

Philemon: The Power of Grace A Commentary on Philemon 8-21

Anissa Martin (AGTS Master of Arts Student, 2011)

Philemon—one of the “postcard” epistles, so small it did not warrant chapter divisions—is often overlooked. Yet, simply by its place in the canon, it offers something of value if one would only take the time to discover it. As one of the most personal letters in Scripture, it was sent mainly to one individual; however, with the inclusion of a few other people, it “turns what appears to be a private matter into a household matter in the broader sense of the Christian family.”¹ Paul used a private situation to teach the church as a whole.

Historically, people have viewed Philemon through the lens of slavery because it was written about and for a slave. Other people have wrongly used it as a basis for promoting slavery and all its evils. Problematic with such an interpretation is the wide spectrum of understanding regarding slavery—which is rather difficult to define. To consider Philemon’s place in the canon as solely a discourse on slavery, one misses the larger principle—the power of grace offered to the unworthy and undeserving by Jesus Christ’s work on the cross. Ultimately, Philemon presents a study in grace and its sensational power to change individuals and entire societies. The grace Paul illustrates in Philemon completely undercuts the practice of slavery in which one human is held under the control of another.

Addressee and Author

A simple reading of the letter readily reveals that the recipient is Philemon (v. 2), with the addition of Apphia and Archippus and their house church. Philemon, a person of financial means and a slave owner, hosted a house church. Some scholars posit that Apphia was his wife and, possibly, Archippus was his son.² Others suggest that Apphia was Philemon’s sister and Archippus was simply a fellow worker.³

E. J. Goodspeed and J. Knox re-interpreted the letter by presenting the idea that Archippus, not Philemon, was the real slave owner. Paul simply appealed to Philemon to act as mediator on Onesimus’ behalf and entreated Archippus to have compassion on the run-away slave. According to Goodspeed and Knox, Onesimus returned and “became in due course the bishop of Ephesus in the second century, an identification attested by Ignatius [the Church Father].”⁴ Furthermore, they maintain that Onesimus, as bishop and because of his personal stake, collected and published all the Pauline letters, including Philemon.⁵ Regardless of whether or not the Onesimus from Philemon became the Bishop of Ephesus, the theory that Archippus was the true slave owner is strongly opposed by the fact that Philemon stands at the beginning of the list of recipients.

Paul is the mostly undisputed author of Philemon. The letter appeared early in the Muratorian Fragment and in Marcion's canon.⁶ In the nineteenth century, F. C. Baur of the Tübingen School "questioned its authenticity."⁷ Using "tendency criticism," he proposed that Philemon was a post-Pauline writing as a means of instructing or illustrating how Christian communities should handle the question of slavery.⁸ As Wikenhauser states, "In that case, Philemon would be a very clumsy forgery, for Paul does not clearly direct that Onesimus be set free."⁹ Baur also rejected Philemon as Pauline because of the letters' close parallels to a "Christian romance" of the third century (i.e. *Clementine Homilies*), while W. C. van Manen rejected Pauline authorship because of the ambiguity of directness, stating that "doubleform ... is not a style that is natural to anyone who is writing freely and untrammelled."¹⁰ Philemon has a close connection with the Epistle to the Colossians; if authorship is contested, it is only because of this association.¹¹ In the end, parallelism to a later form does not automatically prove a later date; it could simply be that the later form actually used Philemon as its source. Rejecting the Apostle Paul as the author simply because of the letter's ambiguity is to wrongly lump the epistle in with the other epistles without considering its special construction and purpose. Altogether, I find no solid reason to

reject the Apostle Paul as the author and disbelieve what the epistle, itself, states.

Location and Date

The book of Philemon does not identify a precise location. Paul's letter to individual people does not specify the exact city of residence yet, based on the people mentioned in the introduction and conclusion, one can deduce that Philemon lived in the Lycus Valley in Asia Minor—probably in Colossae or Laodicea. Archippus, Onesimus, Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke are all mentioned in both Philemon and Colossians.

The Lycus Valley was located by the Lycus River, a tributary of the Maeander in Phrygia.¹² Colossae lay near Laodicea and Hierapolis with the larger city of Ephesus about 100 miles to the west-northwest. Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis lay along the main roads and would have been privy to the new philosophies and ideas, including religions such as Christianity.¹³ The area consisted of local natives or Phrygians, Greeks, and Jews.

The introduction clearly indicates that Paul wrote the letter from prison. The problem lies in determining which imprisonment; this information, in turn, would help a person identify the date. Table 1 identifies the varying viewpoints.¹⁴

Table 1. Arguments For Each Location¹⁵

Imprisonment in Rome	Imprisonment in Ephesus
1000-mile land journey and two sea voyages. A dangerous journey for a slave to undertake.	100 miles away yet large enough for a slave to “get lost in” and Onesimus would have been more familiar with this city
Paul was not planning to return to the Lycus Valley but to proceed to Spain, why then the request for lodgings?	The closeness of Ephesus to Colossae makes more sense when considering Paul’s desire for lodging.
Rome would seem a more likely place for an escaped slave who is trying to escape his master’s detection.	The people associated with Paul’s imprisonment seem better acquainted with an imprisonment at Ephesus.
The association with Colossians makes a Roman imprisonment more probable, it best agrees with the information given in Colossians and Acts.	An Ephesian imprisonment is never overtly mentioned and can only be assumed, but Acts is a selective history.
The seriousness of the Colossian Heresy could have prompted Paul to change his mind and desire another visit.	Paul speaks of suffering imprisonment in plural even before Caesarean and Roman imprisonments (2 Cor. 6:5; 11:23).

When considering only the book of Philemon, Ephesus would seem the weightier argument, but one cannot disassociate it from Colossians; in that case, a Roman imprisonment seems more likely. Rome is a great distance from Colossae and Laodicea, and—in view of the severe punishment exacted on runaway slaves—it seems more likely that Onesimus would have desired to hide in a large city a long distance away from his former master. Also, Paul was on house arrest in Rome, which allowed him the freedom to have visitors; this helps one understand why he would mention particular people and his ability to write and send letters. Because Onesimus is

mentioned in Colossians as returning with Tychicus, the bearer of Colossians, and is mentioned in Philemon and Colossians as associated with the same people, it seems clear that Philemon should be dated at the same time as Colossians. Assuming a Roman imprisonment, Philemon would have been written in approximately A.D. 60-63.¹⁶

Purpose

Paul’s purpose in writing Philemon was to make an appeal to Philemon on behalf of a slave named Onesimus (v. 10). Paul appeals to Philemon to accept Onesimus back—not as a slave, but as a dear brother in Christ (v. 16). The following provides a simply outline of the book:¹⁷

- I. Introduction (vv. 1-7)
 - A. Authorship (v.1)
 - B. Recipients (vs. 1-2)
 - C. Blessings (v. 3)
 - D. Prayer (vv. 4-7)
 - 1. Thankfulness for Their Love and Faith (vv. 4-5)
 - 2. Thankfulness for Their Love and Faith (vv. 4-5)
 - 3. Prayer for Their Continued Fellowship (vv. 6-7)

- II. Paul's Appeal (vv. 8-16)
 - A. For Acceptance of Onesimus (vv. 8-10)
 - 1. Because of Paul's Status and Imprisonment (vv. 8- 9)
 - 2. Because Onesimus is Now a Son of Paul (v. 10)
 - B. For "Usefulness" of Onesimus (vv. 11-16)
 - 1. As a Minister to Paul in His Imprisonment (vv.11-14)
 - 2. As a Fellow Brother in Christ (vv. 15-16)

- III. Paul's Admonishment (vv. 17-22)
 - A. Accept Onesimus as Paul Himself (v. 17)
 - B. Charge Onesimus' Debt to Paul (vv. 18,-19)
 - C. Refresh Paul's Heart with Obedience (vv. 20-21)
 - D. Prepare a Lodging for Paul (v. 22)

