be taken out of what Philemon already owes Paul.

20: Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.

Paul asks Philemon to do for him³² what he was renowned for (cf. verse 7). The

³²Unknown to the English reader is that the Greek pronouns translated “me” and “my” are in an emphatic position, i.e., positioned so as to draw attention to them, for the purpose of emphasis. In other words, Paul is saying to Philemon, in effect, you have benefitted/refreshed others (verse 7); now benefit/refresh me.

Greek verb translated “benefit” is akin to the Greek proper noun “Onesimus”; thus, many believe this is another (cf. verse 11) word play on Paul’s part. In other words, Paul is saying to Philemon, “Be an Onesimus to me.”

21: Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say.

In words that O’Brien (p. 305) calls “tantalizing,” Paul expresses his confidence that Philemon will do what Paul asks, and then some. What exactly is Paul asking Philemon to do? Spare Onesimus’s life (a runaway slave could be executed)? Emancipate Onesimus so that he could return to Rome to serve Paul (cf. v. 13)? Whatever it was³³, the inscripturation of the letter (the fact that it is included in the canon of Scripture) is a strong indication that Philemon did what Paul had asked.

22: At the same time also prepare me a lodging, for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you.

Paul begins to wind down the letter. He is hopeful of being released from his imprisonment (cf. Philippians 1:25-26 and 2:24).³⁴ In anticipation, he asks Philemon to prepare a place for him to stay. Paul knew that his release would not come without the prayers of God’s people (“your” is in the plural). Deibler (p. 774), in commenting on this verse, makes a salient point: “How could Philemon pray for Paul’s release and yet refuse to release Onesimus?” Notice that Paul’s concern is not so much being released, as it is one of the results of being released, namely, his release would allow him to be with the Colossians (“you” is in the plural). Like “separated” in verse 15, “given” here in verse 22 is passive in voice, indicating that, ultimately, Someone else must act in order for Paul to be given to the Colossians.

23: Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you,

Paul concludes his epistle to Philemon in typical fashion with some greetings (verses 23-24) and a benediction (verse 25). The first one to send greetings to Philemon (“you” is in the singular) is Epaphras (cf. Colossians 1:7 and 4:12), most

³³“The uncertainty as to what it is Paul was asking of Philemon can never finally be settled. Perhaps Philemon knew well enough; there may be hints and allusions in the language of which the modern commentator is completely ignorant” (Dunn, p. 334).

³⁴Though we have no explicit biblical record that Paul was released, it is generally agreed that he was, went on a fourth missionary journey, was arrested and imprisoned again by Rome, and was put to death shortly after penning his last epistle, 2 Timothy (cf. his words in 2 Timothy 4:6-7).

likely Philemon's pastor (cf. footnotes 5 and 6), who had become Paul's fellow prisoner (cf. Romans 16:7 and Colossians 4:10).

24: as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers.

The second to send greetings to Philemon was Mark. Like Onesimus (cf. verse 11), Mark had gone from being useless, at least to Paul (Acts 13:13 and 15:37-38), to useful (2 Timothy 4:11). The third to send greetings to Philemon was Aristarchus (cf. Acts 19:29, 27:2, and Colossians 4:10). The fourth to send greetings to Philemon was Demas (cf. Colossians 4:14); sadly, Demas would go on to forsake Paul (cf. 2 Timothy 4:10). The fifth to send greetings to Philemon was Luke, the "beloved physician" (Colossians 4:14) and author of the gospel bearing his name and the book of Acts. All of these men were co-workers (cf. verse 1 and the cross references listed under the comments on it) of Paul in the cause of Christ.

25: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Paul ends the epistle by giving the Colossians ("your" is in the plural) a benediction (he begins it similarly, verse 3). This is a typical Pauline benediction³⁵, with "spirit" = "you" (compare Paul's benedictions in Galatians 6:18, Philippians 4:23, and Philemon 25 with his benedictions in Romans 16:20, 1 Corinthians 16:23, 2 Corinthians 13:14, Colossians 4:18, 1 Thessalonians 5:28, 2 Thessalonians 3:18, 1 Timothy 6:21, 2 Timothy 4:22, and Titus 3:15).

Discussion Questions for Philemon 17-25

1. How are Paul's words at the end of verse 17 a picture of salvation?

Answer: When we are saved, God the Father accepts us as He accepts His Son, Ephesians 1:6; in this respect, Philemon is a picture of God the Father, Onesimus of the believer, and Paul of God the Son—just as Paul asks Philemon to accept Onesimus as Paul, so God the Son "asks" God the Father to accept

³⁵Though not the typical Greek one. The typical Greek "sign off" was "farewell" (see, for example, Acts 15:29). Paul, however, "Christianizes" it with a benediction of grace. This leads Gordon Fee, commenting on an identical Pauline benediction in Philippians, to state on page 462 of his commentary on Philippians: "In Paul's hand conventions are never merely conventional."

the believer as God the Son.

2. Implied from verse 18 and the first half of verse 19, before reconciliation can take place between an offending party and an offended party, what does the offending party have to do?

Answer: repay or make right the wrong, i.e., restitution