

# *Epistle to Philemon*

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**(1981 and 2000 Studies)**

The following notes on the Epistle to Philemon were compiled from Bible studies led by Bro. Frank Shallieu in 1981 and 2000. They should be utilized with the following understanding:

1. Each paragraph preceded by **“Comment”** or **“Q”** (an abbreviation for **“Question”**) was introduced by someone other than Bro. Frank.
2. The original study did not follow a prepared text but was extemporaneous in nature.
3. Although the transcriber tried to faithfully, with the Lord’s help, set forth the thoughts that were presented in the study, the notes are not a verbatim rendering and, therefore, should be considered in that context.
4. Finally, Bro. Frank did not review the notes for possible errors that may have inadvertently entered the text.

With this disclaimer in mind, may the notes be a blessing as a useful study guide.

# EPISTLE TO PHILEMON

(Studies led by Bro. Frank Shallieu in 1981 and 2000)

This epistle was written near the end of the Apostle Paul's life, around AD 64, shortly before he died. Hence it was placed next to Hebrews and just before the epistles written by other apostles. Paul was in his late sixties at this time.

**Comment:** Scofield wrote of Paul's Epistle to Philemon, "It is of priceless value as a teaching (1) in practical righteousness, (2) in Christian brotherhood, (3) in Christian courtesy, and (4) in the law of love."

**Philem. 1 Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer,**

The epistle was addressed to Philemon, who lived in Colosse. Onesimus, his slave, had left him. Paul very much appreciated Onesimus and thus was writing to Philemon to plead on behalf of the runaway slave.

Paul called attention to the fact that he was a "prisoner of Jesus Christ." He was a prisoner in a double sense—both figuratively and literally—and Timothy was visiting him. The letter was "From Paul and Timothy to Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus" (verse 2). Only four letters recorded in Holy Writ were written by Paul to an individual instead of to an ecclesia, namely, Titus, Philemon, and 1 and 2 Timothy.

Twice Paul was imprisoned in Rome, the first imprisonment being in approximately AD 64 and the second about AD 66. The general opinion is that this Epistle to Philemon was written during Paul's first imprisonment, that is, while he was under house arrest. We believe Paul wrote to Philemon either toward the end of his house arrest when he knew he would be released or just after his release. More specifically, we know this epistle was written before Paul's Second Epistle to Timothy because Demas had not yet deserted the apostle and gone back into the world (2 Tim. 4:10).

**Comment:** Usually Paul mentioned at the beginning of an epistle that he was an apostle. The lack of this information in the address suggests the letter to Philemon was personal.

**Reply:** In other words, the whole tone of this epistle is a little different from those epistles in which he designated his authority as an apostle. The Epistle to Philemon begins with just a plain address, so some consider it to be a personal, private letter. Then the question might be asked, Why was it included in the Sacred Canon? Not only did the Lord in His providence so overrule matters, but the epistle contains a lot of meaty thought.

This epistle was written by Paul himself and carried to Philemon by Onesimus (Philem. 19). "Philemon" is the Anglicized version of the name, and it is interesting that Paul called Philemon "dearly beloved" because several times in this epistle, he used a paronomasia, a play on words. Since *Phil* means "love," Paul was commenting on the name by saying "dearly beloved." He also called Philemon "fellowlabourer." As we read the epistle, we will see in what capacity he was a fellow laborer.

**Philem. 2 And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house:**

With Apphia being a female name, she was probably Philemon's wife. Thus Paul addressed the epistle to fellow laborer Philemon and his wife Apphia, a sister in Christ. Probably Archippus,

“our fellowsoldier,” was Philemon’s consecrated son. In Colossians 4:17, Archippus was told to fulfill the ministry that he had received in the Lord. Apparently, the class in Colosse was small, and Philemon, in whose house the meetings were held, was the elder. In time, Archippus succeeded him as elder.

