PAUL'S LETTER TO PHILEMON

The King's Welcome

Philemon, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Welcome: Paul's Letter to Philemon, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. Philemon is the shortest letter of Paul's we have, but the saying is staying.

Philemon is tiny. It's 25 verses long, one page in most Bibles, shorter than some text threads. You could read it out loud in about three minutes. It's a private note from Paul to a friend, about one person.

That person is a man named Onesimus. He was a slave. Somehow, he had ended up away from his owner, a Christian named Philemon, and had found his way to Paul, who was in prison. While he was with Paul, Onesimus became a follower of Jesus. Now Paul is sending him back, with this letter in his hand.

What will Philemon do? Under Roman law, he could punish Onesimus harshly. Paul asks for something radically different: welcome him back, not as property but as a brother. And if he owes you anything, Paul says, put it on my account.

This little letter raises big questions. What does the gospel say about slavery? How do you forgive someone who has wronged you? How do you ask a friend to do something hard without forcing them? And what does it look like when Jesus takes our debts and puts them on His own account? Let's go.

How This Book Works

Philemon has only one chapter, so this book divides it into four short sections, following the flow of Paul's letter: his greeting and thanks (verses 1–7), his appeal for Onesimus (verses 8–16), his offer to pay (verses 17–22), and his final greetings (verses 23–25). Each chapter of this book covers one section and explains what Paul is saying in plain language.

Because the letter is so short, Setting the Scene is longer than usual. It explains slavery in the Roman world, introduces the people in the letter, describes the different theories about what happened between Onesimus and Philemon, and shows how this letter connects to Colossians. Read it first. It will make the letter come alive.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

This book quotes Philemon sparingly and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Read the section of the letter first, then the chapter here. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on the Gospels, Acts, and Paul's letters from Romans to Titus, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Philemon has only one chapter, so this book divides it into four sections. I've quoted the letter sparingly and relied mostly on paraphrase, background, and discussion material. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV).

This letter is set against the background of Roman slavery. I've described that institution honestly, without minimizing its cruelty, and explained how it differed from, and resembled, the race-based slavery of more recent centuries. I've also described, briefly and factually, how this letter was used on both sides of the debates over slavery in the nineteenth century, including by defenders of slavery.

Scholars hold several theories about why Onesimus was with Paul. I've presented the main ones fairly. I've also noted the early tradition linking Onesimus to a later bishop of Ephesus, and labelled it as uncertain.

The letter is a beautiful picture of forgiveness and reconciliation, and that theme is applied to teens' lives. I've been careful to make clear that forgiveness does not mean excusing harm, pretending it didn't happen, or staying in an unsafe situation, and to encourage any reader experiencing abuse to tell a trusted adult.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will discover that Jesus has paid what they owe, and that they will learn to welcome others the way He has welcomed them.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

A Letter in a Slave's Hand

Picture the scene. A young man walks up a road toward the town of Colossae, in what is now western Turkey. He's carrying letters. One is addressed to the whole church in Colossae; you can read it in your Bible as Colossians. The other is a short, personal note to a wealthy believer in town named Philemon.

The young man is Onesimus. He's a slave, and Philemon is his owner. Some time ago, Onesimus left Philemon's household. Now he's coming back. He has no idea how Philemon will respond. Everything may depend on the note in his hand.

Slavery in the Roman World

To understand Philemon, you need to understand Roman slavery, and you need to see it honestly. Slavery was everywhere in the Roman Empire. Historians estimate that in Italy perhaps one in five to one in three people were enslaved, and in other provinces the share may have been lower, though all such numbers are uncertain. People became slaves in many ways: they were captured in war, kidnapped by pirates or slave traders, born to enslaved mothers, abandoned as babies and raised as slaves, or sold to pay debts.

Under Roman law, a slave was property. An owner could buy, sell, rent out, or give away a slave like a piece of furniture or an animal. Enslaved people couldn't legally marry, and their children belonged to the owner. Families could be split up and sold separately. Slaves

could be beaten, chained, branded, and sexually exploited, and they had almost no legal protection. When slaves were witnesses in court, Roman law required that their testimony be taken under torture.