- IV. Conclusion (vv. 23-25)
 - A. Greetings from Fellow Christians (vv. 23-24)
 - B. Doxology (v. 25)

Philemon is a standard "letter of recommendation" from ancient Rome where "patron[s] wrote to social peers or inferiors on behalf of a dependent client to ask a favor for him."¹⁸ Craig Keener lays out the letter as follows: (1) *exordium*, or the opening appeal (vv. 4-7); (2) main argument consisting of proofs (vv. 8-16); and (3) *peroratio*, or a summary of the case (vv. 17-22). The letter is one of "deliberative rhetoric" used by educated persons in persuasion.¹⁹ A similar letter from antiquity is Pliny the Younger's letter to his friend Sabinianus.²⁰ Pliny's appeal falls short in comparison with Paul's; it never appeals for equality, whereas Paul asks for a complete change of status for Onesimus. "Paul's letter to Philemon ranks among the most liberating documents of ancient times."²¹ While Paul never overtly commands Philemon to free

Onesimus, the requests to view him as a brother makes such a command unnecessary—one does not keep a brother as a slave. As Arthur A. Rupprecht writes,

Whenever the letter to Philemon was sent, whether before or at the same time as the Colossians letter, it is obvious that Paul sensed the unrest that would exist or had existed because of his handling of the Onesimus matter. Onesimus, the slave, was either released from bondage or he was received back without punishment, itself an unheard of thing in the ancient world. Either outcome would cause Christian slaves to reach the conclusion that the Church advocated physical as well as spiritual freedom for them.²²

If Paul had commanded Philemon in such a manner, he would essentially have made Philemon the slave who either had to fulfill his commands or face consequences. Rather, Paul's appeal calls Philemon to consider how relationships in Christ must change as each Christian is changed internally. Philemon offers no doctrinal discourse, but it does reveal that relationships in the body of Christ are as important as correct doctrine.

The letter itself leaves much to be assumed. One deduces that Onesimus is a slave of Philemon who has fallen out of favor with him and somehow came to know Christ through Paul's ministry. The reader is never explicitly told how Onesimus displeased his master or if he is, in fact, a fugitive. Paul does not reveal how he met Onesimus. Verse 18 states, "But if *in* anything he has wronged you or owes you, charge this to me," and has been used to exhibit thievery on Onesimus' part, but that is conjecture at best.

Analysis of Context

Paul follows the customary salutation along with a prayer and blessing (vv. 1-7) and the purpose of the letter, right relationship with Onesimus restored (vv. 8-16). After the appeal, where Paul gently urges Philemon to see Onesimus in a new light, he sets forth a harsher admonishment. In this portion (vv. 17-21), Paul reminds Philemon of his indebtedness to Paul as a way of more strongly encouraging Philemon to do the right thing. After the admonishment, Paul concludes with requests for lodging, greetings from fellow believers, and a doxology.

The relationship between Philemon and Onesimus is one of master and slave. While this is the only biblical letter which specifically addresses this type of

relationship, Paul does address it on a smaller scale in a few other epistles (1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:28; Eph. 6:5-9). In the passages in 1 Corinthians and Galatians, Paul sets forth the new social status found in Christ—equality and mutual submission. In Christ, everyone has the same standing—sinners saved by grace. In the Ephesians passage, Paul discusses what a master-slave relationship should look like when one or both have become brothers/sisters in Christ. The Philemon epistle takes it one step further; while Paul does not directly tell Philemon to set Onesimus free, he urges him to see Onesimus as a brother instead of a slave, which carries the same idea.

Slavery in Ancient Rome

Philemon, a slave, is at the heart of the letter; therefore, one cannot study the book without first establishing some general background on slavery. If one views slavery through the North American lens, one would interpret the epistle entirely out of context. The slavery present during the first century was of a completely different nature than that practiced by Americans in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. Slavery was a foundational part of first-century society. "Slavery existed throughout the history of antiquity side by side with free labor ... both by masters and by slaves it was regarded as an inevitable and unavertable [Sic] condition."²³ Slavery was so common that former slaves had no problem owning other slaves. In a letter written by the Cynic Seneca to Serenus, one finds discussion of a former slave, Diogenes, who now, as a freedman, owns his own slaves.²⁴ Slaves comprised a large part of the population and were not associated with one particular race or culture. According to William Westermann, slavery had six sources: slavery by birth, exposure of infants, sale of children under stress or poverty, sale of slave material from border

tribes to the slave trade within the boundaries of the empire, voluntary submission to slavery, and penal condemnation to slave status.²⁵ Slaves did not have a particular look and their treatment varied according to specific duty and individual master.²⁶

Most sources posit that Paul could not and did not even consider the ending of slavery; it was too much a part of society. I cannot feel comfortable drawing that same conclusion when Philemon is such a radical letter. The ancient world was not a democracy and for Paul to protest slavery would simply lead to war and bloodshed, accomplishing little for God's Kingdom. Instead, Paul fought for the eventual emancipation of all slaves by redefining relationships in Christ. True Christianity, which promotes equality, love, and respect, would change society and naturally end slavery.²⁷ Americans sometimes forget that Christianity is not, nor has it ever been, a political movement. Jesus did not come in political power to overthrow the government; He came as a servant whose glory was revealed in His sacrifice (cf. Isa. 53). Jesus, and later Paul, did not address the issues of society by recommending an overthrow of the political structure, but by acting within the structure and calling for an overthrow of the sinful self. Donald Guthrie aptly states,

... although the existing order of society could not be immediately changed by Christianity without a political revolution (which was contrary to Christian principles), the Christian master-slave relationship was so transformed from *within* that it was bound to lead ultimately to the abolition of the system (emphasis added).²⁸

The ancient world adhered to either the Roman or Greek point of view and each had

differing laws regulating slavery. The Romans viewed slaves as objects to be owned. "The slave of a Roman was an object of buying, renting and selling; damage to this slave was damage to property; and several persons at once could own him, as if he were a field."²⁹ Roman slaves, in principle, had no rights or duties; in practice, in society, it was more like a "continuum of statuses."³⁰ In Greek law, slavery was not so distinct from freedom, which was broken down into four components:

1. The freedman is to be his own representative in all-legal matters.
2. The freedman is not subject to seizure as property. He cannot be taken into custody, except by due process of the laws applying to free men.
3. He may do what he desire to do, i.e., he may earn his living as he chooses.
4. He may go where he desires to go, or (in a variant form) he may live where he desires to live.³¹

Any of the last three components could be limited as a condition of manumission—basically being a "freedman" was in name only.

The Greeks had three categories of ancient slaves: (1) public slaves, (2) temple slaves, and (3) privately-owned slaves.³²

Westermann states, "Household employment was one particular field of labor in which slaves may have been used more generally than free servants."³³

Onesimus would have been a privately-owned household slave, which is the only type of slave Paul addresses.³⁴ People often used privately-owned slaves as letter bearers or carriers for private correspondence. One

has to wonder if this is, in fact, how Onesimus came to be away from Philemon—considering the reader is never explicitly told that he had in fact run away.³⁵

Both Roman and Greek law viewed a runaway slave as unacceptable. “The problem of the runaways was a serious one in all parts of the Empire, constituting a loss of property and of valuable services to the owners of slaves and a general public menace through the increase of brigandage.”³⁶ Interestingly, a letter survives that tells of two sisters whose slave has been granted a level of freedom (see Greek laws above), but who was still required to pay out of his work earnings for the sisters’ support. When he refused to pay, the sisters wrote a letter appealing to the law.³⁷ Slaves were, in the end, property; they could be beaten, sold, and separated from their families, although there was an “astonishing fluidity of status in both directions, from slavery to freedom as from freedom to slavery.”³⁸

Slavery and the Apostolic Fathers

The period after the death of the Apostles through the second century is known as the era of the Apostolic Fathers. It is usually thought of as the time after the death of John the Apostle to the death of Polycarp. With a brief look at the *Didache*, Ignatius’ letter to Polycarp, *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, one can see a view of slavery in this period.

