

INTRODUCTION AND PHILEMON

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I. Introduction

A. Philemon is the shortest of Paul's letters – only 335 words in the Greek text. In the New Testament, only 2 and 3 John are shorter. It was written by Paul from prison (or house arrest), probably in Rome, to a dear friend named Philemon, a man Paul had converted to Christ years earlier, probably during his ministry in Ephesus (mid or late 52 to mid or late 55).

B. The letter concerns a slave named Onesimus who most likely ran away from his master, Philemon, and probably compounded his crime by stealing from him when fleeing, as runaway slaves often did to help fund their escape.

1. I say he "most likely" ran away because some are persuaded Onesimus was not actually a runaway (*fugitivus*) but had fled with an intention to return after finding a mediator who could intercede on his behalf with Philemon to get him off the hook for some failure on his part (an *erro*). I am with those who subscribe to the traditional view that he was a runaway slave.¹

¹ See, e.g., John G. Nordling, "Onesimus Fugitivus: A Defense of the Runaway Slave Hypothesis in Philemon," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 41 (1991): 97-119; Scot McKnight, *The Letter to Philemon*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 38-39; Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 367-369; Arthur A. Rupprecht, "Philemon" in Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, eds., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, rev ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 12:631-632; David E. Garland, *Colossians/Philemon*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 299-300.

2. The name Onesimus means "useful" and, for obvious reasons, was a common name for slaves. Paul plays off this fact in v. 11.

3. While on the run, Onesimus somehow encountered Paul, who was in prison or under house arrest. Paul brought him to faith in Christ, and Onesimus became a godsend to Paul in his difficult situation. Though Paul was wanting to keep him, he felt it necessary to send Onesimus back to Philemon. He does so with this letter.

C. This letter is closely related to Colossians.

1. Both are written by Paul from prison (Col. 1:1, 4:3, 4:18; Philem. 1:1, 9-10, 13); both include Timothy as a sender (Col. 1:1; Philem. 1:1); both refer to Epaphras (Col. 1:7; Philem. 23) and Archippus (Col. 4:17; Philem. 2); both include Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke among Paul's companions (Col. 4:10, 14; Philem. 24); and both refer to Onesimus (Col 4:9; Philem. 10).

2. Since Onesimus is a resident of Colossae (Col. 4:9), we're safe in assuming that Philemon was also. So both letters almost certainly were written around the same time and sent together to Colossae.

3. As I have noted regarding the other Prison Epistles, there's a debate about whether Paul is imprisoned in Ephesus or Rome when he wrote Colossians and Philemon. I'm with those like F. F. Bruce, Peter O'Brien, Markus Barth & Helmut Blanke, Donald Guthrie, D. A. Carson & Douglas Moo who think Rome is more likely. In that case, it was written in the early 60s.

4. Donald Guthrie states: "[Philemon's] close connection with Colossians makes it virtually certain that the two epistles belong to the same period and the most probable theory is that Tychicus accompanied by Onesimus took them both to Colossae at the same time (i.e., during the first Roman imprisonment)."²

D. One of the big questions is how Onesimus happened to encounter Paul while being on the run.

1. Perhaps Onesimus fled as far as Rome because he thought its teeming cosmopolitan population offered advantages to a person trying to hide from authorities. Maybe when he was there he had second thoughts about his escape and, knowing that Paul was an influential friend of Philemon, sought out Paul for refuge and assistance.³ Or maybe God brought them together in a more "coincidental" way.

² Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 664.

³ D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 291.

2. It is almost certain they did not meet by Onesimus being arrested as a runaway slave and being imprisoned with Paul. If Onesimus had been arrested, he would not be incarcerated with Paul, a Roman citizen, and even if he was, Paul, as a prisoner, would be in no position to arrange his return to Philemon. As Arthur Rupperecht notes, "[T]he return of a fugitive slave was a complicated, technical procedure in Roman law by this time. Certainly a prisoner could not directly send back a runaway slave and fellow prisoner."⁴

E. Interestingly, we know from the early second-century writings of Ignatius (*Ign. Eph.* 1.3), a leader of the church in Antioch, that a man named Onesimus was an influential church leader in Ephesus (the overseer or bishop). It is possible this was Philemon's former slave.

