

## **Thanksgiving to GOD**

Thank you, GOD, for the amazing gift of salvation through Thy Son. Thank you, Lord, for giving your life on that cruel cross that I deserved to be hung upon. Thank you, Spirit, for the gift of the Words given to us in the Scriptures that guide us toward eternity. Thank you, GOD, for preserving those words down through the ages, and the preservation of them until the end of time.

### **Special Recognition**

Thank you to a special lady who has spent countless hours reading and helping correct the English, et cetera, of this poor author's attempts at writing. **Thank you Sheri McAfee.**

### **A Prayer**

Dear GOD, please forgive this author's feeble attempts. I pray that whatever I have written that it will not be in error which would condemn my soul and those who might read my words and believe them. Please look with mercy and forgiveness upon these feeble efforts.

### **A Suggestion**

A wise teacher this author had (Franklin Camp) used to tell us to study from a number of good Bibles. He said when you find differences in them, then it is time to dig and find out why. This writer would like to encourage all to follow this practice.

# **Philemon**

**a commentary**

by: R.F. (Bob) Knox, Jr.

# **Philemon**

## **Introduction**

### **Main Characters**

1. Paul — An apostle in bonds.
2. Philemon — Master of a formerly unfaithful bond-servant.
3. Onesimus — Former unprofitable slave; now a profitable disciple of Christ.

### **Author**

1. The Holy Spirit.
2. Paul, the Spirit's chosen author.

### **Written To**

1. Philemon.
  - a. Conscientious and dedicated Christian.
  - b. His home was in Colosse.
    - (1) Home place of Onesimus — could be Onesimus' original home place (Col. 4:9).
    - (2) "there salute thee Epaphras" (v. 23).
      - (a) Epaphras was wherever Philemon lived.
      - (b) Epaphras — faithful minister at Colosse (Col. 1:7).

### **Purpose of the Letter**

1. Paul would not appropriate for his own use what belonged to another.
2. Onesimus needed to return and make things right – restoration.
3. Concern over the way the Colossians would respond to Onesimus' return, especially Philemon.

**Philemon 1 “Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer,” (KJV)**

“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved and fellow-worker,” (ASV)

Other than giving his name as the sender of this letter, the very first thing Paul said was that he was a prisoner. This would automatically draw sympathy from Philemon. Technically, Paul was a prisoner of the Roman government. But he was not a prisoner because he had violated any of Rome’s laws. He was a prisoner because he had given his allegiance to Christ — because he stood for and practiced the teachings of Christ.

Though bound with a chain to a Roman soldier, Paul was a free man. The height of freedom is not the condition one may enjoy in this world. The height of freedom is found in Christ and in Him alone.

“Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on Him, If ye continue in My word, then are ye My disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. They answered Him, We be Abraham’s seed, and were never in bondage to any man: how sayest Thou, Ye shall be made free? Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. And the servant abideth not in the house for ever: but the Son abideth ever. If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed” (John 8:31-36).

*“When bound to Christ, my soul is free; But sin doth make a slave of me” (Fields, p. 263).*

Timothy’s greetings are included with Paul’s, as they

are in so many of his letters. Some believe this is evidence that Timothy penned this letter for Paul. This writer believes the internal evidence supports Paul's using his own hand to write it (v. 19).

The letter is written to Philemon, whom Paul said is "dearly beloved" and a "fellowlabourer." The name "Philemon" means "*beloved*," so this may be a play on words as Paul shows his affection for him. Philemon indeed was "dearly beloved" because of his relationship to Christ. For the apostle Paul, there could be no greater relationship on earth than the fellowship and love which brethren should feel for one another. Since they were personally acquainted, that would make the bond even stronger (cf. Verses 2, 5, 7, 19). All Christians should hold such a love for their brethren.

"A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another" (John 13:34).

Philemon is also addressed as a "fellowlabourer." Usually one tends to think of this term in the light of one who preaches the Gospel. But the word "fellowlabourer" (συνεργός) would apply to a Christian actively involved in promoting the Lord and His kingdom.

*"Fellow laborer or worker, helper. In the NT, spoken only of a co-worker or helper in the Christian work" (Zodhiates).*

There was no designation of "clergy" and "laity" in the early church, and such cannot exist in the Lord's church in any age. All faithful Christians are fellowlaborers in the Lord's kingdom.

**Philemon 2 "And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in**

**thy house:"**

"and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow-soldier, and to the church in thy house:" (ASV)

Two names are given: "Apphia" (*"That which is fruitful"* – Lockyer, p. 31) and "Archippus" (*"Master of the horse"* – Lockyer, p. 53). Because of the way this letter was written, i.e., a personal letter to Philemon, it is believed by most writers that Apphia was Philemon's wife and Archippus was their son. Based upon Colossians 4:17, it is also believed that Archippus was an evangelist, i.e., a "minister."

"say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it."

He may have served as the evangelist for the church in Colosse. Here Paul calls him "our fellow soldier." This is a common term in the New Testament with regard to Christians. Christians are indeed soldiers in an army which is engaged in the most crucial warfare of all time.

"Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier" (2 Timothy 2:3-4).