Not Gentler, Just Different

People sometimes say that Roman slavery was milder than slavery in the Americas. That's only partly true, and it can be misleading. Roman slavery wasn't based on race; people of any ethnicity could be enslaved. Some enslaved people worked as teachers, doctors, accountants, or managers and lived better than many poor free people. Many urban slaves were eventually freed, and freed slaves could become citizens and even wealthy.

But millions of others worked in brutal conditions in mines, quarries, and on huge farms, and many died young. A slave's life depended entirely on the character of the owner. And every enslaved person, however well treated, lived under the constant possibility of violence, sale, and separation from the people they loved. Slavery in any form treats human beings made in God's image as things. It is never gentle.

Runaways

Running away was one of the few ways enslaved people could resist, and owners feared it. Runaway slaves could be hunted by professional slave catchers. If caught, they could be whipped, branded on the forehead, forced to wear a metal collar, sold to a harsher owner, sent to the mines, or even executed. Archaeologists have found Roman slave collars with inscriptions telling anyone who found the wearer to return him to his master. Anyone who

sheltered a runaway could be held legally responsible for the owner's loss.

That's the world Onesimus lived in. If he had run away, returning to Philemon was an enormous risk.

What Happened to Onesimus?

Paul never tells us exactly why Onesimus was with him. Scholars have suggested three main possibilities.

The traditional view, going back at least to the fourth-century preacher John Chrysostom, is that Onesimus was a runaway. Maybe he had stolen something, which could explain Paul's offer to pay anything he owed (verse 18). Somehow he ended up near Paul, perhaps by chance, perhaps because he'd heard of him in Philemon's house, and became a believer.

A second view is that Onesimus wasn't running away for good, but went looking for Paul on purpose. Roman legal writers discussed slaves who, after a falling-out with their owner, went to a friend of the owner to ask him to plead on their behalf. A slave who did this wasn't legally considered a runaway. In this view, Onesimus knew that Philemon respected Paul, and asked Paul to help him make things right.

A third view is that the church in Colossae, or Philemon himself, had sent Onesimus to help Paul in prison, and Paul is now writing to ask Philemon to let him stay and serve. A few scholars have even suggested that Onesimus wasn't a slave in the usual sense at all, or that Archippus, not Philemon, was his owner, but these are minority views.

Each theory has strengths. The letter itself doesn't settle the question. But in every version, Paul is asking Philemon to treat Onesimus in a way Roman society would never have expected.

Where Was Paul?

Paul says he's a prisoner (verses 1, 9, 10, 13). Traditionally, Christians have thought he wrote this letter during his house arrest in Rome, described at the end of Acts, around AD 60 to 62. Many scholars think it's more likely that he was in prison in Ephesus, around AD 54 to 55, which is only about a week's walk from Colossae, making it easier for Onesimus to get there and for Paul to plan a visit (verse 22). A few suggest Caesarea, where Paul was held for two years (Acts 24:27). Wherever he was, Paul was in chains, and he hoped to be released soon.

The People in the Letter

Philemon was a believer in Colossae, probably fairly wealthy, since he owned at least one slave and had a house large enough for the church to meet in. He seems to have become a Christian through Paul (verse 19). Apphia is greeted next, and most scholars think she was Philemon's wife. Archippus may have been their son or another church leader; Paul calls him a fellow soldier. The church met in their home, since there were no church buildings yet.

With Paul were Timothy, his longtime partner; Epaphras, who had first brought the gospel to Colossae (Colossians 1:7); and Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke.

The Colossians Connection

Philemon and Colossians were almost certainly sent together. Colossians says that Tychicus is coming, along with Onesimus, our

faithful and dear brother, who is one of you (Colossians 4:7–9). Both letters mention Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke as being with Paul. And Colossians includes a message for Archippus, telling him to complete the ministry he has received (Colossians 4:17).