II. The Text

A. Opening (1-3)

¹Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy the brother, to Philemon our beloved fellow worker – ²and to Aphia the sister and to Archippus our fellow soldier – and to the church in your house: ³grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

1. Paul opens the letter identifying himself as "a prisoner of Christ Jesus." As others have suggested, Paul's imprisonment is probably "a subtle reminder of his own sacrifices for the sake of the gospel and should lead Philemon to look on his request with sympathy."⁵ Philemon is being asked to do something as a disciple by one who has suffered greatly for the faith.

2. Timothy is mentioned as a sender probably because he was privy to and supportive of Paul's position in the sensitive matter that forms the main subject of the letter. It's also quite possible that Timothy knew Philemon. It's clear from the letter that Paul is the actual author.

3. Though the letter is very personal, Paul includes as addressees Aphia, Archippus, and the church that meets in Philemon's home.

a. As Douglas Moo notes, "In Greco-Roman letters it is virtually always the first-named individual who is the main recipient of the letter. Most interpreters agree, then, that Philemon is the basic addressee. He was the owner of Onesimus and the church mentioned in [v. 2] met in his house."⁶

⁴ Rupperecht, 633.

⁵ Moo, 380.

⁶ Moo, 382.

b. Most commentators believe Aphia is Philemon's wife, and some assume that Archippus is their son, but we really can't be sure. Almost certainly they have some connection with Philemon's household or to the church that meets in his home. Archippus is cryptically addressed in Col. 4:17: Tell Archippus, "See that you complete the ministry you have received in the Lord."

c. Some commentators believe that Paul's acknowledging Aphia, Archippus, and the house church in the salutation merely was a matter of courtesy and does not mean they were actual addressees. It seems more likely that Paul wants the household and house church to know what he is expecting from Philemon (and thus indirectly of them), so he includes them as secondary addressees. As such, the letter would have been read in the assembly.

4. House-churches often are mentioned in the N.T. On occasion the whole congregation in one city might be small enough to meet in the house of one of its members. In other places, house-churches appear to have been smaller circles of fellowship within the larger group.

5. Paul desires for them continuing "grace and peace" from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace refers to the unmerited favor that God lavishes on us in many different ways. Peace with God and each other is ours through Christ.

B. Thanksgiving (4-7)

⁴I always give thanks to my God when mentioning you in my prayers ⁵because I hear of your love for all the saints and the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus. ⁶[I pray] that the fellowship of your faith might become effective in [the] knowledge of every good thing that is in us for Christ. ⁷For I have had much joy and comfort on account of your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.

1. The pronouns "you/your" here are singular, which makes clear that the direct addressee is Philemon. When Paul mentions Philemon in his prayers, he always thanks God for him. And the reason he always thanks God for Philemon is that people have told him of Philemon's love for all the saints and his faith in the Lord Jesus.

a. Following the Greek word order, many English versions render v. 5 along the lines: *because I hear of your love and faith, which you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints*. But with many commentators and with versions like NRSV, NIV, and NET, I think Paul has arranged the words chiasmically so that the love is for the saints and the faith is in the Lord Jesus. This parallels his statement in Col. 1:4.

b. Paul taught this man the truth about Jesus, and years later he's hearing how Philemon is honoring the Lord in his faith and service. That will cause you to give thanks!

2. There are quite a few wrinkles and variations in how v. 6 is translated in the English versions. As I understand it, Paul is asking God to use the fellowship that accompanies Philemon's faith, his experience of the bond of love in the body of Christ, to produce knowledge of every good thing that is ours *because* of Christ (and thus is *for* Christ's glory). Paul sees Christian fellowship as an experience that God may use to deepen knowledge about all the blessings received through Christ. If that is correct, those in our day who reject the church in favor of some isolated spirituality are cutting themselves off from this potential avenue of divine enlightenment.

3. Paul's prayers for Philemon are motivated in part by Philemon's love for the saints, a love that was manifested in his having refreshed their hearts.⁷ Philemon had made a difference in their lives, and that gave Paul much joy and comfort or encouragement. N. T. Wright says, "The Colossian Christians, weary in their daily battles for the Lord, find in Philemon the refreshment and rest needed to regain strength for renewed warfare."⁸

C. Body (8-20)

1. Appeal for Onesimus (vv. 8-11)

⁸Therefore, though I have much boldness in Christ to command you to do the proper thing, ⁹I appeal to you instead on the basis of love – being such a person as [I am], Paul, an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus – ¹⁰I appeal to you concerning my child, whom I begot while in chains, Onesimus. ¹¹He once was useless to you, but now he is useful [both] to you and to me.

