

Language: English

Book: Philemon

Introduction to Philemon

Part 1: General Introduction

Outline of the Book of Philemon

1. Paul greets Philemon (1:1-3)
2. Paul makes requests of Philemon about Onesimus (1:4-21)
3. Conclusion (1:22-25)

Who wrote the Book of Philemon?

Paul wrote Philemon. Paul was from the city of Tarsus. He had been known as Saul in his early life. Before becoming a Christian, Paul was a Pharisee. He persecuted Christians. After he became a Christian, he traveled several times throughout the Roman Empire telling people about Jesus.

Paul was in a prison when he wrote this letter.

What is the Book of Philemon about?

Paul wrote this letter to a man named Philemon. Philemon was a Christian who lived in the city of Colossae. He owned a slave named Onesimus. Onesimus had run away from Philemon and possibly stole something from him as well. Onesimus went to Rome and visited Paul in prison.

Paul told Philemon that he was sending Onesimus back to him. Philemon had the right to execute Onesimus according to Roman law. But Paul said that Philemon should accept Onesimus back as a Christian brother. He even suggested that Philemon should allow Onesimus to come back to Paul and help him in prison.

How should the title of this book be translated?

Translators may choose to call this book by its traditional title, "Philemon." Or they may choose a clearer title, such as "Paul's Letter to Philemon" or "The Letter Paul wrote to Philemon."

Part 2: Important Religious and Cultural Concepts

Does this letter approve of the practice of slavery?

Paul sent Onesimus back to his former master. But that did not mean Paul thought slavery was an acceptable practice. Instead, Paul was more concerned with people serving God in whatever situation they were in.

What does Paul mean by the expressions "in Christ," "in the Lord," and others like them?

Paul used these phrases to express the idea of a very close union between Jesus Christ and believers--that believers belong to Christ. Belonging to Christ means the believer is saved and is made a friend with God.

These phrases also have specific meanings that depend on how Paul used them in a particular passage. Depending on the the context, the word "in" can mean "because of," "by means of," "that agrees with," "in submission to," "in the manner of," or "in regard to." The translator may represent those more immediate senses. But, if possible, it would be good for the translator to choose a word or phrase that represents both the immediate sense and the sense of "in union with." (See: inchrist)

Part 3: Important Translation Issues

Singular and plural "you"

In this book, the word "I" refers to Paul. The word "you" is almost always singular and refers to Philemon. The two exceptions to this are 1:22 and 1:25. There "you" refers to Philemon and the believers that met at his house.

Chapter 1

Philemon 1:1

General Information:

Three times Paul identifies himself as the author of this letter. Evidently Timothy was with him and probably wrote the words down as Paul said them. Paul greets others who meet for church at Philemon's house. All instances of "I," "me," and "my" refer to Paul. Philemon is the main person to whom this letter is written. All instances of "you" and "your" refer to him and are singular unless otherwise noted.

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and the brother Timothy, to Philemon

Your language may have a particular way of introducing the authors of a letter. Alternate translation: "I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy, our brother, are writing this letter to Philemon"

a prisoner of Christ Jesus

"a prisoner for the sake of Christ Jesus." People who opposed Paul's preaching had punished him by putting him into prison.

brother

Here this means a fellow Christian.

our dear friend

The word "our" here refers to Paul and those with him but not to the reader.

and fellow worker

"who, like us, works to spread the gospel"

Philemon 1:2

our sister ... our fellow soldier

The word "our" here refers to Paul and those with him but not to the reader.

Apphia our sister

Here "sister" means she was a believer, and not a relative. Alternate translation: "Apphia our fellow believer" or "Apphia our spiritual sister"

Archippus our fellow soldier

Paul speaks here of Archippus as if they were both soldiers in an army. He means that Archippus works hard, as Paul himself works hard, to spread the gospel. Alternate translation: "Archippus our fellow

spiritual warrior" or "Archippus, who also fights the spiritual battle with us"

Archippus

This is the name of a man in the church with Philemon.

Philemon 1:3

May grace be to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

"May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace." This is a blessing.

God our Father

The word "our" here refers to Paul, those with him, and the reader.

our Father

This is an important title for God.

Philemon 1:4

General Information:

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Philemon 1:5

General Information:

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Philemon 1:6

the sharing of your faith may be effective

Possible meanings are 1) "the way you tell others what you believe may cause them to believe also" or 2) "the way you believe the same way we do will cause good things to happen."

be effective, so you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have

"have a good result, and you will completely understand all the good things we have"

in Christ

"because of Christ" or "because we are Christ's people"

Philemon 1:7

the hearts of God's holy people have been refreshed by you

Here "hearts" is a metonym for a person's emotions or inner being. This can be stated in active form. Alternate translation: "you have encouraged believers" or "you have helped the believers"

you, brother

"you, dear brother" or "you, dear friend." Paul called Philemon "brother" because they were both believers and he was emphasizing their friendship.