That means that when Colossians was read aloud to the church, Onesimus would have been in the room. And when the church heard Paul's instructions to slaves and masters in Colossians 3:22–4:1, including the command that masters treat slaves fairly, remembering that they have a Master in heaven, everyone would have thought of Philemon and Onesimus. If you've read the Colossians volume in this series, you'll recognize the setting.

Bishop Onesimus?

About fifty years later, around AD 110, a church leader named Ignatius of Antioch was taken to Rome to be executed. On the way, he wrote letters to several churches. In his letter to the church in Ephesus, he praises their bishop, a man named Onesimus, and even seems to make a pun on the name, the same pun Paul makes in Philemon.

Was this the same Onesimus? It's possible. If Onesimus was a young man when Paul wrote, he could have been in his sixties or seventies by then. Some scholars have suggested that Bishop Onesimus helped collect Paul's letters, which would explain why such a short personal note was preserved. But Onesimus was a very common name, especially for slaves, so we can't be sure. It's an intriguing possibility, not a proven fact.

Who Wrote It?

Almost no one doubts that Paul wrote Philemon. Even scholars who question whether Paul wrote some of the letters with his name on them accept this one as genuinely his. Its personal details, warmth, and style all fit Paul. That also makes Colossians, which is linked so closely to it, important evidence, though as explained in the Colossians volume, scholars debate whether Paul wrote that letter too.

The Map

Chapter 1 (verses 1–7): Paul greets Philemon and his household and thanks God for Philemon's love and faith.

Chapter 2 (verses 8–16): Paul appeals to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus, his son in the faith, and asks him to receive him as a brother.

Chapter 3 (verses 17–22): Paul offers to pay whatever Onesimus owes, and asks Philemon to get a room ready.

Chapter 4 (verses 23–25): Greetings from Paul's companions, a blessing, and what happened next.

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CHAPTER 1

A Friend Worth Asking

Philemon 1–7

Paul starts his letter in an unusual way. In most of his letters, he introduces himself as an apostle, someone with authority from Jesus. Here, he calls himself a prisoner of Christ Jesus. He's not pulling rank. He's in chains, and he wants Philemon to remember that.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Prisoner, Not Boss**
>
> Paul could have opened with his title. He was the apostle who had probably led Philemon to faith. He had every right to tell Philemon what to do, and he says so later (verse 8). But he chooses to start from weakness, not power. That's a hint about how the whole letter works. Paul is going to persuade, not command. When you need to ask someone to do something hard, starting with humility instead of authority usually works better, and it's more like Jesus.

Paul writes along with Timothy, whom he calls our brother. The letter is addressed to Philemon, a dear friend and coworker; to Apphia, our sister; to Archippus, whom Paul calls a fellow soldier; and to the believers who gather at Philemon's house.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Not Exactly Private**
>
> Philemon is the most personal of Paul's letters, but it isn't entirely private. Paul addresses it to Philemon's whole household and to the church that met there. The NIV footnote on verse 3 points out that the Greek word for you is

plural in verses 3, 22, and 25, while everywhere else in the letter it's singular. So Paul is speaking to Philemon personally, but he's making sure the church is listening in. That means whatever Philemon decides, he'll decide in front of his church family. Paul is gently reminding him that his response to Onesimus isn't just a private matter. It's a matter for the whole family of believers.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Church in a House**

For the first two or three centuries, Christians didn't have church buildings. They met in homes, usually the homes of members who had enough space. A wealthy believer's house might have a courtyard or dining room that could hold a few dozen people. Picture it: on Sunday, the church gathers in Philemon's house to sing, pray, hear Scripture, and share a meal. Philemon, the owner, is there. So is Apphia. And so, probably, are the slaves of the household, serving the food. Now Onesimus is coming back, and he's a believer too. Where will he sit?

Then Paul offers his usual greeting: grace and peace from God the Father and from Jesus, the Lord.