The name Archippus is another play on words. *Arch* means “chief ruler,” and *hippos* is the Greek word for “horse”—hence the “tamer of horses.” In ancient times, horses were essential in warfare, and a wild breed was needed to withstand the rigors and hardships of training for battle. A valued component in the arsenal of the army, horses were a prized element for victorious warfare. Accordingly, Paul called Archippus “fellowsoldier.” The names of Philemon and Archippus were paronomasias in a constructive sense.

“And to the church in thy house.” Christians met in private homes in the first century. Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matt. 18:20).

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

Verse 3 was a typical greeting from Paul: “Grace and peace to you from God [first] and Jesus [second].”

**Philem. 4 I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers,**

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

Paul constantly remembered Philemon in prayer. An outstanding personality and a consecrated brother, Philemon had under his charge a slave named Onesimus, who had run away and was now a believer. Perhaps Philemon had other slaves as well.

Verse 5 shows that Philemon had a reputation for “love and faith ... toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints.” Evidently, Philemon was a man of means, and his liberality (“love”) was known to quite a few. Different brethren who visited Paul in prison reported some of the remarkable things Philemon had done. In addition, as the epistle will show later, Paul did know him. In fact, Paul had introduced him to the truth. Philemon’s love was “toward *all* saints”; that is, his largesse was quite extensive, confirming that he was a man of means. He manifested love in deeds, not just in words. Verse 5 lists the proper sequence. Philemon (1) had faith in Jesus and (2) was concerned about other less fortunate Christians.

**Comment:** Verse 1 is proof that Paul knew Philemon personally, for the words “dearly beloved” and “fellowlabourer” were genuine.

**Reply:** Yes, and to show the necessity to be genuine, “honey,” picturing flattery, was not to accompany offerings under the Law (Lev. 2:11).

How was Philemon’s faith manifested? Being a man of means, he would have found it more difficult than a poorer person to associate himself with a religion that was in disrepute, for he risked his reputation and possibly also his income. It is harder for a rich person to condescend and accept Christianity in all its terms. Incidentally, there were believers in King Herod’s court, Pontius Pilate’s wife was influenced, and some of the emperor’s family in Rome accepted Jesus. Thus the gospel did reach high places. Paul’s powerful sermons were persuasive.

In ancient times, it was customary for those of wealthy families to be taught a trade in case they ever came upon difficult times. Tent making was hard work, but evidently, Paul was

skilled in this trade he had learned, for he was able to support not only himself but also others.

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

A large part of Philemon's ministry was his hospitality to others. Being a man of means, he could exercise a beneficial influence toward others financially, as well as in other ways. He was very generous toward the poor brethren, toward those who were in dire straits. In addition, he had an affectionate interest in all who gave their heart to the Lord, recognizing them, regardless of status, as one in the family. Paul was saying that if Philemon continued this "communication," he would be effectual to the ministry—doing good for the Lord's people and the Lord's cause. Paul was exhorting Philemon to keep on with his influence for good.

One's value increases as he is effectual in the outworkings of his faith, manifesting it to others. For example, activities today include tracting, visiting the sick, and standing up for truth. The ministry of Christ is not limited to one type of evangelization, nor is it necessarily geared only toward evangelization. "With the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (Rom. 10:10). Confession that comes from the heart is more meaningful.

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

**Philem. 8** Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient,

**Philem. 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.

"For we have great joy and consolation in thy love." The pronoun "we" probably refers to Paul, Timothy, Epaphras, Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, and Lucas, some of whom were originally from Colosse (Philem. 1,23,24). Paul brought in their names to endorse the subject matter he was about to introduce. He was skillfully putting a little subtle, gentle pressure on Philemon.

"The bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother." Philemon ministered to the needs of others. While in some cases the need was money, in other cases he furnished aid and assistance such as medical help. One of the greatest schools of medicine was in Asia Minor, and Luke, the famous physician, was a graduate of that school. Terms like "bowels of mercy," "bowels of hunger," and "bowels of want" are sometimes used. Philemon habitually refreshed brethren by supplying their need in various ways. Paul was playing on the goodness and the inherent kindness of Philemon, and he would use those qualities to pressure him in regard to Onesimus.

