

Letters to Love By

PHILEMON

FIRST DAY: Introduction

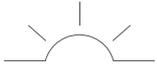
Love is the greatest distinguishing quality in the life of the believer. Jesus said, *By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another* (John 13:35). The love of Jesus is not only manifested in the way we speak to one another, but also in the way we behave in the various situations of life. Sometimes, it is only in the most difficult and extreme situations that the distinguishing love of Christ can be seen. In each of our lives, God will allow difficulties, dilemmas, and distresses so that we may have opportunity to demonstrate the divine love of Jesus!

Paul's letter to Philemon is one of the greatest examples of the difficulties, dilemmas, and distresses that the command of Jesus *to love one another* can present. This letter, as well as the one to the church in Colosse, was written from prison and sent with Tychicus and Onesimus. Perhaps Tychicus accompanied Onesimus, a runaway slave, in order to safeguard him from bounty hunters. According to Roman law, Onesimus could have been punished, prosecuted, or even put to death by Philemon. However, Paul's letter appealed to Philemon to forgive Onesimus *for love's sake* and receive him as a *beloved brother*. For Philemon, forgiveness would have been an extraordinary act of love and Christian grace. Such a thing was extremely rare in Roman society. By forgiving Onesimus, Philemon would exemplify the extraordinary love that is in Christ.

Onesimus was guilty of a great trespass, and as such, represents each of us in our offenses against God. As Martin Luther stated, *All of us are Onesimus*.¹ He, like us, was condemned by the law, but saved by grace. Paul, like Jesus, interceded when he offered to pay any debt that this slave had incurred against his master.

As you study Philemon, take special note of the humble way in which Paul appealed for Onesimus, as well as his references to love.

Ask God to work a deeper dimension of Christ's love into your heart.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Many Bible scholars believe that Apphia and Archippus were Philemon's wife and son. However, it is possible that Archippus was an elder at the church in Colosse (see Colossians 4:17).



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

In the first two centuries, the church did not own buildings. Christians usually met in homes.

SECOND DAY: Read Philemon 1–6

1. During Paul's first internment in a Roman prison (sometime around 62 A.D.), he wrote this letter to Philemon, a believer in Colosse. Use Paul's greeting in Philemon 1–3 to note and comment on:
 - a. Paul's identity (verse 1a)
 - b. Paul's relationship to Timothy (verse 1b)
 - c. Those Paul's letter was addressed to (verses 1c–2)
 - (1) Notice how Paul addressed Philemon. What does this tell you about the kind of letter Paul was writing him?
 - d. Paul's greeting (verse 3)
2. From Philemon 4, remark on Paul's *prayers* for Philemon.
3. Why was Paul so thankful for Philemon? Philemon 5

- a. Paul apparently heard these things about Philemon from others. What does this indicate about him?
 - (1) Is there something in particular that you would want people to hear about you?

4. Paul prayed that God would make the *sharing* of Philemon's faith *effective* (Philemon 6a). The word *sharing* is the Greek word *koinonia*, which is also translated *fellowship*, *participation*, and *communion*. Why is this a great prayer request?
 - a. *By* what means would Philemon have an *effective* witness? Philemon 6b
 - (1) What are some of the *good* things you have in Christ that you want to acknowledge? See also James 1:17.

 - (2) How do you think acknowledging all we have in Christ fortifies the *sharing* of our *faith*?

5. The name *Philemon* denotes *one who is loving, kind, or affectionate*. From your study today, share a way you see him living up to his name.
 - a. How does Philemon's testimony speak to you?

THIRD DAY: Read Philemon 7–11

1. Philemon had a beautiful testimony of love and faith. From Philemon 7a, remark on Paul's response to this testimony.
 - a. What had Philemon done for the *saints*? Philemon 7b
 - (1) Why is this noteworthy?
2. In consideration of Philemon's testimony, Paul felt he could address a difficult situation with him. Paul pointed out that he had the spiritual authority to be *very bold* and *command* Philemon concerning this issue (Philemon 8). However, by what means did Paul choose to make his *appeal*? Philemon 9a

- a. Why is this a great way to make an *appeal* to someone?

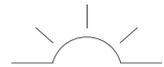
- b. Secondly, to add weight to his *appeal*, what did Paul remind Philemon of? Philemon 9b

- c. What does Paul's approach to this difficult situation indicate to you concerning:
 - (1) His relationship with Philemon

 - (2) His use of his authority

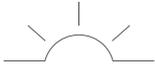
3. Having introduced his *appeal* to Philemon, Paul broached the subject he wanted to address. Philemon had a slave named Onesimus who had apparently run away to the great city of Rome. According to Philemon 10, what had happened to Onesimus?

4. In Philemon 11, the word *unprofitable* can also be translated *useless*. However, because of Onesimus's recent salvation, what could Paul *now* declare about him?



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The Greek word for *appeal* (*parakleo*) also means *to entreat, beseech, and to plead for*.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Paul employed an ingenious word play when he spoke of Onesimus being *unprofitable*. In Greek, the word *unprofitable* is *archrestos* and the word *profitable* is *euchrestos*. These words sound similar in Greek but have two very different connotations. The name *Onesimus* means *profitable*.

a. Link Onesimus's testimony with the following verses and remark on the work of salvation:

(1) 1 Corinthians 6:9b–11

(2) Ephesians 2:1–5

(3) Colossians 1:13–14

(4) Titus 3:3–5

5. From your study today, share a way you see the providence of God at work in the life of Onesimus.

a. How does this encourage you?

