

Philemon

First things first: it's not 100% clear how the name Philemon is meant to be pronounced - especially in English. And, of course, in any modern language we're still going to be saying the name differently than it would have sounded in ancient Greek. So the good news is that, because everyone is mispronouncing it, we don't need to get hung up on the right way to say it. Still, the best pronunciation is probably Phee-LAY-mon (and not PHI-lee-mon).

The name Onesimus is more straightforward, but this is probably only the man's slave name. Slaves were often given a mundane appellative; for instance, Romans 16:23 speaks of "brother Quartus" which is essentially, "brother Fourth", because he was (or possibly still is) some master's fourth slave. Similarly, the name Onesimus literally means "useful" - a meaning which Paul uses to his rhetorical advantage in the letter. If we were going to give someone a modern equivalent nickname it would probably be "Handy".

Philemon is unique among Paul's letters found in the Bible. Not only is it short but it's also very personal. It's addressed to one individual for a very particular purpose, without explicit theological teaching. When Paul wrote it he couldn't possibly have imagined that one day that this letter would be divided into 25 verses and included as part of Holy Scripture. What a strange thing! Because Philemon is so brief and so unusual, it not surprisingly also rarely receives much attention. This provides us with an opportunity, both to experience a fresh encounter with a less-familiar Scripture as well as to study it in greater depth than might be possible with other, longer letters.

1-3

1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, 2 to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

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

Often when we read Paul's letters we rush past the greeting/salutation, as if we have nothing to learn from these ancient pleasantries. But immediately here we discover something quite important: Paul writes this letter as a prisoner. If we fail to see (and remember) this detail then we lose an important dimension of the relationship between Paul and Onesimus.

Paul describes himself, not just as a prisoner, but specifically as a prisoner of/for Jesus Christ. Paul finds himself in jail (again) because the Gospel he preached often produced civic unrest. He showed up proclaiming that all the old gods were just idols and naturally some people became very upset. The authorities weren't so much interested in whether Paul is right or wrong as to whether his presence disturbs the peace (see Acts 19:21-40, for instance). At this

point in time there were no police forces or codified laws. The primary concern of rulers was maintaining the precarious social order, and they often did so with a heavy hand. From their perspective, the easiest thing to do was put Paul in jail where he couldn't cause so much trouble - then make him promise to leave.

But when Paul call himself "a prisoner of/for Christ Jesus" he is not merely providing an explanation of the offense that lead to his imprisonment. Yes, Paul is in prison for preaching the Gospel, but undoubtedly Paul intends more by this brief title. Throughout Paul's letters he describes the Christian life as being "in Christ" and he often uses the language of unity and identity with Christ. In everything, in every way, Paul wants to be Christlike. If Christ provides the model then Paul wants his life to conform to it; if Christ is the mold, Paul wants to be pressed into it. And Paul consistently understood his own sufferings for Christ as a participation in Christ's own sufferings.¹ He wore his sufferings as a badge of honor, an indication of his faithfulness to the Lord, of his unity with Christ.

Another detail to highlight is Paul's inclusion of Timothy in the letter. Timothy serves as Paul's co-laborer and co-sender. When we imagine Paul composing a letter we probably envision a lone man sitting at a desk with ample paper and writing utensils. The reality was usually much different. Especially when in prison, supplies were scarce. And Paul also makes clear in some of his letters than another person is writing the letter as he dictates. It is his mouth which speaks the words but the hand of another that writes them. Likewise Paul also said at times - as he does later in this letter - that he writes (or at least a portion of it) with his own hand.

The letter is addressed to Philemon and is quite personal in nature, but (perhaps surprisingly) Paul also addresses the letter to both Apphia and Archippus. And not only that, Paul says that the letter is "to the church in your house." So even though the letter deals exclusively with a request by Paul of Philemon, Paul still wishes for the letter to be read in front of the entire church! If Philemon doesn't heed Paul's wishes, the whole community will know it.

