

Philemon 1:1-3 The Importance of Godward Greetings

Introduction: Amid all of the NT books that deal with profound theological issues, church controversies, and problems of the apostles, there stands a short, solitary book that deals with a personal and private matter (which is addressed publicly). We find a remarkable demonstration of brevity, tact and delicacy by an apostle who often had to defend his office against vicious attacks. This letter, if it does nothing else for us, shows us that character *does* matter. One curious observation: there are no verbs in the first 3 verses.

1) The writer and his associate—1:1ab

- a) The author: ¹ *Paul*,
 - i) *a prisoner of Christ Jesus*,
 - (1) Because of his loyal service for Christ Jesus
 - ii) Note that he does not emphasize his apostleship in this letter.
- b) His associate: *and Timothy*,
 - i) *the brother*,

2) The people to whom Paul is writing—1:1c-2

- a) Three individuals, apparently Gentiles
 - i) The primary recipient: *to Philemon* (“affectionate one”),
 - (1) *the beloved*
 - (2) *and our fellow-worker*,
 - (a) Philemon was actively involved in advancing the cause of Christ.
 - ii) The possible wife of Philemon: ² *and Apphia*,
 - (1) *the beloved*, (some MSS read “sister”)
 - (2) Apphia is a common name in this area.
 - iii) A worker in the congregation: *and Archippus*,
 - (1) *our fellow-soldier*,
 - (a) Comrade-in-arms in the face of difficult circumstances.
 - (2) He is mentioned in Co. 4:17 as one who served the Lord in the congregation he attended.
- b) One church
 - i) The Colossian congregation that Philemon hosts: *and to congregation that is in your* (Philemon’s) *house*.

3) The greeting/blessing/prayer desired for the recipients—1:3

- a) The blessing’s content, expression of God’s favorable attitude
 - i) A normal Greek greeting, expression of goodness: ³ *Grace to you^{pl}*,
 - ii) A normal Jewish greeting, expression of completeness: *and peace*
- b) The blessings’ source
 - i) *from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*.

4) Things we need to remember (think, feel, do):

- a) Imagine sitting in this house church in the home of Philemon. Onesimus and Tychicus have just returned with this letter from Paul. What will the *rest* of Paul's letter say? What will Philemon do?
- b) Though Paul was imprisoned at the time of this writing, there were no words of complaint from him.
- c) This personal matter was also the concern of the local assembly. We do not relate to people in a vacuum. Our *private* relationships with other brothers and sisters are also (at times) *public* matters. We live within a spiritual community.

Philemon 1:4-7
The Importance of Godward Prayer

Introduction: What are some things we can pray for as we pray for other believers?

1) The frequency of Paul's praying—1:4-5

- a) ⁴ *I am always thanking my God (the Father),*
 - i) Cf. Rom. 1:8; 1 Cor. 1:4; Eph. 1:16; Col. 1:3; 1 Thess. 1:2; 2 Thess. 1:3
- b) How? *when making mention/remembrance of you (Philemon) in my prayers,*
- c) When does Paul thank God the Father?
 - i) What 2 things does Paul hear about Philemon? ⁵ *while hearing ...*
 - (1) *of your (Philemon's) love,*
 - (2) *and of the faith*
 - ii) How are love and faith expressed?
 - (1) Invisible faith: *which you (Philemon) are having toward [pro,] the Lord Jesus*
 - (2) Visible love: *and toward [eivj] all the saints,*
 - (a) Paul will eventually make the point that this must apply to Onesimus as well.
 - iii) Cf. 1 John 3:23

2) The cause of Paul's praying—1:6

- a) ⁶ *that the sharing [koinwni,a] of your (Philemon) faith may be effective / productive [evnergh,j] in (the sphere of) the full-knowledge [evpi,gnwsij] of every good thing that is in you^{pl} (the congregation) unto [eivj] (the glory of) Christ Jesus.*
 - i) Does this refer to evangelism? I have taught this often.
 - ii) Does this refer to encouragement of other believers? This seems to be more consistent in light of the context of welcoming Onesimus back.
- b) The more Philemon grasps what he possesses in Christ, the more effectively he will share with others.

