

## The Letter to the Church in Philemon's Home

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*The most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do.*

*It is my ambition to say in ten sentences what other men say in whole books.*

*If it takes a lot of words to say what you have in mind, give it more thought.*

*Be brief; say much in few words.*<sup>1</sup>

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If nowhere else, Paul certainly heeds this wisdom in his letter “to Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker—also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home” (1b-2). Only twenty-five verses long, the book of Philemon says much in very few words, using great tact and diplomacy, as well as “rhetorical dissonance, subtlety, and wordplay,” to achieve Paul’s purpose.<sup>2</sup> It is for this reason that this letter is one of the most difficult to interpret. No external information regarding the circumstances is available to provide insight into the persons or situation; it is the only extant personal letter of Paul;<sup>3</sup> the clever and witty usage of Greek words is often lost in translation;<sup>4</sup> questions abound regarding Paul’s locale,<sup>5</sup> the community being addressed,<sup>6</sup> and Philemon’s connection to Colossians;<sup>7</sup> and, most notably, the matter of Paul’s stance regarding slavery raises no few issues.<sup>8</sup>

What can be said with certainty is this: Paul is in prison (1, 10, 13) and is writing to Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and “the church that gathers in *your* [presumably Philemon’s]

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Jefferson, <<http://www.quotegarden.com/brevity.html>>. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, <<http://www.quotegarden.com/brevity.html>>; Dennis Roth, <<http://www.quotegarden.com/brevity.html>>; Sirach 32.8, respectively.

<sup>2</sup> Craig S. Wansink, *The Oxford Bible Commentary: CD-ROM*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), “Introduction, A. Paul’s Imprisonment.”

<sup>3</sup> William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975, rev. ed.), 269.

<sup>4</sup> As L.T. Johnson noted, “the letter is a masterpiece of suggestion,” *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 354.

<sup>5</sup> Per Acts, Paul was imprisoned in Rome and Caesarea, and one could posit an Ephesian imprisonment by reading between the lines of the narrative. While nothing definitive can be said, it seems likely that Paul writes from Ephesus (roughly 100 miles from Colossae, the presumed location of Philemon’s house church), since he asks for a room to be prepared for him in Philemon 22. cf. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, rev. ed., “Philemon” by Arthur A. Rupprecht, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 630.

<sup>6</sup> Laodicea is suggested based upon Col 4.13, 15, 16 with “the missing letter to Laodicea, mentioned in Col 4.16, [being] none other than the letter to Philemon,” *Daily Study Bible*, Barclay, 273. Colossae is suggested based on persons named in Philemon and Colossians (see footnote 7).

<sup>7</sup> As with Paul’s locale, nothing definitive can be said; however, a link between the letter to Colossae and to Philemon is posited based on the shared list of names in both (cf. Phlm 1b-2, 23-24; Col 1.1, 13, 4.9-10, 12, 14, 17).

<sup>8</sup> “Phlm has received little attention in the history of Christian theology. It has always been the most insignificant member of the Pauline corpus...It is only since the 19<sup>th</sup> century struggle over slavery (notably in Britain and America) that this little letter has taken on real significance...[as] Phlm was brought out of relative obscurity to be used (by both sides in the debate) as an example of Paul’s attitude to slaves and slave-owners. It thus came to be at the heart of the debate about the emancipatory potential of Christianity,” J.M.G. Barclay, *T&T Clark Study Guides: Colossians and Philemon*, (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 14, 15; cf. Metzger, Bruce M. and Michael D. Coogan, eds. *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, “Slavery and the Bible” by Stephen A. Marini, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 701-702.

home” (1b-2).<sup>9</sup> The relationship between these individuals and their role in this community is largely speculative, though Philemon is likely the primary “actor,” given that he is named first.<sup>10</sup> A slave named Onesimus has somehow encountered Paul in prison,<sup>11</sup> and as a result he became a Christ follower (9-10, 15). Paul is now sending him back with this letter, informing Philemon of Onesimus’s conversion and submitting several veiled requests (10-21).