Verses 7-10 read as follows in the Revised Standard Version: "For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you. Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an ambassador [or old man—see RSV footnote] and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— ... appeal to you for my child, Onesimus." The NIV has, "Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the heart of the saints. Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains." Paul could have been very forward and exercised his authority as an apostle, but instead he was *appealing* to Philemon.

In other epistles, Paul pictured himself as a mother and a father to the Church, being solicitous for the welfare of the brethren and nurturing them. Here he said he got joy and comfort not directly from Philemon but because Philemon was doing good to *others*. Paul had a self-sacrificing love.

Paul was praying on behalf of all the churches and was very interested in their welfare. Therefore, when he heard reports of another brother who was somewhat similarly minded and had the same spirit, he rejoiced. He appreciated knowing that there were others who thought as he did. Paul's efforts were not wasted, for he reaped fruits through Philemon!

Notice how the apostle described himself: "Paul the aged" (verse 9). He was only in his sixties, but that was "old age" considering what he had gone through in his ministry. He was shipwrecked, persecuted, beaten with stripes, stoned and left for dead, imprisoned, etc. All of these experiences, plus the nearness of his death, were taxing him physically. A lifetime of experience was crammed into his ministry.

Paul personalized his comments by using the word "brother" (verse 7) and calling himself "aged." The word "aged" can also be understood in the sense of Paul's extensive experience and understanding of human nature, which enabled him to give counsel to those who were less experienced. He was an "ambassador" in this sense, for a person who is aged and has mellowed in experience can give advice to others. Nevertheless, Paul was appealing to Philemon from a position of weakness. Previously Paul was active and influential and a terror to the Jewish religious authorities, but now, at the close of his life, he was giving advice to Philemon not as an apostle but as a brother who had experience. Paul was stepping down to Philemon's level and speaking heart to heart, appealing to him regarding what was proper and would be pleasing to God. He offered some practical advice in subsequent verses.

In verse 9, Paul repeated that he was a "prisoner of Jesus Christ" (verse 1). He was going to impress upon Philemon the great sacrifice and service that Onesimus had rendered to him in prison. Paul was asking Philemon not to look down on Onesimus as a master to a servant because of their relationship in Christ. The *great* Apostle Paul was saying in effect, "Now I am a prisoner, and I am appealing to you from that standpoint." Since Onesimus was a runaway slave, much harm could be done to him if his master so chose. Paul would present quite a case for Onesimus—one that Philemon could not refuse—for he wanted Philemon to understand the reason why Onesimus should be allowed to retain his freedom.

What did Paul mean when he said, "Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient"? He included this note in his plea to show that he was softening what he could do with apostolic authority. In contrast, consider how Paul dealt with the Corinthians. He wrote at least three epistles to them, of which we have only two. He first tried to enjoin the class and then resorted to bold statements and reasoning. "Do you want me to come to you with authority as an apostle, or would you rather that I come as a brother?" Here, with Philemon, instead of being too strong, he was saying, "In writing this letter to you, Philemon, I, as an apostle, could word it in a different fashion, but I will use another manner." Paul was hinting at what his request would be. The word "convenient" implies that the request was legitimate and proper and one that a reasonable person should accept.

"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." Paul used the word "love" in verses 7 and 9 because he would rather approach Philemon from the standpoint of pleading, or beseeching, for a favorable response to what he was about to disclose.

Paul's referring to himself as "the aged" can be taken two different ways. He coupled his age

with his being a prisoner. As an apostle, he could be more aggressive, even though he was in prison, for he was not a newcomer or a youngster but a veteran of the truth, a stable character, one who not only had taught by mouth and letter but had suffered for the truth's sake. He had suffered in the past, and he was presently suffering in prison because of his faithfulness to the truth. As an old-timer who had lived the Christian life, Paul would give advice not from an apostolic standpoint but from the common-sense standpoint that Philemon would rather hear something from one who had stood up for his belief and lived his life for the Lord. In fact, the Law says to honor the hoary head (Lev. 19:32).