3) A transitional sentence before the main part of the letter—1:7

- a) Benefit to Paul personally: ⁷ *For [ga,r] we (Paul and those with him in Rome) are having much joy [ca,rij] and encouragement [para,klhsij] because of [evpi,] your (Philemon's) love,*
 - i) While Paul is in a Roman prison, he hears comments about the love Philemon shows to people in Colosse.
- b) Benefit to the congregation corporately: *because [o[ti] the affections [spla,gnon] of the saints have been refreshed [pf. pass. ind. avnapau,w] through [dia,] you, brother.*
 - i) This is refreshment at the deepest possible level of one's person.

4) Things we need to remember (think, feel, do):

- a) If you have not read the entire letter, do you think Philemon will practice this love toward his former runaway slave Onesimus?
- b) Is our love for the saints visible to others?
- c) Do we bring joy and encouragement to other believers?
- d) Do we genuinely refresh other believers?

Philemon 1:8-11

Being useful to God and to other Christians

Introduction: Moving from an emphasis on Philemon’s obvious love, Paul develops a practical plan for Philemon to put that love to use. But how does one in obvious authority over another go about telling the other person to love an unbeliever who sinned grievously against him?

1) Paul contrasts 2 possibilities—1:8-9a ⁸ *Therefore*, (vv. 4-7)

- a) Authority: what I could have done: *although I have much boldness in Christ to order* [evpita,ssw] *you what is appropriate*,
 - i) Paul would NOT have been wrong to order Philemon to take Onesimus back, but this situation called for a different approach. What we CAN do is not always what we SHOULD do. (Kitchen)
- b) Love: but what I am doing instead: ⁹ *yet for the sake of love I am encouraging* [parakale,w]
 - i) This forces Philemon to make a deliberate choice to welcome Onesimus.
- c) Paul could easily have called out Philemon publicly, demanding what action he must take with regard to Onesimus, but, while assuring a certain course of action, it would not have yielded the lasting relationship that was even more desirable. (Kitchen)
 - i) Onesimus could easily wonder later on, “Did Philemon take me back just because Paul told him to?”

2) Paul describes himself, hinting at what he expects from Philemon—1:9b

- a) Respect: Paul is not getting any younger: —*being such as Paul the old man*,
 - i) Paul is probably in his mid-to-upper 50’s at this time.
- b) Sympathy: Paul’s life is not getting any easier: *and now also a prisoner* [de,smioj] *of Jesus Christ*—

3) Paul introduces his plan to Philemon—1:10-11

- a) Paul’s encouragement: ¹⁰ *I am encouraging* [parakale,w] *you concerning my child* [te,knon] *Onesimus* (“profitable”),
 - i) The same term [te,knon] to describe Timothy (1 Tim. 1:2) and Titus (Titus 1:4). Onesimus may have been a **slave** to Philemon, but he was Paul’s **child**.
 - ii) By the time Paul uses the name Onesimus at the end of the sentence, Philemon has been disarmed.
- b) Paul’s description of Onesimus:
 - i) He became a disciple of Christ through Paul’s prison ministry: *whom I have begotten / fathered* [genna,w] *in my chains* [desmo,j],
(1) God used Paul to bring about the conversion of Onesimus.
 - ii) In the past he was not a good slave as an unbeliever: ¹¹ *who formerly was useless* [a;crhstoj] *to you*,

iii) He is currently beneficial (physically and spiritually) to believers: *but now is useful* [eu;crhstoj] *to you and me.*

(1) Philemon is getting back a better slave than the one he lost. God transforms Onesimus by the power of the gospel.

4) Things we need to remember (think, feel, do):

- a) One of the hidden delights of the Christian life is to see God working in marvelous, miraculous ways, revealing Himself in converging circumstances that cannot be explained by coincidence or chance. (MacDonald)
 - i) First Paul had led Philemon to the Lord. Then the apostle had later been arrested and taken to Rome for trial. Philemon's slave had run away and made his way to Rome. Somehow or other he had met Paul and had been converted. Master and slave were both born again through the same preacher but in widely separated places and under quite different circumstances. Was it a coincidence? (MacDonald)
- b) Useful is something we are made by God's grace, not something we are simply by nature or personality.

