

Philemon

Big Things Come in Small Packages	Paul's letter to Philemon is the shortest of Paul's 13 letters in the New Testament. It's also a Prison Epistle. Don't let it's brevity fool you though. It's one of the more impactful books in the New Testament.
The Backdrop of Philemon	Philemon was a rich Roman citizen from Colossae. He likely met Paul while he was in Ephesus and was converted to Christianity. Sometime later, when Epaphras – one of Paul's "disciples" – started a church in Colossae, Philemon became a leader of the church that met in his house. Philemon, like all household patriarchs in the Roman world, owned slaves. One of them was named Onesimus. From the context in the book, these two had a serious falling out. Onesimus wronged him in some way (how we don't know) and ran away. Eventually, Onesimus came to Paul in prison to appeal for help in some way. Onesimus becomes a Christian in that encounter. Consequently, Paul found himself in a difficult situation.
The Situation Paul Faced in Writing	Paul has led both Philemon and Onesimus to the Lord and now both are at odds with each other. Consequently, Paul writes to ask Philemon to receive Onesimus back because he advised him to return to make things right. But then Paul encourages Philemon not only to receive him back, but to embrace him as a brother in Christ and <u>no longer a slave</u> .
Theme	Philemon has two themes: The first one is forgiveness. Paul informs Philemon that forgiveness had come to his heart when he accepted Jesus. Therefore, he should extend that forgiveness to Onesimus. The second is how to view a brother or sister in Christ who has been forgiven by God just like you. The Gospel demands we view them as "brothers" and "sisters" in Christ. It demands we view them equality, regardless of social status.
Philemon in a Phrase	Forgive and embrace as Christ has forgiven and embraced you.
Key Verses	<i>¹⁸ If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. (v18-19)</i>
Structure	Philemon is a short book, only one chapter, in three parts: (1) An Opening Prayer of Thanks (1-7); (2) The Appeal to Philemon for Forgiveness, Restoration, and Acceptance of Onesimus (8-20); (3) Encouragements and Greetings (21-25). All three sections highlight the main themes.

Opening Prayer of Thanks (1-7)

If you are going to deal with a delicate situation by encouraging Philemon to forgive Onesimus and receive him as a brother/equal, then you need to start by appealing the same way to Philemon. Paul does that in the opening. It establishes the basis for the appeal that follows.

¹ Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker—² also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home: ³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. ⁶ I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. ⁷ Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people. (1-7)

The Appeal to Philemon for Forgiveness, Restoration, and Acceptance of Onesimus (8-20)

How the Appeal is Made: On the Basis of Love	<i>⁸ Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹ yet I prefer to <u>appeal to you on the basis of love</u>. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—¹⁰ that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. (8-11)</i>
Why the Appeal was Effective: Respect	<i>¹² I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. ¹³ I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴ <u>But I did not want to do anything without your consent</u>, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary (12-14).</i>
What the Appeal Was: Radical in Implication	<i>¹⁵ Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever—¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord. ¹⁷ So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. (15-17)</i>

Why the Appeal Matters: Substitutionary Atonement Imagery	<i>¹⁸ If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. (v18-19)</i>
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Encouragements and Greetings (21-25)

The important thing here is that Paul believes by faith that Philemon will receive the message and act accordingly. He knows that forgiveness received demands forgiveness dispensed.

²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask. ²² And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. ²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. ²⁴ And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers. ²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit (21-25)

“To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable in others because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.” -- C.S. Lewis