

CHAPTER 9

OUTLINE OF PHILEMON

As was the case with Colossians, these notes will follow the outline of F. F. Bruce in the NIC, new edition. The translation is simply a literal translation from the Greek.

Prescript (vv. 1-3)

v. 1, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus and Timothy the brother

“A prisoner”; a few texts have “apostle,” or “servant.”

“Of Christ Jesus,” i.e., for the sake of Christ.

“And Timothy,” joins in writing; but primary author is Paul (cf. vv. 4, 9, etc.).

To the beloved Philemon and our fellow-worker, (v. 2) and to Apphia the sister and to Archippus our fellow-soldier and to the church at your house;

Philemon probably known to Paul, a convert of Paul’s (v. 19).

Apphia probably Philemon’s wife.

Archippus probably Philemon’s son (cf. Col 4:17), could have been the minister in absence of Epaphras.

House-church, part of the congregation at Colossae; included in the address, although the letter primarily for Philemon alone; parts of the letter would be relevant for the church.

v. 3, Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Customary invocation.

Plural “you” replaced with singular until end of letter (v. 22b, and then in v. 24); bulk of the letter for Philemon alone.

Thanksgiving for news of Philemon's liberality (vv. 4-7)

Before making his specific request, Paul thanks God, and Philemon indirectly, for Philemon's Christian reputation, especially for his kindness and help to the church and to individual Christians. The request Paul will make for Onesimus will call upon Philemon to exercise this grace to a greater degree.

v. 4, I give thanks to my God, always making remembrance of you in my prayers,

"I give thanks," customary present.

"Always," could go with "give thanks," but probably with following participle, "making remembrance."

"Making remembrance," first of two participles modifying "give thanks"; modal participle, explaining how Paul gives thanks.

"You" is singular; continues singular for most of book.

v. 5, Hearing of your love and the faith which you have to the Lord Jesus and unto all the saints,

"Hearing," second participle modifying "give thanks," causal use; reason for giving thanks.

"Love and faith . . . Lord Jesus and saints"; chiasm; love to saints, faith in Lord Jesus; some MSS reverse "love and faith" to eliminate the chiasm; B. suggests "love and loyalty," making both terms apply to both objects.

The terms used by Paul in this introductory thanksgiving and prayer are closely related to the main requests of the letter. B. (p. 208, n. 23) notes these parallels:

My prayers (4)	Your prayers (22)
Your love (5)	On account of the love (9)
The fellowship (6)	Partner (17)
Every good thing in us (6)	Your good (14)
The hearts of the saints are refreshed (7)	Refresh my heart (20)

v. 6, So that the fellowship of your faith might be effective in the knowledge of every good thing which is in us unto Christ;

"So that," implies the verb "we pray"; gives the content of Paul's prayers for Philemon.

“Fellowship,” *koinonia*, sharing, both in spiritual and material ways; “liberality.”

“Of your faith,” genitive of source; faith inspires sharing.

“Will be effective,” will produce a good result for those who receive it, but (in light of the following phrase) for Philemon himself; it will bring him blessing from God (cf. 2 Cor 9:6).

“In the knowledge of every good thing,” i.e., in experiencing all the good blessings.

“Which is in us unto Christ,” i.e., which we have in Christ; the blessings to which we are entitled by our union with Christ and obedience to him.

Note O’B’s translation of v. 6 (p. 275): “I pray that your generosity, which arises from your faith, may lead you effectively into a deeper understanding and experience of every blessing which belongs to us as fellow-members in the body of Christ.”

v. 7, For I had great joy and comfort because of your love, because the hearts of the saints are refreshed through you, brother.

“For,” reason for Paul’s prayers; Paul inspired to pray for these blessings on Philemon, because he himself was blessed because of Philemon.

“I had great joy and comfort,” when he heard; Paul rejoices in good deeds of his spiritual children (1 Thess 2:19-20; 3:7-8; cf. 3 John 3-4).

“Because of your love,” lit. “on the occasion of your love,” when Philemon exercised his liberality in helping the saints.

“Hearts of the saints,” lit. “bowels of the saints,” used for liver, kidneys, etc.; means inmost feelings; “hearts” a better translation for modern culture.

Paul’s request (vv. 8-14)

This section is the heart of the letter, the primary reason for writing. Having laid the groundwork by recognizing Philemon’s past generosity and grace to the Christians, Paul now calls upon him exercise these same traits by forgiving and receiving back his runaway slave Onesimus.

v. 8, Wherefore, having great boldness in Christ to command to you that which is proper,

“Wherefore,” from transition verse 7, Paul introduces his request.

“Having great boldness . . . to command,” concessive use of participle, “although I have”; apostolic authority; note that Paul did not introduce himself as an apostle in v. 1; cf. approach to the Thessalonians (1 Thess 2:6-7).

“What is proper,” Philemon to remember that he is a master under God’s sovereignty, not for personal merit (Col 4:1); Christians required to forgive those who offend us (cf. Lord’s Prayer, and parable of unjust steward).

v. 9, Rather, on account of love I exhort, being such a one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—

“Rather, on account of love,” instead of invoking authority, Paul appeals to his love for Philemon, and Philemon’s love for him; love the fulfilling of the law (Rom 13:10).