"I supposed it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother, and companion in labour, and fellowsoldier, but your messenger, and he that ministered to my wants" (Philippians 2:25).

"Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armour of GOD, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the Devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of GOD, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; And your feet shod with the preparation of the Gospel of peace; Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of GOD: Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints; And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the Gospel” (Ephesians 6:10-19).

“to the church in thy house”

*“As many scholars have pointed out, ‘Up to the third century we have no certain evidence of church buildings for the purpose of worship.’ All references point to private houses for this”* (Coffman, p. 363).

Besides the present text, there are a number of passages which confirm the above statement by Coffman.

“Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus: Who have for my life laid down their own necks: unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Likewise greet the church that is in their house. Salute my wellbeloved Epaphroditus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia unto Christ” (Romans 16:3-5).

“The churches of Asia salute you. Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in

their house” (1 Corinthians 16:19).

“Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church which is in his house” (Colossians 4:15).

*“The oldest known church (building, RK) was found at Dure Europes, on the bank of the Euphrates River in the Syrian desert. It dates from the first half of the third century”* (Blaiklock, quoted by MacArthur, p. 214).

There are some who believe that the early church had at least some buildings which were set aside primarily for the worship of the church. They base this on James 2:2-3.

“if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool.”

The word “assembly” in this text comes from the Greek word συναγωγή.

*“A bringing together, gather (as of fruits), a contracting; an assembling together of men”* (Thayer).

*“Gathering-place, place where something collects”* (Bauer, p. 782)

As can be seen from the above definitions, the word “assembly” could be used of a private home as easily as a public place of gathering. There are two basic words associated with this word “assembly” (synagogue): (1) assembly, and (2) building. This author’s opinion is that it is a stretch to try to force the

idea that they had a building set aside in the first century for worship purposes based solely on this passage and the above word. Part of his thinking is based upon the persecutions which took place during this time by both Jews and Romans. How convenient for them if Christians had buildings set aside for worship. Just wait for them to gather, round them up, and send them to the arenas. Considering this, how foolish it would have been for Christians to meet at a prescribed place each week.

“Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves” (Matthew 10:16).

**Philemon 3 “Grace to you, and peace, from GOD our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”**

“Grace to you and peace from GOD our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (ASV)

“Grace” — χάρις — *“that which affords joy, pleasure, delight, sweetness, charm, loveliness...good-will, lovingkindness, favor”* (Thayer); *“grace, particularly that which causes joy, pleasure, gratification, favor, acceptance, for a kindness granted or desired, a benefit, thanks, gratitude”* (Zodhiates).

When most people think of grace, they tend to define it as *“unmerited favor”* which is bestowed upon another with no expectation of receiving anything in return. Many of those who define the word in this way will then go on to say that GOD does not expect anything from man in return for the loving favor He has given. Folks, that simply is not true and is a perversion of the meaning of the word “grace.” It is understood that the favors GOD has bestowed upon man are

unmerited — man deserves nothing GOD has given him, and he certainly has not earned any of these favors. But to then take the leap that GOD expects nothing in return for the favors He has bestowed is not Scriptural. How can anyone deny that GOD expects man to listen to the instructions His Son gave and not expects GOD to require obedience? If it is the case that GOD expects nothing in return for the grace He has shown, would that not mean that all are going to be saved regardless of whether or not they obey Him? That would be universal salvation, but the Scriptures clearly teach that not everyone will be saved. What is the basis upon which man will be saved by GOD's grace? Faith indeed is absolutely necessary to be saved. But without the work of obedience behind that faith, one is lost for eternity.

“Not every one that saith unto Me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of My Father which is in Heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name? and in Thy name have cast out devils? and in Thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from Me, ye that work iniquity. Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of Mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. And every one that heareth these sayings of Mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.” (Matthew 7:21-27).

People need to ask themselves this simple question and answer it honestly: Am I being a wise or foolish builder of my soul? What does the Bible teach about faith and obedience (works)?

“Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only. Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also” (James 2:24-26).

Peace is a state of tranquility which is usually based upon an absence of hostility and fear. Biblical peace is a state of mind which comes from knowing that one has a right relationship with GOD.

“hereby we do know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He that saith, I know Him, and keepeth not His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth His word, in him verily is the love of GOD perfected: hereby know we that we are in Him. He that saith he abideth in Him ought himself also so to walk, even as He walked” (1 John 2:3-6).

That right relationship comes from knowing that one is “in Him” because he has obeyed Him. This peace can exist for a Christian, even when it seems that the world around him is in utter crisis. This is true because Christians know that everything will be all right if they remain faithful to GOD.

“Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the Devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life” (Revelation 2:10).

This is why Christians who faced death in the arenas often amazed the crowds which were calling for blood — they met death with a peace which the spectators

could not understand. Look at the apostle Paul when he went to Philippi. After casting out a spirit of divination from a maid, an uproar was created so that Paul and his companions were arrested. They were beaten and cast into the “inner prison.” What attitude did Paul and his companions exhibit? Did they rant and rail against the jailor and those who put them there?

“at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto GOD: and the prisoners heard them” (Acts 16:25).