Paul opens the letter in the traditional manner of his day—a greeting (1-3) followed by a thanksgiving and prayer (4-6)<sup>12</sup>—before submitting his primary petitions (7-21) and closing with a final request and parting greetings (22-25). It is these middle verses (7-21) that prove difficult for the reader and interpreter alike; the ambiguity of which is due to the wordplay by which Paul presents his requests. In verse 7 Paul begins his appeal by recalling Philemon’s loving actions in the past, making special note of the fact that “the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.” Verses 9-10a reveal Pauline diplomacy at its best, as he recognizes the precarious nature of the circumstances and tempers his approach by requesting rather than commanding.<sup>13</sup> In 10b-17 Paul sets forth his appeal on behalf of his “child” whom he has “begotten” (converted to the faith), namely Onesimus. The wordplay in verses 11-12 is quite rich, particularly in the Greek text. Onesimus, Paul’s “child,” had been “useless” [αχρηστον] but now is “useful” [ευχρηστον], and Paul has sent Onesimus, his “very heart,” back to Philemon. Paul desired that Onesimus would stay and continue to help him while in prison (13), but again, diplomacy prevailed, as Paul wanted this to result from Philemon’s consent and volition (14). In verses 15-16 Paul suggests a reason for the separation, namely that Onesimus would return, no longer as a slave, but “a beloved brother [viz. a fellow believer]...both in the flesh and in the Lord.” Paul closes with a most extravagant request, in which he sets forth the radical claims of Christ upon the social

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<sup>9</sup> Greeting multiple persons and the church as a whole makes it clear that “the decision about Onesimus is not to be left to Philemon; it is to be a decision of the whole Christian community,” Barclay, *Daily Study Bible*, 274. Put another way, Paul is putting additional pressure on Philemon to conform to his requests by making it a communal rather than solely personal matter.

<sup>10</sup> “Paul is writing to the head of a Christian house-church, or even to a church in the person of its host (since Paul anticipates communal pressure on Philemon)...A plausible reconstruction is that Phlm was a well-to-do Christian, Apphia was his wife, and Archippus was close to him; Phlm’s house served as the meeting place of the house church,” Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 502, 504.

<sup>11</sup> At issue is the circumstance in which Onesimus came into contact with Paul during his imprisonment, presumably at Ephesus. “Onesimus generally is seen in one of three ways: (1) As a runaway slave...(2) as an estranged slave, appealing to his owner’s friend...or (3) as a slave, sent by Philemon, to serve Paul in prison,” Wansink, “Introduction, B. Onesimus, 1.” In truth, all three scenarios are plausible and defensible based on the text. Such is the difficulty of the letter, and the ambiguity of Paul’s language. In the end, as with all personal letters, to the persons involved the matter is perfectly clear, to those on “the outside looking in” everything is far from certain. Personally, the latter two scenarios seem more likely, as one is left to wonder why a runaway slave would seek out a known associate of his master. cf. J.M.G. Barclay, 98-102. What seems clear is that “some serious breakdown [had occurred] in the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon” (Phlm 11, 15, 18-19), and thus, whether Onesimus came to Paul as an envoy or an estranged slave, his purpose is to seek an advocate who can send a letter of recommendation and reconciliation, J.M.G. Barclay, 100.

<sup>12</sup> Rupprecht, *EBC*, “In both pagan and Christian letters of the first centuries AD, the salutation was followed by an expression of thanksgiving and prayer,” 637.

<sup>13</sup> Paul seeks to maintain his good standing with this community while allowing Philemon the dignity of acting appropriately without an explicit command; cf. Rupprecht, *EBC*, “The delicacy of his position demands that he ‘appeal’ rather than ‘command’ (v 9). He wants Phlm to read between the lines and follow his wishes, without having to risk his fragile authority by making them explicitly,” 354-5. Or, as Raymond Brown put it, “the letter, designed to persuade, is astute, with almost every verse hinting at something more than is stated,” *An Introduction*, 505.

norms of the day: “accept him [Onesimus, the slave] as me” (17), and follows this with a vow to cover any debts owed to Philemon by Onesimus (vv 18-19). Verse 20—“refresh my heart in Christ”—wraps up the appeal, forming an *inclusio* with verse 7.<sup>14</sup> In verse 21 Paul places further pressure upon Philemon to comply by expressing, in advance, his “confidence in [Philemon’s] obedience” and the knowledge that “[he] will do even more than what [Paul] says.”