Next, Paul tells Philemon that he thanks God for him every time he prays for him. Why? Because Paul keeps hearing about Philemon's love for all God's people and his faith in Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **All God's People**

Notice the word all. Paul praises Philemon's love for every believer. That's a compliment, but it's also a setup. Onesimus is now one of God's people. If Philemon's love really reaches all of them, it will have to reach Onesimus too. Paul hasn't mentioned Onesimus yet. But a careful reader can already see where this is going.

Paul prays that Philemon's partnership in the faith will be effective, so that he'll understand more and more fully all the good things believers have in Christ. The Greek word for partnership is

koinonia, which also means fellowship or sharing. It describes the deep connection believers have because they share life in Jesus.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Koinonia**
>
> Koinonia is one of the richest words in the New Testament. It describes believers sharing their lives, their possessions, their joys, and their struggles (Acts 2:42–47). It's much more than hanging out together after church. It means belonging to one another. Paul will use a related word in verse 17, when he asks Philemon to treat him as a partner. Fellowship isn't just a warm feeling. It has practical consequences. It changes how you treat people.

Then Paul says that Philemon's love has given him great joy and encouragement, because Philemon has refreshed the hearts of God's people. The word Paul uses for hearts literally means inner parts, the place where people felt deep emotion. It's the same word Paul will use in verse 12 to describe Onesimus, and in verse 20 when he asks Philemon to refresh his own heart.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Refreshers**
>
> Some people drain you. You leave a conversation with them feeling tired, discouraged, or worse about yourself. Other people refresh you. They listen, encourage, notice when you're struggling, and leave you feeling stronger. Philemon was a refresher. He used his home, his money, and his time to bless other believers. Who refreshes you? And whom do you refresh? You don't need a big house or lots of money to do it. A text, a note, a ride, an invitation to sit together at lunch, or an honest question about how someone's really doing can refresh someone more than you know.
>
> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Paul's Strategy**
>
> Some readers notice that Paul's opening is carefully crafted. Ancient teachers of rhetoric, the art of persuasion, taught speakers to begin by winning the goodwill of their audience. Paul praises Philemon sincerely, and he also lays the groundwork for his request. He mentions love, partnership, all God's people, and refreshed hearts, all ideas he'll come back to when he asks

Philemon to welcome Onesimus. That doesn't make Paul's praise fake. He means every word. But it shows that he's thought carefully about how to say something difficult. That's a skill worth learning.

KEY VERSE

Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

Philemon 7 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Paul introduced himself as a prisoner instead of as an apostle?
2. Paul's letter is personal, but the whole church is listening in. How does it change things when others know how we respond to people who have hurt us?
3. Who refreshes your heart? Whose heart could you refresh this week?
4. What's the difference between flattering someone and sincerely encouraging them before asking something hard?

TRY THIS *Think of someone who has refreshed you, and tell them specifically how. Then look for one person this week who seems drained, and do something to refresh them.*

CHAPTER 2

No Longer a Slave

Philemon 8–16

Now Paul gets to his request. He says that, as an apostle, he could be bold and simply order Philemon to do the right thing. But he'd rather appeal to him out of love.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Ask, Don't Order**
>
> Paul had the authority to command. He chose not to use it. Why? Because forced kindness isn't really kindness. If Philemon welcomed Onesimus only because Paul ordered him to, his heart wouldn't have changed. Paul wants Philemon to choose love freely. Parents, coaches, and leaders sometimes have to give orders. But the best leaders often persuade instead of commanding, and they treat people as partners, not subordinates. When you have power over someone, like a younger sibling, a newer player on your team, or someone less popular, how do you use it?

Paul describes himself as an old man, and a prisoner for Jesus besides. Some scholars think the Greek word may mean ambassador instead of old man, since the two words were very similar. Either way, Paul is appealing to Philemon's sympathy and respect.