How could they react in this way? Because they had peace of heart. Their bodies were obviously in agony because of the beating they received. But they had peace with GOD. They knew how to suffer in joy.

“My brethren count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing” (James 1:2-4).

For many, this would have been the time to give up, but not Paul and his company.

Note that true grace and peace come from “GOD our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” It could just as easily been added that such also comes from the Spirit. By linking the Father and Jesus Christ together, one has a clear declaration that Jesus is deity.

#### **Philemon 4 “I thank my GOD, making mention of thee always in my prayers,”**

“I thank my GOD always, making mention of thee in my prayers,” (ASV)

“I thank my GOD” One should take the time to read and consider the following passages regarding Paul’s prayers — Romans 1:8-9; 2 Timothy 1:3; Ephesians

1:16; Colossians 1:9; 1 Corinthians 1:4. From these references (and others), one can easily see that Paul was a praying man. Another thing which may be learned is that Paul spent a lot of time praying for others on a regular basis. One needs to ask himself, *How much time do I spend praying for others?* Paul did not pray for these people one time and then forget them — he continued to pray for them. They were “always” [πάντοτε — “Always, at all times, ever” - (Zodhiates)] in his prayers.

Not only did Paul pray on a regular and repeated basis for his brethren, but he also asked for their prayers for himself (cf. Colossians 4:3-4; 1 Thessalonians 5:25; 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2). It does not matter who one is or what position he may hold; everyone needs the prayers of his brethren.

Paul referred to GOD as “my GOD.” Paul considered his relationship with GOD to be a very personal one. Every Christian should ask himself if that is the relationship he has with GOD. Is GOD a very personal GOD, or is he some far-removed and vague entity?

GOD is the giver of all which is good and beneficial.  
“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above,  
and cometh down from the Father of lights, with  
whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning”  
(James 1:17).

Therefore, every Christian should be praying for his brethren’s well-being. Every Christian should pray for those who are non-Christians, that they may be enlightened to the point of obeying GOD. Every Christian should then be seeking those who need to obey and edifying his brethren.

*“No soul is so pure or devout as to be beyond*

*the need of prayers*" (Coffman, p. 368).

In verse five, some specifics are given with regard to Paul's thanksgiving for Philemon.

**Philemon 5 "Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints;"**

"hearing of thy love, and of the faith which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all the saints;" (ASV)

In the previous verse, Paul said he thanked GOD on a continual basis for Philemon. What was it about Philemon for which Paul was so grateful? His faith and love toward Jesus and the brethren. Philemon, unlike so many, was not a part-time Christian. He professed belief and lived the Christian life.

What kind of love is being spoken of in this verse? It *"is the love of will and choice, of self-sacrifice and humility"* (MacArthur). Who told Paul about the love and faith of Philemon? It could have been Epaphras (Col. 4:12) or possibly Onesimus himself after his conversion.

*"This sequence is especially significant because there is no proper human relationship unless there is first a right relationship with God"* (Nielson, p. 703).

One must first love GOD with every ounce of his being, and then he can truly love his fellow man.

"Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy GOD with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets"

(Matthew 22:36-40).

This author believes that this is one of the problems faced in the Lord's church today. Too much emphasis has been placed on loving one's fellow man and not enough emphasis on putting GOD absolutely first in one's life. *"If we will just love our fellow man, everything will be all right."* But will it? The only way everything is going to turn out all right is if one first loves GOD with all of his being. Some of the greatest philanthropists of all time have apparently loved and cared deeply about their fellow man — yet, they have never obeyed the Gospel. It is possible for a person to show love and concern for his fellow man, even his brethren, and not obey GOD.

"By this we know that we love the children of GOD, when we love GOD, and keep His commandments. For this is the love of GOD, that we keep His commandments: and His commandments are not grievous" (1 John 5:2-3).

The proper order of love is to love GOD first and then humankind.

**Philemon 6 "That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus."**

"that the fellowship of thy faith may become effectual, in the knowledge of every good thing which is in you, unto Christ."  
(ASV)

The word "communication" comes from the Greek word κοινωνία, which Thayer defines as *"fellowship, association, community, communion, joint participation, intercourse."* Zodhiates defines it as *"fellowship with, participation."* One sees that the primary emphasis of "communication" is fellowship, a joint participation and

sharing. It would seem that Paul was speaking about Philemon's influence based upon his actions — his life as a whole. It is a fellowship based upon his faith.

This fellowship of Philemon's faith is to be "effectual." This word comes from ἐνεργής, which Thayer defines as *"active...an opportunity for the working of the gospel; in something, Philemon 6."* Zodhiates says it is, *"referring to energy, i.e., engaged in work, capable of doing, active, powerful, effective."* The Holy Spirit is showing that saving faith, beneficial faith, must be active. Saving faith comes through the acceptance of the word of GOD. It then become active in doing and promoting that which is right. When true faith is activated, it becomes effective in the life of the individual and also in the influence one has on others for good.

The word "acknowledging" would be better translated as "knowledge," as it is in the ASV. It comes from the Greek word ἐπίγνωσις, which Thayer defines as *"precise and correct knowledge."* It is a stronger word than is normally used for knowing something. One may have a knowledge of something, but if he has precise knowledge, he has gained more mastery of that subject.

