

Philemon

Syllabus

1. The course requirements are as follows: the student will read the text of Philemon in Greek.
2. The student will read a commentary of his or her choosing on the book of Philemon.
3. The participant shall write a 4-5 page paper at the conclusion of the course describing their understanding of the text of the letter including all introductory matters.
4. The course grade will consist entirely of this written work.
5. The student is required to read the following commentary by the course instructor along with the commentary of their choosing (2 above).

Introductory Matters

Philemon is the shortest of all Paul's letters. The subject of the letter, Onesimus, became Bishop of Ephesus according to an early tradition of the Church. The letter's recipient was Philemon along with Archippus, Apphia, and the community which gathered in their house. Evidently they lived in Colossae. The letter was written because Onesimus, a slave, had run away. That was not uncommon in the Roman world. Paul did not write simply as a private individual to Philemon about this situation but as an apostle. Onesimus should be received as a Christian brother and not as a runaway slave subject to the death penalty. Evidence suggests that Paul wrote this letter while in prison in Rome sometime around 60-61 AD.

On the question of slavery in Christianity, we can make four observations. 1) Slaves are involved in serving Christ. 2) Owners have a master in heaven. 3) God deals impartially with master and slave. 4) Both are bond-servants of Christ. Though Paul nowhere calls for the abolition of slavery, FF Bruce wisely notes that "what this letter does is to bring us into an atmosphere in which the institution of slavery could only wilt and die". Being Brothers in Christ abolishes such distinctions and the terms slave and master are transcended, even superseded.

Phle 1:1 Παῦλος δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ καὶ Τιμόθεος ὁ ἀδελφὸς
Φιλήμονι τῷ ἀγαπητῷ καὶ συνεργῷ ἡμῶν

Philemon belongs to a community of mutual love and has demonstrated his love in the past. This note of mutual love echoes throughout the entire letter.

2 καὶ Ἀφίῃ τῇ ἀδελφῇ καὶ Ἀρχίππῳ τῷ συστρατιώτῃ ἡμῶν καὶ τῇ κατ' οἶκόν σου ἐκκλησίᾳ,

The folk named here are not recipients of the letter but merely greeted as a courtesy. Apphia was most likely Philemon's wife, and Archippus their son- as this was the normal order of greeting when one addressed a person and his family. Archippus is noted as one who had labored with Paul in his missionary labors. The Church which meets in their house is also greeted, as a courtesy.

3 χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη ἀπὸ θεοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ.

Paul's greeting indicates a deep prayerful concern for Philemon, Apphia, Archippus and the church that meets in Philemon's house, and that they might understand and appreciate more fully the grace of God in which they stand.

4 Εὐχαριστῶ τῷ θεῷ μου πάντοτε μνησίαν σου ποιούμενος ἐπὶ τῶν προσευχῶν μου,

Once again Paul begins a letter by mentioning that he gives thanks to God for the recipient. See the companion letter, Colossians. Πάντοτε "Continually" means he did not forget Philemon in his regular prayers.

5 ἀκούων σου τὴν ἀγάπην καὶ τὴν πίστιν, ἣν ἔχεις πρὸς τὸν κύριον Ἰησοῦν καὶ εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἀγίους,

ἀκούων expresses continuity and duration; it suggests that Paul had received up to date information about him.

Πίστιν means faithfulness towards Jesus and God's people.

6 ὅπως ἡ κοινωνία τῆς πίστεώς σου ἐνεργῆς γένηται ἐν ἐπιγνώσει παντὸς ἀγαθοῦ τοῦ ἐν ἡμῖν εἰς Χριστόν.

This is an intercession concerning Philemon's generosity. Intercessory prayer springs out of the prayer of thanksgiving. Paul could not give thanks for the love and faith of his colleague without making intercession for him.

ἡ κοινωνία τῆς πίστεώς σου = your fellowship with other Christians created by faith.

ἐνεργῆς means "effective" rather than "active". This stresses the fact that we are being brought always into a closer relationship with Christ. In sum the verse says "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".

7 χαρὰν γὰρ πολλὴν ἔσχον καὶ παράκλησιν ἐπὶ τῇ ἀγάπῃ σου, ὅτι τὰ σπλάγχνα τῶν ἀγίων ἀναπέπαιται διὰ σοῦ, ἀδελφέ.