The *Didache*, or *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, was found by Philotheos Bryennios in 1873 in the Library of the Holy Sepulchre in Constantinople. Ten years later, he published them and quickly they became, according to some scholars, one of the most important literary pieces for Christianity outside of the New Testament. The book is split into two sections: (1) a discourse on ethical practices and behaviors,

and (2) a discourse on church ritual.³⁹ In chapter 4:10-11 it writes:

Do not give orders to your male slave or female servant—who hope in the same God—out of bitterness, lest they stop fearing the God who is over you both. For he does not come to call those of high status, but those whom the Spirit has prepared. And you who are slaves must be subject to your masters as to a replica of God, with respect and reverential fear.⁴⁰

Interestingly, people did not react for or against slavery; they simply assumed it to be a part of life within the church. The teaching of the *Didache* parallels those of the Apostle Paul where masters are reminded that they, too, have a Master in heaven and should treat their slaves accordingly (Eph. 6:9; Col. 4:1). The teaching also parallels Ephesians 6:5, 6 and Colossians 3:22 in commanding slaves to obey their masters.

The letters of Ignatius were written while Ignatius, the early second century Bishop of Antioch, was en route to his martyrdom in Rome.⁴¹ In Ignatius’ *Letter to Polycarp*, section 4.3, he writes:

Do not be arrogant towards male and female slaves, but neither let them become haughty; rather, let them serve even more as slaves for the glory of God, that they may receive a greater freedom from God. And they should not long to be set free through the common fund, lest they be found slaves of passion.⁴²

Once again, slaves are commanded to obedience and masters to kind treatment. Ignatius does not make an appeal to a Master in heaven, as seen previously in the *Didache*, but he does make an intriguing reference to slaves being set free through a

common fund. Based on this reference, one can conclude that in some church communities of which Ignatius was a part, they combined finances and purchased enslaved brothers and sisters in order to set them free. It leaves one to wonder why the church would take these actions. Did the church do this because of negative feelings regarding slavery, in general, or for some other reason?

Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna, was martyred in the first half of the second century. The account of his martyrdom, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, is apparently based on eyewitness accounts and is the “earliest Christian martyrology that we have outside of the New Testament description of the death of Stephen (Acts 7).”⁴³ This account provides the first reference to slaves owned by a Christian outside of Scripture.⁴⁴ In sections 6 and 7 of *Polycarp’s Martyrdom*, the reader learns that it was at the arrest and torture of two young slaves and the subsequent confession of one of them that Polycarp was found and arrested. The arrested slaves were members of Polycarp’s household. Obviously, if a Bishop of the church owned slaves, the practice, sadly, was not frowned upon within the church.

Clement of Alexandria concerns himself more with sexual purity and integrity than with slavery. Actually, in his writings and warnings regarding slaves and the impurity they can bring, one can see a prejudice against slaves.⁴⁵ In his writing, *Christ the Educator*, book 3, chapter 6, he writes,

To begin with, take ornaments away from the woman, and servants from the master, and you will discover that the master differs in no way from the slaves he has bought, neither in bearing, nor in appearance, nor in voice. In fact, he is very similar to his slave in these respects. *He differs from his slave in one*

way only, in that he is more delicate and, because of his upbringing, more susceptible to sickness (emphasis added).

In this, one finds a striking similarity to Aristotle’s beliefs that some men are more fitted by nature for slavery. He writes, “these are by nature slaves, for whom to be governed by this kind of authority is advantageous, inasmuch as it is advantageous to the subject things already mentioned.”⁴⁶

Origen, Clement’s successor, is the one considered responsible for “an opinion about the origin of slavery that has haunted the Church for at least seventeen centuries.”⁴⁷ In his *Homily on Genesis 7*, he claims that slavery entered the world through Ham’s descendants. He writes:

Consider how the Hebrews are said to have been reduced to slavery violently, to whom liberty was natural ... but Pharaoh reduced the Egyptians to slavery easily, and it is not written that he did this violently. For the Egyptians were prone to a degenerate life, and easily fell into the servitude of all sorts of vices. Look to the origin of this race and you will see that their father, Ham, who mocked his father’s nakedness merited that his son Canaan should be a slave to his brethren; so that the condition of slavery should be proof of the wickedness of his disposition. Here we find not only gross prejudice, but a schism between biblical teachings on equality in Christ and Christian teachings that by nature people are not equal even within the church. It is obvious how such a belief lends itself to the enslavement of people groups, especially as was culminated in the slavery of the African people in the New World.⁴⁸

Slavery According to Augustine

Augustine, Bishop of Hippo (396 A.D.), was a prolific writer whose theology did much to shape the Church for centuries. His influence was paramount, including his views on slavery. His three works, *The Confessions*, *City of God*, and *The Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, reveal a fairly clear understanding of Augustine's perspective regarding slavery, which would carry on in the Church and have ramifications for 1500 years.

Augustine's work, *The Confessions*, focuses on his coming to know and accept God; while it does not deal with the issue of slavery per se, it reveals an other-worldly concept of the issue. In books 6, 7, and 8, predominantly, Augustine wrestles with his sinfulness and views slavery as, ultimately, slavery to sin. Augustine recreates an atmosphere where freedom is a spiritual issue; when a person finds God, he or she finds freedom. While such a belief is not wrong, it created a foundation for Augustine to continue accepting slavery in this world.

Augustine's *The City of God*, is a massive work that consists of twenty-two books. In Book 19.15-16, Augustine echoes Origen's equation of the sin of Ham with the introduction of slavery. He writes: "For of course it is understood that the condition of slavery is justly imposed on the sinner."⁴⁹ He also makes reference to the idea that the Latin word from which "slave" is derived carries with it the concept of preservation, since by making captives slaves, they were being preserved from death. Augustine does purport that slavery was not God's intention initially, but then he goes on to write,

Moreover, in a peaceful order in which some men are subjected to others, humility is as beneficial to servants and pride is harmful to masters. But by

nature, in which God first created man, no man is the slave either of another man or of sin. Yet slavery as a punishment is also ordained by that law which bids us to preserve the natural order and forbids us to disturb it; for if nothing had been done contrary to that law, there would have been nothing requiring the check of punishment by slavery. For this reason too the Apostle admonishes slaves to be subject to their masters, and to serve them heartily and with good will, so that if they cannot be freed by their masters they may themselves make their very slavery in some sense free, by serving not in crafty fear but in faithful affection, until all wickedness pass away and all lordship and human authority be done away with and God be all in all.⁵⁰

Clearly, Augustine finds slavery to be a natural and inevitable component of society. He also misinterprets Paul and fails to place his exhortation to slaves in proper context. Augustine lived when Christianity actually had political power, and he could have worked toward abolishing an evil like slavery; however, he failed to do so. Augustine also states, "So if any one in the household by disobedience breaks the domestic peace, he is rebuked by a word or a blow or some other kind of just and legitimate punishment."⁵¹ This statement intrinsically holds so-called natural order above anything else and a person who breaks this peace is deserving of punishment.