We know very little about Apphia - the name only appears this one time in the Bible - but we do know that it's a feminine name and that she was a woman. Paul's letters contain several instances in which Paul addressed, greeted, or referred to woman in the church. At the time this would've been highly unusual, and provides evidence of the extent to which, in these early churches, "there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

- 1. We take for granted that the New Testament is largely comprised of Paul's letters. But step back for a moment and consider: is it strange that we call Paul's writings "Scripture"? - especially when it's as personal as the letter to Philemon? How is this "God's word" to us?**
- 2. What does Paul mean when he calls himself, "A prisoner of/for Christ Jesus"? Why did Paul end up in jail so often? Do you think a part of him liked being there? Does the fact that Paul writes from prison change how we understand the letter?**
- 3. When you imagine Paul (or other authors of books of the Bible) writing their text, what do you usually envision? And what do you think it actually looked like**

¹ Consider this startling claim Paul makes to the Colossians: "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church."

(especially when Paul writes from prison)? Could Paul have been as successful without the help of others?

4. *What is the significance of the fact that the early church had female leaders? And that Paul addresses them specifically?*

4-7

4 When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God 5 because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. 6 I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. 7 I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

One of the problems with English is that it doesn't distinguish between second person singular and plural (except in the American south, where "y'all" is used). Because we are individualistically minded people (whether we know it or not!) we tend to read instances of "you" in the Bible as being addressed to the individual.² The vast majority of the instances of "you" in the Bible are actually plural, and this is important. There are many times when we need to bear in mind that the Bible addresses a group (and a group is often more than just a collection of individuals). In Philemon, however, Paul is indeed addressing a singular "you", which is Philemon. Paul speaks directly to him, even though everyone else in the church is listening!

Paul begins his address by expressing thankfulness for Philemon's faithfulness. Paul tells Philemon that he prays for him which, given Paul's standing and his long prayer list, would've been encouraging for Philemon. Paul says that he thanks God for what he has heard about Philemon (perhaps even from Onesimus). Although most translations break up verse 5 into "love of saints" and "faith in the Lord Jesus", the most literal translation of this verse is, "because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints". It's not hard to understand how Paul can say that Philemon loves the saints, but to say that he has faith in/toward them sounds strange to our ears. But it's important remember that the word we translate into English as faith also has the dimension of faithfulness, fidelity, and allegiance (in fact, these words are often better transitions than "faith"). So Paul is expressing that Philemon's love and faithfulness toward the Lord Jesus is manifested by his love and faithfulness to God's people

² For instance, when we read Jesus' statement "You are the light of the world" we might hear him as if he's talking directly to us and think, "I am the light of the world!" But he's clearly addressing a group of a people who collectively are the light of the world, like a city on hill - and cities usually have more than one person!

We don't know in what ways, exactly, that Philemon loved the saints and refreshed their hearts, but we can assume that, in one way or another, Philemon was an important servant of the church. And from this love and faithfulness Paul has received much encouragement, surely in part because it is a sign that the Gospel has taken root in the community.

In verse 6 Paul prays for Philemon, although the precise meaning of this is difficult to determine and just about every translation renders it quite differently. Not only is it often difficult to translate an ancient language, but even those who know biblical Greek well sometimes struggle to understand what Paul meant.³ The sharing of faith Paul has in mind here is not Philemon preaching the Gospel to non-believers; here "sharing of faith" means something more like "communion" or "fellowship". Paul has already praised Philemon's faith demonstrated by his love for God's people, but Paul seems to be praying that Philemon's faith (that is, his faithfulness) would grow even more effective as he begins to comprehend what Christ has made possible for the church. One way to think about Paul's letters as a whole is that they attempt to help believers walk in light of what God has *already done* in Christ, to leave the old ways behind and to embrace the new creation. Paul wants to help Philemon see that, for God's people, there are new possibilities for relationship between one another - including between slave and master.

- 5. When you read "you" in the Bible, do you typically read it as speaking directly to you, the individual? How might it affect the way we read the Bible to bear in mind that "you" is often plural, and often addresses the group, not just a collection of individuals? And how does it affect the way we read this letter to know it's addressed to a "you" (Philemon) who isn't you?**
- 6. Why is Paul confident that Philemon possesses faith and love? How do we ever know that someone has faith? How is it revealed? What is the difference (or is there one?) between faith and faithfulness? Similarly, how do we love God?**
- 7. What does it mean to "share your faith" with the church? What does Paul hope for Philemon? And, by extension, what does Paul hope for all believers - including us?**

³ Translators also like to avoid producing confusing English sentences, which means they typically find a way to smooth over rough spots in the text, which means they necessarily engage in interpretation rather than simple translation. There's really no way around it, unless we're all going to learn Greek. And even then we'd still need to interpret....

