**Philemon Commentary**

**Philemon Chapter 1**

Phm 1:1

**“a prisoner *for the sake* of Christ Jesus.”** The Greek literally reads that Paul is “a prisoner of Christ Jesus.” This is a simple genitive construction, but the genitive can have many possible meanings. Basically, the genitive can be summed up as one thing relating to another in some way. What Philemon 1:1 is saying on a basic level is that Paul is a prisoner who is in some way related to Christ Jesus.

Philemon 1:1 is an example of a verse that can give the wrong impression when it is translated literally. Normally, if Paul said, “I am a prisoner of Christ Jesus,” we would think that Christ was holding Paul in a prison or jail, but that is not the case. Paul was a prisoner, yes, but he was in prison in Rome and was a prisoner of the Roman Empire. We must remember that Philemon is one of what scholars refer to as Paul’s “Prison Epistles,” because he was in prison when he wrote to Philemon (cf. Phlm. 1:10).

To understand the proper meaning of the genitive phrase “of Christ Jesus” in this context, we need to understand why Paul was in prison. In this case, Paul was in prison because he had preached and taught about Jesus Christ. So here in Philemon, Paul is referring to his imprisonment by Rome being for the sake of Christ, because of his stand for Christ.

**“our brother.”** The Greek text literally reads, “the brother,” but that could be confusing in English and make it seem like there was only one brother, “the” brother Timothy. Most versions supply “our” in place of the “the.”

**“Philemon.”** This is the only place in the Bible where Philemon is mentioned by name.

Phm 1:2

**“our sister.”** The Greek text is literally, “the sister,” but that could be confusing in English and make it seem like there was only one sister, “the” sister Apphia. Most versions supply “our” in place of the “the.”

Phm 1:6

**“*and I pray*.”** A new subject has started, which is much clearer in Greek than in English, so the italics help the reader realize that a new subject has started, (cf. Phlm. 4 where the subject starts.) It should be noted that verse 6 has many phrases that can be translated different ways, and when these are combined, this makes for a huge array of different translations. Very reputable scholars differ widely on what the verse is referring to, and we admit that there are several possible meanings.

**“your participation in the faith.”** The Greek phrase (ἡ κοινωνία τῆς πίστεώς σου) can have many different meanings. Some suggested are: “the kindly deeds of charity which spring from your faith” (Lightfoot[[1]](#footnote-18611)); “the communication [to others] of your faith” (Vincent[[2]](#footnote-30215)); “your fellowship with other Christians created by faith” (Lohmeyer[[3]](#footnote-26955)); “communion [with Christ] by faith” (Dibelious-Greeven[[4]](#footnote-32704)); “the faith in which you participate” or “the participation of other Christians in your faith” (J. Y. Campbell[[5]](#footnote-27675)).

It seems most logical that Paul is referring to Philemon participating in the Christian Faith by what he does. Given the fact that Paul is exhorting Philemon to take Onesimus back into his good graces, Philemon’s participation in the Faith seems to be a good translation here. The Epistle is not about outreach, and placing an unattached sentence about that here seems out of place, when nothing relates to it before or after.

**“is energized.”** Paul is writing that Philemon’s fellowship would be energized and that as a result, he would take Onesimus back (Lenski has “energetic” or “active”[[6]](#footnote-25044)).

**“us.”** The Greek texts have a variant reading, some reading “you” and some reading “us.” The NA 27 goes with “us” since, given the surrounding pronouns, it is the more difficult one. Especially given the context, it would be easier for a copyist to change “us” to “you” than “you” to “us.” Paul is trying to establish a bond with Philemon, and using “us” does that well.

Phm 1:7

**“hearts.”** The Greek is literally “bowels,” which refers to the emotional center of a person.

[For more information on “bowels,” see commentary on Philippians 1:8.]

Phm 1:8

**“bold enough in Christ.”** Paul is appealing, not on his personal desire, but to his being “in union with Christ” which includes the will of Christ and his apostolic authority. The Greek word translated “bold” includes freedom and frankness of speech. In asking Philemon to receive his slave Onesimus as a fellow Christian he has to be very respectful because in the honor-shame society of Rome, to ask that someone else does something that they normally might not do could shame them.

Phm 1:10

**“Onesimus.”** The name Onesimus means “useful” or “profitable,” and it was a common name for a slave in the Roman Empire. Paul places the name in a kind of pun, because he writes Philemon and says that Mr. “Useful” was once “useless” to you, but now he is “useful” to both Paul and Philemon. In Greek, the name Onesimus in Philemon. 1:10 is a different word than “useful” and “useless” in Philemon 1:11, but the meanings of the Greek words carry the pun and make the point.