Having summarized the contents of the letter, we are still left to ask what it is that Paul is actually asking of Philemon. What does Paul request that he is confident Philemon will do “even more than” (21)? That he is asking for Onesimus to be sent back while he [Paul] is in prison seems clear enough (see verses 12-14).<sup>15</sup> What is far from evident is the nature of Paul’s requests regarding Onesimus’s status as Philemon’s slave. Does he simply wish Onesimus to help him as a slave who is on loan for a time? Or does he suggest that Philemon free Onesimus from his position of servitude? These questions are at the center of the debates regarding this letter, as they have been since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see footnote 8). Some scholars see a failure on Paul’s part to speak out strongly, forcefully, and clearly against the institution of slavery. Others have read the letter as a revolutionary challenge to the social order of the day.<sup>16</sup> One’s interpretation seems to hinge upon the ability to place the letter in its original context and to avoid approaching the text with modern-day “lenses” which force an anachronistic reading upon its contents.<sup>17</sup> It is my view that Paul is urging something quite radical and revolutionary upon Philemon—and the Christian community that gathers at his home—when he asks them to treat Onesimus as a “brother” (16) and as if he were Paul (17).<sup>18</sup> Paul uses subtlety and wordplay for

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<sup>14</sup> “In literature, *inclusio* is a literary device based on a concentric principle, also known as bracketing or an envelope structure, which consists of creating a frame by placing similar material at the beginning and end of a section,” <<http://www.reference.com/search?q=Inclusio>>. Here the *inclusio* is formed with the use of the phrase “refresh the heart” [σπλαγγχα] in verses 7 and 20.

<sup>15</sup> “Paul’s puns and double entendres, his hints and subtle pleas, make this intent almost unmistakable,” Wayne Meeks and John T. Fitzgerald, *The Writings of Saint Paul*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007), 95.

<sup>16</sup> “The dire results of the revolt of the slaves in Italy led by Spartacus in 73-71 BC show that any proposal of the abolition of slavery would have had Empire-shaking potentialities,” Brown, *An Introduction*, see also Brown (507) for a brief summary of the positions; cf. J.M.G. Barclay, 114-119.

<sup>17</sup> I allude to forcing later institutions of slavery, particularly those manifested in America, upon Paul’s context. There is, after all, a reason it was called “the peculiar institution.” Slavery in Paul’s day and in America was *not* the same entity, even if they shared similar elements and practices at times. The fact that the letter to Philemon and other biblical texts were used to defend slavery is a tragic example of the abuse of the Bible and a fundamental misunderstanding of the gospel message—which calls us to love and serve rather than exploit, abuse, and manipulate one another. Context is crucial to understand statements and actions. The same is true of Paul’s letters. Yet, it is safe to say that the gospel’s abolition of boundaries—gender (no longer male or female); class and hierarchy (no longer slave or free); race, ethnicity, and nationality (no longer Jew or Greek)—is everywhere and always a subversive and radical challenge to the norms of the day. This fundamental truth should shape our interpretation of Paul’s requests here.

<sup>18</sup> According to Brown, *An Introduction*, “Society in the provinces of the Roman Empire where Paul would have conducted missionary activity was highly stratified...at the bottom would have been the immense number of slaves with whose existence the economic welfare of the Empire was intimately involved,” 503. As such, Paul’s request that Philemon and the community treat Onesimus as an equal and as if he were Paul is a challenge to the societal hierarchy. Paul leaves the details of such an action open, but is confident that they will do more than just treat him as an equal. This calls to mind Jesus’ words in Matthew 25 where he equates himself with the least and lowliest in society’s estimation. When you help and love these, you are loving and serving Jesus. Paul’s request seems to function similarly here, offering a challenge to the common societal assumptions and designations that placed slaves/servants in a lesser or lower category of persons.