In *The Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, Augustine writes one specific item that is of concern with regards to the institution of slavery. In chapter 19.59, he writes:

Here, then [referring to Matt. 5:40] we are to understand all such things for which we may be brought into litigation, whereby they may pass from our

ownership to his who contends or in behalf of whom he contends—clothes, for instance, house, land, a beast of burden, and in general, *any kind of property. But whether this is to apply to slaves also is a weighty problem.* For no Christian ought to possess a slave as he might a horse or money ... But if that slave is receiving from you, his master, a better moral education and training, one that is more conducive to his worship of God, than he can possibly receive from him who would take him away, I do not know if anyone would venture to say that he should be disregarded the same as a garment (emphasis added).⁵²

Augustine clearly saw slaves as property, and although he encouraged their moral training, relied too much on philosophy and misinterpreted Scripture, thereby allowing wrong theology to continue unhindered. Unfortunately, Augustine's precedent was largely accepted throughout church history, including the leaders of the Protestant Reformation, Luther and Calvin. This naturally led to what has become a mar in American history—the enslavement of African people.

Slavery in the New World

Slavery, as it existed in the New World, was racially motivated with the enslavement of African people to European-born people. African people became a commodity, which was kidnapped, transported, and sold in exchange for wealth. The slaves were used as free labor to work on large plantations so that the masters could enjoy wealth and relative ease. Slaves were kept illiterate due to a fear of education; biblical passages were often misused, especially passages regarding slavery, in order to continue oppressing the slaves.⁵³ Black slaves who served as preachers were illiterate.⁵⁴ Indeed, when masters allowed their slaves to be religious,

a part was always hidden or simply forbidden, with the promise of a whipping, because masters did not want their slaves to pray for freedom. This disconnect often led many slaves to reject “Bible Christianity”—as practiced by their masters. In turn, an experiential Christianity arose within the slave world that did not focus on the Bible and its interpretation, but rather on the experiences achieved.⁵⁵

A sermon by Charles Colcock Jones to a slave congregation in 1833 is a great example of the misuse of Scripture—surprisingly based on Philemon. He writes:

I was preaching to a large congregation on the *Epistle of Philemon*: and when I insisted upon fidelity and obedience as Christian virtues in servants and upon the authority of Paul, condemned the practice of *running away*, one half of my audience deliberately rose up and walked off with themselves, and those that remained looked any thing but satisfied, either with the preacher or his doctrine. After dismissing, there was no small stir among them; some solemnly declared ‘that there was no such an Epistle in the Bible’; others, ‘that they did not care if they ever heard me preach again!’ ... There were some too, who had strong objections against me as a Preacher, because I was a *master*, and said, ‘his people have to work as well as we.’⁵⁶

It is astonishing what one can “find” within Scripture to support a perspective of personal benefit. It is also horrifying how bad theology can be passed down through the ages. Slavery is an example of this. Instead of the church being the forerunner in abolition, understanding the slave passages in context, and seeing the radical aspect of Philemon, they looked to philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, to interpret Scripture.

They failed to use the platform of Christendom to bring about righteous change, which resulted in a horrifying form of slavery that ended with the subjugation of a people group based solely on their ethnicity.

Slavery in Modern Times

Slavery continues to exist today, not as a pillar of society like in ancient Rome, nor with the racial foundation such as existed in the New World. However, slavery exists in the form of forced prostitution and labor and it permeates almost every culture in the world. It is an “underground market in people, termed human trafficking” and as of 2006 “between 600,000 and 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders each year—approximately two-thirds are ensnared in sexual slavery.”⁵⁷ Human trafficking includes “force, fraud, or coercion—legally sanitized words that cover intimidation, kidnapping, beatings, rape, deceit, abandonment, and murder.”⁵⁸ Human trafficking is an “exploitative and lucrative” business bringing slaveholders billions of dollars in annual profit.⁵⁹ Although mostly women and girls are trapped as sex slaves, men and boys are also enslaved for homosexual prostitution. In the West, the demand for sex slaves is “encouraged by the ubiquitous presence of pornography and the glamorization of prostitution in films such as *Pretty Woman*.”⁶⁰

By its very nature, sex slavery remains secretive and behind closed doors; consequently, it can be easily forgotten, but this does not dismiss its reality in the world today. This new form of slavery “is not about owning people in the traditional sense of the old slavery, but about controlling them completely. People become completely disposable tools for making money.”⁶¹ It is not difficult to see how slavery has morphed into the human trafficking existent today.

When an idea like natural inferiority is promulgated and accepted, it does not take much transformation for that to become sex slavery, especially among women who have long been viewed as inferior.

Modern day slavery also includes the forced labor of adults and children. There are several common themes in modern day slavery:

Each victim is manipulated through the threat of violence or its use; each is a displaced person, in foreign circumstances that increase his or her dependence on the slave holder; each represents a profitable input in an underground market but is also considered, paradoxically, a highly expendable input; and each is, practically, surviving in a reality that evades the intervention of law.⁶²

Adults and children alike are essentially tricked into taking a job in another area and, oftentimes, a foreign country. Then, when the person is solely dependent on his or her employer, he or she is forced to work inhumane hours and in horrible conditions with little or no pay. One can easily see how breaking out of these conditions is virtually impossible. In some cases, it is only through death that the slave escapes. Many of the people who find themselves in such conditions are looking for a better life or a way out of poverty, only to end up as slaves. The reality of slavery in the modern context only increases the need for proper interpretation of the Bible and epistles like Philemon. Christians in the twenty-first century must make up for the misinterpretation of the past and become the forerunners in ending slavery once and for all.

Commentary on Philemon

The following commentary will focus on the heart of Philemon (vv. 8- 21) and not the introduction (vv. 1-7) or the greetings and doxology (vv. 22-24). Correct interpretation requires that one work from the most original text, in considering the textual variations in the multitude of New Testament manuscripts, the author’s translation is as follows:

8 Therefore, having much confidence in Christ to order you *to do* the fitting thing, 9 rather, I appeal on account of love, being such *a one* as Paul the elder, but now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus; 10 I appeal to you on behalf of my son, whom I have begotten in *my* imprisonment, Onesimus, 11 the one formerly useless to you but now useful to you and to me, 12 whom I have sent to you, him, that is my heart; 13 Whom I was wishing to keep with myself, so that on your behalf he might serve me in the bonds of the gospel, 14 but I wish to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good thing might be according to free will *and* not as according to

necessity. 15 For perhaps on account of this he was separated for a season, that you might have him forever, 16 no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you both in *the* flesh and in *the* Lord. 17 Therefore if you have me *as* a partner, receive him as me. 18 But if *in* anything he has wronged you or owes you, charge this to me. 19 I, Paul, have written *this* with my hand, I will repay; in order that I might not say to you that you owe to me even yourself. 20 Yes, brother, I would like to benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. 21 Being confident of your obedience I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than what I say.

When examining the Greek text of Philemon, the letter’s artistry quickly becomes apparent. Paul uses a number of words multiple times and also the letter contains several *hapax legomena*, or words used only once in the entire New Testament. F. F. Church demonstrates the rhetorical structure of Philemon in Table 2.⁶³

Table 2. Visualization of Philemon’s Rhetoric

<i>Exordium</i>	<i>Proof</i>	<i>Peroratio</i>
my prayer (v. 4)		your prayers (v. 22)
your love (vv. 5, 7)	through love (v. 9)	
all the good (v. 6)	the good (v. 9)	
the sharing in common of your faith (v. 6)		sharing in common with me (v. 17)
the inner being of the saints has been refreshed through you (v. 7)	Onesimus my inner being, a beloved brother (vv. 10, 12, 16)	I desire some “benefit” (<i>onaimen</i>) in the Lord, refresh my inner being (v. 20)

8 Διὸ πολλὴν ἐν Χριστῷ παρρησίαν
ἔχων ἐπιτάσσειν σοι τὸ ἀνήκον

8 Therefore, having much confidence in Christ to order you *to do* the fitting thing,

Διὸ, therefore, points back to the previous two verses in which Paul encouraged Philemon to be effective in the participation of his faith for Christ and expressed joy at Philemon's love and his refreshing of the saints hearts. Paul is able to appeal to Philemon (v. 9) and not command him precisely because of Philemon's track record in doing the right or good thing. The noun translated confidence, *παρρησίαν*, actually carries the idea of freedom of speech. Considering the context, Paul is not referring to his personal authority as an apostle, but rather all believers' freedom of speech that comes because of a relationship with Christ. As followers of Christ, boldness comes to encourage and speak truth to one another.