Then, finally, Paul names the person the letter is about. He's appealing for his son Onesimus, who became his son while Paul was in chains. In other words, Onesimus became a believer through Paul in prison.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Paul's Son**

Paul calls Onesimus his son, the same word he used for Timothy and Titus. To Roman society, Onesimus was a slave, maybe a runaway, maybe a thief, with no legal rights and no family name of his own. To Paul, he was family. Notice too where it happened: in prison. Paul's chains didn't stop the gospel. They put him right where he could meet Onesimus.

Then Paul makes a pun. The NIV footnote explains that the name Onesimus means useful. It was a common name for slaves, the kind of name an owner gave someone he thought of as a tool. Paul writes that Onesimus "was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Mr. Useful**

Paul's pun works on several levels. The name Onesimus means useful, and the words Paul uses for useless and useful are achrestos and euchrestos. They sound a lot like Christos, Christ, and in Paul's day they were probably pronounced almost the same. So Paul may be saying something like: he used to be without Christ, but now he's with Christ. Onesimus finally lives up to his name, not because he's a better tool, but because he's a new person. And notice that he's become useful to Paul as well, not as property, but as a partner in ministry.

BACKGROUND CHECK **You Are Not Your Label**

People get labels: the troublemaker, the weird kid, the screwup, the one who always quits, the one from that family. Onesimus had a label too: a slave named Useful who had turned out useless. But in Jesus, people aren't stuck with the labels others give them, or the ones they give themselves. Paul saw Onesimus as a son, a brother, and a partner. God sees you through the eyes of grace too. And He calls you to see others the same way.

Paul says he's sending Onesimus back, and calls him his very heart. That's the inner-parts word again. Sending Onesimus away was like tearing out part of himself.

Paul admits he would have liked to keep Onesimus with him, so he could help Paul in prison in Philemon's place. But he didn't want to do that without Philemon's agreement. He wanted any kindness Philemon showed to be voluntary, not forced.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Send Him Back?**

Many modern readers struggle with the fact that Paul sent Onesimus back to his owner at all. Why didn't Paul just keep him or help him escape? There are several things to consider. Under Roman law, sheltering a runaway was a crime, and Paul was already a prisoner. Onesimus could not have lived safely as a fugitive. Paul also seems to want a real reconciliation between two believers, not just an escape. And he may be hoping that Philemon will free Onesimus and send him back to work with Paul, which many readers think verses 13, 14, and 21 hint at. Still, it's fair to feel the tension. Paul worked within the world he lived in, while planting ideas that would eventually challenge that world at its roots.

Then Paul offers a new way of looking at what happened. Maybe, he says, the reason Onesimus was separated from Philemon for a little while was so that Philemon could have him back for good. Not as a slave anymore, but as something better: a beloved brother.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Perhaps**

Notice that Paul says perhaps. He doesn't claim to know exactly why God allowed things to happen as they did. But he suggests that God may have been at work even in a painful separation, maybe even in Onesimus's wrongdoing, to bring about something better. It's like Joseph telling his brothers that what they meant for evil, God meant for good (Genesis 50:20). That doesn't make wrongdoing okay. But it does mean God can bring good out of situations that seem hopeless.

Paul says Onesimus is very dear to him, and he should be even dearer to Philemon, both as a person and as a fellow believer. The NIV translates the first phrase as a fellow man; the Greek literally

says in the flesh. Some think Paul means that Philemon should value Onesimus as a human being and in their everyday relationship, not only spiritually.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Brother**

This is the heart of the letter. Paul asks Philemon to see Onesimus as a brother. In the Roman world, that idea was explosive. Masters and slaves didn't eat together, didn't socialize, and certainly didn't call each other brother. Paul had already written that in Christ there is neither slave nor free (Galatians 3:28). Now he applies it to one particular slave and one particular master. Paul doesn't explicitly say, free him. But if Philemon really treats Onesimus as a beloved brother, what will that mean for their relationship? Many readers, both ancient and modern, have concluded that the logic of this verse points toward freedom.

KEY VERSE

Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

Philemon 15–16 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Paul chose to appeal to Philemon instead of commanding him?
2. What labels do people put on you? What labels do you put on others? How does the gospel change them?
3. How do you feel about Paul sending Onesimus back? What questions does it raise for you?
4. Can you think of a time God brought something good out of a painful situation in your life?

