

A Commentary on the Letter to Philemon

by William Masopust

A Commentary on the Letter to Philemon
2008 William Masopust

© CREATIVE COMMONS (BY-NC-ND)

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

You are free to share (copy, quote, distribute, or display) the text of this commentary (this work), so long as: a) the original author of this work is properly attributed, b) you do not use the text of this work for commercial use, and, c) you do not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

Philemon

Verses 1 & 2:

¹Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellow-laborer, ²And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellow-soldier, and to the church in thy house:

This is the epistle's salutation. From these scriptures it can be seen that the epistle is from Paul and Timothy and is written to Philemon; but Paul also included Apphia, Archippus, and the church held in Philemon's house. As Paul states in verse one, he is a prisoner for the cause of preaching of Jesus Christ. Paul then addresses Philemon as a "fellow laborer." By this, he means that Philemon is also a man that labors for the cause of Christ.

Verse 3:

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

In verse three, Paul is sending his blessings to Philemon. This blessing is typical^a to the epistles from Paul.

a) Romans 1:7; 1st Corinthians 1:3; 2nd Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3; Ephesians 1:2; Philippians 1:2; Colossians 1:2; 1st Thessalonians 1:1; 2nd Thessalonians 1:2; 1st Timothy 1:2; 2nd Timothy 1:2; Titus 1:4

Verses 4 – 7:

⁴I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers, ⁵Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast towards the Lord Jesus, and towards all saints; ⁶That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. ⁷For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints¹ are refreshed by thee, brother.

Verse four begins the epistle—as with other epistles^a written by Paul—with praise and thanks to God. In verses five through seven, Paul is thanking God for Philemon's love and faith toward Jesus Christ and the saints (holy ones², sacred (physically, pure, morally blameless or religious, ceremonially, consecrated)³). This makes it evident that Philemon is a fellow believer in Christ.

a) Romans 1:8; 1st Corinthians 1:4; 2nd Corinthians 1:3; Galatians 1:5; Ephesians 1:3; Philippians 1:3; Colossians 1:3; 1st Thessalonians 1:2; 2nd Thessalonians 1:3; 2nd Timothy 1:3

Verses 8 & 9:

⁸Wherefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient. ⁹Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

In verses eight and nine, Paul is telling Philemon that he is asking for a favor. Paul tells Philemon that instead of ordering this favor—because Paul feels it proper—he would rather appeal, beg, or call upon Philemon for the favor out of love. Paul's reasons for not ordering Philemon is that he is old in age and in prison.

Verse 10:

¹⁰I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:

In verse ten, a new person, Onesimus, is introduced. Onesimus plays a key part in the epistle to Philemon. His name, by definition, means useful⁴. Paul writes, in verse ten, to tell Philemon that Onesimus has been converted for Christ. (Onesimus is not Paul's literal son. Paul had won Onesimus's soul for Christ; therefore, he is a spiritual father, or a mentor, to Onesimus.)

Verse 11:

¹¹Who in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:

The beginning of verse eleven shows that Onesimus has a past with Philemon. Verse eleven is very interesting, given the meaning to Onesimus's name. Before Paul led him

1 Some translations read, "...the hearts of the saints..."

2 New American Standard Bible alternate translation for "saints" in verse five.

3 Strong's Concordance definition for "saints" in verse five.

4 New American Standard Bible *Theme and Message* of Philemon

to conversion, he was useless, or unprofitable. Now that he has been converted, he has become useful, or profitable. It was God's plan from the beginning of Onesimus's life to make him "useful" to His kingdom. It may be concluded that this is also the case for all believers. Christians become "useful" to the kingdom of Heaven upon acceptance of Christ as Lord and Savior.

Verse 12:

¹²Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, my own bowels:⁵

The beginning of verse twelve gives another clue that Onesimus has some kind of past with Philemon. Paul is urging Philemon to receive Onesimus because he holds Onesimus dear to him—as a son^a.

a) Philemon 10a

Verses 13 & 14:

¹³Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered to me in the bonds of the gospel: ¹⁴But without thy mind⁶ I would do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.

In these two verses, Paul is telling Philemon that he would like to keep Onesimus in his company for his ministry. However, Paul decides to leave that decision to Philemon by sending Onesimus back in person^a. Paul does this to give Philemon time to make his mind and not make a hasty decision. There is an important point to be made here. Paul sets a good example for discipleship. A disciple should not be ministered to in compulsiveness, or in haste, but with patience and willingness^b. Otherwise, there will be no benefit to the disciple.

a) Philemon 12 b) 1st Peter 5:2

Verses 15 & 16:

¹⁵For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldst receive him for ever; ¹⁶Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more to thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?

Overall, these two verses have a theme of forgiveness to them. Verse sixteen gives the past relationship between Onesimus and Philemon. It appears as if Onesimus was a servant to Philemon. Now that Onesimus is a follower of Christ, Paul is requesting that Philemon receive Onesimus, not as a servant, or slave—as he was formerly, but as a brother^a and slave for Christ^b. All Christians have lived lives like that of Onesimus. Every believer was a slave to sin before conversion^c. When a new believer receives the Spirit of adoption^d, he or she is no longer a slave, but accepted into the kingdom of Heaven as a brother or sister to other Christians in Christ Jesus.

5 Some translations read, "...that is, my own heart."

6 Some translations read, "...without your consent..."

a) Matthew 23:8 b) 1st Corinthians 7:22 c) Romans 8:15, 23; 9:4; Galatians 4:5; Ephesians 1:5 d) John 8:34

Verses 17 – 20:

¹⁷If thou accountest me therefore a partner, receive him as myself. ¹⁸If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on my account; ¹⁹I Paul have written it with my own hand, I will repay it: although I do not say to thee that thou owest to me even thy own self besides. ²⁰Yes, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels⁷ in the Lord.

In these four verses, Paul is assuring Philemon that he will square any debts or offenses from Onesimus. This may give way to the inference of Onesimus having debt, theft, or other offenses against Philemon. Paul is personally reconciling those offenses on Onesimus's behalf.

Verses 21 & 22:

²¹Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote to thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say. ²²But at the same time prepare me also a lodging; for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given to you.

Verses twenty-one and twenty-two are both an example of Paul's faith. In verse twenty-one, Paul expresses his faith towards Philemon. In verse twenty-two, Paul is expressing faith for deliverance from his current state in prison. He is expecting to be released through a prayer of agreement with Philemon^a.

a) Matthew 18:19-20

Verses 23 & 24:

²³There salute thee Epaphras, my fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus; ²⁴Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellow-laborers.

At the end of the epistle, Paul includes final greetings from his fellow Christians.

Verse 25:

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

This is a very typical^a final blessing and farewell of Paul's epistles.

a) Romans 16:24; 1st Corinthians 16:23; 2nd Corinthians 13:14; Galatians 6:18; Ephesians 6:24; Philippians 4:23; Colossians 4:18; 1st Thessalonians 5:28; 2nd Thessalonians 3:18; 1st Timothy 6:21; 2nd Timothy 4:22; Titus 3:15

⁷ Some translations read, "...refresh my heart..."