What knowledge is Philemon to have and practice — to share? It is to be a precise and working knowledge of "every good thing." What does "good" mean? Webster defines good as *"of a favorable character or tendency 'good news' (2): BOUNTIFUL, FERTILE 'good land' (3) HANDSOME, ATTRACTIVE."* But that definition is only part of the idea that this word means. The word in the text is ἀγαθός, which Thayer defined as *"of a good constitution or nature...useful, salutary... pleasant, agreeable, joyful, happy."*

Zodhiates defined it as “*good and benevolent, profitable, useful.*” Note, that which is truly good is that which is beneficial and useful. What is more useful than GOD’s word and the practice of that word? If just ten righteous people could have been found in Sodom, the cities of the plain would have been spared destruction (Gen. 18:32). Mankind was spared annihilation because there was one righteous soul in Noah’s day (Gen. 7:1).

Where is this knowledge and practice of beneficial things to be found? In one who is “in Christ Jesus.” One’s love for Christ must motivate him to serve GOD acceptably. Such love will also benefit his fellow man, as well as himself.

This all leads to something which is very important in the church — fellowship. True Christian fellowship involves sharing a bond between one another. It is truly a family relationship. Consider the strife which would have been generated in GOD’s family at Colosse if Philemon had not forgiven Onesimus.

**Philemon 7 “For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.”**

“For I had much joy and comfort in thy love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through thee, brother.” (ASV)

“For we have great joy and consolation in thy love” As Paul thought about Philemon and the qualities he possessed, it brought him “great joy.” When one considers those he has known in the past who are faithful to GOD and live loving and kind lives, it cannot help but cause the heart to rejoice. As he thought about Philemon, he also had “great consolation.” The

word “consolation” comes from the word παράκλησις, which Thayer says, “*a calling near, summons...that which affords comfort or refreshment.*”

What was it about Philemon that caused this joy and consolation in Paul? because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee.” The term “bowels” does not refer as it does in modern times to the intestines, but rather to the heart and lungs of the physical body. The ancients perceived this as the seat of the emotions and used the term “bowels” to signify this feeling. σπλάγχνον – “*our heart (tender mercies, affections, etc.*” (Thayer). From this, one sees that Philemon was genuinely concerned about people and the problems they faced in life and did what he could to alleviate those problems and give encourage.

Those who were going through troubles, whether they were mental or physical, were “refreshed” by Philemon. This word comes from the Greek word ἀναπαύω, which Thayer defined as “*to cause or permit one to cease from any movement or labor in order to recover and collect his strength, to give rest, refresh.*” “*To give rest, quiet, recreate, refresh*” (Zodhiates). MacArthur said this was a military term that spoke of an army which had been marching but was now resting (p. 218). The saints had been comforted, given rest, by Philemon when troubles came in such a way that they were refreshed and then able to get back to their tasks. They were uplifted by him, encouraged to continue, especially in faithfulness to GOD.

What motivated Philemon to behave in this way? “love” This is ἀγάπη — a love which displays good will. Kind affections and benevolence toward others. This love is a deep, learned love which sacrifices one’s self, if need be, for the welfare of another. It is the kind of

love which Jesus showed toward and expects from all of His disciples.

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

What did Jesus do? He sacrificed His home in Heaven to come to this earth for man’s benefit. He sacrificed His life on the cross, the sinless for the guilty, so that man could have eternal salvation.

Because of the life Philemon lived, the joy and comfort he brought to Paul and his brethren, Paul was happy to refer to him as “brother.” The word brother is from ἀδελφός, which Thayer defines as “*from the same womb.*” Indeed, they had been born from **the same womb!** When Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be born again in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, Nicodemus’ first thought was being physically born from woman’s womb. Jesus showed that there is a spiritual womb, a spiritual birth from which one must be born. All faithful Christians come from this **one spiritual womb!**

“Of His own will begat He us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures” (James 1:18).

**Philemon 8 “Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient,”**

“Wherefore, though I have all boldness in Christ to enjoin thee that which is befitting,” (ASV)

As a chosen apostle, Paul knew that he had the right to command in areas where truth and right are concerned (cf. Galatians 1:1; Romans 1:1; 2 Corinthians 2:8; 2 Thessalonians 3:6). But instead of commanding Philemon in this matter, he appealed to

his sense of right. He wanted Philemon to forgive Onesimus willingly from a humble heart of love. One should never obey GOD from a sense of blind compulsion but rather because of a deep love for GOD. That kind of love creates a desire to please GOD.

Paul stated that he could be “bold” with Philemon. The word “bold” is from παρρησία, which means, “*freedom in speaking, unreservedness in speech... openly, frankly, i.e., without concealment*” (Thayer). “*Freedom or frankness in speaking*” (Zodhiates). This writer thinks Paul was saying that he could be very frank and simply tell Philemon what to do because of his position of appointment by the Lord. This seems to be indicated by the word “enjoin,” which means, “*to enjoin upon, order, command, charge*” (Thayer).

