

Structure

The letter as a whole is a symmetrical parallelism, ABCCBA:

1-3 Paul's greeting to Philemon and grace from the Lord Jesus

4-7 Thanks and prayers for Philemon

8-16 Appeal to Philemon to receive Onesimus ("useful") as a brother, once useless but now useful to both Paul and Philemon, as voluntarily as Onesimus and Paul have returned him

17-20 Appeal to Philemon to welcome Onesimus as he would welcome Paul, and as a brother and debtor to Paul to consider being useful to Paul (by returning Onesimus to Paul)

21-22 Confidence in Philemon to do even more than Paul has asked explicitly

23-25 Greetings from those with Paul and grace from the Lord Jesus

The first and last divisions are greetings and blessings. Both use "Anointed Jesus" and "Lord Jesus Anointed" symmetrically. Both use "fellow" twice, and both refer to Paul as a "prisoner." The second division refers to Paul's prayers for Philemon, the fifth to Philemon's prayers for Paul. At the center are two appeals for reconciliation with Onesimus. The first, based on mutual freedom, contrasts freedom and compulsion: Paul in chains freely returning his "child" to Philemon, Onesimus a useless slave freely returning himself to his master, and Philemon a slave owner who is invited to freely receive his slave as a brother. The second appeal is based on mutual indebtedness: Onesimus's, Paul's, and Philemon's to each other. The first appeal, 8-16, is structured ABA. The center, 11-13, focuses on Paul's (and Onesimus's) voluntary gift to Philemon. The two sides, 8-10 and 14-16, focus on Philemon's response as voluntary, not compulsory.

Note the ring pattern in 3, where grace from Jesus surrounds peace from God, and a similar pattern in 5. The faithfulness to Jesus in 5 is described in 6, and the love for the holy ones in 5 is described in 7.

Background

As in Philippians, Rome is a likely possibility for where Paul wrote this letter. If so, it was written sometime in AD 55-63. That fits better with Paul being "an old man" (Phlm 9, implying an age of 50-56), since Paul's birth is estimated at about AD 5-10. If he wrote this from Rome about 60, his age would have been about 50-55.

Theme

Paul's explicit goal here is a reconciliation. Note the irony in 13, "whom I wanted to keep for myself," which expresses the attitude of both Philemon, who wanted Onesimus back, and Onesimus, who ran away. And note the irony in 19, "by my own hand," which is also the way Onesimus has returned himself to Philemon. Paul's inexplicit goal (13, 21) is that Philemon will free Onesimus and return him to Paul as a fellow worker.

There are many allusions or puns on the name, Onesimus, which means "useful." See 6 "fruitful" and "good," 7b "refreshed," the rare last word in 8 "useful" which is paired with and sounds like the last word in 10 "Onesimus," the rare last word in 11 "useful" which sounds like "Christos" and is paired with the last word in 13 "good news," 11 the rare "useless" and "useful," 13b "serve," 14c "kindness," 20a the rare "use," 20b "refresh," and 22b "restored." Four of these puns use words that appear only once in Paul's undisputed letters. Puns can be hard to translate.

Even though short, this letter twice celebrates Paul's theme in all of his letters of unity among God's "holy ones" and with "God our Father and the Lord Jesus Anointed" (in 3 and 4-7). The word "spirit" is used only once, in the last verse, and refers to "your [plural] spirit," the spirit that God shares with all his "holy ones," (Gal 4:6, Rom 8:9). None of the popular translations capitalize it. The word "holy" is used twice, both times in reference to God's "holy ones," who share that spirit.

"You" and "your" are plural only in 3, 22 and 25, and singular elsewhere.

Philemon

Text in *italics* is omitted in the Greek source

Paul, a prisoner of **Anointed Jesus**, and brother Timothy,
 To Philemon, our beloved and fellow worker, ² and to sister Apphia,
 and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church at your house:
³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and *the* **Lord Jesus Anointed**.

⁴ I give thanks to my God always making mention of you in my prayers,
⁵ hearing of your love and faithfulness
 which you have toward the Lord Jesus
 and for all the holy *ones*,
⁶ that the partnership of your faithfulness may be fruitful
 through knowledge of all *the* good
 that *is* in us for Anointed.

⁷ For I have received much joy and encouragement from your love,
 because the hearts of the holy *ones* have been refreshed by you, brother.

⁸ Therefore, having in Anointed full assurance to command you what is useful,
⁹ for love's sake
 I rather appeal,
 being such as Paul an old man and now also a prisoner of Anointed Jesus.

¹⁰ I appeal to you
 for my child,
 whom I have fathered in *my* chains, Onesimus,
¹¹ once to you useless, but now to you and me useful,
¹² **whom I have sent back to you, himself,**
that is, my own heart,
¹³ **whom I wanted to keep for myself,**
 so that on your behalf he might serve me in the chains of the good news.

¹⁴ But without your consent
 nothing I wanted to do,
 so that not forced your kindness may be
 but voluntary.

¹⁵ Perhaps this is why he was taken away
 for a while,
 so forever
 you may receive him
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 So if you regard me as a partner, welcome him as me.

18 And if he has wronged or owes you anything, charge that to me.

19 **IPAULIHAVEWRITTENBMYOWNHANDIMYSELFWILLREPAY** ¹

May I not tell you that you owe even yourself to me.

