

The Epistle Philemon



Paul,
a prisoner of Jesus Christ,
and Timothy
our brother,
unto Philemon
our dearly beloved,
and fellow laborer

- Philemon 1:1

Introduction



Philemon is a short, personal letter from Paul, written while he was in prison (around AD 60–62). It’s addressed to a man named Philemon, his household (including Apphia and Archippus), and the church that met in their home. The letter is carried by Onesimus—once a runaway household servant who met Paul, came to faith in Christ, and changed. Paul sends him back with a bold request: “Receive him no longer as a slave, but as a beloved brother. And if he owes you anything, put it on my account.”

This letter to Philemon shows what the gospel looks like when it walks into a strained relationship. Paul doesn’t bark orders. He appeals “for love’s sake,” asks for willing consent, and puts his own reputation and resources on the line to make peace. In a world that ran on status and payback, this letter lifts up forgiveness, family in Christ, and partnership for the Lord’s work.

Philemon is a good text to read after the epistle of Jude for the following reasons

Jude said: Contend for the faith and rescue those slipping (Jude 3, 22–23).

Philemon shows: How that faith contends with love—patient appeal, not pressure (Philemon 8–9, 14).

Jude warned: False voices tear the church apart (Jude 4, 12–13).

Philemon practices: What puts people back together—reconciliation and receiving one another “as you would receive me” (Philemon 16–17).

Jude called for mercy: “Have mercy on those who doubt” (Jude 22).

Philemon models mercy with cost: “If he owes you anything, charge that to me... I will repay” (Philemon 18–19).

Structure of the Epistle as a Whole

<u>Correspondences</u>	<u>Verse(s)</u>
A1 Salutation	1-2
B1 Benediction	3
C1 Prayer for Philemon	4-6
D1 Joy in Philemon—stated	7a
E Refreshing of the saints—stated	7b
F1 Right to command withheld; Paul prisoner	8-9
G1 Onesimus now “useful” to you and to me	10-11
H1 “Receive him as myself”	12
I1 Onesimus in thy stead; willing, not by necessity	13-14
H2 “Receive him as myself” (refrain)	17
G2 Beloved to me and to you; brother not slave	15-16
F2 “I do not say (though I might)”	19b
E2 “Refresh my heart”	20b
D2 Joy in Philemon—entreated	20a
C2 Confidence in Philemon; lodging requested	21-22
A2 Epistolary greetings	23-24
B2 Benediction	25

1 Paul,

- ✦ a prisoner of Jesus Christ,
- ✦ and Timothy
- ✦ our brother,
- ✦ unto Philemon
- ✦ our dearly beloved,
- ✦ and fellow laborer,

2 And to our beloved Apphia,

- ✦ and Archippus
- ✦ our fellow soldier,
- ✦ and to the church in thy house:

3 Grace to you,

- ✦ and peace,
- ✦ from God our Father
- ✦ and the Lord Jesus Christ.

4 I thank my God,

- ✦ making mention of thee always
- ✦ in my prayers,

5 Hearing of thy love and faith,

- ✦ which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus,
- ✦ and toward all saints;

6 That the communication of thy faith

- ✦ may become effectual
- ✦ by the acknowledging of every good thing
- ✦ which is in you in Christ Jesus.

7 For we have great joy and consolation in thy love,

- ✦ because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.

8 Wherefore,

- ✦ though I might be much bold in Christ
- ✦ to enjoin thee that which is convenient,

9 Yet for love's sake

- ✠ I rather beseech thee,
- ✠ being such a one as Paul the aged,
- ✠ and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

10 I beseech thee

- ✠ for my son Onesimus,
- ✠ whom I have begotten in my bonds:

11 Which in time past

- ✠ was to thee unprofitable,
- ✠ but now profitable to thee
- ✠ and to me:

12 Whom I have sent again:

- ✠ thou therefore receive him,
- ✠ that is,
- ✠ mine own bowels:

13 Whom I would have retained with me,

- ✠ that in thy stead
- ✠ he might have ministered unto me
- ✠ in the bonds of the gospel:

14 But without thy mind

- ✠ would I do nothing;
- ✠ that thy benefit should not be as it were
- ✠ of necessity,
- ✠ but willingly.