It is unclear exactly how Paul and Onesimus met. It seems clear that Onesimus was a runaway slave, but exactly how then would they meet? It could have been that Onesimus, realizing that he could be caught by the Romans and executed, remembered Philemon speaking of Paul and sought him out in Rome to be a go-between so he could establish his relationship with Philemon again. It would not have been the case that Onesimus would have been caught by the Romans and put in prison, because Paul was not in prison but was under house arrest, and a fugitive slave would never have been put in that circumstance but would have been treated much more harshly.

Another possibility, one set forward by James Dunn is that Onesimus may have run away specifically to seek Paul.[[7]](#footnote-19203) This would explain how he could see Paul and yet be of service to him, which meant that he was not under arrest but was free. Being in Philemon’s household, Onesimus would have heard much about Paul and realized how much Philemon valued what Paul said. In fact, he may have even met Paul. If an unresolvable conflict arose between Philemon and Onesimus, it is possible that Onesimus thought that running away and finding Paul so that Paul could be a go-between him and Philemon was his only reasonable course of action. In any case, when Onesimus found Paul and began to dialogue with him, he got born again, and then at some point after that Paul wrote Philemon and sent Onesimus back to him with the letter.

**“whose father I have become.”** In this context, the word “father” is used in a double sense. First, it refers to the fact that while Paul was in prison, he got Onesimus saved and became his spiritual “father.” Onesimus was not a Christian when he served under Philemon before running away, as we see from Philemon 1:15-16, but he got saved by Paul in prison. Second, the word “father” refers to being a mentor, a father figure. Paul taught Onesimus the Word of God and the fundamentals of being a Christian. He was “useful” to Paul and ministered to him, and was a beloved brother (Phlm. 1:11, 13, 16).

Phm 1:12

**“am sending.”** An epistolary aorist. Paul wrote the letter which he sent with Onesimus.

**“heart.”** The Greek is literally “bowels.” [For more on “bowels” see commentary on Phil. 1:8.]

Phm 1:13

**“be of service.”** It seems clear that Onesimus was not under arrest like Paul was (see commentary on Phlm. 1:10, “Onesimus”). Therefore, he could be of service to Paul in many different ways, from simple service such as running errands to encouraging him in the faith, praying with him, singing with him, etc.

**“my imprisonment for the good news.”** The Greek text has the “good news” in the genitive case and more literally reads, “my imprisonment of the good news.” In this context, the genitive is a genitive of relation; Paul was in prison due to his relation with the Good News; that is, he was preaching it and defending it.

Phm 1:15

**“forever.”** From the adjective *aiōnios* (#166 αἰώνιος), which most versions render “eternal.” For this word see commentary on John 3:16. *Aionios* can mean “age” as in the Messianic Age, or it can have a strictly temporal meaning of “eternal.” Here the word is used in a specifically temporal aspect. Paul contrasts Onesimus’ absence “for a little while” with having him “forever.”

Phm 1:16

**“in the Lord.”** See Word Study: “In the Lord.”

Phm 1:18

**“charge that to me.”** (BDAG, Lenski).

Phm 1:19

**“not to mention to you.”** This is the essence of what Paul is saying. The Greek is expressed in an ellipsis, and reads more literally, “in order that I may not say to you” (ἵνα μὴ λέγω σοι). Marvin Vincent points out that this is “A sort of elliptical construction in which the writer delicately protests against saying something which he nevertheless does say.”[[8]](#footnote-25191) Thus, the idea is that Paul is saying, “[I will repay the debt] in order that I do not have to tell you that you owe me your very self.”

Paul is being very kind, but also very forceful. He knows there is a chance that Onesimus has incurred a debt to Philemon—in fact, Paul may know for a fact he had incurred the debt—and Paul is willing to repay the debt. But he is also making sure that Philemon would accept or perhaps even excuse Paul’s payment by reminding Philemon of what Paul had done for him.

Phm 1:20

**“in the Lord.”** See Word Study: “In the Lord.”

**“heart.”** The seat of a person’s emotional life. Philemon had refreshed the hearts of others (Phlm. 1:7); now Paul is asking that Philemon refresh his heart too.

[For more on “bowels” see commentary on Phil. 1:8.]

Phm 1:25

**“with your spirit.”** That is, with you. See commentary on Galatians 6:18.

1. J. B. Lightfoot, St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon, 2nd ed., 335. [↑](#footnote-ref-18611)
2. Vincent, Word Studies in the New Testament, 3:516. [↑](#footnote-ref-30215)
3. Lohmeyer, Kolosser und Philemon, 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-26955)
4. Dibelious-Greeven, An die Kolosser, Epheser an Philemon, 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-32704)
5. J. Y. Campbell, Three New Testament Studies, Brill, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-27675)
6. Lenski, Interpretation of Timothy, Titus and Philemon, 957. [↑](#footnote-ref-25044)
7. Dunn, The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon [NIGTC]. [↑](#footnote-ref-19203)
8. M. R. Vincent, Philippians and Philemon [ICC], 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-25191)