20 Yes, brother, may I have use of you in *the* Lord, refresh my heart in Anointed.

21 Confident of your obedience I have written to you,
knowing that even more than I ask you will do.

22 At the same time also prepare a room for me,
for I hope that through your prayers I will be restored to you.

23 Greeting you is

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner
in **Anointed Jesus**,

24 *and* Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, *and* Luke, my fellow workers.

25 The grace of the **Lord Jesus Anointed** *be* with your spirit.

¹ 1:19a When Paul wrote, all letters were capitals, there was no punctuation as we know it, no chapter or verse markings, no spacing between words, sentences, or paragraphs.

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Παῦλος δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ καὶ Τιμόθεος ὁ ἀδελφός

Φιλήμονι τῷ ἀγαπητῷ καὶ συνεργῷ ἡμῶν ² καὶ Ἀπφία τῇ ἀδελφῇ

καὶ Ἀρχίππῳ τῷ συστρατιώτῃ ἡμῶν καὶ τῇ κατ' οἶκόν σου ἐκκλησίᾳ,

³ Χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη ἀπὸ θεοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ.

⁴ Εὐχαριστῶ τῷ θεῷ μου πάντοτε μνεΐαν σου ποιούμενος ἐπὶ τῶν προσευχῶν μου,

⁵ ἀκούων σου τὴν ἀγάπην καὶ τὴν πίστιν,

ἣν ἔχεις πρὸς τὸν κύριον Ἰησοῦν

καὶ εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους,

⁶ ὅπως ἡ κοινωνία τῆς πίστεώς σου ἐνεργῆς γένηται

ἐν ἐπιγνώσει παντὸς ἀγαθοῦ

τοῦ ἐν ἡμῖν εἰς Χριστόν.

⁷ χαρὰν γὰρ πολλὴν ἔσχον καὶ παράκλησιν ἐπὶ τῇ ἀγάπῃ σου,

ὅτι τὰ σπλάγχνα τῶν ἁγίων ἀναπέπαιται διὰ σοῦ, ἀδελφέ.

⁸ Διὸ πολλὴν ἐν Χριστῷ παρρησίαν ἔχων ἐπιτάσσειν σοι τὸ ἀνῆκον

⁹ διὰ τὴν ἀγάπην

μᾶλλον παρακαλῶ,

τοιούτος ὢν ὡς Παῦλος πρεσβύτης νυνὶ δὲ καὶ δέσμιος Χριστοῦ

Ἰησοῦ.

¹⁰ παρακαλῶ σε

περὶ τοῦ ἐμοῦ τέκνου,

ὃν ἐγέννησα ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς, Ὀνήσιμον,

¹¹ τὸν ποτέ σοι ἄχρηστον νυνὶ δὲ [καὶ] σοὶ καὶ ἐμοὶ εὖχρηστον,

¹² ὃν ἀνέπεμψά σοι, αὐτόν,

τοῦτ' ἔστιν τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα.

¹³ Ὃν ἐγὼ ἐβουλόμην πρὸς ἐμαυτὸν κατέχειν,

ἵνα ὑπὲρ σοῦ μοι διακονῇ ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς τοῦ εὐαγγελίου,

¹⁴ χωρὶς δὲ τῆς σῆς γνώμης

οὐδὲν ἠθέλησα ποιῆσαι,

ἵνα μὴ ὡς κατὰ ἀνάγκην τὸ ἀγαθόν σου ᾗ

ἀλλὰ κατὰ ἐκούσιον.

¹⁵ Τάχα γὰρ διὰ τοῦτο ἐχωρίσθη

πρὸς ὥραν,

ἵνα αἰώνιον

αὐτὸν ἀπέχῃς,

¹⁶ οὐκέτι ὡς δοῦλον ἀλλ' ὑπὲρ δοῦλον, ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν,

μάλιστα ἐμοί,

πόσῳ δὲ μᾶλλον σοὶ

καὶ ἐν σαρκὶ καὶ ἐν κυρίῳ.

¹⁷ εἰ οὖν με ἔχεις κοινωνόν, προσλαβοῦ αὐτόν ὡς ἐμέ.

¹⁸ εἰ δέ τι ἠδίκησέν σε ἢ ὀφείλει, τοῦτο ἐμοὶ ἐλλόγα.

¹⁹ ἐγὼ Παῦλος ἔγραψα τῇ ἐμῇ χειρὶ, ἐγὼ ἀποτίσω·

ἵνα μὴ λέγω σοι ὅτι καὶ σεαυτόν μοι προσοφείλεις.

²⁰ ναὶ ἀδελφέ, ἐγὼ σου ὀναίμην ἐν κυρίῳ· ἀνάπαυσόν μου τὰ σπλάγχνα ἐν Χριστῷ.

²¹ Πεποιθὼς τῇ ὑπακοῇ σου ἔγραψά σοι,

εἰδὼς ὅτι καὶ ὑπὲρ ἃ λέγω ποιήσεις.

²² ἅμα δὲ καὶ ἐτοίμαζέ μοι ξενίαν·

ἐλπίζω γὰρ ὅτι διὰ τῶν προσευχῶν ὑμῶν χαρισθήσομαι ὑμῖν.

²³ Ἀσπάζεται σε

Ἐπαφρᾶς ὁ συναιχμάλωτός μου

ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ,

²⁴ Μάρκος, Ἀρίσταρχος, Δημᾶς, Λουκᾶς, οἱ συνεργοί μου.

²⁵ Ἡ χάρις τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ μετὰ τοῦ πνεύματος ὑμῶν.