15 For perhaps he therefore departed for a season,

- ✠ that thou shouldest receive him forever;

- 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?
- 17 If thou count me therefore a partner,
✠ receive him as myself.
- 18 If he hath wronged thee,
✠ or owes thee,
✠ put that on my account;
- 19 I Paul
✠ have written it with mine own hand,
✠ I will repay it:
✠ albeit I do not say to thee
✠ how thou owes unto me
✠ even thine own self besides.
- 20 Yea, brother,
✠ let me have joy of thee in the Lord:
✠ refresh my bowels in the Lord.
- 21 Having confidence in thy obedience
✠ I wrote unto thee,
✠ knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.

22 But withal prepare me also a lodging:

✠ for I trust that through your prayers

✠ I shall be given unto you.

23 There salute thee Epaphras,

✠ my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus;

24 Marcus,

✠ Aristarchus,

✠ Demas,

✠ Lucas,

✠ my fellow laborers.

25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ

✠ be with your spirit.

✠ Amen.

Biblical Observations

Observation 1

1 Paul,

- ✦ a prisoner of Jesus Christ,
- ✦ and Timothy
- ✦ our brother,
- ✦ unto Philemon
- ✦ our dearly beloved,
- ✦ and fellow laborer,

- *Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus...* Paul leads not with his office but with his chains. By calling himself Christ's prisoner (not Rome's), he frames his suffering as under Christ's Lordship and chooses appeal over command from the opening line (see verses 8–9).
- *and Timothy our brother...* Timothy is the co-sender and noted here. This underscores shared ministry and verifies the letter's contents within a known team. Paul's appeal will be communal, not merely personal.
- *To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow worker...* Philemon is affirmed for love and labor before any request is made. This sets the tone: recognition of grace already at work becomes the ground of Paul's persuasion.

He was a respected leader with a church meeting in his home (verses 1–2) will have to live out reconciliation in front of the congregation. From the start, the greeting hints that private conflict will have public, church-shaped implications.

- *Personal Application...* Open hard conversations the way Paul opens Philemon—by honoring Christ's rule over your circumstances, affirming the other person's faith and service, and choosing the path of loving appeal rather than pulling rank.

Biblical Observations

Observation 2

2 And to our beloved Apphia,

- ✠ and Archippus
- ✠ our fellow soldier,
- ✠ and to the church in thy house:

- *Apphia our sister...* A named woman stands in the addressee line, signaling that this appeal touches the whole household. Early tradition identifies her as part of Philemon's household (likely his wife), highlighting that reconciliation decisions are family-impacting, not just individual.
- *Archippus our fellow soldier...* The military metaphor marks him as an active coworker who shares in gospel struggle and responsibility (cf. Col 4:17). Including him up front implies he has spiritual authority or ministry duties affected by Paul's request.
- *and the church in your house...* The local assembly meets under Philemon's roof. Early Christian communities often gathered in homes, which means the conflict and its resolution will be visible to the congregation. Private grievances have public discipleship consequences.

By addressing multiple stakeholders, Paul frames the issue as a community matter with communal accountability; the coming appeal will be weighed, witnessed, and modeled before the church.

- *Personal Application...* Gospel conflicts rarely stay "just between two people." Involve the real stakeholders with humility, remember your home can be a place where the church is refreshed, and treat reconciliation as a team effort that strengthens everyone's walk.

Biblical Observations

Observation 3

3 Grace to you,

- ✠ and peace,
- ✠ from God our Father
- ✠ and the Lord Jesus Christ.

- *Grace and peace...*Paul opens with the blessing that frames the whole letter: the appeal he's about to make grows out of God's grace and aims at restored peace within the church family.
- *Personal Application...*Begin hard conversations under grace and aimed at peace; pray this blessing before you speak.