a. Given Philemon's known love for the saints, Paul appeals to him on behalf of Onesimus, who is now a brother in Christ. He says, "*Therefore . . . I appeal to you . . .*"

b. As an apostle, Paul has "much boldness in Christ," meaning he has special authority to act on Christ's behalf. And in that capacity, he could have "ordered" his dear friend to do what he should do. But instead, he appeals to him "on the basis of love." Rather than compelling him, he wants him to choose the requested action because he sees it through the lens of Christian love. Moo comments:

Paul's reason for making love rather than a command the basis for Philemon's action is, as v. 14 makes clear, that he wants Philemon to act of his own free will. But it must also be said that the nature of Paul's appeal hardly lets Philemon "off the hook." Indeed, by appealing to Philemon on the basis of love, Paul raises the stakes and puts even greater pressure on Philemon. Obeying a command may be onerous, but it is rather

⁷ "Hearts" here and elsewhere is literally "bowels" (*splanchna*).

⁸ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 178.

straightforward and can be accomplished grudgingly. But Paul puts the ball into Philemon's court: he is, in effect, testing the depths of Philemon's love and the extent of his understanding of Christian fellowship. He must not only do what Paul wants him to do; he must do it for the right reasons. And the pressure on Philemon is all the greater when we remember that the appeal is being heard by his entire house church.⁹

c. Paul reinforces his appeal by noting he is an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus. People in the ancient world generally were attentive to and sympathetic toward the needs of aged relatives, which gives added traction to the fact Paul had found in Onesimus a son who was useful to him. Reminding Philemon of his chains was a reminder not only of his sacrificial service for Christ but also of his increased need for help. If there is any human being whose request a Christian would not want to turn down, it's Paul.

d. Onesimus became Paul's child in that Paul led him to Christ. Playing off his name, Paul says that Onesimus, who formerly did not live up to his name (was useless instead of useful), now will do so because of his conversion to Christ. He has been born again, born as a new person.

c. Do you see the power in that? Christ changes people. Conversion is not only a change in our standing before God; it's a change in our very being. A Christian is not the same person in a new situation; he's a new person in a new situation.

2. Tactfully makes his desires known (vv. 12-16)

¹²I have sent him to you, this one [who] is my heart. ¹³I was wanting to keep him with me in order that he might serve me on your behalf while I am in chains for the gospel, ¹⁴but I desired to do nothing without your consent so that your good deed might not be by compulsion but by free will. ¹⁵For perhaps for this reason he was separated [from you] for a short time, so that you might have him back eternally, ¹⁶no longer as a slave but more than a slave, [as] a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

a. Paul hints plainly that he wants Philemon to allow Onesimus to return and join in ministry with Paul. Onesimus is Paul's heart, and he was wanting to keep him that he might serve on Philemon's behalf while Paul is in chains for the gospel, but he would only do that with Philemon's consent. Implicit in this is the assumption that (a) Philemon would have wanted to help Paul while in prison had not other duties made that impossible, and (b) Onesimus will serve nicely as Philemon's representative and hence substitute.

⁹ Moo, 403.

b. Paul suggests that Onesimus's flight may have been part of a larger divine purpose, namely that Onesimus find Christ, with the result that Philemon might have him back not just for this life but eternally as a brother in Christ. That puts the wrong done to Philemon in a different context. God was working a blessing through it, as he did when Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery.

c. Paul says that Philemon's having Onesimus back as a beloved brother is "both in the flesh and in the Lord." In other words, the bond of brotherhood is not only spiritual but has consequences in the flesh, in their concrete, earthly relationship. But just what it means for that earthly relationship is not specified.

(1) Certainly it involves reconciliation and implies that Philemon should not punish Onesimus and should be a kind and attentive master to him. In other words, even if Onesimus returns to his duties as a slave, he can never again be merely a slave, a walking household device. The social and emotional gulf that once separated Philemon and Onesimus as master and slave has been bridged by the cross of Christ. As Paul wrote years earlier in Gal. 3:26-28, "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus,²⁷ for as many as were baptized into Christ, clothed yourselves with Christ.²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; there is neither male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

(2) But many think Paul also "may be hinting at a request for Onesimus' manumission,"¹⁰ suggesting that this may have been God's purpose in having separated them so that Onesimus might end up free to serve Paul in his ministry.

d. Whether Paul is here hinting at Onesimus' manumission, it is clear in the New Testament that God did not mandate release of all slaves or prohibit any Christian involvement in the institution of slavery. That has led some to accuse him of being immoral. They insist that God could not possibly have a morally acceptable reason for allowing any kind of slavery to continue. That is a baseless and blasphemous charge made by people bent on casting God in the worst possible light. To assess this claim, a number of things must be kept in mind.

