

LETTER OPENING, GREETING, AND THANKSGIVING (1-7)

Paul, a prisoner for Messiah Jesus, and Timothy our brother. To Philemon our beloved fellow worker ² and Apphia our sister and 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*. ⁴ I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ hearing of your love and faithfulness which you have toward the Lord Jesus and to all the saints, ⁶ in order that the sharing of your faith may become effective in the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Messiah. ⁷ For I have taken much joy and comfort from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you brother.

The letter to Philemon is a mere 335 words, yet it raises crucial issues about slavery and the ethics of pastoral persuasion. It is the final letter in the Pauline corpus and among the most personal and pastoral in the New Testament canon. The letter is addressed primarily to Philemon but also includes Apphia, Archippus, and the church in his house. This means that we have a private letter that is placed into a wider congregational setting as the context in which the drama of Onesimus's flight and the effectiveness of Paul's mediation is played out. A household matter is put before a household church. Moreover, it is a letter that draws us into the narrative and social world of the apostle and the associated challenges that Paul faced as a missionary pastor.¹ Notably, in the letter opening, Paul offers thanksgiving praises to Philemon for the very virtues that he hopes he will express in resolving the matter concerning Onesimus.

1. Cf. Petersen 1985.

The opening self-identification of **Paul** is uniquely spelled out as a **prisoner for Messiah Jesus**, which is no doubt literal (see Phlm 9; Eph 3:1) and refers to an imprisonment most probably during his time in Ephesus. Perhaps the designation attempts to evoke a deliberate pathos, since the legal position of a slave was not dissimilar to that of a prisoner and so adds further relevance to the exhortation that Paul will make for a slave. Paul is not a prisoner of “Caesar” or the “state” but of the **Messiah Jesus**, since it is the cause of the Messiah and the gospel for which he is in chains. As elsewhere, **Timothy** is included as cosender (1 Thess 1:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:1–2; 2 Thess 1:1), but his involvement in the composition of the letter, unlike Colossians, is probably indirect. Paul writes this short and very personal letter with his own hand (v. 19). The addressee is **Philemon**, which was a fairly popular name in Phrygia, common in inscriptions and papyri.² He is described as a **beloved fellow worker**, which associates him with the Pauline mission, though in what sense is undefined (in later church tradition he is identified as the bishop of Colossae).³ Philemon may have some role in the leadership of the church that meets in his house, along with Archippus, or else he has contributed to Paul’s missionary endeavors at some point in the past. The latter is more likely in view of the reference to “partnership” in v. 17, which suggests a sharing of resources. Also named is **Apphia**, who is probably Philemon’s wife or sister. This again is a common Phrygian name, and in one instance it is found on a tombstone in the ruins of Colossae: “Hermas to his wife Apphia, the daughter of Trypho.”⁴ Regardless of her actual relation to Philemon, as the lady of the house she would have been the primary overseer of slaves in the dwelling and in the daily operation of the household. She may also have held some formal office in the house church that met in her house. **Archippus** is named next. He probably was the primary fill-in pastor in Colossae given Epaphras’s absence. Archippus was called to discharge some kind of “ministry” in the interim while Epaphras was away (Col 4:17). Importantly, the letter is also addressed, even if obliquely, to the **church in your house**. The **your** is ambiguous as it could refer to a house belonging to either Philemon, Apphia, or Archippus, but the former seems more probable given that Philemon is the first named addressee

2. *NDIEC* 3:91; 5:144.

3. *Apostolic Constitutions* 7.46.

4. Cited from Barth and Blanke 2000: 254.

and as an owner of slaves he would most likely have a dwelling capable of hosting several persons. Christians met in a variety of places and settings (outdoors, rented rooms, shops, etc.). House churches were common if a congregational member had a suitable space available for use in prayer, Scripture reading, and shared meals. The church that meets in Philemon's house remains on the periphery of the letter as Philemon's response to Paul is to be played out before them. Paul deliberately draws in the congregation as a whole in order to make them stakeholders in the outcome of his request.

Paul includes his customary grace and prayerful thanksgiving for Philemon. Special themes here are faith(fulness), the saints, joy, comfort, and refreshment, which will all appear again in the letter. The reason for Paul's thanksgiving is Philemon's **love and faithfulness** for the **Lord Jesus and to all the saints**. Indeed, Paul intends to appeal to Philemon to love Onesimus as a brother and to obey Paul's request out of gratitude to him. Paul also prays that **the sharing of your faith may become effective in the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Messiah**. This **sharing** refers to an overflow of goodness and kindness, much like a faith-in-action-through-love exhibited towards other believers (see Gal 5:6; 6:6; 1 Thess 5:15; Rom 15:2). Paul prays that other Christians, not least himself, participate in the good expression of Philemon's faith. It is both a prayer of thanks and a plea for continued generosity by Philemon. This sharing becomes **effective** through the fullness of **knowledge**. That knowledge pertains to how the good that Christians do benefits other Christians and thus Christ himself. Charles Moule notes that "good" is ordinarily mentioned by Paul as something that is done or performed rather than the object of knowledge.⁵ The **good thing** in question then is the good conduct that accompanies the sharing of one's faith, which springs out of the abundant goodness that one has already received. Put simply, out of the abundance of good things that Philemon has received through the Lord Jesus he is now to display goodness to others. The prepositional phrase **for the sake of Messiah** is ambiguous (lit. "into/for Messiah"; contrast "that we may do for Christ" [NRSV]; "every good thing we have in Christ" [NIV]; "all the good we can do for Christ" [NJB]). The preposition *eis* is probably purposive and suggests that the values embodied by the Messiah are upheld and honored in the benevolence of

5. Moule 1957: 143.

Philemon 1-7

Christians towards their brothers and sisters in the faith.⁶ In other words, Paul lauds (and will appeal) to an identical benevolence in Philemon. A further reason for Paul's thanksgiving is that Philemon's **love** for the saints occasions Paul's **joy and comfort**. This extends not only to Paul but to other **saints** (i.e., those of Paul's circle who know of Philemon, such as Epaphras) who have been **refreshed** by Philemon. The connotation here is of relief from toil and frustration through assistance. Once more the compliment implies a question. Philemon has been a means of comfort and consolation to others before; on the issue relating to Onesimus, will he be so again?

SAMPLE

6. Cf. Lohse 1971: 194; and CSB, who opt for "the glory of Christ."