Paul could have commanded Philemon as to “that which is convenient.” The word “convenient” is ἀνήκω, “*to have come up to, arrive at, to reach to, pertain to...what is due, duty*” (Thayer). Note that the ASV translates the word “convenient” (KJV) as “befitting.” Though the word “forgiveness” is not found in the book of Philemon, it is the goal that Paul seeks, because it was the right thing, the proper thing, to be done. It might be considered that Paul expects that Philemon will do what is right in this matter because of his love, faith and the fact that “the bowels of the saints are refreshed” by him. Onesimus is now one of the saints.

**Philemon 9 “Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.”**

“yet for love's sake I rather beseech, being such a one as Paul the aged, and now a prisoner also of Christ Jesus:”  
(ASV)

Look at Paul's appeal to Philemon — could such an appeal be refused when one considers this verse? Paul was begging Philemon with three points. To "beseech" is παρακαλέω, "*to call to one's side, call for, summon... to beg, entreat, beseech*" (Thayer). What three things did Paul use to entreat Philemon to do what he desired of him?

First, he appealed to him on the basis of love. It seems obvious from this letter that there was a warm relationship which had been developed in the past. This relationship existed in part because of the fact that Philemon "owest unto me even thine own self besides" (v. 19). It would seem that Philemon was his brother through the efforts of Paul (v. 7). Naturally, the one who brings salvation into the life of another would be held in high esteem by the converted one. There is also the love which Philemon had exhibited in the past toward others. He loved what was right and just. But primarily, the love which would motivate Philemon would be his love for Christ. Christ offered himself for him, forgiving him. Should not he do the same things toward others?

Second, Paul referred to himself as "the aged." πρεσβύτης, "*an old man, an aged man*" (Thayer). Over the years, this writer has discovered that age is a relative thing from two standpoints. One may be old in years but young in understanding or demeanor, i.e., one who does not act his age. On the other hand, age is often relative from a cultural standpoint. In America, one fifty years old is not considered old (unless one is sixteen years old), because many people live twenty or thirty years beyond that point. But when this writer did mission work in Indonesia, he received respect because he was fifty, and many people do not live to reach that

age there. This writer thinks one should also consider something else regarding Paul's age. Paul would have been around sixty or older at the time this letter was written. Look at all he had endured, and consider how old he may have looked. In experience, he was much older than his years portrayed. Even as a young man, his advancement beyond his contemporaries was noted.

"And profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers" (Galatians 1:14).

*"The years of his imprisonments, beatings, poor food, illnesses, difficult journeys, persecution, and concern for the churches had taken their toll. He had packed five lifetimes into threescore years" (MacArthur, p. 223).*

Third, Paul appealed to Philemon's sympathy because he was a prisoner. He was in a Roman prison because he was "a prisoner of Jesus Christ." Paul knew what it meant to give up his "rights" in order to serve Christ acceptably. If Philemon was to forgive Onesimus, he would have to give up his right to be angry with him based on the law of the land. He would have to give up feelings of betrayal.

Again it is asked, How could Philemon refuse what Paul was seeking from him? If such a letter was received today by one, written by someone he respected and loved in Christ, could a cold shoulder of indifference be turned toward his request?

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

“I beseech thee for my child, whom I have begotten in my bonds, Onesimus,” (ASV)

Paul had made multiple impassioned pleas and now he states for whom these pleas were made — Onesimus. Paul said Onesimus was “my son.” Among the Hebrews, one who was taught by another was considered to be that one’s son.

*“If one teaches the son of his neighbor the law, the Scriptures reckon the same as if he had begotten him”* (Talmud, quoted by Coffman, p. 353).

Paul expressed this same idea to the Corinthians.

“For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the Gospel” (1 Corinthians 4:15).

One of things one can know from this whole account is that Onesimus was not a prisoner. How then did Paul come in contact with him? It would seem that there is only one way — Onesimus found Paul. Since Paul had converted Philemon, it is very probable that Onesimus had come to know Paul at that time. Further, he could not have been a prisoner, because Paul did not have the authority to release him and send him back to Philemon. There is another possibility, and that is that one of Paul’s helpers came across him and brought him to Paul.

The name Onesimus means *“helpful.”* Up until this time, he does not appear to have lived up to his name. But after his conversion, he would have lived up to the instructions of Paul regarding slaves and thus become very helpful.

“Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but

in singleness of heart, fearing GOD: And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ. But he that doeth wrong shall receive for the wrong which he hath done: and there is no respect of persons” (Colossians 3:22-25).

In modern times, for someone to be told to be faithful as a slave to his master is repugnant to most. But, do those same persons understand that the spirit of the above command applies to relationships of employer and employee?

Before one can be baptized for the remission of his sins, he must repent. Too many people think that repentance is just saying “I am sorry.” But one should remember that repentance is **a change of mind** that leads to one’s changing his actions. If a person does not change his actions after saying he repented, then he did not repent. Whereas Onesimus had been unprofitable to Philemon, to have repented meant that he would now be profitable.

“I have begotten in my bonds” This shows that even under difficult circumstances, one may win souls. The Bible student knows that after Paul was beaten and then cast into the inner dungeon in Philippi, he converted souls (jailor and his household, possibly some of the prisoners). How could he do this? It can be done if a person is not selfish. Instead of thinking about his own troubles, he was concerned about the trouble others were in, i.e., that they were on a road to destruction, if he did not grab hold of the opportunity he had to teach them.

