



## literary flow

### Summary (Time/People/Purpose) | Themes | Outline

Philemon ends the collection of Paul’s letters. It stands out as the shortest and most personal, in that Paul addresses a one of his former converts, Philemon, begging him to put the gospel into action by the act of reconciliation. Philemon, who served in the Colossian church, had experienced a breach and betrayal by his slave Onesimus. This slave found true freedom when he met Paul while imprisoned at Rome (60-62 AD) and surrendered his life to Jesus. Paul, then, sends Onesimus back to Philemon, putting their conversion to the test and on display for the church at Colossae. For the proof of the gospel is witnessed in the practice of forgiveness.

Themes	Key [Root] Words
<p><b>Slavery:</b> an unfortunate reality of the ANE culture where wealthy land owners possessed poor, low-class workers; the gospel both abolished slave status, while requiring slaves to work diligently within the system (Col 3:12; Tit. 3:10)</p> <p><b>Brother/fellowship/partner:</b> Paul uses many words to depict equality in Christ</p> <p><b>Onesimus:</b> Former slave whose name means “useful”</p>	<p>Fellow-/partner- (5x)*</p> <p>*2 Greek words</p> <p>brother (4x)</p> <p>heart (3x)</p> <p>refresh (2x)</p>

<b>Greeting:</b> From Paul and Timothy (1a)   to Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus (1b-2)   Grace (3)			
<b>Paul Prays</b> ...for love and faith shared (4-6)	<b>Paul Rejoices</b> ...for Philemon’s service (7)	<b>Paul Appeals</b> ...for reconciliation between Onesimus and Philemon (8-16)	<b>Paul Assumes</b> ... Onesimus’s debt (17-18) ...Philemon’s debt (19-21)
<b>Farewell:</b> Final Instructions (22)   Greetings (23-25)			



## redemptive threads

### Gospel | Status | Forgiveness

Writing again from prison, Paul labels himself a servant of the **gospel** (1, 13). He rarely flaunted his apostolic authority—Jesus’ hand-picked witness to the Gentiles—rather, Paul humbly appeals to his readers. Philemon is no exception; Paul affectionately calls him brother, fellow-worker, and equal. As a beneficiary of Paul’s **gospel** work (19), Philemon was indebted to Paul. Paul mentions this without holding it over Philemon. No: Paul wants Philemon to obey the

**gospel**, not its messenger. Contemporaries of Paul preached the **gospel** for money and power, but Paul preached it for the freedom it brings to individuals and communities in love with Jesus.

These **gospel**-centered communities (i.e., churches), were marked by their love for the saints (5), partnership in ministry (6), and hearts refreshed in the grace, joy, encouragement, and faith found in Christ (3, 7, 20). Moreover, the Christian community is not only united by its practice and character, but also the **status** believers inherit as “new creations” (2 Cor. 5:17). The **gospel** allows no room for social inequity, discrimination, or classism. Jew, Greek, slave, free, male and female do not delineate who is in and who is out of God’s grace (Gal 3:28; Col. 3:11). Instead, the **gospel** recognizes believers as family members—brothers and sisters (1, 2, 7, 16, 20)—ministry partners—fellows and collaborators (1, 6, 17)—and organically connected parts—eyes, ears, mouths, and toes. In the end, Philemon is not a commentary on slavery as much as it is a picture of the new heavens and earth: where earthly **status** dissolves, and children of God sing.

Perhaps the greatest picture of God’s Kingdom is the practice of **forgiveness**. Jesus teaches in the Lord’s Prayer that **forgiveness** among neighbors and siblings coincides with God’s **forgiveness**. Monetary debt is one of the metaphors Jesus uses to describe **forgiveness**. Paul reflects this in his letter to Philemon, promising to pay any debt Onesimus owes to his former master (18). Furthermore, **forgiveness** goes a step further, in that it does not merely alleviate debt, but restores Onesimus’s **status** in the church and society (16). Paul knew the Colossian church would observe this act of **forgiveness**, and it would be a grace to the entire community (2, 25). In fact, *every act of forgiveness incarnates the gospel to the church and wider world!*

<b>Slave Ethic in OT</b> (Ex. 21:2)	If you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve for six years; but on the seventh he shall go out as a free man without payment.
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## practical application

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### *The Restorative Church:*

Who refreshes your heart? Whom do you need to forgive?  
 How often do you think in terms of status (e.g., social, economic, vocational, educational), and how does it affect your relationships with others?

Philemon Reading Challenge		S	M	T	W	R	F	S
Immersion	Philemon 1-25							
Fluency	Philemon 1-25							
Essential	Philemon 1-25							