[Excursus on First-Century Slavery](#)

Slavery was a basic social institution in the ancient world. S. Scott Bartchy writes, "As many as one-third of the population of the empire were enslaved, and an additional large percentage had been slaves earlier in their lives."¹¹

¹⁰ Moo, 424-425.

¹¹ S. Scott Bartchy, "Slave, Slavery" in Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, eds., *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 1098.

The Bible does not endorse or assume the goodness of any slavery; it simply tolerates in a specific social context a regulated form of a certain kind of slavery. It takes ancient slavery as a fact of life and regulates people's involvement in it.

Unlike marriage and parent-child relationships, Scripture nowhere suggests that slavery was ordained or instituted by God. On the contrary, slavery was a product of sinful humanity. This is evident from the fact that in 1 Cor. 7:21 Paul urges, "Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you-- although if you can gain your freedom, do so" (NIV). He would never give such advice to spouses or to parents and children. In this regard, it is probably more than coincidental that, from all indications, neither Jesus nor the Apostles owned slaves.

The seeds for slavery's dissolution were sown in texts like Philem. 16 ("no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother"), Eph. 6:9 ("Masters . . . do not threaten [your slaves]"), Col. 4:1 ("Masters, provide your slaves what is right and fair"), and 1 Tim. 6:1-2 (masters are "brothers"). (Note also that Jesus' teaching about mercy and forgiving debts [e.g., Mat. 6:12, 18:23-34] implies the inappropriateness of debt-slavery.) As has been said, where those seeds of equality came to full flower, the very institution of slavery would no longer be slavery.

Early Christians understood this implication, the significance of these "seeds." They not only demonstrated a radically different attitude toward slaves, dealing with them as they did freemen, but began the practice of freeing slaves one by one as they had opportunity. There are reports of early Christians releasing huge numbers of slaves, regarding which Philip Schaff comments:

These legendary traditions may indeed be doubted as to the exact facts of the case, and probably are greatly exaggerated; but they are nevertheless conclusive as the exponents of the spirit which animated the church at that time concerning the duty of Christian masters. It was felt that in a thoroughly Christianized society there can be no room for despotism on the one hand and slavery on the other.¹²

Paul Chamberlain writes:

In AD 315, only two years after the Edict of Milan the Christian emperor Constantine took the small step of criminalizing the act of stealing children for the purpose of bringing them up as slaves. Over the next few centuries, Christian bishops and councils called for the redemption and freeing of slaves, and Christian monks freed many themselves. The effects were stunning. By the twelfth century slaves in Europe were rare, and by the fourteenth century they were almost unknown on that continent, including in England.¹³

¹² Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church Vol. II*, 5th rev. ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1891), 353.

¹³ Paul Chamberlain, *Why People Don't Believe* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 141.

I do not doubt that the Christian principles of equality and brotherhood should have flowered more quickly into the eradication of slavery, but that was the result of Christian dullness to the implications of the gospel not to the intent or purpose of God. And, of course, even after slavery was essentially eliminated in Europe under Christian influence, the Evil Empire struck back.

European slavery was revived by the British in the seventeenth century, followed by the Spanish and the Portuguese. The abolitionist movement of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was led by Christians, people like William Wilberforce, Charles Spurgeon, John Wesley, William Lloyd Garrison, Charles Finney, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. This movement was driven by the understood implications of certain of the above biblical texts and the outright condemnation of kidnapping and slave trading in Ex. 21:16 and 1 Tim. 1:10, activities that characterized Colonial slavery.

The fact God did not forbid Christians in the first century from owning slaves but rather tolerated a regulated form of first-century slavery does not mean that was his ideal for mankind, that he was just fine with it. His ideal is brotherhood and equality, but it is possible that the world had gotten so twisted that he was willing to tolerate less than his ideal as a concession to the hardness of men's hearts, similar to what he did, through Moses, in permitting divorce (see Mat. 19:3-9).

