

***Paul's Letter to Philemon and  
the Colossians***



***Curtis Byers***  
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**Course Outline**

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## **Preface**

Paul's 'Prison Letters' (Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon) were written to congregations while he was in Roman custody. In the letter to Philippians, Paul's references to the "imperial guard" (1:13) and to converts within "Caesar's household" (4:22) strongly suggest that Paul was in Rome when he wrote Philippians. There are no such references in the other three Prison Letters, although the correspondences between these three letters force the conclusion that were written in same time frame from the same imprisonment. Traditionally, Rome has also been thought to be the place of origin for these three letters. That view still has its defenders, but many scholars think it was written from an imprisonment in Ephesus. We will evaluate the available evidence, but one must be careful not to be too dogmatic about things we just do not know.

More importantly, since Colossians, the focus of our study, was written in the same time period as Ephesians and Philemon, it follows that similar themes or language in these letters can be profitably compared with each other. Consequently, this study begins with a quick overview of Philemon, and comparisons with Ephesians will be made throughout the study.

Lightfoot has been followed by modern commentators (e.g. McDonald, Porter, p.471) in his judgment that Paul's letter to the Colossians was to the least important church of all his letters. I doubt if Paul would agree. It may be that Colossae was the least important city, but no church deserves the branding as unimportant. And, as will become evident, Paul's teaching within this letter has been both enlightening and useful to Christians from the first century until now.

The *English Standard Version* (ESV; Text Edition 2011\*) will be used as the basis of this study. Comparison will be made to the following translations: (listed by date of latest published revision)

KJV	<i>King James Version (1769)</i>	NASU	<i>New American Standard Bible (1995)</i>
ASV	<i>American Standard Version (1901)</i>	HCSB	<i>Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004)</i>
NJB	<i>New Jerusalem Bible (1985)</i>	NAB	<i>New American Bible (2010)</i>
NRSV	<i>New Revised Standard Ver. (1989)</i>	CEB	<i>Common English Bible (2010)</i>
REB	<i>Revised English Bible (1989)</i>	NIV	<i>New International Version (2011)</i>

May God bless our study.

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## **Front Cover**

### **St. Paul in Prison**

Rembrandt, 1627

60x73 cm, oil, panel, Baroque

Private Collection *via* WikiArt

***The People and Places of Philemon and Colossians***

Appia	AF i uh, AP fi uh
Archippus	ahr KIP uhs
Aristarchus	ar is TAHR kuhs, ehr iss TAHR kuhs
Barnabas	BAHR nuh buhs
Colossae	ko LAHS ee, koh LAHS sih
Demas	DEE muhs
Epaphras	EP uh frass
Hierapolis	high ur AHP o lis
Laodicea	lay ahd i SEE uh
Laodiceans	lay ahd i SEE uhnz
Nympha	NIM fuh
Onesimus	o NES i muhs
Philemon	fi LEE muhn
Tychicus	TIK i kuhs

*References:* Richard C. White, *The Vocabulary of the Church*, Macmillan, 1960  
W. Murray Severance, *Pronouncing Bible Names*, Expanded Ed. B&H Publishers, 1994

**Lesson 1**

**Letter to Philemon**

The Letter to Philemon is the most personal of Paul's letters we possess. Although the content appears to deal solely with a matter between Paul and Philemon that involved Onesimus, Philemon's servant, it is instructive that the church that gathered in Philemon's house is included in the address. On its own merits, this letter deserves careful study. But our interest in the letter is primarily in its relation to the letter Paul wrote to the Colossians. As we read the text of Philemon and Colossians, we will deduce that Philemon lived in Colossae. Thus, this short letter to Philemon aids our understanding of the character of the church at Colossae.

**Philemon**

- 1 Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,  
To Philemon our beloved fellow worker
- 2 and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in  
your house:
- 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
- 4 I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers,
- 5 because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord  
Jesus and for all the saints,
- 6 and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full  
knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.
- 7 For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother,  
because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.
- 8 Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what  
is required,
- 9 yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now  
a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—
- 10 I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my  
imprisonment.
- 11 (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and  
to me.)
- 12 I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.
- 13 I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve  
me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel,
- 14 but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your  
goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.
- 15 For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might  
have him back forever,
- 16 no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved  
brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh  
and in the Lord.
- 17 So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.
- 18 If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my  
account.