“Exhort,” request still has moral force.

“The aged,” *presbutes*; different from comparative form *presbuteros*, “elder,” often used for church office.

Some translate this term as “ambassador,” normally but not always spelled differently, *presbeutes*; B. 212; cf. Eph 6:20, “an ambassador in chains.”

“Also a prisoner,” Paul appeals to his weakness in the flesh as a suitable reason for modesty in presenting his request, and also for some sympathy from Philemon in granting it.

v. 10, I exhort you concerning my own child, whom I have begotten in my bonds, Onesimus,

“Exhort concerning,” strong possibility this could be a request for Philemon to send Onesimus back to Paul (B. 212 n. 57); would equal “ask for.”

“My own child,” strong possessive construction; other of Paul’s “children” were Timothy, Titus, Corinthian Christians, Galatian Christians (B. 213).

“Whom I have begotten in my bonds,” while in prison; Paul witnessed to Onesimus, won him to the Lord (as he earlier had Philemon, v. 19).

“Onesimus,” not named until end of verse, builds up interest and allows positive comments before naming him; accusative by attraction to pronoun.

v. 11, Who once (was) useless to you, but now is useful [both] to you and to me,

After naming Onesimus, Paul describes him with a series of three adjective clauses introduced by the article *ton* or the relative pronoun *hon* (vv. 11, 12, 13).

This first clause describes the change in his character since becoming a Christian.

Name Onesimus from *onesimos* (Class.) “useful, profitable,” from verb *oninemi*, “to profit, benefit, help”; root used in v. 11 is different, but a synonym, *chrestos*, “useful, serviceable” [this name used by Suetonius when talking about riots in Rome, probably should have been *christos*, referring to Christ].

“Useless . . . useful,” *achreston* . . . *euchreston*; change in character (cf. thief in Eph 4:28).

“To you and to me,” Philemon will find him useful now, either working in his house, or as his representative to help Paul.

v. 12, Whom I have sent back to you, him, that is my own heart:

The second clause describes Paul’s actions concerning Onesimus: he is sending him back, in spite of his great affection for him.

“I have sent back,” epistolary aorist; actually was to bear the letter (also Colossians, Col 4:9).

“Him,” added for emphasis.

“My own heart,” lit. “bowels,” great emotion bound Paul to Onesimus.

v. 13, Whom I was wishing to retain for myself, that in your behalf he might minister to me in the bonds of the gospel.

The third clause describes Paul’s attitude and motives as he sends Onesimus back. It is an indirect request for Philemon to return Onesimus to him in Rome.

“I was wishing,” impf. tense emphasizes intensity and duration of Paul’s desire; A. T. Robertson prefers a “potential imperfect,” “I might have wished.”

“In your behalf,” since Philemon cannot be with Paul, Onesimus stands as his representative (cf. Epaphroditus fulfilling this function for the Philippians, Phil 2:30).

“The bonds of the gospel,” genitive of source; Paul’s preaching of the gospel caused his imprisonment (cf. Acts 23:6).

v. 14, But without your knowledge I wished to do nothing, that your good (work) might not be according to necessity but according to free-will.

Paul explains why he decided not to retain Onesimus. He would have been presuming on Philemon’s generosity.

“I wished to do nothing,” aorist indicates decision; as opposed to imperfect for Paul’s desire to retain Onesimus.

“Your good,” Philemon’s generosity in supplying someone from his household to help Paul in prison.

“Not necessity . . . but . . . free-will,” not force of circumstances forcing Philemon, but his free choice to send Onesimus (not just responding to a letter, but with the slave in hand).

“Necessity,” cf. 2 Cor 9:7, not giving by compulsion.

“Free-will,” *hekousios*, (NT *hapax*).

The request reinforced (vv. 15-20)

This letter is asking Philemon to receive and forgive Onesimus, and perhaps even to send him back to Paul. In this section Paul emphasizes the moral obligation that Philemon is under to do this.

v. 15, For perhaps on account of this he was separated for an hour, that you might have him back forever.

“Perhaps,” only here & Rom 5:7, a suggestion as to the reason for God’s providence in Onesimus’ flight; B. believes Paul says “perhaps,” because he hopes Philemon will send him back.

“He was separated,” passive, God’s providence; cf. Joseph (Gen 45:5).

“For an hour,” “forever,” brief interval (2 Cor 7:8; Gal 2:5) vs. length of Christian fellowship.

“Have him back,” *apecho*, pay in full, receive him back entirely, heart as well as body.

v. 16, No longer as a slave, but above a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, and how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

“No longer as a slave,” may refer to a requirement for manumission, but probably not; rather, “no longer (only) as a slave”; negative used for contrast (as 1 Cor 1:17); B. seems too strong to say, “He writes as one who assumes that Philemon will do the decent thing—that he will take legal steps to change the master-slave relationship” (p. 217); unless there were circumstances peculiar to Onesimus’ situation (one might consider his voluntary return), it is hard to see why Philemon should feel obligated to free him.

