

## Session #2: Philemon Verses 8-25



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### Onesimus Returned Home Verses 8-14

**Verse 8** *I have the full right...to order you*

We now move

into the intention of the letter. This first verse gets off to a very strong start. St. Paul reminds Philemon of his authority over him and could “order” Philemon to **do what is proper**. Where did St. Paul get that authority? While there is no historical documentation, scholars believe that St. Paul was instrumental in Philemon’s conversion as well as his mentor in becoming a Christian leader. There is also a probability that

St. Paul is referring to his authority as an Apostle of Christ and primary leader within the Christian community, but, as is his nature and supported by what we read in 1 Corinthians 9:12-23, St. Paul chooses not to misuse the power of his relationships in making requests. He is, after all, a slave to all (Philemon verse 19; 1 Thessalonians 2:6-8). If you think the word **order** seems a little strong for St. Paul you would be right. It is the only time it is used in all of St. Paul’s righting, and was only used in the gospels (Mark 1:27, 9:25) by Jesus in commanding demons. The Greek word used here is *parresia* and could also be translated *confidence and boldness*.

**Verse 9** *urge you out of love*

Now this sounds more like St. Paul. Someone who

presents the facts and argues for them but steps back out of respect for the other allowing them to make up their own mind. And regardless of what happens continues to love and support them. But it is not beneath St. Paul to use all the resources he has available, so here he makes an emotional appeal. If we read this verse with contemporary eyes we might understand or imagine St. Paul as an 85-90 year old man when he offers **Paul, an old man**. Chronologically, for that period and “old” person would be in their 50’s and 60’s since the average length of life was 35 to 45 years of age. But the statement more highlights the humiliation and indignity of St. Paul’s imprisonment and probably his seniority over Philemon.

**Verses 10 & 11** *Onesimus*

Now we know the point of the letter. St. Paul is writing on

the behalf of Onesimus. Who is Onesimus?

- A slave: As we discussed last week, Onesimus is was a slave in the household of Philemon (verse 16) who ran away, possibly having stolen something as he left (verse 18).
- Found himself in Christ: During Onesimus’ time under Philemon’s ownership he was not what one would call a workaholic since later in verse 11 St. Paul will say: **who was once useless to you**. It is possible that Onesimus, in his acceptance of faith not only proved his worth to St. Paul by being his messenger and “gofer” while in prison; but would later become a strong leader in the Christian movement and may be the Bishop Onesimus names by Ignatius of Antioch as the Bishop of Ephesus serving from 81 AD to 96 AD.
- Brought to faith through the ministry of St. Paul and very dear to him: It should surprise no one that St. Paul identifies Onesimus as **my child** since we have already heard him call Philemon “brother” and Acchius as “sister”. St. Paul sees himself as the spiritual father of all

but especially towards Onesimus. There is only one other individual that St. Paul identifies someone, in the New Testament, as “my child” and that is Timothy in 1 Corinthians 4:17 and Philippians 2:22. So we know that there is a special affection for Onesimus.

- Important to St. Paul: There is one other point to be made before moving on. Scholars point out that St. Paul is using a bit of word play based on Onesimus’ name. The name Onesimus translated from Greek means “*useful*” and was a common name given to slaves. St. Paul in writing about Onesimus ***who was once useless to you but is now useful to you and me.*** Onesimus is ready to live up to his name.

**Verse 12 my own heart** We can sense from this verse that St. Paul really cherishes his relationship with Onesimus. But, there is also a bit of wordplay here as well. If you remember, in verse 7 St. Paul writes: *the hearts of the saints*. In our discussion of St. Paul’s use of the word “heart” the Greek translation (*splanchna*) is more accurately translated as bowels and speaks to the emotions of a person. St. Paul was appealing to those he wrote from an emotional stand point. The use of the word here, in verse 12 could not only refer to St. Paul’s ties to Onesimus but relate back to the use of the word in verse 7 drawing Philemon and the listening audience into understanding that they are called to love Onesimus as St. Paul does. Not in ownership or servitude but as equals in the fellowship of Christ.