Biblical Observations

Observation 4

4 I thank my God,

- ✦ making mention of thee always
- ✦ in my prayers,

5 Hearing of thy love and faith,

- ✦ which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus,
- ✦ and toward all saints;

6 That the communication of thy faith

- ✦ may become effectual
- ✦ by the acknowledging of every good thing
- ✦ which is in you in Christ Jesus.

7 For we have great joy and consolation in thy love,

- ✦ because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.

- *Thanksgiving and report...*Paul rehearse Philemon's track record of love and faith to create a gospel foundation for the appeal—affirmation before exhortation.
- *Communication of your faith...*The partnership (koinōnia) of faith becomes effective as believers recognize and put to work every good thing they share in Christ; fellowship is active, not passive.
- *Refreshing the saints...*Philemon's love has tangibly strengthened weary believers; the letter will ask him to extend that same refreshment to Onesimus.
- *Personal Application...*Name the grace you see in others and call it into action; encouragement today often prepares the heart to say "yes" tomorrow.

Biblical Observations

Observation 5

8 Wherefore,

- ✦ though I might be much bold in Christ
- ✦ to enjoin thee that which is convenient,

9 Yet for love's sake

- ✦ I rather beseech thee,
- ✦ being such a one as Paul the aged,
- ✦ and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

- *Appeal over command...* Though he has authority, Paul chooses loving persuasion, modeling leadership that values willing obedience.
- *Paul the aged and prisoner...* His chains and years are not leverage but context—he suffers under Christ’s lordship and appeals as a spiritual father, not a taskmaster.
- *Personal Application...* When you hold the “right” to insist, try the harder path: ask in love and make room for willing consent.

Biblical Observations

Observation 6

10 I beseech thee

- ✦ for my son Onesimus,
- ✦ whom I have begotten in my bonds:

11 Which in time past

- ✦ was to thee unprofitable,
- ✦ but now profitable to thee
- ✦ and to me:

12 Whom I have sent again:

- ✦ thou therefore receive him,
- ✦ that is,
- ✦ mine own bowels:

- *New birth in prison...* Onesimus became a spiritual son while Paul was in chains—God brings new life in unlikely places.
- *In time past was to thee unprofitable...* A deliberate play on his name: the gospel transforms a failed past into present usefulness to both Paul and Philemon.

Onesimus's name means "Useful." Paul plays on that: "He used to be useless to you, but now he's useful to both of us" (v. 11). Later he even says, "let me get some benefit from you" (v. 20)—using the same root as Onesimus's name. Point: in Christ, a man who wasn't living up to "Useful" is now truly useful.

- *My very heart...* Sending Onesimus back costs Paul emotionally; reconciliation often requires sending what is dearest.
- *Personal Application...* View repentant people through Christ's transforming work, not through their past failures; welcome them as family.

Biblical Observations

Observation 7

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

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

- *In your stead...*Paul sees Onesimus's service as Philemon's ministry by proxy, honoring Philemon's rightful stake in the decision.
- *But willingly...*True Christian good is voluntary; coercion empties it of spiritual value.
- *Personal Application...*Give others space to choose what is right; let generosity and forgiveness be freely offered, not extracted.

Biblical Observations

Observation 8

15 For perhaps he therefore departed for a season,
✦ that thou shouldest receive him forever;

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?

- *Providence re-read...* What looked like a loss may be God's setup for a greater gain—receiving a brother forever.
- *Above a servant...* Conversion reframes identity and relationships: social roles remain, but spiritual family takes primacy “in the Lord.”
- *Personal Application...* Ask how God might be rewriting a painful story into a redeemed relationship; treat fellow believers first as brothers. Take a minute to think of one person—your own story, a family member, a friend, a coworker, or someone you see often—who looked “too far gone.” Instead of assuming the worst, pray for them by name, send a simple word of encouragement, or offer help that points them back to Christ. This week, try:
 1. Pray daily for that person (30 seconds, by name).
 2. Send one short text or call: “Thinking of you. How can I pray for you?”
 3. If possible, invite them to coffee, church, or group.
 4. Look for signs of God's work and thank Him, even for small steps.