TRY THIS *Think of someone at school or church who's often labeled or looked down on. This week, treat them like a brother or sister. Sit with them, talk with them, include them, and learn their real name and story.*

CHAPTER 3

Charge It to Me

Philemon 17–22

Paul's appeal reaches its climax. If Philemon considers Paul a partner, he should welcome Onesimus the same way he would welcome Paul himself.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Welcome Him as Me**
>
> Imagine the apostle Paul showing up at Philemon's door. Philemon would throw open the doors, prepare the best room, cook a feast, and invite the whole church. Paul says: that's how I want you to welcome Onesimus. Not with suspicion, not with a lecture, not as a returning slave put back to work in the kitchen, but as an honored guest and a partner. Jesus said something similar: whoever welcomes the least of His people welcomes Him (Matthew 25:40).

Then Paul makes an extraordinary offer. "If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Did Onesimus Steal?**
>
> Paul's words in verse 18 suggest that Onesimus may have caused Philemon some financial loss. Maybe he had stolen money or property when he left. Or maybe the loss was simply the work he hadn't done while he was gone, which an owner would have counted as a debt. Paul doesn't say. He doesn't make excuses for Onesimus, either. He just offers to pay.

BACKGROUND CHECK **An IOU**

Paul says he's writing this part with his own hand, and promises to repay. Paul usually dictated his letters to a secretary and added a few lines in his own handwriting at the end (see Galatians 6:11 and Colossians 4:18). Here, he signs what amounts to a legal IOU. In the Roman world, a handwritten promise like this could be used to collect the debt. Paul is putting his own name, and his own money, on the line.

Then Paul adds, a little playfully, that he won't mention that Philemon owes Paul his very self. In other words, Paul had probably led Philemon to faith in Jesus. Compared to that, whatever Onesimus owes is small change.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Charge It to Me**

For centuries, Christians have seen Paul's words as a picture of what Jesus does for us. We have wronged God. We owe a debt we could never repay. And Jesus says to the Father: put it on My account. Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century reformer, wrote that we are all God's Onesimuses. Jesus takes our debt and gives us His standing, so that God welcomes us the way He would welcome His own Son. Paul himself wrote that God made Jesus, who had no sin, to be sin for us, so that we could become right with God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21). Theologians call this kind of exchange imputation: our sin counted to Jesus, and His righteousness counted to us. Onesimus could walk back into Philemon's house carrying Paul's promise. We can come to God carrying Jesus' promise.

Paul asks Philemon to give him some benefit in the Lord, and to refresh his heart in Christ. The word Paul uses for benefit sounds like the name Onesimus, another little pun. Then Paul says he's confident Philemon will obey, and that he knows Philemon will do even more than Paul asks.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Even More**

What does Paul mean by even more? He doesn't say, and that's probably on purpose. Many readers think he's hinting that Philemon should free Onesimus, or send him back to help Paul, or both. Paul leaves it to Philemon to figure out what love requires. That's often how it works with God too. He doesn't give us a rule for every situation. He calls us to love, and lets us discover how far love goes.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Tact**

Paul's letter is a masterpiece of tact. He never insults Philemon. He never threatens him. He praises him sincerely, reminds him of their friendship, appeals to love instead of authority, offers to pay any debt himself, and expresses confidence that Philemon will do the right thing. And yet, by the end, it would be very hard for Philemon to say no. Tact isn't the same as manipulation. Manipulation tries to trick someone into doing what benefits you. Tact helps someone choose what's good, in a way that respects their freedom and dignity. Learning to say hard things kindly is one of the most useful skills you can develop.