**Philemon 11 “Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:”**

“who once was unprofitable to thee, but now is profitable to thee and to me:” (ASV)

Had Onesimus been rebellious to his master’s orders in the past? Had he stolen from him? It is not known what made Onesimus an unprofitable servant in the past. What is known is that he is not the same man he used to be. His body was the same, but **he** was not the same man.

“Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

“Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into His death? Therefore we are buried with Him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3-4).

One should also note that Paul said Onesimus was now valuable to two people — himself and Philemon. One cannot help but wonder if, possibly after forgiving Onesimus, he sent him back to minister to Paul.

**Philemon 12 “Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:”**

“whom I have sent back to thee in his own person, that is, my very heart:” (ASV)

“Whom I have sent again” Onesimus held the relationship of a slave to Philemon. Yet, Paul sent him back to that relationship.

Slavery is a moral violation of the intent of GOD’s word. It is the opposite of what one today calls the “golden rule.”

“Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men

should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets" (Matthew 7:12).

So why would Paul send Onesimus back to this situation? Consider the following words of Lipscomb regarding this.

*"The Christian religion does not destroy the relations regulated by the civil laws. It sanctifies, makes the Christian use them for the good of others, and with the fidelity with he would serve God" (p. 298).*

What if the Holy Spirit had told Paul to order Philemon to release Onesimus because he was now a Christian — he was not the same man he used to be? How many would have pretended to become Christians so they could be released from their bondage? How many in America over the years have found religion in prison, thinking this might help them escape a death penalty for their horrendous crimes against humanity?

Where the Gospel has gone, man has been elevated, and social evils have been dispelled. The Gospel does not promote social upheaval, but nevertheless its principles will destroy evil practices if it is allowed to act as the leaven it was intended to be.

The Bible states that "a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump" (Galatians 5:9). Normally, leaven is thought of as something which is evil in the Bible, and if evil is allowed to continue, the whole lump (society) will be corrupted. But one should remember that Christians are to be a leavening agent for good in one's society. How does leaven work? It works quietly, steadily, and efficiently.

"mine own bowels" Since the term "bowels" represents the seat of one's emotions, in effect, Paul was saying that a piece of his heart was going with

Onesimus as he returned to Philemon. This shows the great love, care and concern which had developed between him and his son.

**Philemon 13 “Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the Gospel:”**

“whom I would fain have kept with me, that in thy behalf he might minister unto me in the bonds of the Gospel.” (ASV)

Paul showed that Onesimus had become valuable enough that he would have liked to have “retained” him for his service. The word “retained” is from κατέχω, “*to hold back, detain, retain*” (Thayer). What Paul would like to have done, i.e., retain him for his personal use, would not be done, because it would have taken what belonged to Philemon. Onesimus was Philemon’s servant and should benefit him. Consider those who might act in horror at what this writer has written about this subject and with what Paul did in sending Onesimus back to his master. Certainly GOD does not want someone to sell deadly alcohol, nor does He want someone to sell his/her body for another’s carnal pleasure. So does that give GOD-fearing Christians the right to go burn down the store that sells such? Does GOD grant Christians the right to put those to death to stop them from conducting their immoral practices? As repugnant as these are to GOD, and ought to be to a Christian, GOD does not work that way.

Paul assumed that if Philemon were there, he would have served Paul in the Gospel. Since he was not there, Onesimus had served him, so-to-speak, in his place. He assumed that Philemon would have desired his servant to have taken care of Paul. Note also that

Paul reminded him again that he was a prisoner. Christianity is not a religion of force, i.e., one cannot be forced to do right. Doing right must be done voluntarily.

**Philemon 14 “But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.”**

“but without thy mind I would do nothing; that thy goodness should not be as of necessity, but of free will.” (ASV)

“without thy mind” The word “mind” is from γνώμη, which Thayer defines as “*the faculty of knowing, mind, reason...resolve, purpose, intention.*” Though Paul would have liked to keep Onesimus with him to help in the work, he recognized that he did not have the right to usurp the authority of Philemon in this matter. It was Philemon’s right to choose his course and the immediate course of Onesimus.

In this passage and its context, one observes that GOD endorsed the right of one’s having personal property. Further, the one who has that personal property is the one who has the right to determine what is done with that property. Another cannot decide what is to be done with it. Christianity is a matter of choice. Right choices bring blessings, while bad choices bring condemnation. A good illustration of this is found in Acts chapter five. Ananias and Sapphira own some property.

“Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power?” (Acts 5:4).

Peter told them that their property was under their own authority and that they could do with it as they thought best. They were not condemned for having property, nor were they condemned for selling the property. They

were condemned when they lied about what they had done with it, i.e., that they gave the entire price to the church (See author's commentary on Acts 5:4 for more details.).

As this writer considers what Paul is doing here, he sees the free-will nature of Christianity emphasized, as well as the free-will nature of sinners. GOD will not force man to make the right choices, and his creation does not have the right to force people to act like a Christian or to do what is right. This is true even if what the person is doing is evil. In order to get rid of social evil, physical force is not the answer. The hearts of people must be changed to effect the proper course of actions.