In this simple transition important ideas from both the thanksgiving and the body of the letter are mentioned or anticipated. He again mentions Philemon's love. The second clause of the verse may indicate that Paul has learned of one particular deed by which Philemon has helped the congregation.

τὰ σπλάγχνα Designates pity or sympathy or tender mercy. Because Philemon had acted in this manner towards others, Paul expects he will act in the same way towards Onesimus.

ἀναπέπαιται means to cause to give rest, refresh, taking rest in a literal sense, or calming someone who is disturbed or upset.

8 Διὸ πολλὴν ἐν Χριστῷ παρρησίαν ἔχων ἐπιτάσσειν σοι τὸ ἀνῆκον

This section (vv8-20) is the heart of the letter, and it is an intercession for Onesimus. The introductory word Διο links it with everything said thus far. παρρησίαν describes someone who can speak out freely.

9 διὰ τὴν ἀγάπην μᾶλλον παρακαλῶ, τοιοῦτος ὢν ὡς Παῦλος πρεσβύτης νυνὶ δὲ καὶ δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ.

Paul does not intend to force compliance, instead he bases his appeal on the love of Christ. He wants Philemon to consent freely. Because he knows of Philemon's kindness and generosity in the past that he is able to entreat rather than command, and he looks forward to Philemon's love being shown once again.

τοιοῦτος ὢν = "since this is the sort of person I am"

πρεσβύτης can also denote an envoy and is not restricted to chronological age. Cf. Eph 6:20.

δέσμιος - prisoner, he shares in the suffering of Christ.

10 παρακαλῶ σε περὶ τοῦ ἐμοῦ τέκνου, ὃν ἐγέννησα ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς, Ὀνήσιμον,

"I encourage" is repeated yet again. He is reinforcing the theme of the letter- a request.

This may have been the first word Philemon had heard of Onesimus since he ran away.

Paul establishes the fact that he is a Christian, and this is very important for how Philemon can be expected to receive him. Onesimus means "helpful, profitable".

τοῦ ἐμοῦ τέκνου, ὃν ἐγέννησα denotes the image of spiritual parenthood. There are numerous references to this in the New Testament- 1 Cor 4:15, 2 Tim 1:2, Titus 1:4.

Likewise, in the Babylonian Talmud, "when a man teaches the son of another the Torah, the Scripture treats him as if he had fathered him". It was also believed that the Jew who

wins another to faith satisfies in an ideal manner the injunction to be fruitful and multiply.

Since Onesimus is Paul's son, he is therefore Philemon's brother!

11 τόν ποτέ σοι ἄχρηστον νυνὶ δὲ [καὶ] σοὶ καὶ ἔμοι εὐχρηστον,

ἄχρηστον / εὐχρηστον contrasts what Onesimus had once been and has since he met Christ now become. From useless to useful. This contrast between useful and useless occurs everywhere in Greek literature from Plato to the Shepherd of Hermas. Phrygian slaves were well known for being unreliable and unfaithful. Onesimus has become a different person. That is the mark of genuine conversion.

12 ὃν ἀνέπεμψά σοι, αὐτόν, τοῦτ' ἔστιν τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα·

ἀνέπεμψά epistolary aorist. Such use of the aorist means the writer is placing himself in the situation of the readers- and should be translated as a present tense verb.

Runaway slaves of the day were often taken to market and sold and the price obtained returned to the original owner. So far as Jewish law was concerned on the matter, see Dt 23:15-16. Paul thus expects Philemon to recognize that Paul is under no obligation to return Onesimus. But the rabbinic interpretation (BT Gittin 45a) is that it refers to a slave (including a gentile slave) who fled from outside the Land of Israel to the Land. The Medieval commentators noted that the reasoning is that if he fled from idol worship to Israel, than he should not be forced to return to idol worship.

ἔστιν τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα = he is very dear to me. He doesn't mean that Onesimus is literally his bowel!