Verse 8 is a dependent clause and it does not contain a finite verb; it contains two participles, *ἔχων* and *ἀνήκον*, and an infinitive, *ἐπιτάσσειν*. The first participle acts as a concessive, carrying the idea of although. The second participle is being used substantively and is literally “the fitting thing.” What is this “fitting thing?” It is the actions that Philemon should take with Onesimus, which Paul defines in greater detail in verses 15-16. The infinitive verb, *ἐπιτάσσειν*, comes from the verb *ἐπιτασσω* and is an explanatory infinitive explaining the extent of Paul's confidence. One could interpret this verb as Paul's right as an apostle, but considering the form of the letter and that Paul never once references his apostleship, it seems more likely that Paul is highlighting the duty of Philemon as a Christian and Paul's right as a fellow believer to enjoin him to perform that duty.

9 διὰ τὴν ἀγάπην μᾶλλον παρακαλῶ,
τοιούτος ὢν ὡς Παῦλος πρεσβύτερος νυνὶ
δὲ καὶ δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ

9 rather, I appeal on account of love, being such *a one* as Paul the elder, but now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus;

The adverb *μᾶλλον* emphasizes what Paul is going to do instead of commanding or ordering; the preposition, *διὰ*, indicates the reason for following the coming appeal—that reason is love. The verb *παρακαλῶ* is an interesting verb with a myriad of meanings and uses. It comes from the preposition *παρά*, which can be translated ‘from, beside, in the presence of, and alongside of,’ and the verb *καλέω*, ‘I call.’ It is used in the first century and especially the New Testament as “to call near, summon, invite, beseech, comfort, exhort, urge, entreat, and implore.”⁶⁴ It carries an idea of inviting and encouraging someone to imitate a person's actions. In this case, Paul is inviting Philemon, because of love, to do what should be done in Christ and what Paul, himself, would do.

The last part of the verse calls attention to Paul's status of elder, as someone who has wisdom, and his status of prisoner, as someone who has done the “fitting thing” even when it came at a personal sacrifice. Paul's appeal comes from a rich background of experience, thereby giving it more weight. Paul could have used his status of apostle to order Philemon, but instead he uses his example. This is a case where Paul defers to referent power instead of legitimate power as the defining factor in his exhortation.

10 παρακαλῶ σε περὶ τοῦ ἐμοῦ τένου,
ὃν ἐγεννησα ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς, Ὀνήσιμον,

10 I appeal to you on behalf of my son, whom I have begotten in *my* imprisonment, Onesimus,

In the previous verse, Paul lays the foundation for his appeal—love and his example; verse 10 identifies the purpose of his appeal, Onesimus. Paul repeats the same verb, *παρακαλῶ*, and then goes on to describe his relationship with Onesimus, a father with his child. It is understood from this sentence that Onesimus came to faith through Paul’s ministry while Paul was in prison. This concept of being a spiritual father is used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:15, 17, Galatians 4:19, 2 Timothy 1:2, and Titus 1:4. It is a Jewish idea that carries over into the Christian world. Paul’s reference to Onesimus as his child not only reveals the spiritual change that has taken place in Onesimus’ life, but also the affection that Paul has for him.

This is the first time Onesimus is mentioned in the epistle. The name Onesimus means useful or profitable and Paul uses this to his advantage. Paul places Onesimus at the end of the description in order to provoke favorable thoughts regarding Onesimus. Philemon understands that Onesimus is not simply his slave, but now Paul’s son in the faith.

11 τὸν ποτέ σοι ἀχρηστον νυνὶ δὲ σοὶ καὶ ἐμοὶ ευχρηστον, 12 ὃν ἀπέπεμψά σοι αὐτόν, τοῦτ' ἔστιν τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα 13 ὃν ἐγὼ ἐβουλόμην πρὸς ἑμαυτὸν κατέχειν, ἵνα ὑπὲρ σοῦ μοι διακονῇ ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς τοῦ εὐαγγελίου,

11. the one formerly useless to you but now useful to you and to me, 12 whom I have sent to you, him, that is my heart; 13 Whom I was wishing to keep with myself, so that on your behalf he might serve me in the bonds of the gospel,

The next three verses draw attention to Onesimus’ new status and to Paul’s affection for him. Verse 11 creates a word play on Onesimus’ name, useful. Paul is revealing to Philemon that, whereas Onesimus once did not live up to his name, now he does. We find the substantive article, *τόν*, along with the adjectives, *ἀχρηστον* and *ευχρηστον*, in the same case as Onesimus was in the last verse, which shows appellation. They are all referring back to or naming him. *Ἀχρηστον* is the first *hapax legomena*; it is chosen precisely for being a synonym with Onesimus’ name.

Paul once again uses the noun *σπλάγχνα* (used previously in v. 7). It literally refers to the bowels, which were considered the seat of the emotions. Paul is expressing his affection for Onesimus. In its use in verse 7, Paul was expressing joy at Philemon’s refreshing of the saints’ *σπλάγχνα*, but here Paul appears to be giving Philemon the opportunity to refresh Paul’s heart through his actions with Onesimus.

In verse 13, Paul uses the imperfect tense, “I was wishing,” to show a desire that he had over a period of time, but then decided against. The wish was there, but was not fulfilled. Could this be an invitation for Philemon to fulfill that wish? The desire to keep Onesimus was in order that he might minister to or serve, *διακονη*, Paul while he is in prison because of the gospel. It is interesting to note the many times Paul has used the emphatic form and its cognates of the personal pronoun, *ἐγώ*. This is not without purpose, but accentuates Paul’s own interest in Onesimus and his situation.

14 χωρὶς δὲ τῆς σῆς γνώμης οὐδὲν ἠθέλησα ποιῆσαι, ἵνα μὴ ὡς κατὰ ἀνάγκην τὸ ἀγαθὸν σου ἢ ἀλλὰ κατὰ ἐκούσιον.

14 but I wish to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good thing might be according to free will *and* not as according to necessity.

The verb in this clause switches to the aorist active and shows a decision being made after the deliberating imperfect from the previous verse. The word translated consent, *γνώμης*, means opinion or decision and is coupled with the emphatic possessive *σῆς* because Paul wants Philemon to know that he is the sole decision-maker in Onesimus' situation. Paul's reason for deferring to Philemon is expressed next using a purpose clause expressed by *ἵνα* with a subjunctive verb—that Philemon would not be coerced but allowed to act freely. The good thing spoken of in this verse seems to refer back to verse 8, the fitting thing. Paul has not yet defined what that is in the letter, but he has masterfully created an atmosphere where, no matter how revolutionary, it will be the obvious thing to do.

15 *Τάχα γὰρ διὰ τοῦτο ἐχωρίσθη πρὸς ὥραν, ἵνα αἰώνιον αὐτὸν ἀπέχης,*

15 For perhaps on account of this he was separated for a season, that you might have him forever,

The opening phrase here, *Τάχα γὰρ*, seems almost ambiguous and uncertain but, understanding Paul's use of persuasive language and ancient rhetoric, it becomes clear that Paul is pointing to something or, in this case, someone that has had control the entire time. The *διὰ τοῦτο* is referring to a phrase that is yet to come and will be discussed in a following section. The verb Paul uses, *ἐχωρίσθη*, is most telling. The verb's definition is not unclear or overly interesting, rather it is the form used that directs the sentence. The verb is a passive construction of the third person singular. Based on the context, the implied subject is

Onesimus and that he is the one receiving the action. The verb and phrase offer no explanation as to the agent precisely because Paul is pointing to God as the agent. Paul wants Philemon to understand that what has occurred has been God's plan and this should direct any action he takes with Onesimus. A paraphrase might read: "It seems obvious that God is the one who separated Onesimus from you."