8-11

8 For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, 9 yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. 10 I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. 11 Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me.

When we write an email requesting that someone do something, we often (if we're smart) begin by saying something complimentary about the person. We don't just write a message that says, "Complete this task by Friday." Instead we say something like, "I hope you're enjoying the sunshine. Thanks again for all the good work you've been doing. I know you're busy with many important things, but could you please complete this task by Friday?" We want the person to receive our request positively and part of this is having them react positively toward us. And we do this in part because we (hopefully) care about the person but also because we want to persuade them. We write these emails because we have a goal in mind and we want to achieve it.

In the ancient world "rhetoric" was one of the fundamental scholastic disciplines. Rhetoric is the art of discourse, wherein a writer or speaker strives to inform, persuade, or motivate particular audiences in specific situations. Paul was trained in the art of rhetoric, but he was apparently much better with the pen than with speech.⁴ Paul writes to Philemon with a clear goal in mind, and verses 4-6 are meant to ingratiate himself to Philemon. This doesn't mean that his words aren't true - Paul means what he says - but he shares this truth for a specific purpose. Starting with verse 8, Paul's purpose comes into focus.

Paul's argument is quite crafty. He tells Philemon that he could order him to do what is right, but he's not going to do that. Paul invokes his own authority but then claims he's not going to use it. He instead wants to persuade Philemon on the "basis of love," but Paul has already set up the argument so that Philemon's "duty" is not open to interpretation. He wants Philemon to choose the right thing, but given the authority Paul is claiming, Philemon might wonder how much choice he really has. Paul then makes it yet harder for Philemon to refuse by reminding him that he (Paul) is an old man and a prisoner for Christ. How could you say no to the request of an old man in prison for Christ!

Paul then states explicitly that he's writing on behalf of Onesimus, although it's not entirely clear if Onesimus has requested this of Paul or if Paul writes of his own accord. It could be both. When Paul says that he has become Onesimus' "father" he probably means that, through his

⁴ 2 Corinthians 10:9-11: "I do not want to seem as though I am trying to frighten you with my letters. 10 For they say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.' 11 Let such people understand that what we say by letter when absent, we will also do when present." Paul defends his ministry against accusations from (some of) the Corinthians, and it seems they have charged him with being much more forceful in writing than in person.

teaching and influence, Onesimus has become a Christian. This explains Paul's otherwise curious statement that previously Onesimus was "useless" to Philemon where now he useful to both Philemon and Paul. Paul doesn't mean that Onesimus is now an improved, more compliant, harder working slave. No, he's now more useful, it becomes clear, because he is no longer just a slave but also a brother in Christ. His status - thanks to Paul - has changed.

- 8. Why does Paul avoid giving Philemon a command? Is Philemon really free to choose? Why does Paul want the choice to be his? Can love be commanded?**
- 9. In what way is Paul an authority? How does he use his authority - and how doesn't he use it? What do learn from Paul about the use of authority by Christians?**
- 10. What role does persuasion play in our faith? In helping bring others to faith? Does the truth require persuasion?**
- 11. How might Philemon have reacted to the news that Onesimus had become a believer? Was this good news? Or might he rather his slave remained a non-believer?**

12-16

12 I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. 13 I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; 14 but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. 15 Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, 16 no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

Paul makes clear that he would rather Onesimus remain with him, but he instead decides to send him back to Philemon. Onesimus, befitting his name, has become very useful to Paul in ministry. But the reality is that Onesimus is still Philemon's slave; this really is the heart of the matter. Paul is returning him not only out of courtesy but because it is the cultural expectation. And because Onesimus belongs to Philemon, Paul states that he considers Onesimus' work to be in Philemon's place, the service rendered to him by Onesimus performed as if by Philemon. In part this helps Philemon to see that his slave, while away, has not been wasting time but

instead doing good work that reflects well on Philemon (work which, Paul implies, Philemon perhaps should've been doing himself).