Finally, Paul asks Philemon to get a guest room ready, because he hopes to be released, in answer to their prayers, and to visit soon. That's a friendly request. It's also a gentle reminder that Paul will be able to see for himself how Onesimus has been treated.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Forgiveness Is Hard**

Paul is asking Philemon to forgive. That may be the hardest thing anyone can do. Maybe someone has lied about you, betrayed your trust, hurt someone you love, or done something that cost you a lot. Forgiving them might feel impossible, or even unfair. The Bible doesn't pretend forgiveness is easy. But it calls us to forgive because God has forgiven us so much (Colossians 3:13). Forgiveness means releasing your right to get even and trusting God with justice. It's often a process, not a single moment. You may need to forgive the same hurt many times as the feelings come back.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Forgiveness Is Not**

Forgiveness doesn't mean pretending what happened was okay. It doesn't mean the other person faces no consequences. And it doesn't mean you have to trust someone again right away, or put yourself back in harm's way. Reconciliation, restoring a relationship, takes two people, and it requires the person who did wrong to change. In Philemon, Onesimus had become a new person, and Paul was there to vouch for him. If someone is hurting you, whether a friend, a boyfriend or girlfriend, a family member, or an adult, forgiveness never means staying in an unsafe situation. Tell a parent, a counselor, a teacher, or another trusted adult. You can forgive someone and still keep yourself safe. God cares about your safety.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Saying Sorry**

Onesimus had a hard job too. He had to go back and face the person he had wronged. Maybe you're in his position. You've hurt someone, and you need to make it right. That takes courage. A real apology names what you did, doesn't make excuses, and, where possible, tries to repair the damage. You may not be able to control how the other person responds. But you can do your part, and trust God with the rest.

KEY VERSE

So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me.

Philemon 17–18 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What would it look like to welcome someone the way you'd welcome your favorite person in the world?
2. How does Paul's offer to pay Onesimus's debt help you understand what Jesus has done for you?
3. What's the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation? Why does that difference matter?
4. Is there someone you need to forgive, or someone you need to apologize to?

TRY THIS *Write down the name of someone you're struggling to forgive. Pray for them every day this week, and ask God to help you release your right to get even. If you need to apologize to someone, do it this week. If anyone is hurting you, talk to a trusted adult today.*

CHAPTER 4

What Happened Next

Philemon 23–25

Paul ends with greetings from his companions. Epaphras, whom Paul calls his fellow prisoner, sends greetings. Paul's coworkers Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke add their greetings too.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Familiar Crew**

These names show up in other letters too. Epaphras brought the gospel to Colossae and kept praying for the church there (Colossians 1:7; 4:12–13). Mark had once abandoned Paul, but was now back on the team (Acts 15:37–39; 2 Timothy 4:11). Aristarchus was from Thessalonica and had been through a riot and a shipwreck with Paul (Acts 19:29; 27:2). Luke, the doctor, wrote the Gospel of Luke and Acts. And Demas would later desert Paul because he loved this world (2 Timothy 4:10). Even the people around Paul had stories of failure, faithfulness, second chances, and sadly, walking away.

Paul closes with a one-line blessing of grace from Jesus. As the NIV footnote notes, the you here is plural again. Paul's blessing is for the whole church.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Grace at the End**

Paul ends almost every letter with grace, and it's fitting here. The whole letter is about grace: the grace that turned Onesimus from useless to useful, the grace Paul asks Philemon to show, and the grace of Jesus, who paid our debt. Grace is getting what you don't deserve. Onesimus didn't deserve to be welcomed as a brother. Neither do we. That's what makes it grace.

So what did Philemon do? The Bible doesn't say. But we have some clues. The letter was kept, copied, and included in the New Testament. It seems unlikely that Philemon would have preserved a letter that made him look bad if he had refused. Many readers think Philemon welcomed Onesimus, and possibly freed him. And, as described in Setting the Scene, it's possible, though uncertain, that the Onesimus who later became bishop of Ephesus was the same man.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Letter and Slavery, Then**