a variety of reasons, though it would seem that the societally subversive nature of his requests would have been a primary factor.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, when you read Paul's letters, you get a sense that his theology, like everyone's, is in process as he is continually learning the radical, far-reaching implications of the good news, the gospel of Jesus the Christ. This could be yet another reason for the ambiguity found in this letter.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, one truth that rings forth throughout his writings is the fact that, in Christ, there is no longer hierarchy, distinction, or division, "for all are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3.28; cf. Gal 3.22-29; Col 3.11; 1 Cor 12.13). This truth reverberates here as well, as Paul asks Philemon, who "refreshes the hearts [τα σπλαγχνα] of the saints" (7) and to whom Paul is "sending [his] very heart [τα εμα σπλαγχνα; viz. Onesimus]" (12), to "refresh [his] heart [τα σπλαγχνα] in Christ" (20). Paul asks the one who refreshes hearts to refresh his heart, which means sending Onesimus back to help Paul during his imprisonment (13) and also treating Onesimus as he would a "brother" (16) and as he would Paul (17).<sup>21</sup> While this does not necessarily imply freedom, it certainly involves a radical transformation of the relationship.<sup>22</sup> If nothing else, this would result in a *de facto* manumission, as Paul again reveals that the boundaries created by society have been done away with in Christ, and even the lowliest in society's estimation are to be embraced, regarded, and treated as brother and apostle.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> "Notice how much is being asked: not simply that Onesimus escape the punishment that could legally be imposed, not simply that Onesimus be freed...but that Onesimus be moved to the plane of Christian relationship," Brown, 505.

<sup>20</sup> As J.M.G. Barclay suggests, "the ambiguity in these instructions may be due to the fact that, for practical reasons, Paul did not know what to recommend...In the ancient world, such was the breadth of dependence on slaves that even quite modest households contained two or three slaves, so that to be unable to possess any was, for a man of Phlm's status, a social catastrophe." While we can do no more than speculate as to why Paul remained vague, understanding "what slavery and manumission entailed in the ancient world will enable us to appreciate what was at stake in the various options before Philemon," *T&T Study Guides*, 116, 117.

<sup>21</sup> cf. Meeks and Fitzgerald, *The Writings*, 97, footnote 5.

<sup>22</sup> "What is certain...is the radical character of conversion, not only of people but of their attitudes toward their own property, their rights, and their obligations," *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, "Philemon," Paul S. Minear, 590. "Even if 'brotherhood' in the ancient world did not necessarily entail equality...the expression of mutuality...would be most difficult to combine with a strictly hierarchical nature of slave-ownership," Barclay, *T&T Study Guides*, 117.

<sup>23</sup> "Phlm is a carefully crafted witness to an emerging Christian ethos, showing at once its power to transform symbols and attitudes, as well as its struggle to transcend social norms...[In this letter] we begin to see how this new sort of fellowship will strain evermore urgently against the framework of ancient social structures," Johnson, *The Writings*, 354, 355.

## Outlines of and Commentaries on Philemon

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### Oxford Bible Commentary<sup>24</sup>

- I. Prescript and Thanksgiving (1-7)
  - i. Prescript (1-3)
  - ii. Thanksgiving (4-7)
- II. Body: Paul's Request (8-20)
- III. Final Prayer, Greetings, and Blessing (21-25)

### Raymond Brown<sup>25</sup>

#### DIVISION ACCORDING TO CONTENTS

- 1-3 Address, greeting
- 4-7 Thanksgiving serving as an *exordium* to gain Philemon's good will by praise
- 8-16 Appeal offering motives to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus (*confirmation*)
- 17-22 Reiteration and expansion of appeal (*peroration*)
- 23-25 Concluding greeting, blessing

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<sup>24</sup> Wansink, *Oxford Bible Commentary*.

<sup>25</sup> Brown, *An Introduction*, 503.

### **For Further Study**

- Barclay, John M.G. *T&T Clark Study Guides: Colossians and Philemon*. New York: T&T Clark, 2004.
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