13 Ὅν ἐγὼ ἐβουλόμην πρὸς ἑμαυτὸν κατέχειν, ἵνα ὑπὲρ σοῦ μοι διακονῆ ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς τοῦ εὐαγγελίου,

ἐβουλόμην = imperfect middle indicative, wish, will, would like. It would have been his preference. Imperfect verbs frequently indicate desire but not actuality. Aorist verbs are verbs of actual occurrence (see ἠθέλησα in the following verse).

ὑπὲρ σου = as your representative.

14 χωρὶς δὲ τῆς σῆς γνώμης οὐδὲν ἠθέλησα ποιῆσαι, ἵνα μὴ ὡς κατὰ ἀνάγκην τὸ ἀγαθόν σου ἦ ἀλλὰ κατὰ ἐκούσιον.

γνώμης Means “opinion” or “decision” and here has the connotation of “previous knowledge”.

ἵνα μὴ ὡς κατὰ ἀνάγκην τὸ ἀγαθόν σου ἦ ἀλλὰ κατὰ ἐκούσιον is Paul's way of saying that Philemon's action should be spontaneous and not forced.

15 Τάχα γὰρ διὰ τοῦτο ἐχωρίσθη πρὸς ὥραν, ἵνα αἰώνιον αὐτὸν ἀπέχης,

Τάχα implies possibility. πρὸς ὥραν literally means “for an hour”. When something is but an hour it is quite insignificant when compared with its lasting consequences. Consequences are often far more important than actions.

16 οὐκέτι ὡς δοῦλον ἀλλ’ ὑπὲρ δοῦλον, ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν, μάλιστα ἐμοί, πόσω δὲ μᾶλλον σοὶ καὶ ἐν σαρκὶ καὶ ἐν κυρίῳ.

Onesimus will be far more than a slave to his master. Cf. I Cor 7:20-24. ὑπὲρ when used with the accusative means “beyond” or “more than”. There was no religious organization in the ancient near east or roman world which included a slave as a brother. Paul and the early church are unique in this.

μάλιστα is a superlative form meaning especially. If Onesimus is a beloved brother for Paul than he is even more than that for Philemon.

17 εἰ οὖν με ἔχεις κοινωνόν, προσλαβοῦ αὐτὸν ὡς ἐμέ.

Paul bases his appeal on the partnership he shares with Philemon. Paul doesn’t just intercede for Onesimus, he identifies with him.

18 εἰ δέ τι ἠδίκησέν σε ἢ ὀφείλει, τοῦτο ἐμοὶ ἐλλόγα.

There would have been serious financial consequences when a slave ran away. Loss of labor, loss of investment (the price of the slave), and cost of replacement. Further, to get all the way to Rome Onesimus most likely would have had to stolen funds. It was, after all, 900 or so miles away. ἐλλόγα was a commercial term that meant “to charge to someone’s account.

19 ἐγὼ Παῦλος ἔγραψα τῇ ἐμῇ χειρὶ, ἐγὼ ἀποτίσω· ἵνα μὴ λέγω σοὶ ὅτι καὶ σεαυτὸν μοι προσοφείλεις.

ἐγὼ Παῦλος ἔγραψα τῇ ἐμῇ χειρὶ, ἐγὼ ἀποτίσω This parenthetical segment is Paul’s IOU. Note the emphatic ἐγὼ. The rest of the sentence harkens back to verse 18. Paul gently reminds Philemon that he owes Paul a lot more than Onesimus owes him!

20 ναὶ ἀδελφέ, ἐγὼ σου ὀναίμην ἐν κυρίῳ· ἀνάπαυσόν μου τὰ σπλάγχνα ἐν Χριστῷ.

ὀναίμην in the first person optative means “may I have benefit”.

21 Πεποιθῶς τῇ ὑπακοῇ σου ἔγραψά σοι, εἰδὼς ὅτι καὶ ὑπὲρ ἃ λέγω ποιήσεις.

ὑπακοῇ means obedience rather than willingness. Obedience is the only proper response to the command of an Apostle.

22 ἅμα δὲ καὶ ἐτοίμαζέ μοι ξενίαν· ἐλπίζω γὰρ ὅτι διὰ τῶν προσευχῶν ὑμῶν χαρισθήσομαι ὑμῖν.

ξενίαν denotes hospitality and even entertainment; but it also even means “a guestroom”, which seems the sense used here. The outcome of Paul’s imprisonment is completely in the hands of God. Paul’s release would benefit them- and that is why he desires it.