Or maybe he tolerated it because mandating the release of slaves in that specific social context would have caused anarchy and consequent suffering as the gospel exploded across the Roman world. In other words, perhaps the thorn of slavery was embedded so deeply in the society that it needed to be removed slowly. Perhaps society first needed to be altered under Christianity's influence to be able to handle such a change without overwhelming adverse side effects, without great ancillary suffering. James D. G. Dunn states:

[S]lavery was an established fact of life in the ancient world. As many as one-third of the inhabitants of most large urban centres were slaves. The economies of the ancient world could not have functioned without slavery. Consequently, a responsible challenge to the practice of slavery would have required a complete reworking of the economic system and a complete rethinking of social structures, which was scarcely thinkable at the time, except in idealistic or anarchic terms.¹⁴

Or maybe he tolerated it because he knew that mandating its abolition in that social setting would have triggered such an immediate and violent cultural reaction that the young church would be criminalized prematurely and thereby be crushed or at least prevented from spreading in the way that it did. In that case, you can see why God might want to plan for slavery's *gradual* death through the principles of equality and brotherhood rather than lead with that ethical mandate.

¹⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 699.

In the context of this regulated form of first-century slavery that God tolerated, if release was desired it needed to be worked out on an individual basis consistent with the principle of brotherhood. But as long as the relationship remained, the slave could not take advantage of having a brother for a master, and the master could not mistreat the slave.

That God tolerated a regulated form of first-century slavery does not mean he would tolerate that same form of slavery in a different social context, where it was not so tied up with the functioning of the society that mandating its removal would cause economic collapse, anarchy, and consequent suffering or where the entire church's survival or its launching into the world would not be jeopardized. Neither does it mean God would tolerate other forms of slavery, a slavery different from the slavery of the first century, such as the slavery that existed in early America.

That is why those believers in early America who cited the Bible in support of Colonial slavery were wrong. They were abusing the Bible by jumping from the fact God had *tolerated* an "apple," a modified form of first-century slavery, to the claim he had thereby *endorsed* an "orange," the slavery of early America.

Slavery in the first century was a very different institution from early American slavery. Bartchy states (paragraphs are not continuous in original):

Central features that distinguish 1st century slavery from that later practiced in the New World are the following: racial factors played no role; education was greatly encouraged (some slaves were better educated than their owners) and enhanced a slave's value; many slaves carried out sensitive and highly responsible social functions; slaves could own property (including other slaves!); their religious and cultural traditions were the same as those of the freeborn; no laws prohibited public assembly of slaves; and (perhaps above all) the majority of urban and domestic slaves could legitimately anticipate being emancipated by the age of 30.

It must also be stressed that, despite the neat legal separation between owners and slaves, in none of the relevant cultures did persons in slavery constitute a social or economic class. Slaves' individual honor, social status, and economic opportunities were entirely dependent on the status of their respective owners, and they developed no recognizable consciousness of being a group or of suffering a common plight. For this reason, any such call as "slaves of the world unite!" would have fallen on completely deaf ears. (From p. 69: "The great slave rebellions, all of which were led primarily by prisoners of war between 140-70 B.C.E., never sought to abrogate slavery. Rather, these rebels sought either escape or to turn the tables by enslaving the owners.")

Furthermore, by no means were those in slavery regularly to be found at the bottom of the social-economic pyramid. Rather, in that place were those free and impoverished persons who had to look for work each day without any

certainty of finding it (day laborers), some of whom eventually sold themselves into slavery to gain some job security.

Large numbers of people sold themselves into slavery for various reasons, e.g., to pay debts, to climb socially (Roman citizenship was conventionally bestowed on a slave released by a Roman owner), to obtain special jobs, and above all to enter a life that was more secure and less strenuous than existence as a poor, freeborn person.

Slaves were used for "an enormous variety of functions in enormously different circumstances," some of which when compared to New World slavery seem astonishingly responsible: "doctors, teachers, writers, accountants, agents, bailiffs, overseers, secretaries, and sea-captains."

Since slaves represented a substantial investment by their owners . . . , they could at least expect to receive enough food to keep them alive and working. Manumission could mean the end of that security. Epictetus [a first-century philosopher], himself an ex-slave, took pleasure in pointing out that the slave who thinks only of gaining his freedom may be reduced, when he is manumitted, to "slavery much more severe than before."