Paul used many nuances, or delicate manipulations, to soften up Philemon in a subtle and constructive way. This was using guile in a good form. Guile is usually employed for improper ulterior motives and purposes of deceit, but Paul properly used guile here and to win people to Christ on other occasions.

“Now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.” In addition to being a literal prisoner, he was a prisoner for Jesus. In other words, because of his belief in Jesus Christ, he suffered persecution for both Christ's sake and righteousness' sake.

**Comment:** Paul was in prison for no fault of his own but because of his faithfulness to Jesus.

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

**Philem. 11** Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:

**Philem. 12** Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:

**Philem. 13** Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel:

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

Verses 10-14 read as follows in the Revised Standard Version: “I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment. (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own free will.”

There is an excellent principle here. The account is very emotional, very moving, but in his reasoning, Paul was saying that if goodness is done of a person's own volition and in a delicate way, it is more acceptable to God. In this manner, a person would not be robbed of a fuller reward, for “God loveth a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7). Old Testament offerings were to be cheerfully and wholeheartedly given, for a freewill, voluntary offering was more acceptable to God. The greater the sacrifice and cost to the individual in giving such an offering, the more pleasing it was to the Lord.

Appealing to *voluntary* service is an important factor. Many who have organizational and leadership capabilities use their power of direction to *force* others to do certain things. In making others feel *duty-bound*, they rob an individual of the opportunity of *voluntary* service, which he would have seen anyway. When a person already wants to do something in his own way, it is wrong for another to butt in and suggest the service.

Paul would have liked to keep Onesimus, who previously was unprofitable to Philemon. This observation shows how the gospel can radically change a person from being profligate, rendering disinterested service under compulsion, to doing useful service for the Lord.

Onesimus and Onesiphorus were probably the same individual, for both names pertain to “profit” (see Young’s *Analytical Concordance*). Specifically, Onesimus means “profitable, helpful,” and Onesiphorus means “bringing profit.” It is possible that Onesimus changed his name because he was a runaway slave. Onesimus is the Latinized (Romanized) form; Onesiphorus is Greek.

In 2 Timothy 1:16,17, Paul said that Onesiphorus diligently searched in Rome to find out which dungeon or cell he was in. In ancient times, dungeons were dreadful places with poor illumination and no sanitation. One who tried to find a prisoner risked his own life, for a guard could rob or murder the person and no one would know the difference.

In Paul’s first imprisonment in Rome, he was under house arrest for a period of time and then released. The second time he was confined to a dungeon. While under house arrest, Paul had liberty for witnessing, for he could have brethren visit him and even hold meetings, but not so in the dungeon. While under house arrest, he was chained to a guard with one hand, so his chains were literal. According to tradition, that guard became a convert. Paul’s Second Epistle to Timothy and his Epistle to the Hebrews, written from the dungeon, were his last letters. In between 1 and 2 Timothy, the epistles of Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Titus, and Philemon were written.

Verse 12, which reads, “Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels,” sounds almost as if Paul had given birth to Onesimus. Paul sent Philemon his “very heart,” meaning he would very much have liked to keep Onesimus (Philem. 12 RSV). In taking the time to help Paul, Onesimus reminds us of Mary, who anointed Jesus with spikenard. Onesimus risked his life and exerted great effort, persistence, and courage to find and help Paul. Considering Nero’s temperament—his ways and whims—the actions of Onesimus were most commendable.

The relationship between Paul and Onesimus gives us a clue in regard to the end of the age. Sometimes the saints are *companions* of others in their afflictions. To such, God imputes credit as if they themselves were part of the sacrifice. The visiting of one undergoing great affliction is very pleasing to God.