23 Ἀσπάζεται σε Ἐπαφρᾶς ὁ συναιχμάλωτός μου ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ,

See Col 4:10-14.

24 Μάρκος, Ἀρίσταρχος, Δημᾶς, Λουκᾶς, οἱ συνεργοί μου.

25 Ἡ χάρις τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ μετὰ τοῦ πνεύματος ὑμῶν.

Appendix

Dä Briäaf vom Pàulus an Filemoon- Zürichdeutsch

- (1) Dä Pàulus, än Gfangnä vo Jesus Chrischtus, und dä Brüädär Timooteus an ggliäbtä Filemoon, äm Mitarbätär vo öis,
- (2) und ad Schwöschtär Afia, an Archippus, öisä Mitkäämpfär, und ad Gmàind, wo sich I dim Huus trift.
- (3) Gnaad und Fridä übär Öi vo Got, öisäm Vatär, und vom Här Jesus Chrischtus.
- (4) Ich dankä mim Got, indem ich i miinä Gebät immär a Diich tànkä,
- (5) wel ich vo diinärä Liäbi und vom Gläubä ghöörä, wo Du an Här Jesus und alnä Häiligä gägänübär hàsch,
- (6) und das Gmàinschaft vo Dim Gläubä wërksaam wird, indem Du s'Guàtän ärchànsch, wo miir im Hiiblik uf Chrischtus händ.
- (7) Ich ha grossi Fröid und grossä Trooscht dur Dini Liäbi, wel d'Häärtsä vo dä Häiligä dur Dich, Bruädär, uufgschtelt wordä sind.
- (8) Drum möcht ich, obwool ich diä groossi Freihàit in Chrischtus heti, Diir öpis tsbefelä,
- (9) Dich àifach bitä - wels ja um d Liäbi gaat, als àinä won iich, dä alti Pàulus, jelt abär au än Gfangnä vo Jesus Chrischtus bin -
- (10) Ich bitä Dich für mis Chind, won ich zum Gläubä gfüärt han, obwool ich Huusarrescht han, für dä Oneesimus,
- (11) wo Diir ämal unnüts gsii isch, jelt abär Diir und miir nützlich isch.
- (12) Ich han än zu Diir zrug gschikt, är isch mis Härts.
- (13) Ich han än bi miir welä bhaaltä, das är schtat Diir miir diänt i dä Feeslä vom Evangeelium.
- (14) Ooni Dini Zuäschtimig han ich abär nüt welä machä, damit Dini Wooltaat nöd ärtswungän isch, sondärn freiwillig.

- (15) Vilicht hät das grad müäsä sii, das är drum für ä Ziit lang vo Diir äwägg isch, damit än nachanä für immäär bi Där häsch.
- (16) Und zwaar nöd als Sklaav, sondärn mee als än Sklaav, nämlich als än Brüädär wo aagnoo isch, und das für miich, abär na fil mee für Diich, sowool im Flàaisch als im Här.
- (17) Wän Du mich für diin Gfäärtän aaluägsch, so nimm än uf wiä miich.
- (18) Wänn är Diir abär äs Unrächt taa hät odär Diir öpis schuldig isch, so tuä das miir aaràchnä.
- (19) Ich, dä Pàulus, has mit minä àignä Hand gschriibä: Ich wird äs zalä. Ich muäs där ja nöd sàgä, das Du miir Dich sàlbär schuldig bisch.
- (20) Brüädär, ich wot froo sii übär Dich im Här, mach mär ä Fröid i Chrischtus.
- (21) Wel ich Dim Ghoorsam vèrtrouä, han ich Där gschribä, und ich wàiss, dass Du na mee machsch, als ich diir sàgä.
- (22) Glichziitig bit ich Dich abär, dass Du miir än Platz vorberàitisch. Ich hoffä, dass ich Öi dur Öiri Gebàt ggschànkt wärdä.
- (23) Än Gruäss vom Epafra, mim Mitfangnä i Jesus Chrischtus,
- (24) vom Markus, Arischtarchus, Demas und äm Lukas, minä Mitarbàitär.
- (25) D'Gnaad fom Här Jesus Chrischtus wird mit Öiräm Gàischt sii.