**back to you** The verb used here, *anapempein*, not only means “send back” but it can also be translated to say “refer a case to you.” Either translation works because it speaks to the content of this letter of pleading on behalf of Onesimus

**Verse 13 serve me on your behalf** We could read this as a hope or suggestion on St. Paul’s part communicating his wish that Philemon send Onesimus back to him. But most scholars offer that this is more of a playful message on St. Paul’s part. Onesimus came to St. Paul on his own accord. The phrase **back to you** could suggest that Philemon sent him. *Paul knows full well that Philemon did not send the slave, but he also knows that Philemon would do anything for him – for Paul – to whom he (Philemon) owes his salvation. Perhaps with a touch of humor and irony, Paul is speaking as if Philemon actually sent Onesimus as a help in his imprisonment. The whole letter presupposes a deep affection between Paul and Philemon.* (Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon by Dennis Hamm, SJ)

**Verse 14 so that the good you might do might not be forced but voluntary** The Greek word used for voluntary is *keta hekousion*. It is a word that is only used twelve times in the Old Testament and always in association with the kind of Temple sacrifice known as a “free-will offering” (Leviticus 7:16; 23:38; Numbers 15:3; 29:39). It is used only once in the New Testament and that is here in verse 14 of Philemon. In ancient Judaism there was an expectation of “tithing” a certain amount of your harvest of profits to the Temple. But there was a special blessing on one who would give above and beyond, not out of their surplus but from their need, just because they wanted to – a free will offering. Nothing that St. Paul writes is by accident or coincidence. It is very likely that St. Paul wants Philemon to understand that his response to St. Paul’s request should not be out of obligation but done because he wants to. St. Paul is recognizing that Onesimus still has many years

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of service in him and could greatly benefit Philemon's household, but in Philemon's sacrifice the blessings of God would flow on him and the Christian community.

**Point of Reflection:** What is our response when someone who has truly wronged us comes back to us asking forgiveness? While arguments can be said for both sides one of two lessons we can learn from St. Paul is the need to forgive. Could Onesimus, back in his own environment revert to old ways? Absolutely. But in faith St. Paul is asking us to give the one who has done the wrong the benefit of the doubt. The other lesson we can take from this is that we need to make amends. The eighth in the 12 step process of AA is: *Made a list of persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.* How many of us in our Christian walk have done a moral inventory of our lives looking for those we have hurt and then made the effort to not only face up to our sins but to go and ask the person forgiveness and the opportunity to make amends.

### **The Request Verses 15-20**

#### **Verse 15 he was away from you for a while**

In the Greek this phrase can be translated both as an active verb (went away) or a passive concept (was separated). Most scholars agree that the best translation in light of St. Paul's theology is that Philemon (and us) understand Onesimus' flight as a matter of God's intervention, of divine providence. Not that God caused the episode to happen but that in allowing the separation to happen good things can come from it. And the good that can come from this is that Philemon **might have him back forever.** If Philemon chooses to keep Onesimus as a slave then once Onesimus' time of service is done he will surely leave and never return. But if Philemon accepts Onesimus as a brother in Christ, forgiving all debt and indentured obligations then they will truly be brothers in Christ for all time. In the ongoing discussion that is Scripture interpretation one theologian (Dennis Hamm, SJ) presents another possibility as to the context of this letter. Onesimus is not a run away slave but there has been some falling out between Onesimus and Philemon and Onesimus has gone to St. Paul in hopes that he might facilitate reconciliation. In some ways this makes a lot of sense because why would Onesimus be in the company of someone who is his master's great and close friend? We can never be sure as to which was the circumstances of Onesimus being in St. Paul's company. Ah, such is the discussion of scripture.

#### **Verse 16 no longer as a slave**

This is the only time St. Paul will identify the ownership relationship between Philemon and Onesimus – as master slave. This verse suggests that the bond between Philemon and Onesimus was a treasured affiliation. The phrase **as a man** literally translates to *in the flesh* which given first century interpretation and the added already **beloved**, that Onesimus was a favored slave of Philemon. All that said what we can draw from this verse and conversation is that when Onesimus was baptized in Christ he received an identity that supersedes all other identities. St. Paul writes about this in other letters (Romans 8:14-17; 12:3-4-5; 1 Corinthians 7; Galatians 3:28) that in the eyes of God *There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus* (Galatian 3:28). As Christians we too

should work to adapt the eyes of God and see not the gender or race or nationality, not the infirmity or age but simply a brother or sister in Christ.

**Verse 17** *if you regard me as a partner, welcome him as you would me* How do you think Philemon would greet St. Paul should he come to visit? How do you and I treat a beloved friend when then seek us out? I don't know about you but there are certain friends that I would roll out the red carpet for. I would bend over backward to make them feel welcomed and at home. Now put that in the context of a master "welcoming" a possible run away slave. Or better yet think of doing the same grand welcome to someone who has really hurt or offended you. This is what St. Paul is asking not only of Philemon but all of us. In faith mercy, compassion and forgiveness should be the foundation upon which we do all things. In the same way Christ did not wait to see if we deserve His forgiveness before he forgave, we are to do the same for all those we encounter. Not just the ones we want to forgive and welcome. As for the phrase **as a partner**, we have discussed this before, while there could be a business relationship between the two (Tent making?) it is most likely that St. Paul is referring to their mutual work as missionary disciples of the Gospel.