Paul suggests that he didn't, strictly speaking, have to send Onesimus back; he would've been justified in keeping him. Paul takes this action because, "I preferred to do nothing without your consent" - but the implication is that this is indeed merely a preference, not an obligation. He could've forced Philemon but he wanted this to be done voluntarily. By not commanding Philemon, Paul gives Philemon the chance to save face by doing what is right of his own accord rather than finding himself in the position of a subordinate following the command of a superior. Philemon can avoid the embarrassment of having had a slave run away (and that slave fleeing to someone more powerful and generous than he) because Paul essentially offers him the option of reinterpreting past events and the current situation. Paul certainly pressures or leverages Philemon, but he doesn't explicitly tell him what to do. Paul alludes to his authority but he doesn't wield it. He makes clear what the right choice is but he still leaves Philemon with the choice.

And then Paul introduces that possibility that this "separation" actually has providential aspect. Paul avoids saying explicitly that Onesimus ran away although that is clearly what has happened. Typically there would be consequences for a runaway slave (and embarrassment for the master) but Philemon is invited to see that this instead a "separation" which is to his benefit. He may have been temporarily deprived of his slave but now, in return, he receives something even better. Now Onesimus is not only useful to Paul, he's useful to Philemon in an entirely new way. He lost a slave but he gains a brother.

Or at least that's how Paul frames the matter. It's not difficult to imagine that Philemon might still be angry with Onesimus or bear some resentment toward him. Paul clearly wants to placate Philemon's sense of loss and so describes the situation in terms of what he gains. Throughout the short letter, in subtle ways, Paul attempts to head off any punishment Onesimus might receive upon returning to his master. And to be clear, it was risky for him to return - and for Paul to send him.

- 12. When do Christians have an obligation to follow the laws and customs? And when is it acceptable to break them for a greater good?**
- 13. Would Paul have been justified in "keeping" Onesimus instead of sending him back to Philemon?**
- 14. Paul said that he wants Philemon's action to be voluntary and not under compulsion - but has Paul really left him any choice? Has Paul successfully avoided making a command - or has he only made a command in a different, softer form?**
- 15. To which concern do you think Paul is giving priority: what is good for him? what is good for Onesimus? what is good for Philemon? or to what is simply Good?**
- 16. How does the fact that Onesimus is now a Christian influence the way Philemon is likely to receive him? Should it make any difference that Onesimus is a Christian?**

17-19

17 So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 18 If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. 19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self.

Paul asks Philemon to regard Onesimus as he would regard Paul himself. Paul stands in the place of Onesimus, even taking upon himself whatever debts that he might owe Philemon. And although Paul doesn't state it - and although he might not even have been consciously thinking it - there is no doubt that Christ's own example informs Paul's actions. In the same way that Christ mediates between the offender and the offended, so too does Paul mediate between Onesimus and Philemon. This is another manifestation of Paul's desire to be Christlike; he is willing to suffer so that these two might be reconciled.

Most scholars agree that behind Paul's statement, "If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything," is the likelihood that, not only did Onesimus deprive Philemon of the service a slave owes a master, but that Onesimus stole from Philemon on his way out the door. It's not hard to imagine a runaway slave feeling justified in doing so, and it's not hard to imagine a master feeling additionally resentful because of it. Perhaps the intervening time would lessen Philemon's anger, and perhaps the fact that Onesimus has become a Christian would mitigate Philemon's desire for retribution, but there is no avoiding that Philemon almost certainly still feels aggrieved. Paul essentially tells Philemon to charge all that to his (Paul's) account. In a sense, Paul is enacting a kind of vicarious atonement on behalf of Onesimus.

Brief excursion: Paul here says that he is "writing this with my own hand." Typically (but not always) Paul dictated his letters to a scribe, but on occasion, as in this instance, he writes with his own hand for added emphasis - and makes sure that it doesn't go unnoticed by drawing explicit attention to it.

And then Paul takes theme of debts owed in a new direction, slipping in this remarkable claim to Philemon: "I say nothing about your owing me your very self." This is a clever rhetorical trick, because in the same moment he says he's not mentioning this thing he could mention he is, in fact, mentioning it. And presumably what Paul has in mind here is that it is because of his own ministry that Philemon is a Christian. This helps put in context the material debt that Onesimus owes; Paul invokes the great - even infinite - spiritual debt that Philemon owes Paul. And since Paul has agreed to take responsibility for the balance of Onesimus' account, the insinuation is that Philemon is no position to demand repayment. Paul makes clear that he is acting freely and not under compulsion, at the very same time he is giving Philemon the opportunity to act freely as well.