Philemon 1:8

Connecting Statement:

Paul begins his plea and the reason for his letter.

all the boldness in Christ

Possible meanings are 1) "authority because of Christ" or 2) "courage because of Christ." Alternate translation: "courage because Christ has given me authority"

Philemon 1:9

yet because of love

Possible meanings: 1) "because I know that you love God's people" 2) "because you love me" or 3) "because I love you"

Philemon 1:10

General Information:

Onesimus is the name of a man. He was apparently Philemon's slave and had stolen something and run away.

my child Onesimus

"my son Onesimus." Paul speaks of the way he is friends with Onesimus as if it were the way a father and his son love each other. Onesimus was not Paul's actual son, but he received spiritual life when Paul taught him about Jesus, and Paul loved him. Alternate translation: "my spiritual son Onesimus"

Onesimus

The name "Onesimus" means "profitable" or "useful."

whom I have fathered in my chains

Here "fathered" is a metaphor that means Paul converted Onesimus to Christ. Alternate translation: "who became my spiritual son when I taught him about Christ and he received new life while I was in my chains" or "who became like a son to me while I was in my chains"

in my chains

Prisoners were often bound in chains. Paul was in prison when he taught Onesimus and was still in prison when he wrote this letter. Alternate

translation: "while I have been in prison" or "while I was in prison"

Philemon 1:11

General Information:

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Philemon 1:12

I have sent him back to you

Paul was probably sending Onesimus with another believer who carried this letter.

who is my very heart

Here "heart" is a metonym for a person's emotions. The phrase "who is my very heart" is a metaphor for someone whom the speaker loves dearly. Paul was saying this about Onesimus. Alternate translation: "whom I love dearly"

Philemon 1:13

so he could serve me for you

"so that, since you cannot be here, he might help me" or "so that he could help me in your place"

while I am in chains

Prisoners were often bound in chains. Paul was in prison when he taught Onesimus and was still in prison when he wrote this letter. Alternate translation: "while I am in prison"

for the sake of the gospel

Paul was in prison because he preached the gospel publicly. This can be stated explicitly. Alternate translation: "because I preach the gospel"

Philemon 1:14

But I did not want to do anything without your consent

Paul states a double negative to mean the opposite. Alternate translation: "But I wanted to make sure that you approved of everything I did"

I did not want your good deed to be from necessity but from good will

"I did not want you to do this good deed because I commanded you to do it, but because you wanted to do it"

but from good will

"but because you freely chose to do the right thing"

Philemon 1:15

Perhaps for this he was separated from you for a time, so that

This can be stated in active form. Alternate translation: "Perhaps the reason God took Onesimus away from you for a time was so that"

for a time

"during this time"

Philemon 1:16

better than a slave
"more valuable than a slave"

a beloved brother
"a dear brother" or "a precious brother in Christ"

much more so to you
"he means even more to you"

in both the flesh
"both as a man." Paul is referring to Onesimus' being a trustworthy servant.

in the Lord
"as a brother in the Lord" or "because he belongs to the Lord"

Philemon 1:17

if you have me as a partner
"if you think of me as a fellow worker for Christ"

Philemon 1:18

charge that to me
"say that I am the one who owes you"

Philemon 1:19

I, Paul, write this with my own hand
"I, Paul, write this myself." Paul wrote this part with his own hand so that Philemon would know that the words were really from Paul. Paul really would pay him.

not to mention
"I do not need to remind you" or "You already know." Paul says he does not need to tell Philemon this, but then continues to tell him anyway. This emphasizes the truth of what Paul is telling him.

you owe me your own self
"you owe me your own life." Paul was implying that Philemon should not say that Onesimus or Paul owed him anything because Philemon owed Paul even more. The reason Philemon owed Paul his life can be made explicit. Alternate translation: "you owe me much because I saved your life" or "you owe me your own life because what I told you saved your life"

Philemon 1:20

refresh my heart in Christ
Here "refresh" is a metaphor for comfort or encourage. Here "heart" is a metonym for a person's feelings, thoughts, or inner being. How Paul wanted Philemon to refresh his heart can be made explicit. Alternate translation: "encourage me

in Christ" or "comfort me in Christ" or "refresh my heart in Christ by accepting Onesimus kindly"

Philemon 1:21

General Information:
Here the words "your" and "you" are singular and refer to Philemon.

Connecting Statement:
Paul closes his letter and speaks a blessing on Philemon and the believers that meet for church in Philemon's house.

Confident about your obedience
"Because I am sure that you will do what I ask"

Philemon 1:22

At the same time
"Also"

prepare a guest room for me
"make a room in your house ready for me." Paul is addressing Philemon here, so the word "prepare" is singular.

for I hope that through your prayers I will be returned to you
Paul is confident that he will return to Philemon and the other Christians there. This can be stated in active form. Alternate translation: "for I confidently expect that God will answer your prayers and send me back to you"

your ... you
These words are plural and refer to Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the other Christians that meet in their home.

Philemon 1:23

Epaphras
This man is a fellow believer and prisoner with Paul.

my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus
"who is in prison with me because he serves Christ Jesus"

Philemon 1:24

So do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers
"Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers, also greet you"

Mark ... Aristarchus ... Demas ... Luke
These are names of men.

my fellow workers
"the men who work with me" or "who all work with me."

Philemon 1:25

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit
The word "your" here refers to Philemon and all who met in his house and so is plural. The words

"your spirit" are a synecdoche and represent the people themselves. Alternate translation: "May our Lord Jesus Christ be kind to you"