**Verse 18** *charge it to me* There has been much speculation as to just what Onesimus did that a monetary value must be put on and St. Paul repay. Was it that Onesimus stole something, possibly to pay for his food and other necessities as he traveled. Did he damage something in the household before he left? Or could it be that St. Paul is offering to pay the amount that would be owed for the days, weeks, months of service Philemon would have benefited if Onesimus had stayed in service. We won't know. We do know that St. Paul is being very clear in the next verse – **I will pay**. This would be the natural response of a father to a son, offering to pay their debts.

**Verse 19** *I Paul, write this in my own hand* In St. Paul writing *in my own hand* it could be that he is indeed the writer of the letter and not a trick by Onesimus to get back into Philemon's good graces. It could also be that St. Paul is dictating the letter to a scribe but in this sentence St. Paul takes the quill into his own hand to verify that this not only comes from him but he is sincere in his offer to pay Onesimus' debt. Like an IOU. My only personal thought is, who in their right mind would collect such a debt from the one and only St. Paul! In case Philemon does think about collecting St. Paul appeals to Philemon's better sense (and guilt) by saying in the last statement of this verse that Philemon owes his **very self** to St. Paul.

**Verse 20** *may I profit from you* Once again St. Paul is up to his old "puny" self in writing this verse. The Greek verb used here for *profit* is the word *onaimen* which echoes with the sound and meaning of the name Onesimus. Later when St. Paul writes **refresh my heart**, he once again uses the Greek word *splanchna* (meaning bowels or innards and meaning emotional connection). He first used that word when speaking of Philemon's shepherding care of his home Church in verse 7 and again later in verse 12 speaking of St. Paul's own affection for Onesimus. So one way of understanding this verse is to recognize that St. Paul is asking for Philemon to draw upon his affections and **Welcome (Onesimus)** with the same depth as Philemon has for his own community and St. Paul has for Onesimus.

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### Good Byes and Blessings Verses 21-25

#### **Verse 21 With trust in your obedience**

The obedience St. Paul is speaking of here is Philemon's obedience to God and God's commands, not to St. Paul directly. But throughout the Old Testament and certainly adopted by the early Christians and still present today that there is an expected submission to the authority of God's chosen representative. Think in terms of our relationship to the Pope or Bishop. Interesting though, that after making a big deal about giving Philemon a choice, St. Paul is now saying... *No, choice. Do as I ask.* And what is St. Paul asking?

1. In asking that Philemon welcome Onesimus as he would St. Paul that even if Philemon choose to keep him as a slave there be no physical or financial punishment
2. In verse 13 we read that St. Paul wanted Onesimus to possibly "serve" him but most scholarship agree that what St. Paul wanted was for Onesimus to be involved in service to the mission of the Gospel.
3. **do even more than I ask** tells us that it is St. Paul's hope that Onesimus be released from all obligations of servitude in Philemon's household.

#### **Verse 22 prepare a guest room for me**

St. Paul is adding extra pressure on Philemon by letting him know that he will be coming himself to check on the situation. Scholars do turn to this verse in suggesting that this imprisonment was in Ephesus rather than Rome. The tradition is, but not written anywhere, that St. Paul went west after his time in Rome. The "you" and "yours" in the phrase **hope to be granted to you through your prayers** in the original Greek are the plural form of the word telling us that St. Paul has moved back to addressing the entire church community.

#### **Verse 23 Epaphras**

Douglas Moo, in his commentary about Colossians, writes this about Epaphras: *Little is known about him, though we can infer that he was a native of Colossae and that he was perhaps converted by Paul himself during the apostle's ministry in Ephesus.* He is mentioned one other time in the Bible (Colossians 1:7). We also know that he shared St. Paul's fate in that he was in the same prison.

#### **Verse 24 Mark**

This is the young son of one of the home churches in Jerusalem that was with St. Paul and St. Barnabas on their first missionary trip but left early, for reasons we do not know, when the company got to the city of Pamphylia (Acts 13:13). This Mark went on to write the first of the gospels.

#### **Aristarchus**

Aristarchus traveled with St. Paul in the past (Acts 19:29; 20:4) and was mentioned as a fellow prisoner with Paul in Rome in Colossians 4:10.