Any consideration Philemon would render to Onesimus would be as if he were doing it to Paul. The ministry of Onesimus to Paul was higher than the service he had formerly rendered to Philemon, his master. In those days, runaway slaves were commonly executed, or else their lives were made wretched by the type of service they were given to perform.

“I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds.” To understand verse 10, we will have to first read Acts 18:24 through 19:7, as follows:

“And a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures, came to Ephesus.

“This man was instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit, he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord, knowing only the baptism of John.

“And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly.



“And when he was disposed to pass into Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him: who, when he was come, helped them much which had believed through grace:

“For he mightily convinced the Jews, and that publicly, showing by the scriptures that Jesus was Christ.

“And it came to pass, that, while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus: and finding certain disciples,

“He said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost.

“And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John’s baptism.

“Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.

“When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

“And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied.

“And all the men were about twelve.”

Apollos came to Ephesus and taught, but he knew only the baptism of John. Priscilla and Aquila subsequently instructed him. When Apollos left for Achaia and the capital city, Corinth, the brethren wrote to receive him, for he had mightily convinced the Jews that Jesus was Christ. Meanwhile, Paul went to Ephesus, where he found certain disciples who had received only John’s baptism. When Paul explained about Jesus’ baptism, they were baptized into Jesus’ death, Paul laid his hands upon them, and they received the Holy Spirit. In other words, there were disciples not yet begotten of the Holy Spirit at the time of Paul’s arrival.

Onesimus ran away from Philemon and went to Ephesus, where he changed his name to Onesiphorus. While at Ephesus, he heard the gospel and became a disciple, but he did not have the Holy Spirit. It is possible that Onesimus heard Paul himself preach at Ephesus, and the apostle’s preaching convinced him that Jesus was the Messiah. Onesimus was fervently interested in Paul, but the problem was that he was still an escaped slave. Later Onesimus learned that Paul had gone to Corinth and from there to Rome. Onesimus went to Rome to find Paul, who was under house arrest. Thus, under the circumstances of “bonds,” Paul baptized Onesimus into Jesus’ death, and Onesimus was “begotten” of the Holy Spirit.

Paul continued, “[Onesimus] Which in time past was to thee [Philemon] unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me.” Certainly Onesimus became *unprofitable* when he deserted Philemon, his master. Of course Philemon had paid a stiff price for this intelligent slave. Therefore, for a slave to run away was a costly loss to his master, especially if the slave had talents, which it seems that Onesimus had. Paul wrote that the *converted* Onesimus was *profitable* to *both* Philemon and him. In one sense, the name Onesimus means “useful” or “beneficial”—and indeed he was! This name was given to him prior to consecration, as if God overruled, knowing Onesimus would some day help Paul.

**Comment:** Since the name Onesimus means “profitable,” this again was a play on words, indicating that as a Christian, he became profitable to both Paul and Philemon.

**Reply:** Yes, and we can imagine the thoughts that went through Philemon’s head when he saw Onesimus approaching him, probably holding the letter over his head, as if to say, “Read this first, before doing anything hastily.”

**Comment:** In Colossians 4:9, Paul called Onesimus “a faithful and beloved brother.”

**Reply:** Three separate letters—one to the Colossians, another to Philemon, and the third to the Philippians—were delivered at the same time.

“Whom I [Paul] would have retained with me, that in thy stead [as Philemon’s representative] he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel.” However, since it was illegal under Roman law for Paul to retain another man’s property, he was giving a good introduction to Onesimus.

“But without thy mind would I do nothing.” In other words, it would have been presumptuous for Paul to write to Philemon, “I will keep Onesimus. Please release him, for he is helpful and profitable to me.” According to his *feelings*, Paul wanted to retain Onesimus to minister unto him “in the figurative bonds of the gospel.” Although Paul was literally in bonds as a prisoner, as well as in the bonds of the gospel, Onesimus could communicate with him and also be a help in other matters.