Philemon 1:12-16
The Transforming Power of the Gospel

Introduction: Paul addresses the sticky issue of a runaway slave and his master. But he deals with it as a pastor, not as a legislator or a social engineer. The primary issue is not slavery, but the human heart. It is dangerous to confuse the gospel with social reform and vice versa.

1) Paul did the right thing—1:12 ¹² *I have sent him (Onesimus) back.*

- a) This forces Onesimus to obey in faith. Fear would be an understandable temptation, would it not? But Onesimus has to “face the music.”
 - i) Note also that Paul does not say Onesimus has repented and has decided to return of his own free will.
- b) This forces Philemon to obey in faith, to decide what he will do. He can no longer ignore the Onesimus situation.
- c) Forcible revolution is not the Bible way to correct social evils. The cause of man’s inhumanity lies in his own fallen nature. The gospel attacks the root cause, and offers a new creation in Christ Jesus. (MacDonald)

2) Paul commands Philemon to do the right thing—1:13-14

- a) Paul recognizes the pain of sending Onesimus back to Philemon—1:13a
 - i) *You, therefore, welcome him, that is my own heart* [spla,gcnon],
 - (1) It was not easy for Paul to part with Onesimus. It was almost like sending away part of himself. (cf. 1:17 “as you would me”)
- b) Paul recognizes the spiritual benefit of Onesimus—1:13b
 - i) Onesimus ministered to Paul while Paul is in prison: ¹³ *whom I* (emphatic) *was intending to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister [diakone,w] to me in my imprisonment for the gospel.*
 - (1) One could argue that Paul’s need as a prisoner is greater than Philemon’s need for his slave. But it would be illegal for Paul to keep someone else’s slave.
 - (2) This is demonstration of the reality of the conversion of Onesimus. He was willing to minister to the followers of Christ who were suffering. It is as though Philemon sent his slave Onesimus to minister to Paul.
- c) Paul recognizes the legal rights of Philemon, but also his Christian motivation—1:14
 - i) ¹⁴ *But without your approval I desired to do nothing, so that your good act might not be by obligation, as it were, but voluntary.*
 - ii) Actions can be forced, but goodness cannot. Forced goodness is not goodness at all, but mere moral conformity. (Kitchen)
- d) Philemon is still the master. Humanly speaking, Onesimus’ future rests in Philemon’s hands.

3) Paul gets to the heart of the situation—1:15-16

- Note the “possibly”: Paul doesn’t have direct revelation from God about this situation, but he has learned to look for God’s possible providence.
- a) Possible explanation of God’s providence in relation to TIME: ¹⁵ *For possibly he was separated* (a divine/theological passive, separated by God) **for a while for this purpose, so that you might receive him forever** (emphatic),
- b) Possible explanation of God’s providence in relation to RELATIONSHIPS:
 - i) The relationship comparison:
 - (1) ¹⁶ *no longer as a bonds slave*
 - (2) *but more than a bonds slave—a beloved brother,*
 - (a) *especially to me,*
 - (b) *but how much more to you,*
 - ii) The sphere comparison: *both ...*
 - (1) Outwardly: *in the flesh*
 - (2) Inwardly: *and in the Lord.*
- c) Philemon gets back more than he lost; he has gained a brother! Douglas Moo reminds us: To refuse to act toward Onesimus, Paul suggests, would be—“perhaps”—to fly in the face of God’s own purposes.

4) Things to remember (think, feel, do):

- a) Christ can transform any human relationship.
 - i) Societal challenges and changes must arise from internal and spiritual transformation. (Kitchen)
- b) By welcoming Onesimus, Philemon can demonstrate the gospel’s power to transform and reconcile broken relationships.
 - i) The gospel resets all our relationships—so don’t be surprised by the hard work it creates for you. (Kitchen)

Philemon 1:17-20

Obey because of the transforming power of Christ

Introduction: Paul finally makes his main point crystal clear: welcome your former slave back with an open heart and open arms.

