



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

Greeting and Thanksgiving

Philemon 1–7

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Introduction

1. Philemon, a one-chapter letter just 335 words (Greek) long, is related to Colossians, “which likewise bears Paul’s name and has Timothy as the cosender (Col 1:1)” (Fitzmeyer 2000, 9).
 - a. Paul appears as a prisoner (Col 4.3, 10, 18).
 - b. Archippus and Onesimus are mentioned (Col 4.9, 17).
 - c. Five of the six who send greetings in Colossians are named in Philemon 23–24: Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke.
 - d. Onesimus, who accompanies Tychicus on his mission to Colossae (Col 4.7–9), is the object of Philemon (Fitzmeyer 2000, 9).

Greeting (vv. 1–3)

2. The greeting has the three components that were common in ancient Greek letters.
 - a. Senders: Paul, with Timothy.
 - b. Addressees: Philemon, but also Apphia, Archippus, and the church in Philemon’s home.
 - c. An initial greeting: grace and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
3. Paul is the sender, and the self-description is unique.
 - a. “Nowhere else does Paul open a letter by referring to himself as *a prisoner of Christ Jesus*” (Wright 1986, 172) (cf. vv. 9–10, 13, 22–23).
 - 1) He does not use the authoritative “apostle” (Rom 1.1; 1 Cor 1.1; 2 Cor 1.1; and esp. Gal 1.1).
 - 2) He does not say he is a “slave of Jesus” (Rom 1.1; Phil 1.1), a “term [that] might have been too indelicate in this letter in view of the topic that it addresses” (Fitzmeyer 2000, 82).
 - 3) Instead, he says he is a prisoner for Christ Jesus, a humbling and personal description he later augments by saying he is an elderly man (v. 9), father to Onesimus (v. 10), a prisoner (v. 10), brother of Onesimus (v. 16), partner to Philemon (v. 17), and potential house guest (v. 22).
 - b. Although Timothy is named as cosender, the way Paul refers to himself and the singular focus on Philemon indicate that this is a very personal letter from Paul.
4. The mention of Philemon first, the use of the singular pronoun to address him, and the endearments he expresses toward him show that Philemon is the primary recipient.
 - a. That he calls him a “dear friend and coworker” (v. 1), appeals to him so personally and directly (vv.

8–20), and asks him to “prepare a guest room” (v. 22), suggests that, unlike most in Colossae (Col 2.1), Philemon and Paul knew each other personally and had, in some way, collaborated in the work of the gospel (Wright 1986, 172).

5. But this is not a private letter.
 - a. Paul’s request to welcome back Onesimus would have necessarily involved the household.
 - b. So, the letter is also addressed to:
 - 1) “Apphia our sister,” “almost universally reckoned to be Philemon’s wife” (Wright 1986, 173).
 - 2) “Archippus our fellow soldier,” probably a figurative way to refer to his service as a coworker.
 - a) In Colossians 4.17, an “Archippus” is exhorted to “pay attention to the ministry [διακονίαν, *diakonian*] you received in the Lord.”
 - b) “Fellow-soldier” (συστρατιώτης, *systratiōtēs*) should thus be taken as “comrade in arms” (NEB) (Fitzmeyer 2000, 88); the word’s other NT use refers to Epaphroditus, Paul’s “brother, coworker, and fellow soldier” (Phil 2.25).
6. Also to the church (ἐκκλησία, *ekklēsia*; only here in Phlm) in Philemon’s home.
 - a. Paul’s use of the singular pronoun, “you,” repeated throughout the letter, indicates that he is referring to a church in Philemon’s home (cf. vv. 4–7, 8, 10–14, 16, 18–21, 23); note also the vocative, “brother” (ἀδελφέ, *adalphē*) in vv. 7. 20.
 - b. Regarding house churches.
 - 1) Historically, “there is no evidence ... of a separate building reserved for liturgy in the Roman empire before the third century A.D.” (Fitzmeyer 2000, 90). The house church provided a place for Jesus’ followers “to have a distinctively Christian worship and a place for cultic activity” (Fitzmeyer 2000, 89).
 - 2) Since the venue would need to be somewhat larger than the average home, “well-to-do owners of homes in which ancient religious groups met were normally granted positions of honor in those groups, as their patrons” (Keener 2014, 635).
 - 3) “Nobody is an island”; his concern with Philemon has a community context (Wright 1986, 173).
 - 4) He is trying to get Philemon to see that his relationship with Onesimus was the concern of the church as well; congregational integrity was at stake, not just that of his intimate family or household. He may be the leader of the house, and, as patron, of the church as well, but he cannot because of that status disregard what others may think (Fitzmeyer 2000, 81–82).
7. He concludes his greeting with a wish for Philemon and the church to have what they will need to be the community they should be.
 - a. Grace is the divine favor by which Christians are saved, and Paul wants the community members to have their due share of it.
 - b. Peace is not merely inner composure or interpersonal absence of conflict; “it echoes the OT *šālôm*, ... [to] ‘be complete, full, perfect,’ [recipients] of the fullness of God’s gracious bounty” (Fitzmeyer 2000, 90).

