The Epistle of Paul to PHILEMON

Greeting

1Paul, a prisoner for Jesus Christ,[1] and brother Timothy, to the beloved Philemon, our fellow worker, 2and to the beloved[2] Apphia and our fellow soldier Archippus, and to the congregation at your (sg)[3] house: 3Grace to you (pl) and peace from God our Father and Sovereign Jesus Christ.

Paul commends Philemon

4I always thank my God as I make mention of you (sg) in my prayers, 5hearing of your love and faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus, and for all the saints, 6so that the sharing of your (sg) faith may become powerful through a full understanding of every good thing that is among you (pl) who are in Christ Jesus;[4] 7yes, we have much thanksgiving[5] and encouragement because of your (sg) love, in that the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.

Paul intercedes for Onesimus

8Now then, though I have all boldness in Christ to order you (sg) to do what is right,[6] 9I—being none other than Paul the old man and now also a prisoner for Jesus Christ—would rather appeal to you, for love's sake. 10I appeal to you on behalf of the son whom I begot while in my chains, Onesimus,[7] whom I am sending back—11formerly he was

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[1] Since Paul elsewhere calls himself a slave of Jesus, he would also be a prisoner of Jesus, but in this context I understand him to be saying that he is in prison because of Jesus.

[2] Instead of "beloved", some 5% of the Greek manuscripts have 'sister' (as in NIV, NASB, LB, TEV, etc.). In any case, Apphia is a woman.

[3] Since English is ambiguous as to whether the second person personal pronoun is singular or plural, and since Paul mixes both in this letter, it becomes necessary to let the reader know which is which. The congregation met in Philemon's house.

[4] Verse 6 probably reads quite differently in your version of the Bible. Were you aware that the "your" refers to Philemon while the "you" refers to the congregation? [The MSS evidence is about evenly divided between "you" and 'us', but I follow the best line of transmission, as in AV and NKJV.] The verse usually ends with "you/us in Christ Jesus", but the preposition is properly "into", which does not make for smooth English. The reference is to those who have believed into Jesus (as He Himself invariably said)—they were outside but have moved inside. So Paul is referring to a group of regenerated people and to the aggregate of 'good things' to be found among them; which I assume would certainly include the gifts of the Spirit, as well as His fruit. As Philemon's understanding of these resources increases, the sharing of his faith will become more powerful, and for this Paul prays. At the end of the verse, perhaps 2% of the Greek manuscripts, of objectively inferior quality, omit "Jesus" (as in NIV, NASB, LB, TEV, etc.).

[5] Instead of "thanksgiving", some 12% of the Greek manuscripts have 'joy', as in most versions.

[6] Paul starts out by asserting his authority, but softens it with an emotional appeal, appealing to Philemon's emotions in various ways.

[7] When not a proper name, the word is an adjective meaning 'useful'.

unprofitable to you, but now he is profitable, both to you and to me.

12So receive[1] him, who is my very heart—13I would have liked to keep him with me, so that he might minister to me in your place, while I am in chains for the Gospel, 14but I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that your contribution might be voluntary, not as an imposition. 15Perhaps this is why he was removed[2] for a while, so that you would have him forever—16no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, very much to me but even more to you, both in flesh and in the Lord.[3]

Paul asks for obedience

17So if you consider me a partner, receive him as if it were me.[4] 18If he wronged you or owes anything, charge it to me. 19I, Paul, am writing with my own hand, "I will repay" (rather than say to you that you actually owe me your very self!).[5] 20Yes brother, let me have *this* benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.[6]

21Being confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you (sg) will do even more than I say. 22But meanwhile, do prepare a guest room for me, because I hope that through your (pl) prayers I will be graciously bestowed on you (pl).[7]

Farewell

23Epaphras, my fellow prisoner for Christ Jesus, greets you (sg), 24as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.[8]

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[1] Some 1.5% of the Greek manuscripts, of objectively inferior quality, omit "receive", as in NIV, NASB, LB, TEV, etc., which obliges them to adjust their rendering accordingly.

[2] "Removed" is passive; Paul implies that God was behind the flight of Onesimus.

[3] What does "both in flesh and in the Lord" mean? Onesimus is now a brother in the Lord, but was he also Philemon's physical brother? But if a brother, how did he become his slave? I don't know. If I had to guess I would imagine that Philemon's father begot Onesimus of a slave woman. Whatever the messy consequences of people's lives without Christ, this letter illustrates nicely how the Gospel can straighten things out.

[4] Verses 17-19 are often used as an illustration of substitutionary atonement, wherein Philemon would represent the Father, Paul the Son, and Onesimus the sinner—what Onesimus owes is charged to Paul, so Onesimus can go free. (Of course the second half of verse 19 doesn't fit; the Father doesn't owe His life to the Son.)

[5] Dear me, Paul builds such a strong case that there is really no way that Philemon can refuse!

[6] Instead of "the Lord", some 20% of the Greek manuscripts have 'Christ' (as in NIV, NASB, LB, TEV, etc.).

[7] Might verse 22 be a veiled threat, that Paul could show up to check up on Philemon? Note that Paul implies that his physical presence will be a blessing.

[8] Evidently Epaphras was also in prison, but not the others. If Mark was there as a result of the request in 2 Timothy 4:11, then this letter was written some time later.

25The grace of our Lord Jesus[1] be with your (pl) spirit.[2] Amen.

[1] I follow the best line of transmission (albeit representing only some 20% of the Greek manuscripts here) in not adding 'Christ'. Being a very personal letter, Paul is less formal.

[2] Since 'spirit' is singular, is it that of the congregation?—or does Paul mean the spirit of each one of the individuals? Even though regenerated we still need grace, and a congregation certainly needs it.