1) Welcome Onesimus back—1:17

- a) The assumption: ¹⁷ *So then, if* (1st class condition; I assume you do) *you consider me a partner,*
- b) The command: welcome *him* (as a partner) *as you would welcome me.*
 - i) Or, to state it negatively, to reject Onesimus is to reject Paul.
 - ii) Paul commands Philemon to receive Onesimus back with joy and thankfulness, as if Paul himself had returned to Philemon's house.
 - iii) Welcome Onesimus, not only back to your estate, but into your congregation as well.

2) Charge his wrongs to my account, and I'll pay you back—1:18-19

- a) Paul chooses to be indebted to Philemon: ¹⁸ *And if* (1st class condition; I assume he did) *he wronged you or owes you anything, put this on my account.* (i.e. charge it!)
 - i) The sinful absence of Onesimus probably cost Philemon some income. The spiritual conversion of Onesimus does not automatically cancel out his material debts to Philemon.
- b) Philemon is indebted to Paul: ¹⁹ **I** (emphatic), *Paul, write this with my own hand: I* (emphatic) *will make restitution—not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides.*
 - i) Paul legally obligates himself to repay the debt of Onesimus. This is a public promissory note, as it were.
 - ii) Paul reminds Philemon while pretending not to do so.
 - iii) Financial loss pales in comparison to eternal spiritual gain. Both Onesimus and Philemon had apparently come to Christ through Paul's ministry. They are equals.
- c) Note how this beautifully illustrates Jesus' teaching in Matt. 18:21-35.

3) Refresh me in Christ—1:20

- a) Paul's wish: ²⁰ *Yes, brother, may I* (emphatic) *benefit* [ovni,nhmi] (similar to the name Onesimus) *from you in the Lord;*
- b) Paul's command: refresh *my heart in the Lord.*
 - i) Brotherly love shown to the slave will refresh both the slave and Paul.
 - ii) God had used Philemon to do this with others earlier (cf. 1:7). By Philemon extending grace and forgiveness to Onesimus, he will be refreshing the heart of Paul also.
 - iii) "In the Lord" is the sphere in which all this is to take place. In this circle stands Paul, Philemon, and now Onesimus. They are "in the Lord" together.

4) Things for us to remember: (think, feel, do)

- a) The fellowship that is created among those who have faith in Christ brings with it obligations to one another. (Douglas Moo)
- b) Marvel at the transforming power of God's grace through Christ.

Philemon 1:21-22
Obey Above and Beyond

Introduction: Do you do only what you are asked? Do you do the bare minimum and nothing more? What does this say about your heart attitude?

1) Paul encourages Philemon by explaining his thought process—1:21

- a) *I have written* [aor. act. ind.] *to you,*
 - i) With a view of the past: ²¹ *Being convinced* [pf. act. ptc. pei,qw] *of your obedience* [u`pakoh,],
 - (1) Paul hints that what he has encouraged Philemon to do (cf. 1:8, 9, 14) actually has God-given authority behind it.
 - (a) Three things: welcome Onesimus (1:17), charge Onesimus' debts to Paul (1:18), and refresh Paul's heart (1:20).
 - (2) Paul knows that Christian obedience comes, not from the Christian, but from the Lord who rescued us and enables that obedience.
 - (3) Philemon, Paul suggests, is faced with a situation which, however much he should act voluntarily and on the basis of love, really has only one course of action open to him. (Moo)
 - ii) With a view of the future: *knowing* [pf. act. ptc. oi,da] *that you will do* [fut. act. ind. poie,w] *beyond* [u`pe,r] *what I am saying.*
 - (1) Philemon will not simply do the bare minimum expected.
 - (2) Beware of reading more into the "beyond" than what is there. Nothing here indicates that Paul expects Philemon to release Onesimus from being his slave (known as manumission).
 - b) Paul knows the transforming power of Christ and the proven character of Philemon.