Consider the situation through Paul's lens here. We should strive not to write people off—just as God hasn't written us off—but that doesn't mean tolerating abuse. Love can include correction, clear boundaries, or even healthy distance while still praying, hoping, and leaving room for God to work.

Biblical Observations

Observation 9

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

18 If he hath wronged thee,
✦ or owes thee,
✦ put that on my account;

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

- *If thou count me...a partner...* The Apostle is stating if we share in Christ, then our welcome to one another must mirror how we would welcome Christ's servant—"as me."
- *Charge it to my account...* Paul offers to absorb the loss and writes a personal guarantee. This mirrors the Lord's teaching in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:23–35): a man forgiven an unpayable debt refused to forgive a small one. Point: those who have had their great debt canceled by the King must not withhold forgiveness for lesser debts. Paul models the opposite of that servant—he steps in to cancel what's owed so reconciliation can happen.
- *You owe me your very self...* This gentle reminder places Philemon's own story under grace—his life in Christ came through Paul's ministry. It echoes our Lord's words, "Freely you have received; freely give" (Matthew 10:8). Grace received should become grace extended—to Onesimus, and to others.

Personal Application...Consider how God may be calling you to "stand in the gap" (Ezekiel 22:30)—to step into a breach so peace can be restored. That can look like bearing another's burden (Galatians 6:2), offering a personal guarantee or practical help, mediating prayerfully between two sides, or choosing forgiveness over repayment. Pray by name, release the ledger, and—if appropriate—take one concrete step this week to help bridge the gap.

Biblical Observations

Observation 10

20 Yea, brother,

- ✦ let me have joy of thee in the Lord:
- ✦ refresh my bowels in the Lord.

- *Let me have joy of thee in the Lord...* From past refreshment to present...Paul invites Philemon to refresh him now as he has refreshed others—turning reputation into action.
- Personal Application...Be the kind of man who reliably brings spiritual rest to others; ask God whom you can refresh this week.

Biblical Observations

Observation 11

21 Having confidence in thy obedience

- ✦ I wrote unto thee,
- ✦ knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.

22 But withal prepare me also a lodging:

- ✦ for I trust that through your prayers
- ✦ I shall be given unto you.

- *Confidence and “more than I say”*... Paul is sure Philemon will obey—and even go beyond the minimum. He’s not twisting his arm; he’s trusting his character and the work of Christ in him.
- *Prepare me also a lodging*... Paul plans to visit after his release. That means the reconciliation won’t stay theoretical. If Paul shows up and Onesimus is there as a brother, everyone will see that Philemon truly followed through.
- *through your prayers*... Paul expects God to weave circumstances for good as the church prays—exactly what Scripture promises: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). So he both prays and acts in faith by asking for a room to be ready.
- *Personal Application*... When you ask a brother to do the right thing, speak with confidence in God’s work in him, set a clear next step you can check on, and pray believing that God can work all things together for good—even complex relationships and hard next steps.

Biblical Observations

Observation 12

23 There salute thee Epaphras,

✠ my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus;

24 Marcus,

✠ Aristarchus,

✠ Demas,

✠ Lucas,

✠ my fellow laborers.

- *The network of co-workers...*Names remind us that ministry is a team effort; faithfulness or failure (as some names later show) affects the whole body.
- **Personal Application...**Invest in gospel partnerships; your example strengthens or weakens others more than you think.

Strengthen your Christian partnerships this week with small, concrete steps:

- Cal to mind three “co-laborers” you have in your life this could be: in church, family, or work. Pray for each by name.
- Consider sending them an encouragement text: “Grateful for you” with a short prayer–
- Thank someone in front of others for their unseen faithfulness.
- Guard your own heart from quitting or drifting (see 2 Timothy 4:10 [Demas later deserted, “having loved this present world”]).