The separation, while orchestrated by God, was not meant to last forever but, *πρὸς ὥραν*, "for a season." That Onesimus was not a follower of Christ upon his separation from Philemon is clear from Paul's reference to his becoming Paul's son during Paul's imprisonment (v. 10). The season of Onesimus' separation served a mighty purpose in bringing him to Christ, but the season was not to be lasting.

16 *οὐκέτι ὡς δούλον ἀλλ' ὑπὲρ δούλον, ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν, μάλιστα ἐμοί, πόσω δὲ μᾶλλον σοὶ καὶ ἐν σαρκὶ καὶ ἐν κυρίῳ.*

16 no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you both in *the* flesh and in *the* Lord.

This verse reveals that *διὰ τοῦτο* was referring to—receiving back Onesimus. It is "on account" of Onesimus' return that God separated him. The verb used here, *ἀπέχης*, is enlightening. In this case, it is the definition that causes one to pause. *Ἀπέχω*, depending on its form, means to abstain, away, enough, have back, have in full, received in full, and off. When it is a transitive verb, requiring a direct object, as in Philemon, it is translated receive in full or have back. It is actually derived from the preposition *ἀπό*, from, which can act as an intensifier, and the verb *έχω*, I have. Its use

through time closely matches the use found in the New Testament, except in the papyri from the same period where one finds the word being used largely for receipts when the payment was received in full. When the verb carries the idea of payment, it is used for inanimate objects not usually people.⁶⁵

Paul uses this verb in four other passages. In 1 Thessalonians 4:3, 5:22, and 1 Timothy 4:3, he uses the middle form of the verb translated abstain or avoid, instructing the churches to abstain from fornication, every form of evil. In 1 Timothy, he quotes those who are wrongly telling the church to abstain from meat. In another passage, Philippians 4:18, Paul uses the present form of the verb, also transitive, referring to the “things” that he received from Epaphroditus on behalf of the church. It is only in Philemon that we find the verb used by Paul (and any other biblical writer) in reference to an actual person and then with the idea of receiving that person back in full. It seems evident that Paul used this verb for a purpose, as seen more clearly in a following section.

The beginning of this clause, *ἵνα*, coupled with the subjunctive form of the verb discussed previously, is a signifier that this is a purpose clause. It tells the reader the purpose of Onesimus’ temporal separation, which is not only to receive him back, but to receive him back forever. (The clause is *ἵνα αἰώνιον αὐτὸν ἀπέχης*). The noun *αἰώνιον* comes from *αἰών* where the words “aeon” or “eon” come from; it carries the idea of an age or a long duration of time. When *αἰώνιον* is used in the New Testament, it is almost always translated “eternal” or “eternity;” only in Philemon is it translated “forever.” It carries the idea of quality rather than time. The understanding of becoming a Christ follower was inherently coupled with eternity and eternal life. Paul

plays on this concept by choosing this particular adjective. The idea is not that Onesimus will never die or leave again, but that qualitatively he, as a Christian, is bound to Philemon in a new and better way and they will enjoy eternity together. What a powerful image. *Αἰώνιον αὐτὸν* are in the same form, accusative, to show their relationship to each other and their relationship as the direct objects of the verb. It is “him” or Onesimus who will be received forever.

The next portion is the climax of the entire letter; it serves as the drive behind Paul’s writing and his subtle push for Onesimus’ freedom. The phrase *οὐκέτι ὡς δούλον*, is very straight forward. Onesimus’ “forever” status has changed from a slave; therefore, Philemon should receive him back differently. Here Paul uses the verb *ἀπέχης*, which was discussed earlier. However, he uses a verb normally reserved for inanimate objects, especially receipts, to refer to a person. As previously discussed, slavery was a complicated, yet expected social arrangement in the Roman world. Slaves were not considered to be people, but rather objects. Aristotle captures the way people viewed slaves when he refers to them as “a live article of property.”⁶⁶ Paul plays off this idea and reveals how this view should be transformed in the Church. Onesimus, as a slave, was property; by his absence, he cost Philemon money. By sending Onesimus back, Paul is telling Philemon that Onesimus’ debt, both figuratively and literally, has been paid in full; therefore, he should be received as such. According to verse 18, Paul forthrightly tells Philemon to charge any monetary debt to himself. Paul obviously wanted to highlight Onesimus’ new nature and change of status.

The status change is not complete by simply stating that Onesimus was “no longer a slave.” Paul now defines who Onesimus is

and how Philemon should view him. Paul writes: *ἀλλ' ὑπὲρ δούλον, ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν*. The verse uses the term *ἀλλά*, “but,” which, in Greek, indicates a strong contrastive—signifying a complete change. Onesimus’ change is found in appositional form where Paul uses first an ablative of comparison, *ὑπὲρ δούλον*, “more than a slave,” with the apposition being *ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν*, “a beloved brother.” The use of apposition reveals that Paul considers the “more than a slave” to be equal to “a beloved brother.”

The word *ἀγαπητός* is derived from the word *ἀγάπη*, “love.” It was used in Classical Greek with reference to desirable things and also to people who were “beloved.” People often used the term to address letters and was first found in this form in the LXX. The word *ἀδελφός* derives from the *ἄ*, copulative, and *δελφύς*, “womb” and literally means “son of the same mother.” Aristotle was the first person to use this term and people later used it in reference to kinsmen, colleagues, associates, member of a college, a term of address used by kings, and, finally, brother—as in a fellow Christian.⁶⁷

Moulton and Milligan cite a number of uses of the word *ἀγαπητός*. Its main use appears to have been in the addresses of letters, but they also cite its use in a horoscope. The use of *ἀδελφός* is more complicated. Moulton and Milligan identify numerous literal uses of the word, but also note instances where it may be used in reference to one’s husband. Further, they state that the word could denote members of the same religious community, kinsmen, and friends. In all instances, the term shows some type of relationship that is recognized and valued.⁶⁸

In the New Testament, *ἀγαπητός* is used in reference to Jesus and, Paul, in particular,

uses the term to refer to fellow believers and people who came to salvation through his ministry. In addition, it is used substantively in addresses, particularly in salutations. It is often used along with *ἀδελφός* when talking to or about a fellow Christian. Its plural form is used when addressing or discussing the church in general. Paul frequently uses the phrase *ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν* in varying forms to highlight the relationship that is common to all Christians, thereby negating partiality in the body of Christ. He uses this particular phrase when highlighting Onesimus’ new status and ability to partake in the equality of relationships available in Christ.

Concerning Onesimus’ new status as a beloved brother in Christ, Paul writes, *μάλιστα ἐμοί*. The word *μάλιστα* is an elative superlative or an absolute superlative, yet Paul couples it with the phrase *πόσω δὲ μᾶλλον σοί*, which contains both *πόσω*, an interrogative pronoun “how much” and *μᾶλλον*, a comparative, “more.” The comparative phrase in this case is put in a position of being a degree higher than the absolute superlative. How is this possible? The whole idea behind a superlative is that there is nothing greater or higher. Paul, writing to Philemon, says that *ἐμοί*, “to me,” [Paul], Onesimus’ status as a beloved brother is especially important, but *σοί*, “to you,” [Philemon], Onesimus is even that much more important. The emphasis here, especially in light of the Greek word choice and construction, is glaringly obvious. The relationship that Onesimus has with Paul is vital; he has become his son in the spiritual sense. However, the relationship with Philemon is an even greater contrast. Previously it was a slave, a commodity; now he is familial, a brother—a beloved brother!