Some people wonder why Paul didn't simply tell Philemon that slavery was wrong and that he must free Onesimus. Christians have discussed this for centuries. Paul's churches were tiny, powerless communities in a vast empire, and a call to overthrow slavery would have been impossible for them to carry out and would likely have brought swift, brutal suppression. Instead, Paul planted principles that undermined slavery from within: every person is made in God's image, slave and free are equal in Christ, masters have a Master in heaven, and a slave can be a beloved brother. Some readers wish Paul had gone further, and that wish is understandable. Others point out that the seeds Paul planted grew into a tree that eventually helped bring slavery down. Both responses take the letter seriously.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Letter and Slavery, Later**

In the nineteenth century, Philemon became part of a bitter argument. In the United States, some defenders of slavery pointed to it as proof that the Bible accepted slavery. Since Paul had sent a runaway back to his master, they argued, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which required escaped slaves to be returned, was biblical. Abolitionists, many of them Christians, strongly disagreed. They pointed to Paul's words no longer as a slave and as a dear brother, to the Bible's condemnation of kidnapping and slave trading (Exodus 21:16; 1 Timothy 1:10), and to the teaching that all people are made in God's image. Formerly enslaved Christians like Frederick Douglass condemned the way slaveholders twisted Scripture to defend cruelty. Some historians note

that enslaved people were sometimes given edited Bibles with passages about freedom removed. Today, Christians overwhelmingly agree that slavery is a grave evil, and many see the misuse of Philemon as a warning about reading the Bible selectively to defend what we want.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Slavery Today**

Slavery isn't only history. Human rights organizations estimate that tens of millions of people around the world today are trapped in forced labor, human trafficking, forced marriage, or debt bondage, including many children and teenagers. Christians and many others are working to end it. You can learn more, pray, support organizations that rescue and restore victims, and be thoughtful about where the things you buy come from. If you ever encounter a situation where someone seems to be controlled or trafficked, including online, tell a trusted adult or contact the authorities.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Small Letter, Big Idea**

Philemon is the shortest of Paul's letters, about one person, one owner, and one debt. But it shows what the gospel does in the real world. It takes people society keeps apart and makes them family. It turns enemies into brothers and sisters. It reaches into living rooms, kitchens, and workplaces, and changes how people treat each other. That's still what the gospel does. And it starts with the One who said: charge it to Me.

KEY VERSE

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Philemon 25 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Which of Paul's companions do you relate to most: Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Luke, or Demas? Why?
2. What do you think Philemon did? What would you have done?
3. Why do you think some people in the past used the Bible to defend slavery? How can we avoid twisting Scripture to support what we already want?
4. Where do you see people being kept apart today, by race, money, status, or popularity? How could the gospel bring them together?

TRY THIS *Read the whole letter to Philemon out loud, then read Colossians 3:11–4:1, which was probably read aloud in the same room. Write a short letter of your own, either to someone you need to reconcile with, or to God, thanking Him for paying your debt.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just read a letter about a man who owed a debt he couldn't pay, and a friend who said, charge it to me. That's a picture of the good news about Jesus.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He wants you home.

God made you on purpose, and He wants you in His family, not as a servant, but as His child.

2 We've all turned away.

We've all gone our own way instead of God's. Like Onesimus, we've walked away from the One we belong to. The Bible calls it sin.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever. It's a debt we can't pay.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus said, charge it to Me.

Jesus died on the cross and took our sin on Himself, and He gives us His righteousness in exchange. Then He rose again.

> *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* **2 Corinthians 5:21 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. He'll welcome you home.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I owe a debt I can't pay. Thank You that Jesus took my sin on Himself and paid it all. I believe You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Thank You for welcoming me home. Help me forgive others the way You've forgiven me. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Philemon straight through. It takes three minutes. Then read Colossians, the letter Onesimus carried with it, and Hebrews, the next book in the New Testament.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored, where people from every background are welcomed as family. Ask about being baptized.

Talk to God every day. Be honest with Him. Ask Him to show you anyone you need to forgive, or ask forgiveness from. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Paul is right, Jesus has already offered to pay what you owe, and it's worth finding out for yourself.

Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

Colossians 3:13 (NIV)