“That thy benefit should not be ... of necessity, but willingly.” Paul was stating a good principle; namely, rather than to use apostolic pressure to make Philemon take a certain course, he preferred that Philemon, of his own initiative, would release Onesimus. Paul was not threatening Philemon, although he could have pursued that method. With the dignity and authority of his office, Paul was personally pleading and supplicating with Philemon as an individual. He approached Philemon with humility, reason, and consideration. His attitude was, “Consider your name and reputation, Philemon. I am just making the suggestion, but I know you will release Onesimus out of the goodness of your heart” (verse 21).

**Philem. 15** For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever;

**Philem. 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?

**Philem. 17** If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.

**Philem. 18** If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account;

**Philem. 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.

**Philem. 20** Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord.

Verses 15-20 read as follows in the Revised Standard Version: “Perhaps this is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand, I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own

self. Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.”

We are privileged to have such a *personal* letter recorded for us in Holy Writ, to be read 2,000 years later. Paul was willing to have any of Onesimus’ debts to Philemon charged to his *own* account (verse 18). Paul said, “If he [Onesimus] hath wronged thee [Philemon], or oweth thee aught, put that on mine account.” Since Paul was in prison, he probably was not referring to a monetary payment, although we do not know for sure. Paul may have meant that if Philemon was troubled about anything, he would accept the responsibility.

The motive of Onesimus in running away was probably that he wanted his freedom. He went to Ephesus, a large city, to hide his identity and also changed his name to Onesiphorus. While in Ephesus, he heard the gospel and became a disciple, but knowing nothing about Jesus’ baptism, he received only the baptism of John for repentance and thus was not begotten of the Holy Spirit at that time. After his conversion, he would have learned Paul was a prisoner in Rome and gone to see him. Paul’s saying, “If Onesimus has wronged you, Philemon,” seems to imply that Onesimus was not a Christian at the time he ran away, or Paul could simply have meant, “If there is anything else in the background of Onesimus that was displeasing, put it behind you for my sake, if you respect me. I will square accounts with you.”

Since Paul’s intention might not have been to pay back financially, he would have wanted to repay in other ways. He was saying, “Instead of doing me a direct service, render me this *indirect* service by accepting Onesimus back.” In sending Onesimus, Paul was concerned as to how Philemon would receive him. Philemon could give Onesimus the most menial tasks or, according to the law of the land, have him severely beaten or even executed. It was unusual that *both* master and slave were Christians.

Christianity avoids social issues. Many have been led astray in the gospel ministry by social issues and have overlooked the fact that a Christian’s real work is character development in himself rather than giving his goods to the poor or arousing the political conscience of the nations. It is significant that Paul did not say Onesimus should have his freedom. Another epistle even states that one is to be content in whatever state he is in when called—whether master or slave or whatever (1 Cor. 7:20). A master should be a good master, and a slave should be a good slave. If both are in Christ, the master should not be embarrassed by thinking he should release the slave in order to be a good Christian. Christians who did not have slaves could be very free with advice to release a slave, but it is *wrong* to be generous and kind with *other* people’s goods. Master-slave issues were purposely avoided in Scripture, for they will be straightened out in the Kingdom.

After all, *God* has servants, so there is nothing wrong with that arrangement in the final analysis. The Great Company will be servants “before the throne” (Rev. 7:13-15). Therefore, the matter of master (lord) and servant all depends on who the master is and what the circumstances are. All are *not* to be equal—the Bible does not teach such equality. God said, “My glory will I not give to another” (Isa. 42:8). Jehovah will forever honor Jesus above all other creatures, even though the Church will share with him. Thus various ministrations of order are quite proper. It is wrong to think there should be a democratic society in which everyone is equal. There will be differences of honor in glory, as well as differences of dominion. “One star differeth from another star in glory,” and the jewels in the breastplate indicate a difference of honor in the glorified Church (1 Cor. 15:41). Moreover, Jesus favored three apostles above the others. Differences are proper when based on *principles*. The Lord bases the differences on character principles and also on sacrificing (the cost of services and what one is willing to give to Him). Even in a family relationship with blood ties, differences can be quite proper.