“But as a beloved brother,” Christian fellowship overcoming social divisions.

“To me . . . more to you,” beloved to Paul for his conversion and service, more to Philemon for his life-long fellowship and close relation; “especially,” most of all, and then “more especially,” great emphasis.

“In the flesh and in the Lord,” as a slave, and as a Christian brother.

v. 17, Therefore, if you have me as a partner, receive him as myself.

“Therefore,” based on the new relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, and Paul’s with both.

“If you have,” first class condition, assumes the case; “have” = “hold” (Luke 14:18; Phil 2:29).

“Me as a partner,” *koinonos*, more specific than the *koinonia* of v. 6; Philemon probably assisted Paul’s work.

“Receive him,” *proslambano*, formal reception; Christians to “receive” each other as Christ “receives” them (Rom 15:7).

“As myself,” an extension of Paul, as he will in v. 22; appropriate since Onesimus was Paul’s “own heart” (v. 12).

v. 18, And if he has wronged you or owes anything, charge this to my account:

“If,” first class condition; may have stolen property, have caused expense and inconvenience, certainly stole his time and services.

“Charge this to my account,” *elloga* is pres. impv. of *ellogao* (only here & Rom 5:13).

v. 19, I Paul have written with my own hand, I will repay:

“I Paul have written,” epistolary aorist “with my own hand,” takes pen, writes with manacled hand, his IOU.

“I will repay,” legally binding note; Paul had resources (offerings from churches, possible inheritance (cf. Acts 23:16; Rom 16:7, 11, 21; Felix’s estimation in Acts 24:26)).

That I do not say to you that you owe even yourself to me.

Here is Paul’s gentle humor. While he is sincerely willing to repay this great debt, he at the same time reminds Philemon of the even greater benefit he has given him. He introduces this remark most gently: “that I do not say to you” (NIV, “not to mention”); then he does mention it, but not specifically.

“That I do not say”; cf. 2 Cor 9:4.

“You owe besides,” *prosopheilo*, owe in addition.

“Even yourself,” Philemon probably a convert of Paul’s, perhaps in Ephesus during Paul’s third missionary journey (since Paul had not been in Colossae, Col 2:1).

We are to forgive those who are indebted to us, since we owe God so much (Matt 6:14-15; 18:21-35). In addition to this fact, Philemon owed a debt to Paul for bringing the gospel to him. If he seeks the spread of the gospel, he will forgive this debt Paul has assumed.

v. 20, Yes, brother, may I myself have “profit” in the Lord from you; refresh my heart in Christ.

Here Paul is the most specific in calling on Philemon to graciously receive Onesimus, and in going beyond, to forgive the debt and even send him back to Paul.

“May I have ‘profit,’” aorist optative of wish from *oninamai*, “have benefit, profit, joy” (NT *hapax*), play on words; same root of name Onesimus, “profitable” (cf. v. 11, with different root).

“Refresh my heart,” lit. “bowels,” as in v. 7; Philemon can now show his character by refreshing Paul, as he as other Christians.

Promise of a visit (vv. 21-22)

The main burden of the letter now being delivered, Paul makes a transition and brings up the second item, his planned visit.

v. 21, Being persuaded regarding your obedience I have written to you, knowing that you will even do above the things I say.

“Being persuaded,” pf. pt., he already was persuaded and now is confident.

“Your obedience,” bold yet fatherly and apostolic; one command was given (v. 17, “receive him as myself”).

“I have written,” epistolary aorist; perhaps in own handwriting here at end of letter (starting with v. 21).

“Knowing that you will do above,” Philemon will exceed this minimum requirement (possibilities: receive him joyfully, forgive debt, send back to Paul, even set Onesimus free and keep him as a hired servant).

v. 22, And at the same time also prepare for me a guest-room, for I hope that through your prayers I will be granted to you.

“At the same time,” as you receive Onesimus; perhaps expected a fairly soon release.

“A guest-room,” either in town, or (probably) in Philemon’s house (since the impv. is 2nd sing.).

“I will be granted,” “given graciously” (bad, Acts 25:11; good, Acts 3:14), released by the Romans by God’s grace.

“Your prayers . . . to you,” resumes 2nd plural temporarily, until v. 25; need to visit Asian churches, even though previous plans had him going next to Rome (cf. Acts 20:25, 38; Rom 15:23).

Greetings from Paul’s companions (vv. 23-24)

[For names and comparison with Col. 4:10-14, see notes on Introduction to Colossians]

v. 23, Greet you Epaphras my fellow captive in Christ Jesus, (v. 24) Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers.

All these five men are named in Colossians as well.

“Epaphras,” receives primary notice, as their pastor.

“Fellow-captive,” term of military capture, as in Col 4:10 (Aristarchus).

Jesus-Justus to only one in Col 4 not mentioned here; perhaps moved to another location.

Final benediction (v. 25)

v. 25, The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ (be) with your spirit.

“Your,” plural, referring to all church in Colossae.

Same form as Phil 4:23.

“Grace,” appropriate for this letter, which calls on Philemon to exercise grace himself.

“With your spirit” = “with you.”