**Philemon 15 “For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever;”**

“For perhaps he was therefore parted from thee for a season, that thou shouldest have him for ever;” (ASV)

“perhaps” Paul was suggesting that GOD's providence was possibly at work here. GOD's providence (and what constitutes His providence) is indeed a mysterious subject. Consider, if the apostle Paul could only hint that this might be the working of GOD, then who can determine with certainty that any event in his life is GOD's providence in action today? This writer has heard many people over the years assert that some event in their lives was the providence of GOD. But on this side of Heaven, one ought to use the language of Paul — perhaps or maybe.

*“Maybe God indeed had a hand in Onesimus' departure. We cannot tell which acts of men are the results of God's intervention. Certainly his*

*running away indirectly produced benefits for the entire Christian world ever since. We would be much poorer, for example, if we did not have the letter to Philemon” (Fields, p. 272).*

“that thou shouldest receive him for ever” Because of his new-found faith and obedience to it, Onesimus might now faithfully serve Philemon for the rest of his life.

**Philemon 16 “Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?”**

“no longer as a servant, but more than a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much rather to thee, both in the flesh and in the Lord.” (ASV)

It should be carefully noted that Paul did not call for Philemon to free Onesimus. Onesimus now fulfilled two roles. On the one hand, he was a physical slave to Philemon. At the same time, they would serve the Lord in worship and work as brothers in Christ. GOD teaches that whatever situation one is in, his first obligation is to act like a Christian.

“Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called. Art thou called being a servant? care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather. For he that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord's freeman: likewise also he that is called, being free, is Christ's servant” (1 Corinthians 7:20-22).

“a brother beloved” Paul emphasized the love he had for Onesimus and went on to point out that Philemon would now love him even more than Paul did. This love would be both “in the flesh” and “in the Lord.”

Many times over the centuries, slaves or servants have come to be considered as part of the family (This fact is illustrated in many family grave sites in America — which by the way are seldom mentioned because of political agendas.)

It needs to be remembered that true obedience to Christ changes things. Onesimus was once an unprofitable servant — now he is profitable. What made the difference? He was now a faithful servant of GOD; he was now a beloved brother in Christ.

**Philemon 17 “If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.”**

“If then thou countest me a partner, receive him as myself.”  
(ASV)

Paul wanted Philemon to accept Onesimus as if he were accepting Paul.

“If thou count me therefore a partner” The idea of one’s being a partner is that of participating together in some venture. The word “partner” is *κοινωνός*, “a partner, associate, comrade, companion” (Thayer). All three of them were now working in the same vineyard — the kingdom of GOD. They all had the same goal: serving the Lord for the rest of their lives and hearing Him say “Well done” on the judgment day. So Paul was saying, “*If you consider me as a partner in Christ, you will receive Onesimus as a partner in Christ as well.*”

**Philemon 18 “If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account;”**

“But if he hath wronged thee at all, or oweth thee ought, put that to mine account;” (ASV)

“If he hath wronged thee” The word “wronged”

comes from ἀδικέω, which means, “to act unjustly or wickedly, to sin, to be a criminal...to do some wrong, sin in some respect: to wrong someone, act wickedly toward him...to hurt, damage, harm” (Thayer). The particular wrong which Onesimus may have done to Philemon is not named, other than the fact that he ran away. This in itself would have cost Philemon, from the standpoint of loss of labor and what would be produced from that labor. Further, it may have been that Philemon would have immediately had to replace that labor at additional cost to himself. As any employer knows, training a new employee is a costly procedure in both time and money. Some have tried to say that Onesimus was probably a thief, having taken what he needed from his master to finance his escape to Rome. There is absolutely no evidence to indicate this thought.

It should also be observed that Paul used the word “If” here. This word can be used in two different ways. First, it can be used to indicate doubt regarding wrongdoing in a case. Second, it can be used to avoid direct charges which would be inflammatory to the case.

“put...that on mine account” With one bold stroke, Paul wiped away the last possible objection for Onesimus’ return. Paul was saying, “*If he owes you anything, charge it to me. Put it on my account.*” Notice what Paul was doing. (1) Paul had not done anything wrong to Philemon – Onesimus had. (2) Paul could not under any circumstances be held responsible for what Onesimus had done. (3) Paul freely assumed the wrong to himself. No one could make Paul accountable for Onesimus’ debt, but he was willing to pay the consequences for another’s wrong so that these two parties could be reconciled. **Paul followed the example of Jesus**, the Son of GOD, here. It is man

who sinned against GOD and deserved the penalty for such. But GOD (Jesus), the totally innocent party, assumed the price of sin in order to reconcile man to GOD. He did this willingly, not under constraint of any kind except for his love for man. Why did Paul do this for Onesimus? **Love** (vv. 5, 7, 9-10)!

**Philemon 19 “I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.”**

“I Paul write it with mine own hand, I will repay it: that I say not unto thee that thou owest to me even thine own self besides.” (ASV)

“I Paul have written it with mine own hand” Sometimes the apostle used a scribe (amanuensis) to write his letters as he dictated them. In the case of this very personal letter, he wrote it himself. He was placing himself under an indisputable legal contract by doing so. Paul was assuming the debt of another, no matter what it was.