Paul separates the relationship change and status of Onesimus into two parts. First, Onesimus has become a beloved brother *καὶ ἐν σαρκί*, “both in *the* flesh,” and second, *καὶ ἐν κυρίῳ*, “and in the Lord.” The *καὶ ... καὶ* construction is a correlative conjunction built to emphasize that both elements involved should be viewed equally. Philemon could easily have seen Onesimus as only having changed in the Lord, then his slave status would have been neither here nor there. However, Paul urges Philemon to recognize that Onesimus’ flesh change, from slave to brother, is just as important. This is paramount in seeing the radicalness of this small letter. Paul’s duo of status emphasis indicates that he saw slavery as contrary to Christian principles.

17 εἰ οὖν με ἔχεις κοινωνόν, προσλαβοῦ αὐτόν ὡς ἐμέ. 18 εἰ δὲ τι ἠδίκησέν σε ἢ ὀφείλει, τοῦτο ἐμοὶ ἐλλόγα. 19 ἐγὼ Παῦλος ἔγραψα τῇ ἐμῇ χειρὶ, ἐγὼ ἀποτίσω ἵνα μὴ λέγω σοι ὅτι καὶ σεαυτὸν μοι προσοφείλεις.

17 Therefore if you have me *as* a partner, receive him *as* me. 18 But if *in* anything he has wronged you or owes you, charge this to me. 19 I, Paul, have written *this* with my hand, I will repay; in order that I might not say to you that you owe to me even yourself.

The word “therefore” (v. 17) relates back to the main point. Paul has sent Onesimus, his heart, back to Philemon and he wants Philemon to receive Onesimus just as he would receive Paul himself. The word *κοινωνόν* is used again. In verse 6, the word referred to Philemon’s faith; now it is used in reference to Paul and Philemon’s relationship. The term carries the sense of a business-partner and can be viewed as a clever word play—like the verb used for receipts cited earlier. Paul discusses a

commodity and payment in the ancient world, but does so with the same language used to designate Christian fellowship.

Verse 18 has long been used as proof that Onesimus stole something from Philemon before he left. While this may, in fact, be the case, the verse alone does not give enough information to make this determination. It is a simple conditional sentence that does not prove a wrong done or goods stolen. The emphasis is on Paul’s willingness to step in and repay. In verse 19, Paul extends an IOU (I owe you). Whether Paul wrote the entire epistle by hand or only this particular sentence is debatable, but in any case, one can be certain he wrote verse 19 because this would act as the legally signed document if a debt existed. Once again, Paul uses the emphatic personal pronoun, *ἐγὼ*, and another *hapax legomena*, the verb *ἀποτίσω*, which is the future form of the verb *ἀποτίνω*. It is a “legal technical term, found frequently in the papyri meaning to ‘make compensation,’ ‘pay the damages.’”⁶⁹

At the end of verse 19, the reader finds a peculiar parenthetical comment with an interesting construction of *ἵνα μὴ* using the indicative. Paul is addressing what he does not want to mention; that is, if considering debts, then Philemon must remember he owes Paul. The verb Paul uses, *προσοφείλεις*, is another *hapax legomena* and is simply a compound verb including the former verb, *ὀφείλει*, found in verse 18 with the addition of the preposition *προς*, which can be translated towards, for, with, or besides. Paul seems to be emphasizing that Philemon’s debt to Paul, his salvation, is a greater debt than what could be owed by Onesimus. The construction of *ὅτι* with the indicative is exegetical clarifying what Paul is not wanting to say, but that which should provoke Philemon to do the right thing.

20 *ναὶ ἀδελφέ, ἐγὼ σου ὀναίμην ἐν κυρίῳ ἀνάπαυσόν μου τὰ σπλάγχνα ἐν Χριστῷ.* 21 *Πεποιθῶς τῇ ὑπακοῇ σου ἔγραψά σοι, εἰδὼς ὅτι καὶ ὑπὲρ ἃ λέγω ποιήσεις.*

20 Yes, brother, I would like to benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. 21 Being confident of your obedience I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than what I say.

In verse 20, another *hapax legomena* occurs with the verb *ὀναίμην*. It is the aorist optative of the verb *ὀνίνημι* and means to benefit or enjoy. Although the expression is commonly used in secular writings, its lack of use in the New Testament makes its use in Philemon too coincidental to not be another word play on Onesimus' name (which is a derivative of this verb). The optative form is not often seen in the New Testament, but when it is used, it carries the idea of an “attainable wish.”⁷⁰ Paul's use of *ἀδελφέ* for Philemon is very telling. In verse 1, Paul referred to Philemon as “the beloved.” The combination of these two Greek words is found in verse 16 to describe what Onesimus has become. It would be hard to miss the note of equality found in Paul's language; Onesimus is now a beloved brother just like Philemon. Paul uses the noun *σπλάγχνα* again as an invitation for Philemon, who was earlier commended for his refreshing of the saints' hearts, to now refresh Paul's heart in his response to Onesimus.

Verse 21 begins with a passive participle that seems to be acting as a participle of manner; in other words, Paul has written in and with confidence, which is accentuated by the use of the next participle, *εἰδὼς*. He knows that Philemon will not only do what Paul has requested, but he will do more than requested. This is another use of the

comparative for emphasis. What is the “even more” that Paul knows Philemon will do? The obvious expectation throughout the letter has been for the forgiveness of Onesimus without holding anything against him. The unspoken expectation has been the hint at equality and freedom. I would venture to say that the “even more” is referring to the unspoken expectation and is a subtle push for Philemon not only to forgive Onesimus and see him as a beloved brother, but to take it to its logical conclusion and set him free.

Philemon for Today

A brief historical survey of slavery quickly reveals that slavery has changed over the centuries. The audience that Paul faced in the New Testament world understood slavery as radically different from the way modern Americans view it. Does this mean the message of Philemon is lost to a modern audience? Absolutely not! Although the letter centers on a slave, the message of right relationships, true transformation, and the amazing power of grace is as necessary for the church today as it was in the days of Paul.

The letter of Philemon steps outside Paul's norm of correcting and encouraging the church through theological discourses and into the realm of relationships. Clearly, God sees correct relationships as just as vital in the church as correct doctrine. The whole purpose of the letter is to mend a severed relationship and call that relationship to a higher level—to one of equals. Paul puts himself into the position of reconciler, just as Christ worked to reconcile humanity to God. Paul exemplifies who Christians are called to be. This high calling is not to be taken lightly and is based in humility. A wealthy slave owner called to view his slave as a beloved brother must “have the mind of Christ” (Phil. 2:5) and put on humility.

From this small letter, one learns the importance of reconciliation, both as the receiver and as the agent, as well as the importance of impartiality. The love of status seems to be a sidekick to sin. The “being like God” lure from Genesis 3:5 haunts humanity and causes people to strive for importance and significance, oftentimes in very wrong ways. This same search can cause people to view other individuals as less valuable, thereby establishing the basis for how they treat their fellowman. Just as Philemon is called to see Onesimus in a new light, Christ-followers should view other believers through a grace-lens, as infinitely valuable and deserving of love. This is the “loving others as yourself” that Christ declared as the second greatest commandment (Matt. 22:39). The unity that eludes the Church would be more easily achieved if people could somehow grasp this small, but profound principle: God loves all people the same; therefore, people should also extend love to their fellowman.

Transformation is God’s business. Sinful humans becoming Christ-like is nothing short of miraculous. In Philemon, the reader is introduced to an obscure first century slave whose life and salvation were orchestrated by God. In like manner, God’s interest and ability, as illustrated in Philemon, extended to humanity today. Although a seemingly trite idea, its profundity is without explanation. If the Church fails to grasp God’s transforming power, it risks becoming ineffective and impotent.