In verse 15, Paul wrote to Philemon, “For perhaps he [Onesimus] therefore departed for a

season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever.” In other words, “Onesimus may have deserted you for a season, but now he is a changed man, a renewed individual, and a brother in Christ. You need not worry about his deserting anymore.” The implication is that Paul and Onesimus talked the matter over before Paul sent him back to Philemon. That way Paul knew the thinking of Onesimus.

Paul continued, “That thou [Philemon] shouldest receive him [Onesimus] for ever [until *death*]”; that is, Paul returned Onesimus to his master and did not say they should separate. And in verse 16, Paul wrote, “Not now as a servant [*merely*], but above a servant.” Onesimus was now a brother and a companion to Philemon, as well as a servant. They were partners *in Christ*.

Paul was not contradicting his explicit advice to the Corinthians to the effect that a converted slave was to continue to be subject to his master, unless the master subsequently *voluntarily* freed him (1 Cor. 7:20-22). Paul did not want Christianity to be linked with the freeing of slaves, for the heathen public would then conclude the purpose of Christianity was to abolish slavery instead of to preach the gospel. Moreover, a slave might have the ulterior motive of “converting” to Christianity just to get his freedom. Therefore, Philemon was not obligated to take Paul’s suggestion and free Onesimus, although we think that happened in due time.

Today the gospel is abused as a gospel of good works, whereas it should be the good news of the message of redemption of the soul. In addition, some think Christianity is the gospel of good manners—gentleness, kindness, etc. Of course a Christian is gentle and kind depending on the circumstance, but those qualities do not define a Christian, and many humble people are not interested in the gospel.

“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?” Paul was suggesting to Philemon, “You now have not only a dutiful servant but also a Christian brother.” On that basis, Onesimus would be very different from the other servants. Rather than just being a butler, for example, he could sit down at meetings and be on an equal basis with Philemon. However, his servitude would be left intact unless Philemon granted his freedom. Paul was not pressuring Philemon to do the opposite of what he had advised elsewhere. He was always consistent with his definitions of Christian development and character.

In verse 17, Paul said to Philemon on a *personal* basis, not as an apostle, “If thou count me therefore a partner [as a brother in Christ, as an equal, as a fellow Christian], receive him [Onesimus] as myself.” In other words, Paul was asking Philemon to forgive Onesimus from the heart. Forgiveness is to be real, but if the sin is repeated the next day, the forgiveness is canceled until, again, forgiveness is asked. Jesus said, “Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him” (Luke 17:3,4). Today we seldom hear any rebukes in the brotherhood. The emphasis is on forgiveness without rebuking, and that is a subtraction from God’s Word. Adding to the Word is a little less sin than subtracting.

In verse 19, Paul wrote, “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.” Despite his poor eyesight, Paul himself wrote this letter (and the letter to the Galatians—Gal. 6:11). The phraseology in the end of verse 19 indicates that Philemon was a convert to Christ through Paul’s efforts. Although there is no record in the Book of Acts of Paul’s ever having gone to Colosse, he was familiar with many of the brethren in the class including Philemon. To state the matter another way, some of the other epistles hint that the general convention in those days was at Ephesus. When the churches wanted to get together, annually or otherwise, they convened in Ephesus. That would explain how many brethren knew Paul and had even heard

him preach when he had not visited their home cities.

In verses 19 and 20, Paul put the case so strong that it would seem Philemon could not deny him. How would Paul “repay” Philemon? Perhaps he meant that Philemon would be repaid through the position he would receive in glory. In proportion as Philemon was willing to heed Paul’s advice, he would receive personalized attention in the Kingdom. Imagine Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon together in the Kingdom recounting what had happened in the previous life!

Verse 20 reads, “Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord.” Earlier Paul said that Philemon had refreshed the bowels of others. Now Paul wanted his bowels to be refreshed by Philemon in the release of Onesimus.