Longer note on Demas:

- Demas first appears as a fellow believer and helper in the faith (Philemon 24; Colossians 4:14) but later deserts the fellowship, Paul described this in 2 Timothy 4:10 as Demas “having loved this present world.”
- Our Lord described this type of believer in the Parable of the Sower. This is the seed that fell among thorns—the Lord described such believers as those that hear the Word but “the care of this world and the deceitfulness of riches” (and “desires for other things”) choke it so it becomes unfruitful (Matthew 13:22; Mark 4:18–19; Luke 8:14).
- Tie-in...Demas is a living example of thorny soil: once serving, later choked by worldly love. The warning is not merely about money, but any “care” that captures the heart and pushes us away from faithfulness.
- **Personal application reflection...**Consider your own personal life. Where are “thorns” choking your fruitfulness—time, attention, comfort, approval, screens, overtime, hobbies?

What one practice you can adopt this week to uproot a thorn (e.g., a media fast, a set prayer time, an act of generosity, or inviting a brother to hold me accountable) ?

Biblical Observations

Observation 13

25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ

- ✠ be with your spirit.
- ✠ Amen.

- *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ...* Paul frames the whole letter with grace at both the start (1:3) and the finish (1:25). This is intentional: every step of reconciliation—from first contact to hard conversations, to final restoration—depends on Christ’s undeserved favor, not our merit or leverage.

Grace is the atmosphere where forgiveness can breathe, where past debts are released, and where new family identity (“brother”) takes root. In other words, Paul isn’t just asking Philemon to “do the right thing”; he’s inviting him to act inside the same grace God has shown him—begin in grace, proceed in grace, and end in grace.

- Personal Application... Make grace your first and last word:
 - Before hard conversations, pray a “grace and peace” blessing (1:3) over the person.
 - During the conversation, slow down: listen first, speak gently, and keep peace in view.
 - Afterward, end with grace—affirm what you appreciate and be open to fellowship.
 - Memorize Philemon 1:25 and use it as your sign-off in texts/emails when appropriate.

Review

In this study we walked through the entire letter of Philemon (1:1–25) and traced how the gospel reshapes relationships—moving from authority to loving appeal, from distance to reconciliation, and from debt to “charge it to my account.” We watched a broken story (Onesimus) become a redeemed relationship and saw how grace frames the whole process from start to finish.

What we covered (Observations 1–13):

- **1:1** — Paul opens as “prisoner of Christ,” choosing humility and appeal over command.
- **1:2** — Apphia, Archippus, and the house-church: reconciliation is a community matter.
- **1:3** — “Grace and peace” frame the conversation.
- **1:4–7** — Thanksgiving for Philemon’s love, faith, and partnership (*koinōnia*); he “refreshes the saints.”
- **1:8–9** — Paul could command, but he pleads “for love’s sake.”
- **1:10–12** — Onesimus becomes Paul’s spiritual son; from “useless” to “useful,” and Paul sends him back as his “very heart.”
- **1:13–14** — Ministry by consent, not coercion—good must be willing.
- **1:15–16** — Providence re-read: receive him forever, “no longer as a slave but a beloved brother.”
- **1:17–19** — “Receive him as me”; “charge it to my account.” Grace received becomes grace extended.
- **1:20** — Turn reputation into action: “refresh my heart.”
- **1:21–22** — Confidence, clear next steps, and accountability (prepare a room; trust God to work).
- **1:23–24** — The ministry team—partnerships matter; faithfulness strengthens the body.
- **1:25** — Final grace: the letter begins and ends with grace.

Key takeaways:

- Lead with grace and aim for peace.
- Affirm the good you see before asking for hard things.
- Choose loving persuasion where you could pull rank.
- See repentant people through Christ’s transforming work, not just their past.
- Stand in the gap when possible—bear a cost to help others reconcile.
- Make reconciliation concrete: set next steps and pray in faith.
- Value partnerships; your steadiness (or drift) affects others.
- Keep grace as the first and last word in conflict.

Suggested next steps:

- Read Philemon aloud once this week (2–3 minutes).
- Pray for one relationship where you need to move from “rights” to “appeal in love.”
- Take one concrete step to refresh someone’s heart (call, text, coffee, practical help).
- Memorize one verse (Philemon 1:6, 1:16, or 1:20) and let it guide your actions.