Grasping God’s transforming power means not only believing in it, but also allowing it to work in one’s life. The failure of past saints to allow deep transformation in their lives is the underlying reason slavery has

continued unabated for thousands of years. Deep transformation of the human heart is the only thing that will truly change society. Laws can dictate behavior, but cannot touch the heart. The political arena can preserve freedoms and punish lawbreakers, but it cannot affect motivations. One cannot overstate this fact. Christians always face the threat of becoming too reliant on the government and political or religious leaders to make things right. In so doing, they neglect to work for the advancement of God’s Kingdom, which does not set itself up in governments, but in human hearts. While believers should do their part to end modern-day slavery, a true end will never come without eliminating the underlying causes, such as lust, perversion, and greed, from peoples’ hearts. Paul reveals such a balance in Philemon. He does not insist on Onesimus’ freedom or even command it, but rather he implores Philemon, in Christ, to do what is fitting—a heart changed in Christ frees a slave. The impartiality and equality of the body of Christ, starts in hearts and extends to change individual relationships and eventually entire societies.

Philemon is also a call for believers to recognize the amazing power of grace. God’s grace in Philemon is two-fold: (1) powerful enough to save a sinner and create a new man—Onesimus; and (2) powerful enough to change the heart of a slave-owner so he could view his slave as a beloved brother—Philemon. This grace is available for people today! God is able and willing to change peoples’ lives and free them from sin. He is able to reconcile broken relationships. The power of grace is fervent and exhaustive and the small letter of Philemon stands above the best works of literature as its prime example.

APPENDIX A

Pliny the Younger's *Letter to his friend Savinianus* (9.21)

Your freedman, with whom you said you were angry, has approached me, and groveling at my feet he has clung to them as if they were yours. His tears were copious, as were his pleas and also his silences. In short, he persuaded me that he was genuinely sorry, and I believe that he has turned over a new leaf because he feels that he has misbehaved. I know that you are furious with him, and I know also that you are rightly so, but praise for forbearance is especially due when the grounds for anger are more justified. You were fond of him, and I hope that you will be so in the future; meanwhile it is enough that you allow yourself to be appeased. It will be possible for you to renew your anger, if he deserves it, and you will have greater justification if you have been prevailed upon now. Make

some allowance for his youth, for his tears, and for your own benevolence. Do not cause him pain, to avoid paining yourself, for you pain yourself when your mild disposition turns to anger.

I fear that I may seem to be applying pressure rather than to be pleading with you, if I join my prayers to his, and I shall do this all the more fully and frankly for having rebuked him more sharply and severely, having threatened that I shall never plead with you again after this. That threat was addressed to him, for it was necessary to scare him, and not to you; indeed, I shall perhaps plead with you again, and my plea will again be granted, provided only that it is fitting for me to request it, and for you to grant it. Farewell.⁷¹

APPENDIX B

Letter by Two Sisters: An Appeal to the Law

In the consulship of our lords the Emperor Diocletian Augustus for the 6th time and Constantius the most noble Caesar for the 2nd time. To the Aurelii Dionysios also called Apollonios and Demetrianos son of Ploution, both from gymnasiarchs, councilors of the illustrious and most illustrious city of the Oxyrhynchites, the most worthy *nyktostrategoí*. From Aurelia Tapammon daughter of Thonios, whose mother was Allous, from the same city acting without a *kurios* by the *ius liberorum* through her foster-father Aurelius Sarapiades son of Didymos also called Hierax from the same city. By inheritance from my parents I own with my sister Dioskouriaina a slave by the name Sarmates, house-born from the female slave Thaeisis, and since the time of the death of my parents

he has been providing us with income. But now, from I did not know what motive, he is withdrawing from his work (?) and is not willing to remain in our service or, moreover, to pay dues, with what purpose I do not understand. Therefore, since I cannot endure the insolence of a servant, I am presenting this written document with the intention of making a petition (?) and requesting that through your attention the slave be compelled to pay the income owed by him and be ordered to remain in our service. In the 12th year and 11th year of our lords the Emperors Diocletian and Maximian Augusti, and the 4th year of Constantius and Maximian the most renowned Caesars, Pauni 19th. Aurelia Tapammon has presented (this) through me, Aurelius Sarapiades. I, Aurelius Ischyriom, wrote for her.⁷²

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²Arthur A. Rupprecht, "Philemon," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 11:454-455.

³Werner Georg Kummel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. Howard Clark Kee (New York: Abingdon Press, 1973), 348.

⁴R. P. Martin, "Philemon," in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 4:755.

⁵John Knox, *Philemon Among the Letters of Paul* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1959), 107.

⁶Rupprecht, "Philemon," 453.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 188.

⁹Alfred Wikenhauser, *New Testament Introduction*, trans. Joseph Cunningham (New York: Herder and Herder, 1960), 420.

¹⁰Ibid., 192-193.

¹¹F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians, NICIT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 191.

¹²Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yorbrough, *Encountering the New Testament: A Historical and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 317.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Caesarea has also been contested as a possible location, but because of the lack of solid evidence. For the purposes of this paper, it has been omitted from consideration.

¹⁵These arguments are summarized from: F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 193-196; David E Garland, *The N.I.V. Application Commentary: Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 295-299; P. T. O'Brien, *World Biblical Commentary: Colossians, Philemon* (Waco: Word Books, 1982), 1-1ii; David A. DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 668.

¹⁶Kummel, 349; Rupprecht, "Philemon," 453-454.

¹⁷Outline is the author's own work.

¹⁸Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 644.

¹⁹Ibid., 644-645.

²⁰See Appendix A.

²¹Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 207.

²²Arthur A. Rupprecht, "Attitudes on Slavery Among the Church Fathers," in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 261-277.

²³William L. Westermann, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1955), 1.

²⁴Seneca, "On Tranquility of Mind," in *Dialogues and Letters*, trans. C. D. N. Costa (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 43-44.

²⁵Westermann, 84.

²⁶For more information on slavery leading up to the first century, consider a review of Herodotus, *The Histories* and Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*.

²⁷Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, 185-86.

²⁸Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4th ed (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 665-66.

²⁹S. Scott Bartchy, *First-Century Slavery & 1 Corinthians 7:21* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1973), 39.

³⁰John Crook, *Law and Life of Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1967), 58.

³¹Bartchy, 42.

³²*Ibid.*, 42-43.

³³Westermann, 11.

³⁴Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, 197-199.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 74.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 107.

³⁷G. H. R. Horsley, ed., *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (Marrickville, N. S. W.: Southwood Press, 1979), 100-103. See Appendix B.

³⁸Westermann, 118.

³⁹Bart D. Ehrman, ed. and trans., *Apostolic Fathers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1: 405-407.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 425.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 203-204.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 315.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 357.

⁴⁴Rupprecht, "Attitudes on Slavery Among the Church Fathers," 262-263.

⁴⁵Ehrman, 375.

⁴⁶Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 21:

⁴⁷Rupprecht, "Attitudes on Slavery Among the Church Fathers," 266.

⁴⁸Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 214-215.

⁴⁹Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. William C. Greene (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 6: 187.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 189-191.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 193.

⁵²Augustine, *The Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, trans. John J. Jepson (New York: Newman, 1948), 5:72-73.

⁵¹Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion* (New York: Oxford University, 2004), 213.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 231-239.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 242-243.

⁵⁴*Tenth Annual Report, Liberty County Association*, (1845), 24-25, as cited in Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 294-295.

⁵⁵John R. Miller, "Slave Trade: Combating Human Trafficking," *Harvard International Review* (2006): 70-74.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 70.

⁵⁷Alice Leuchtag, "Human Rights: Sex Trafficking and Prostitution," *The Humanist* (2003):10-16.

⁵⁸Miller, 70-74.

⁵⁹Kevin Bales, *Disposable People*, as cited in Miller, "Slave Trade."

⁶⁰Miller, 70-74

⁶¹F. F. Church, as cited in Ben Witherington III, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 59.

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⁶⁵Liddell, Scott, and Jones, 620.

⁶⁶Moulton and Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 2:8.

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