#### **Demas**

Also mentioned alongside Luke in Colossians 4:14. Unfortunately, according to 2 Timothy 4:10, he later abandons St. Paul.

#### **Luke**

Yes this is the same St. Luke that will later write the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. He joined St. Paul on his second missionary trip and while not a constant companion from that point meets up with St. Paul at various times eventually remaining with him in Rome during St. Paul imprisonment. It is interesting that St. Luke and St. Mark are together. One has

to wonder if they discussed the idea of writing down the story of Christ, His mission, death and resurrection.

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

With this verse we bring a close to this short document. This “your” is plural in Greek so we know that St. Paul was addressing not only Philemon but the entire home Church. This shows that St. Paul is aware his personal address to Philemon occurs in a public context and is sent with the knowledge of a number of people on the sending end. In any community, even private decisions have communal consequences.

**Final Comment:** Many scholars have criticized St. Paul for not having said more about the idea of slavery and asking, expecting Philemon to free Onesimus. In truth if Philemon had freed Onesimus without the proper inner conversion regarding their relationship, there would be no difference in their relationship. Philemon would still have authority over Onesimus because of their perspective stations in life. What St. Paul was seeking went to a deeper level than simple ownership issues. Throughout his writing he has tried to draw all his readers into understanding the vision of Christ. That, and I repeat what I wrote in Verse 16: when Onesimus was baptized in Christ he received an identity that supersedes all other identities. St. Paul writes about this in other letters (Romans 8:14-17; 12:3-5; 1 Corinthians 7; Galatians 3:28) that in the eyes of God *There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus* (Galatians 3:28). As Christians we too should work to adapt the eyes of God and see not the gender or race or nationality, not the infirmity or age but simply a brother or sister in Christ.

**Reflection Questions:**

1. When was the last time you were verbally encouraged (by word or letter) by a fellow Christian in your practice of faith? Who was it and how did you respond?
2. When was the last time you encouraged another believer? Is there someone in your life now that you may be called to consider giving inspiration and reassurance to?
3. What do you think of this notion of making recompense to those whom you have wronged? Is there anyone in your life today that you should repay for wrong doings?

**Catechism of the Catholic Church**

**Slavery: 2414**

**Human Equality: 1934-38**

**Prayers of Intercession: 2634-36**

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### Bibliography:

- [The Catholic Study Bible NAR](#)
- [The New Daily Study Bible: The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon](#) by William Barclay
- [The Navarre Bible: Captivity Letters](#)
- [New Collegeville Bible Commentary: First and Second Timothy, Titus, Philemon](#) by Terence J. Keegan
- [Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: Philippians, Colossians and Philemon](#) by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch
- [Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: Philippians, Colossians and Philemon](#), by Dennis Hamm, SJ
- [The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon](#), by Douglas Moo

## Reflections on Philemon

Joanna / June 14, 2013

And an excerpt from this week's sermon on Philemon:

Paul's basic claim in Philemon is the same as it is in Galatians 3:28: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

At least here, Paul is not arguing for an end to the institution of slavery in the Roman world—however much we might want him to. But he is arguing for an end to distinctions of class and status *within the church*. Labels and status within the broader world do not apply within the body of Christ.

Philemon views Onesimus as a useless. Paul re-presents Onesimus as useful (which is what "Onesimus" means—a cute little word play). Philemon views Onesimus as a slave. Paul re-presents Onesimus as a son, as "my own heart," as a brother.

The word of God and the testimony of the prophets make clear that there is a time and place for Christ-followers to address justice issues in our broader culture. There are times to speak out against slavery, racism, sexism, heterosexism, fear of foreigners, classism.

This little letter, however, helps us understand that the *first* calling of the church is not to *speak out* against injustice, but to actually *live out* the justice and peace Jesus taught. To live in relationships of equality regardless of how the broader culture—or even the law—says we should relate to each other. To share our resources with those in need. To welcome the stranger—whether they have legal citizenship or not.

As Martin Luther King, Jr., said, the church should be the headlights, leading the way toward justice.

Some of the light we shed may come in the form of history—or sociology or literary theory—any type of helpful academic analysis.

Some of the light we shed may come in the form of narratives—good stories told through word and image.

Some of the light we shed may be through prophetic words—institution rattling words and actions. Scripture attests to a place for all of this.

Paul's letter to Philemon, however, reminds us that much of our light comes not from what we say or write or preach, but from how we live. Especially how we live together. How we live together in love as brothers and sisters.

"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

<https://spaciousfaith.com/2013/06/14/reflections-on-philemon/>