

*The Letter of
Paul to
Philemon*

An Expository
Study by
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Philemon 1:1-3

INTRODUCTION

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer, to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother. Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you--being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ--I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me. I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed

might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary. For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, 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. If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me. But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay--not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides. Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord. Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

According to verse 1, Paul is the author of this letter. Along with his co-laboring companion Timothy, he writes to Philemon and the church in his house concerning a run-away slave named Onesimus. From our reading of this letter, Onesimus stole from Philemon and ran some 1000

miles to Rome where in God's providence he met the apostle Paul. During his time with Paul he became a follower of Jesus Christ and a true asset. But Paul knowing the situation felt it was necessary to send him back to Philemon to make things right.

Writing a personal letter like this which would be read to the entire church would provide accountability for Philemon to do the right thing. This would also serve as instruction to the church on the matter of forgiveness because the theme of this letter is forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not only what we receive at salvation, but it's what we're to give to those who wrong us. Here in this letter we will learn how to do that. Whether it's in the home or in the church, we're to have a forgiving spirit. To not be forgiving is unthinkable and unbiblical. But the tendency of our fallenness is to not forgive.

The writer of Hebrews gives this warning in chapter 12, verse 15 when he says, "Looking diligently lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled." Bitterness" comes from unforgiveness. It springs us and causes trouble. Forgiveness ends bitterness. If you want freedom

from your bitterness then forgive.

John MacArthur in his book *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness* says, “Genuine forgiveness is not feigned or grudging, but is given freely as we ourselves desire to be forgiven. It involves a deliberate refusal to hold the guilt over the head of the offender. It means ending the bitterness, laying aside the anger, and refusing to dwell on the offense that has been forgiven. It is a complete letting go of any thought of retaliation or reprisal. It is, as nearly as possible, the human equivalent of what God promises—to remember the sin no more” (112).

Scripture is clear when it speaks to the subject of forgiveness. It says in Ephesians 4:32, “And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.”

Since God commands us to forgive others, refusing to do so is an act of direct disobedience against Him. And those who refuse to forgive “are worthy of the most severe kind of discipline from the hand of a loving Father” (MacArthur). Philemon knew these truths. Since he was a man who had “faith...toward the Lord Jesus and [love] toward all the saints” (v.5), he understood forgiveness. Part of refreshing the hearts of the saints is ministering

forgiveness to those who wrong you.

Paul begins this letter with what is commonly known as the salutation. A salutation in that day consisted of the writer, the readers, and the greeting and was a common practice in the early centuries which occurred among both Christians and non-Christians.

Paul begins by identifying himself as *the writer*.

I. The Writer (v.1a see also v.19)

A. He Identifies Himself as Paul

1. Paul was his Greek name

Paulos, it meant “little” or “small.”
This Roman name first occurs in Acts 13:9 and is used thereafter.

2. Saul was his Hebrew name

“As a Jew born a Roman citizen (Acts 22:28),” he had two names: The Hebrew name Saul (sauros) and the Roman name Paul. “He doubtless carried both names from birth. It was common for Jews of the Dispersion to have a Jewish name as well as a Roman name” (D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, 35).

B. He Identifies Himself as a Prisoner of Jesus Christ

1. Paul usually “adds some descriptive title or designation” to his name “indicative of his position and

authority” (Hiebert).

In nine of his thirteen letters in the New Testament, he identifies himself as an “apostle” (Rom.1:1; 1 Cor.1:1; 2 Cor.1:1; Gal.1:1; Eph.1:1; Col.1:1; 1 Tim.1:1; 2 Tim.1:1; Tit.1:1) but here he identifies himself as a “prisoner.”

D. Edmond Hiebert says, “Paul properly omits all reference to his official authority (Apostle) or distinctive position of service (Servant) as not fitting in a private and friendly letter. He rather describes himself as a ‘prisoner of Christ Jesus’ (The Thessalonian Epistles, 87-8).

2. Paul was a prisoner in Rome because of his unswerving loyalty to Christ

It wasn’t due to “any whimsical caprice on his part...but because of his devoted attachment and unswerving loyalty to Christ” (Hiebert).

“Philemon was written at the same

time as Colossians, from Rome during Paul's first imprisonment" (John MacArthur, Colossians and Philemon, 203). In fact, so was Ephesians, and Philippians. All four epistles were written in A.D. 60-62 during Paul's Roman imprisonment and are commonly referred to as the prison epistles.

Luke records in Acts 28:16-31 Paul's two year imprisonment at Rome in "his own rented house." It was here where he was allowed to receive "all who came to him" (v.30) "no one forbidding him" (v.31). It was also from here where he spent his time "preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ" (v.31).

The word that Paul uses for "prisoner" is *desmos*. It means "a captive in bonds." It comes from the root word *deo* which means "to bind."

Desmos is closely related to the word *doulos* which means a "bond-

servant.”

Paul’s use of the word *desmos* shows how he perceived himself. He was a “captive in bonds” for Jesus Christ. He refers to himself by this term 6 times in this letter (vv.1, 9, 10, 13, 22, 23). Paul said of his life to the Philippians that he had learned to be content in whatever state he was in (Phil.4:11-13). We certainly see that in this letter.

The genitive, which is the specifying case (Davis), is used also in the phrase “of Christ” to show “Christ is the owner of the prisoner and the cause of his imprisonment” (WBC, Vol.44, Col., Phile.).

C. He Identifies His Companion

“and Timothy our brother.”

Timothy (Timeotheos) means “dear to God” or “honoring God.” It comes from *time* which means, “honor, precious, to esteem” and *theos*, which means “God.”

He was “a Lycaonian, a native of either Derbe or Lystra. His father was a Greek Gentile. His mother Eunice was a Jewess of distinguished piety as was also his grandmother Lois (2 Tim. 1:5), and by them he was educated early in the Holy Scriptures of the OT (2 Tim. 3:15)” (The Complete Word Study Dictionary: NT).

1. Timothy was Paul’s associate

- a) He is mentioned in 6 of Paul’s NT letters (2 Cor.1:1; Phil.1:1; Col.1:1; 1 Thess.1:1; 2 Thess.1:1; Phile.1:1)

Paul refers to him as “my fellow worker” in Romans 16:21.

- b) He joined Paul at Lystra according to Acts 16:1-3

Luke says, “Then he came to Derbe and Lystra. And behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a certain Jewish woman who believed, but his father was Greek. 2 He was

well spoken of by the brethren who were at Lystra and Iconium. 3 Paul wanted to have him go on with him. And he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in that region, for they all knew that his father was Greek.”

- c) He became Paul’s son in the faith

Paul refers to him by this designation in both letters to him. He calls him:

(1) “my true son in the faith” (1 Tim.1:2)

(2) “my beloved son” (2 Tim.1:2)

- d) He refers to him here as “our brother” (Phile.1)

- e) He later pastored the church at Ephesus (1 Tim.1:1-4; 3:15)

2. He did not co-write this letter to

Philemon

It is clear from the use of the first person that Paul wrote this letter (“I” - vv.4, 8, 10, 12, 13, 14, 19). When he refers to Timothy in verse 7 he uses the second person “we.”

John MacArthur says that “Paul mentions Timothy here and in the other epistles (e.g., 2 Cor. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1) because he wanted him recognized as a leader and the non-apostolic heir apparent to Paul” (The MacArthur Study Bible).