But has not Paul perhaps overstated his case? Can he really claim that Philemon owes him "his very self"? Is he not taking credit for God's work, in which Paul plays a part but is not the one responsible for the status of another person's soul? How can Paul be so sure that Philemon wouldn't be a Christian without him? If pressed on these questions, Paul probably would've

conceded the point that, “neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth” (1 Corinthians 3:7).⁵ Again, Paul here is employing a rhetorical strategy for affect, not so much making an absolute theological claim. But that Paul can say such things - even if only for rhetorical affect - still speaks to the depths of his own identification with Christ, an identification so thorough that Paul is apparently comfortable not distinguishing his work from the work of Christ.⁶

- 17. How is Paul’s action on behalf of Onesimus Christlike? Just how Christlike can Paul - or any person - be? Can we “be Jesus” for someone?**
- 18. Should Onesimus make restitution for the wrongs he has committed? Or should he rely on Paul’s graciousness? Can he do both?**
- 19. Would Philemon be justified in being angry at Onesimus? How (if at all) does Paul’s offer to pay Onesimus’s change the situation?**
- 20. To what extent can Paul rightly say to Philemon that he owes Paul his life?**

20-22

20 Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. 21 Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. 22 One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.

At the end of the letter Paul makes a final appeal to persuade Philemon. In addition to his argument that receiving Onesimus as free brother is the best thing to do, Paul adds a personal plea: if Philemon grants his request it would be “a benefit from you in the Lord”; his heart would be refreshed in Christ. And presumably the joy Paul would take is not simply the joy of successfully persuading someone, but much more than that. If these two - who each became Christian through Paul’s ministry - can reconcile with one another, it is evidence of the Good News come to life. What could be more refreshing to an evangelist than to see the enacted power of the Gospel he’s been preaching?

Throughout the letter, Paul has subtly avoided commanding Philemon while leaving him increasingly little room to deny the request. Here, at the last, Paul essentially removes whatever wiggle room Philemon has remaining. Paul declares that he is confident of Philemon’s “obedience” - a word that certainly suggests Paul has authority over him, an

⁵ But he might also respond, “And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?” (Romans 10:14)

⁶ Consider - again - this startling claim Paul makes to the Colossians: “I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.” (Colossians 1:24).

authority that Paul has been exercising indirectly. Even here it's not explicit but merely alluded to. And not only does Paul express the expectation that Philemon will heed his request, Paul expects that Philemon will go above and beyond what Paul has (not) commanded! And lest Philemon think that perhaps he could get away with less, Paul announces (as if its an afterthought) that he hopes to visit soon.

Of course, Paul may indeed actually have believed that Philemon would free Onesimus and welcome him home as a brother - not just because Paul asked - but because he knows Philemon's character. But if Paul were so confident, he wouldn't have needed to bother writing the letter. He wrote Philemon because he wanted to do everything he can to ensure the outcome - an outcome which, it seems, remained as yet undetermined.

- 21. In what ways would it benefit Paul for Philemon to heed his request? How would it "refresh his heart"? Why does Paul use this specific language?**
- 22. What do you think Philemon did when he received the letter?**
- 23. Do you think Paul really is confident that Philemon would do what Paul asked? How did Paul's letter likely affect what would otherwise have happened?**
- 24. Does Paul successfully avoid commanding Philemon? Or is Paul making a command in another form? Does Paul's rhetoric every seem coercive? Or is it always sincere?**

23-25

23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, 24 and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

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

As usual, Paul concluded his letter with greetings and a blessing. As it was from the outset, here Paul continues to use the singular "you"; he's addressing Philemon directly. That all these others know Philemon and wish to send him greetings to speaks to prominence in the church.

The blessings in Paul's letters almost always focus on grace, and here it is no different. Paul wrote the sort of thing he always wrote. And yet, in this instance, it's hard not to imagine that Paul is expressing a prayer that God would bless Philemon with the grace - that reconciling, overcoming grace - to welcome his brother Onesimus.

- 25. What does Paul's letter to Philemon teach us about what it is to be a Christian? What does it have to say about... authority? obedience? freedom? forgiveness? grace? faith? hope? love?**
- 26. What does the letter reveal about Paul himself? In what ways can we follow his example?**
- 27. What does this letter teach us about Christ and the power of the Gospel?**