But without slowing down, Paul reminded Philemon what he owed him. There is no doubt in this writer’s mind that Paul was reminding him of the teaching he had done which brought salvation to his house. All who ever obey the Gospel owe a great debt of gratitude to those who taught them the truth. Of course, the greatest debt of gratitude is owed to GOD for providing the way of reconciliation for all who will accept it. Remember — a debt that can never be repaid was paid for sins, the blood of Jesus. Should not His servants then be willing to forgive, even if it brings sacrifice on their part — or even loss?

**Philemon 20 “Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee**

**in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord.”**

“Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord:  
refresh my heart in Christ.” (ASV)

“Let me have joy of thee in the Lord” There can be no greater joy to a teacher such as Paul, or in any age, than to hear of saints they have taught being faithful to the Lord. Great joy is afforded the teacher to watch one he has taught become more Christ-like as the years roll past.

“refresh my bowels in the Lord” The word “refresh” is the same word used in verse seven (“refreshed”).

*“The word rendered ‘refresh’ means to give rest to, to give repose, to free from sorrow or care; and the sense is, that by receiving Onesimus, Philemon would cause the deep and anxious feelings of Paul to cease, and he would be calm and happy”* (Barnes, p. 309).

Think of the good Philemon could do by accepting Paul’s implied request in this context. It would show the power of the Gospel in the lives of men — the forgiving nature of Christians — and the repentance of the sinner. Consider the influence this would have on the congregation of GOD’s people and the church in the community to see true Christianity in action.

Friend, obedience to the Gospel is the only solution to ALL of the problems found in society. The Gospel can make all personal and business dealings to be accomplished in an honest manner. If obeyed, the Gospel would make all murderous businesses such as pornography, liquor, tobacco and other drugs go away. There would be no dishonest business dealings. Only the Gospel can put an end to divorce, feuds, murder, stealing, et cetera. The Gospel truly is the **power** of GOD to save man from the destructive nature of sin.

“I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ: for it is the power of GOD unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of GOD revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith. For the wrath of GOD is revealed from Heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness” (Romans 1:16-18).

**Philemon 21-22 “Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say. But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you.”**

“Having confidence in thine obedience I write unto thee, knowing that thou wilt do even beyond what I say. But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I hope that through your prayers I shall be granted unto you.” (ASV)

“obedience” This author believes the obedience of which Paul speaks here relates not to any demand which he has made, but rather obedience to GOD. Paul had taught Philemon about the love and forgiveness which GOD commands, he had written regarding a case where forgiveness was needed, and he fully expected that Philemon would consider GOD’s word in this matter. Further, Paul was sure that Philemon, having once considered the truth, would forgive Onesimus. At that point, Onesimus would be restored to a proper relationship with Philemon, who might even free him or send him back to Paul to minister to him in his place (as hinted at earlier).

Paul then asked for a favor for himself. It is obvious that he expected to be released from the Roman prison

in which he was being retained. Such being the case, he was making his plans and included a visit to Philemon. Imagine the emotions which would follow his approach to Philemon's house and having Philemon and Onesimus greet him with smiles and tears of joy.

"prayers" *"Prayers are the nerves that move the muscles of omnipotence"* (MacArthur, p. 231). One of the most important activities in a Christian's life is his prayer life. This is his "telephone line" to GOD, with which his thanksgivings and requests, among other things, are expressed to GOD. GOD answers prayer; thus, requests can be made in accordance with His will, knowing that the answer He gives will always be for one's best interest. This is true whether He answers with yes, no, not now, maybe, et cetera. Paul asked for Philemon's prayers on his behalf, knowing already that he had, was, and would pray for him.

**Philemon 23-25 "There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus; Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen."**

"Epaphras, my fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus, saluteth thee; and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow-workers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen." (ASV)

All the names mentioned above are also mentioned in the Colossian letter in chapter four. This is a strong indication that Philemon lived in Colosse and that the two letters were written at the same time.

With the way these names are listed, it would appear to this author that Epaphras and Paul were in a Roman prison together. Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and

Luke were involved with them in the work at Rome, but as free men. It is possible that Paul simply referred to Epaphras in this way to signify his work. The question this writer has is, Why would he make this distinction between Epaphras and the others? Were they not all involved in proclaiming and promoting the Gospel?

When one looks at Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, he recognizes from many passages in the New Testament that these were long-time associates of Paul in his work. At one time, Mark had been unprofitable to Paul, but later became one of his inner circle of associates, as he is found here (Acts 13:13; 15:36-39). It is sad to observe that one of them will become unfaithful toward the end of Paul's life — Demas.

“Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus unto Dalmatia” (2 Timothy 4:10).

“Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of GOD abideth for ever” (1 John 2:15-17).

Paul began this small, but powerful, letter with grace, and he ended it the same way. If the grace shown by Christ for us is assimilated by us, it can truly be a joyous life both here and especially in eternity.

**“Amen”** — *“so it is, so be it, may it be fulfilled”* (Thayer).