- 19 I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.
- 20 Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.
- 21 Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.
- 22 At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.
- 23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you,
- 24 and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.
- 25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

### **Comments / Questions**

1. This is the only letter Paul calls himself “a prisoner” in the superscription (v.1). There are four other references to his being ‘a prisoner’ or his ‘imprisonment’ (v.9, 10, 13, 23) in this short letter. Why this repeated reference?
2. The letter is addressed to Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the church in Philemon’s house.
  - a. What might be the relationship between Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus?
  - b. Any reason to think there might be other churches in Colossae?
3. Paul appears to have regularly used a secretary to write the body of his letters with him penning only the final greeting – at least that is the most natural sense of 2 Thessalonians 3:17, and is illustrated in 1 Corinthians 16:21, Colossians 4:18, and probably Galatians 6:11. So, is that the case here? Does v.19 suggest that Paul is simply writing that verse (or perhaps the remainder of the letter), or has he written the entire letter with his own hand?
4. The circumstances that gave rise to this letter are ambiguous. All we can be certain of is the following:
  - Onesimus is a slave (= ‘bondservant’) of Philemon. The name *Onesimus* means “beneficial, useful” (hence the play on words in v.11) and was a common name for a slave.
  - Onesimus has been with Paul and becomes a Christian because of Paul’s teaching/influence (v.10, 16).
  - Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon with a heartfelt request on Onesimus’ behalf.
  - Paul is careful not to demand that Philemon honor his request, but Paul is hopeful that he will.
  - Paul pledges to repay Philemon of any monies that Onesimus *might* owe him.

Three critical questions emerge from these statements. What possibilities exist for each one?

- a. Why, or how is it, that Onesimus is with Paul?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- b. What is the request that Paul makes of Philemon?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- c. Does Onesimus owe any money (or its equivalent) to Philemon?

Any way to determine which of the various possibilities are correct?

5. Given the apparent personal nature of the letter, why does Paul include the entire church that met in Philemon's house in his address? Letters were customarily read aloud by the messenger to the recipients. If that was the case with this letter, what would be the impact?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. We only know the circumstances of Paul's imprisonments from *Acts*, and there are only two imprisonments mentioned in *Acts* that are of sufficient length for Paul to have written letters: his Caesarean and Roman imprisonments.
  - a. We will review these imprisonments in more detail in Lesson 3, but at this point simply note those associates who are with him and who send greetings. Should we assume that the sending of greetings imply that these associates are known to Philemon or the church in Colossae?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - b. What does Paul's request that Philemon prepare him a room suggest about Paul's expectations? Is this surprising? Does the *Acts* account around his Caesarean or Roman imprisonment give any indication of him wanting/expecting to return to Asia Minor?

7. Pliny the Younger wrote a letter to a friend on behalf of his friend's freedman. This letter is often cited as a parallel to Paul's letter to Philemon, but the differences are as important as the similarities. Although none of circumstances behind this letter can be assumed to be behind Paul's letter, it does, however, illustrate the role a mediator could play in a dispute. Read the letter below and note the similarities and differences with Paul's letter to Philemon.

***Excursus: Pliny's Letter to Sabinianus***

To Sabinianus

Your freedman, whom you lately mentioned to me with displeasure, has been with me, and threw himself at my feet with as much submission as he could have fallen at yours. He earnestly requested me with many tears, and even with all the eloquence of silent sorrow, to intercede for him; in short, he convinced me by his whole behaviour that he sincerely repents of his fault. I am persuaded he is thoroughly reformed, because he seems deeply sensible of his guilt. I know you are angry with him, and I know, too, it is not without reason; but clemency can never exert itself more laudably than when there is the most cause for resentment. You once had an affection for this man, and, I hope, will have again; meanwhile, let me only prevail with you to pardon him. If he should incur your displeasure hereafter, you will have so much the stronger plea in excuse for your anger as you shew yourself more merciful to him now. Concede something to his youth, to his tears, and to your own natural mildness of temper: do not make him uneasy any longer, and I will add, too, do not make yourself so; for a man of your kindness of heart cannot be angry without feeling great uneasiness. I am afraid, were I to join my entreaties with his, I should seem rather to compel than request you to forgive him. Yet I will not scruple even to write mine with his; and in so much the stronger terms as I have very sharply and severely reproved him, positively threatening never to interpose again in his behalf. But though it was proper to say this to him, in order to make him more fearful of offending, I do not say so to you. I may perhaps, again have occasion to entreat you upon his account, and again obtain your forgiveness; supposing, I mean, his fault should be such as may become me to intercede for, and you to pardon. Farewell.

*Translated by William Melmoth (Harvard Classics Series)*

<http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/pliny-letters.asp#GenPart XII>