FOURTH DAY: Read Philemon 12–16

1. Once Paul had shared with Philemon the good news of Onesimus's salvation, he then made a personal request concerning him. In making this request, Paul used an ancient Roman custom involving runaway slaves. According to Pastor Warren Wiersbe, *Any free citizen who*

found a runaway slave could assume custody and even intercede with the owner.² With this in mind, read Philemon 12–14 (NLT): I am sending him back to you, and with him comes my own heart. I wanted to keep him here with me while I am in these chains for preaching the Good News, and he would have helped me on your behalf. But I didn't want to do anything without your consent. I wanted you to help because you were willing, not because you were forced. Use these verses to share your thoughts on:

- a. Paul's heart for Onesimus

- b. Paul's consideration of Philemon

- c. Paul's intercession
 - (1) In ancient Rome, there was constant fear of slave revolt. Therefore, as Pastor David Guzik notes, *Laws against runaways were strict. When captured, a runaway slave might be crucified or branded with a red-hot iron on the forehead with the letter "F" for fugitive.³ In light of this, why was Paul's request shocking?*

 - (2) Recall that Paul's appeal to Philemon was *for love's sake* (Philemon 9). How do you see this reflected in Paul's request?



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

In Philemon 12, Paul used the word *heart* in reference to his affection toward Onesimus. This word denotes the internal organs and therefore emphasized how Paul's life was bound up with Onesimus.

2. Paul gave an additional appeal for Philemon to consider: *perhaps* there was a greater *purpose* in what had happened with Onesimus. Use Philemon 15–16 to explain this *purpose*.
 - a. Connect Onesimus’s change of spiritual status with Galatians 3:28. What do you see?
 - b. Compare this situation with Genesis 50:20a and Romans 8:28. How do you see the hand of God at work in these circumstances?
 - (1) How does this encourage you concerning your own circumstances?
3. Remarkably, though Onesimus left for Rome as a slave, he would return to Colosse as a brother. How does this speak to you concerning:
 - a. Salvation
 - b. God’s grace

FIFTH DAY: Read Philemon 17–25

1. As Paul concluded his request to Philemon, he appealed to him as a *partner* (*associate, comrade*) in the faith (Philemon 17a). Why do you think it was important for Philemon to see this as an opportunity to *partner* in the ministry with Paul?
 - a. Read Philemon 17b. The word *receive* in this context can mean *to receive into one's family circle*. Considering Onesimus was a runaway slave, why was this request so astonishing?

2. Paul recognized that Philemon may have been wronged by the actions of Onesimus. According to Philemon 18–19a, how did Paul plan to rectify any wrongdoing?
 - a. To put something on someone else's *account* is to *impute*. It is the same action Jesus took when He put our sins on His *account* and paid the price for them on the Cross. Use the following Scriptures to explore what was put on Jesus's *account* and share your thoughts:
 - (1) Isaiah 53:4–5 and 12b

 - (2) Colossians 2:14

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT**

The Greek word Paul used for *partner* is *koinonos* and is derived from the word *koinonia* (*fellowship*), which is used in Philemon 12. This is the second time Paul made a reference to fellowship.

(3) 1 Peter 2:24

(a) How do these Scriptures help explain Paul's willingness to put Onesimus's wrongs on his *account*?

3. Apparently, Paul had led Philemon to Christ. Therefore, why do you think this was a particularly persuasive *appeal*?
Philemon 19b
4. Use Philemon 20 to capture the benefit Paul would receive from Philemon's obedience.
 - a. Link Paul's use of the word *refresh* with Philemon 7. What do you see?
5. Paul was confident of Philemon's *obedience* and that he would do *even more* than requested (Philemon 21). Recall Paul's commendation of him in Philemon 5 and 7. Therefore, why did Paul have this *confidence*?

6. Throughout this letter, Paul had made multiple appeals to Philemon. *Meanwhile*, what did he order Philemon to do? Philemon 22a
- a. Recall that Paul gave this order while still in prison. Note and comment on the following words from Philemon 22b that convey Paul's confidence of release:
- (1) *Trust*
- (2) *Prayers*
- (3) *Granted*
7. Remark on how Paul identified Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke. Philemon 23–24
8. Observe Paul's closing benediction in Philemon 25. Considering the subject matter of this epistle, why is this benediction particularly fitting?



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Epaphras had at one time been a leader at the church in Colosse before joining Paul (see Colossians 1:7; 4:12). Mark and Luke both authored Gospel accounts. Aristarchus and Demas had both served and traveled with Paul, although Demas eventually forsook Paul (see 2 Timothy 4:10).

SIXTH DAY: Review

1. In a few words, describe the basis of each of the following appeals Paul used in his letter to Philemon. The first one is done for you:
 - a. Verse 1
Beloved friend and fellow laborer
 - b. Verses 8 and 21
 - c. Verse 9
 - d. Verses 1, 9, and 13
 - e. Verses 10 and 16–17
 - f. Verses 11 and 13
 - g. Verse 17
 - h. Verse 19
 - i. Verse 20a
 - j. Verse 20b

2. The epistle to Philemon is not just a personal letter; it also gives us an illustration of what God has done for us through Jesus. Fill in the following chart to express your appreciation:

WHAT GOD HAS DONE	CROSS REFERENCES	YOUR APPRECIATION
<i>Transformed us</i> (Philemon 11 and 16)	2 Corinthians 5:17 Ephesians 5:8	
<i>Identified with us</i> (Philemon 17a)	Philippians 2:7 Hebrews 2:11 and 17	
<i>Received us</i> (Philemon 17b)	Ephesians 1:6 Colossians 1:13	
<i>Charged our sin to His account</i> (Philemon 18)	2 Corinthians 5:21	
<i>Paid the price for our sin</i> (Philemon 19)	Mark 10:45 1 Corinthians 6:20 1 Peter 1:18–19	

3. How is this letter an example to you of how Christians are to **love**?