Thanksgiving and Prayer (vv. 4–7)

8. The thanksgiving and prayer in verses 4–7 are typical of what we read in Paul, but the pronouns and focus are singular; Paul’s praise for Philemon is actually integral to the letter’s argument.
9. The four elements—thanksgiving, remembrance in prayer, reason for the prayer, and the result he hoped for—set up and introduce a vital theme (Fitzmeyer 2000, 93).
 - a. In fact, we can discern ten themes in verses 4–7, most of which recur in the letter.

- 1) Love.
- 2) Faith.
- 3) The Lord Jesus.
- 4) God's dedicated people (saints).
- 5) Partnership.
- b. Only faith, holiness, and joy do not reappear later.
 - 1) Love (vv. 5, 9).
 - 2) The Lord (vv. 3, 5, 16, 20, 25).
 - 3) Partnership (vv. 6, 17).
 - 4) Good (vv. 6, 14).
- 6) The good.
- 7) Joy.
- 8) Encouragement/refreshment.
- 9) Heart (entrails, bowels).
- 10) Brother.
- 5) Heart ("entrails") (vv. 7, 12, 20).
- 6) Refresh (vv. 7, 20).
- 7) Brother (vv. 7, 20).
10. Notice that Philemon is an exemplary disciple (v. 5).
 - a. He is doing God's will, summed up in two virtues.
 - 1) He practices "love [*ἀγάπη*, *agapē*]" for all the saints" (he returns to this in his appeal in v. 9).
 - 2) He exhibits "faith [*πίστις*, *pistis*]" in the Lord Jesus."
11. Verse 6 states Paul's goal for Philemon, centering on one word (*κοινωνία*, *koinōnia*) that can be understood in different ways.¹
 - a. Monetary support, common donation, contribution (Rom 15.26).
 - b. Sharing, communicating, close association (1 Cor 1.9).
 - c. The common trust of all believers.
 - d. Participation (Phil 3.10; 2 Cor 8.14).
12. In my judgment, "participation" fits best.
 - a. "*Koinōnia* is part of the truth about the body of Christ. All are bound together in a mutual bond that makes our much-prized individualism look shallow and petty" (Wright 1986, 176).
 - b. Similar to Ephesians 4.11–16, where Paul envisions body members working together to build up the body toward unity (Wright 1986, 177), Paul's hope here is that Philemon and the *ekklēsia* will share in the faith in a way that lets them experience a solidarity that will produce the greatest results "unto Christ" (*εἰς Χριστόν*, *eis Christon*) (Fitzmeyer 2000, 97–98).
 - c. The "knowing [of] every good thing" is thus more experiential knowledge than cognitive.
13. Based on Philemon's track record, Paul is confident this will occur.
 - a. Note that the word translated "hearts" is *σπλάγχνον* (*splanchnon*), entrails or bowels, the customary Jewish term to refer to emotions.
 - b. Note also the final term of endearment: "brother."

July 26, 2026

Works Cited

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- Keener, Craig S. 2014. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary, New Testament*. 2nd edition. InterVarsity Press.
- Wright, N. T. 1986. *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*. The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. ed. Leon Morris. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Notes

¹ Commentaries on Philemon consistently echo this statement about verse 6 by Fitzmeyer (2000, 97): "This verse is the most difficult one to understand in the whole letter" (cf. Wright 1986, 175; Harris 2019, Phlm 6 n. 17).