**Philem. 21 Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.**

The Revised Standard has, “Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.” That was a nice way of expressing the matter. Paul had confidence that Philemon would do even more than he said. Paul was hoping Philemon would give Onesimus his freedom, although such an act was not mandatory. We believe Philemon did so.

**Philem. 22 But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you.**

Again the Revised Standard is good: “At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be granted to you.” As stated earlier, this letter was written either at the end of Paul’s house arrest when his release was imminent or during the time of Paul’s release, that is, between his house arrest and his imprisonment in the dungeon. At any rate, God willing, Paul wanted to visit Philemon, and he asked for prayers to that effect. When Paul was imprisoned the second time, he knew his situation was hopeless because of his ill treatment (2 Tim. 4:6).

Since Paul was released from his first imprisonment in Rome and not from his shorter second imprisonment, verse 22 seems to suggest that he was referring to his first imprisonment. Upon his release, he would honor Philemon with a visit. Of course he did not know at this time that a second imprisonment awaited him after a short release. Whether he was able to get to Colosse during that release, we do not know for sure.

**Philem. 23 There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus;**

**Philem. 24 Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers.**

John Mark (Marcus) was with Paul at this time and also Luke (Lucas). In addition, Colossians 4:9 mentions Onesimus. Onesiphorus, probably the same individual, often refreshed Paul and was not ashamed of Paul’s chain. “The Lord give mercy unto the house of Onesiphorus; for he oft refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain: But, when he was in Rome, he sought me out very diligently [in the dungeon], and found me. The Lord grant unto him that he may find mercy of the Lord in that day: and in how many things he ministered unto me [earlier] at Ephesus, thou knowest very well.... Salute Prisca and Aquila, and the household of Onesiphorus” (2 Tim. 1:16-18; 4:19).

When Paul was imprisoned the second time in Rome, he was put in the dungeon. Onesiphorus went to Rome and, risking his own life, diligently searched for Paul and found him, as mentioned in the Second Epistle to Timothy, written just before Paul’s execution.

Onesimus had earlier faithfully ministered many things unto Paul. When he received the Holy Spirit at Rome, he stayed for a while and then was so willing to serve Paul that he left and went back and forth until Paul's second imprisonment, risking exposure as a runaway slave. Onesimus came from Colosse but probably became a disciple in Ephesus after running away from Philemon.

If Onesimus and Onesiphorus are the same individual, the probable sequence was as follows:

1. Onesimus ran away from Philemon.
2. Onesimus became a disciple of and ministered to Paul at Ephesus.
3. Paul was placed under house arrest in Rome.
4. Onesimus visited Paul in Rome while he was under house arrest.
5. Paul was released from house arrest.
6. Paul advised Onesimus to return to Philemon and wrote the Epistle to Philemon accordingly.
7. Paul was imprisoned in a dungeon in Rome.
8. Onesimus was given his freedom and went to diligently search out Paul and found him in the dungeon.
9. The Second Epistle to Timothy was written.
10. Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews was written.

Probably Philemon released Onesimus as a slave after receiving Paul's letter. It is touching to think that Paul wrote to Philemon about Onesimus, perhaps during his period of release, and also said to prepare a guest room for his own visit. We do not know if Paul ever got there, for he was subsequently put in a dungeon at Rome. Meanwhile, Philemon gave Onesimus his freedom and sent him back to Rome to search out Paul in the dungeon and to tell him everything was all right between Onesimus and him.

In 2 Timothy 1:15-17, Paul said that all in Asia had forsaken him at the time of his direst need, Onesiphorus being an exception. Onesimus would have been ever grateful that the matter with Philemon was straightened out, for after he became a Christian, his earlier running away would have been on his conscience.

Onesimus (Onesiphorus) served Paul at both Ephesus and Rome. Hence a period of time was involved, during which Paul was a "father" to him and this close relationship was formed (Philem. 10).

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