For many, self-sale into slavery with anticipation of manumission was regarded as the most direct means to be integrated into Greek and Roman society. For many this was the quickest way to climb socially and financially. As such, in stark contrast to New World slavery, Greco-Roman slavery functioned as a process rather than a permanent condition, as a temporary phase of life by means of which an outsider obtained "a place within a society that has no natural obligations of kinship or guest-friendship towards him."¹⁵

Andrew Lincoln writes:

Many slaves in the Greco-Roman world enjoyed more favorable living conditions than many free laborers. Contrary to the supposition that everyone was trying to avoid slavery at all costs, it is clear that some people actually sold themselves into slavery in order to climb socially, to obtain particular employment open only to slaves, and to enjoy a better standard of living than they had experienced as free persons. Being a slave had the benefit of providing a certain personal and social security.¹⁶

¹⁵ S. Scott Bartchy, "Slavery (Greco-Roman)" in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:66-70.

¹⁶ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 418.

3. Repeated request and promise to repay (vv. 17-20)

¹⁷So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as [you would] me. ¹⁸And if he wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹I Paul have written in my hand: I will repay [it] (that I might not say to you that you owe me even your very self).

²⁰Yes, brother, I do wish to benefit from you in [the] Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.

a. Paul appeals to his bond with Philemon in asking him to welcome Onesimus in the same way he would welcome Paul. As Onesimus had stood in for Philemon in helping Paul in prison, so now let him stand in for Paul in going to Philemon.

b. Though Onesimus had certainly wronged Philemon in running away, and Paul would know whether he had stolen anything on the way out, Paul expresses those matters conditionally ("if") in order to minimize them and to focus on the fact he will make good whatever loss Onesimus caused Philemon. Paul is taking on himself the debt of another to pave the way for reconciliation.

c. To emphasize his assumption of that debt, he declares in v. 19 that he was writing in his own hand "I will repay it." He then says parenthetically that he did so – formally assumed the obligation by putting it in writing – to avoid bringing up the fact Philemon owes him.¹⁷ By going on the hook for the debt, Paul does not have to ask Philemon to cancel it by appealing to the fact Philemon owes him his life. He will pay Onesimus' debt so that he will not have to "go there." Thus, he reminds Philemon of the fact he saved his life in teaching him about Christ through telling him he is assuming the debt to keep from playing that card; it's a nice rhetorical touch.

d. As Philemon has refreshed the hearts of others (v. 7), Paul asks him, in light of the gentle reminder that he owes Paul his life, to do the same for him by acceding to his requests regarding Onesimus. Recalling v. 12 where Paul described Onesimus as "his heart," "[t]o refresh Paul's own heart is, therefore, to refresh Onesimus."¹⁸

D. Closing (21-25)

1. Expression of confidence and plans to visit (vv. 21-22)

²¹Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you knowing that you will do even more than I say. ²²At the same time also, prepare for me a guest room for I hope that through your prayers I will be granted to you.

¹⁷ The conjunction *hina* commonly is not translated because it is thought its usual telic force ("that," "in order that") does not make sense when connected with "I will repay [it]" (e.g., Moo, 430, n. 135), but I think it makes sense in the way I explain.

¹⁸ David W. Pao, *Colossians & Philemon*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 411.

a. Paul expresses his confidence in Philemon's heartfelt response to Paul's call of love and says he knows that he will do "even more" than he says. Paul clearly has asked Philemon to receive Onesimus as a beloved brother, as he would receive Paul, which reception implies things like not punishing him. In encouraging Philemon to go beyond his specific request by saying he is confident he will, he almost certainly is encouraging him to send Onesimus back to serve with him, as he indicated how much he would like that. He even may be encouraging him to give Onesimus his freedom in connection with that, but he leaves it unsaid.

b. Paul asks him to prepare a guest room, as he hopes soon to be there in response to the prayers of Philemon, his household, and no doubt the church that met there ("your" is plural).

2. Typical closing elements (vv. 23-25)

²³Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, ²⁴[as do] Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. ²⁵The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

a. It is interesting that Epaphras is here described as Paul's "fellow prisoner," whereas in Col. 4:10 Aristarchus is described that way. Moo gives the two options for explaining that fact:

First, an interval may have come between the writing of Colossians and of Philemon, during which Aristarchus has ceased to be a prisoner and Epaphras has become one. This switch is not unlikely if, as many suppose, these fellow workers of Paul decided voluntarily to share his imprisonment in order to help him. Second, it is also possible that calling someone a "fellow prisoner" does not mean that they are a prisoner at the time of writing but that they had, at some point, shared prison with Paul.¹⁹

b. Paul's associates in Colossians included "Jesus who is called Justus," but he is not mentioned here. Presumably he left Paul for some unknown reason between the writing of Colossians and Philemon.

¹⁹ Moo, 440.