2) Paul explains his future plans to both Philemon and the entire congregation—1:22

- a) **What** does Paul command Philemon to do? *prepare* [pres. act. impv. e`toima,zw] *a guest room for me*
 - i) As a traveling teacher, Paul was dependent upon the hospitality of other Christians.
 - ii) This will also serve as some motivation for Philemon to respond rightly before Paul himself shows up on his doorstep.
 - iii) It is an honor to host someone you respect and love.
- b) **When** does Paul want Philemon to do this? ²² *At the same time,*
 - i) i.e. while he is being obedient concerning Onesimus
- c) **Why** does Paul want Philemon to do this?
 - i) *because* [ga,r] *I am expecting* [pres. act. ind. evlpi,zw] *that* [o[ti] *through your^{pl} prayers I will be graciously given* [fut. (theological/Divine) pass. ind. cari,zomai] *to you^{pl} (by God).*

- d) Only God can accomplish Paul's release from a Roman prison. This is why Paul assumes/knows the entire congregation (cf. 1:1-2) has been praying for his situation in prison in Rome.

3) Things to remember (think, feel, do):

- a) Are other believers confident of our obedience?
- b) Are we willing to do humbling tasks (make a bed, clean a room) in our service for Christ and others?
- c) Are we praying for other believers and their difficult situations?

Philemon 1:23-25
The Bookends of Grace

Introduction: We have arrived at the last section in the book. How will Paul closeout this letter to his friend? What is the last thing Philemon needs to hear?

1) Greetings to Philemon—1:23-24

- a) Greetings from a fellow prisoner—1:23
 - i) ²³ *Epaphras, my fellow prisoner [sunaicma,lwtoj] in Christ Jesus, greets you,*
 - (1) Epaphras, a Gentile, has shared the gospel with the congregation in Colosse (Col. 1:7-8)
 - (2) He is a mighty prayer warrior (Col. 4:12-13)
- b) Greetings from fellow workers—1:24
 - i) ²⁴ *as do ... my fellow workers [sunergo,j].*
 - (1) Jewish men
 - (a) *Mark*—from Jerusalem, the cousin of Barnabas (Col. 4:10), who once abandoned Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:13)
 - (i) A previous defector, who is now restored. This shows Philemon that fractured relationships can be mended by the grace of God.
 - (b) *Aristarchus*—a Macedonian Jewish man, from Thessalonica (Acts 20:4)
 - (i) He assisted Paul with handling the money for the offering for the Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 27:2).
 - (2) Gentile men
 - (a) *Demas*—just a few years later he deserts Paul, and heads for Thessalonica (2 Tim. 4:10)
 - (i) A soon-to-be-defector. Perhaps the seeds of his love for the world are taking root here?
 - (b) *Luke*—a Gentile, Paul consistent traveling companion (Acts 16:10; 2 Tim. 4:11)
 - c) Perhaps this is intended to put a little pressure on Philemon, now that he knows these 5 men are aware of what Paul has written to him.

2) Benediction for the whole congregation—1:25

- a) ²⁵ *(May) the grace (active goodness) of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your^{pl} (each one of you) spirit. Amen.*
 - i) Parallel to Gal. 6:18
 - ii) Paul has already expressed his desire for grace for them in 1:3.
- b) William MacDonald reminds us: Life can hold no greater blessing than the unmerited favor of the Savior as one's moment-by-moment experience.
- c) And here he might especially be aware of how much the whole community would need a strong measure of grace in order to respond well to the Onesimus affair. (Douglas Moo)

- d) Such help from God would temper Philemon, and others, have the loving receptivity to Onesimus, for they might otherwise reject the slave, thinking only of his past failure. (James Rosscup)

3) Things to remember (think, feel, and do):

- a) The whole congregation needs grace to be obedient to the teaching in this letter.
- b) Grace is available to the whole congregation. The same resource is available for each and every member of this church.
- c) We can (and should) pray that God's grace be poured out on other believers.