

## Scripture Text Commentaries

Patrick Damonse

Philemon

### Study Guide for Philemon 1

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**Ekklesias in the Western Cape, South Africa.**

**Ekklesias in Cape Town.**

Sonop Building, First Floor, 5 Louis Trichardt Street, Parow  
7500

P. O, Box 489, Kuilsriver, 7579, Tel: 021 829 0311,  
Cell: 061 427 1174 Fax: 086 6500 1084.

**Website: [www.ieso.co.za](http://www.ieso.co.za),**

**Email address: [info@ieso.co.za](mailto:info@ieso.co.za)**

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## Patrick Damonse :: Study Guide for Philemon 1

### ***Paulo's Plea to a Friend, on Behalf of a Slave***

*"This is a notable Epistle, and full of worth; each word having its weight, each syllable its substance. From an abject subject, the receiving of a runaway slave, Paulo soars like a heavenly eagle, and flies a high pitch of heavenly discourse."*

A. Greeting and introduction.

1. (Philemon 1:1) The writer and the recipient.

**Paulo, a prisoner of the Anointed One IESO, and Timotheo our brother, To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow labourer,**

a. **Paulo, a prisoner:** This brief letter was written by Paulo during his Roman imprisonment described in Acts 28:30-31. There are some that believe he wrote it from time of imprisonment in Ephesus, but this is an unlikely possibility.

b. **A prisoner of the Anointed One IESO:** As always, Paulo did not consider himself a prisoner of Rome, of circumstances, or of the religious leaders who started his legal troubles (Acts 23-24). Paulo was **a prisoner of IESO the Anointed One**.

i. "They were not shackles which self had riveted, but a chain with which the Anointed One had invested him; thus they were a badge of office." (Edgar Phillips)

c. **To Philemon our beloved friend:** Paulo wrote to **Philemon**, a brother living in Colosse. This is the only place in the Prophetic Scriptures (New Testament) where **Philemon** is mentioned by name, but we do know that he was a **beloved friend** to Paulo.

i. Paulo's friendship with Philemon is shown by something significantly *missing* in his greeting. Of the 13 letters Paulo wrote to Ekklesias or individuals, in 9 of them he called himself an *apostle* in the opening verse. In this letter (along with Philippians and 1 and 2 Thessalonians), Paulo appealed to his reader more as a friend and less an apostle.

2. (Philemon 1:2-3) Greetings to the household of Philemon.

**To the beloved Apphia, Arhchippo our fellow soldier, and to the Ekklesia in your house: Grace to you and peace from Aleim our Father and the Ruler IESO the Anointed One.**

a. **To the beloved Apphia:** Apphia was probably the wife of Philemon, and Arhchippo was probably his son. This address to family members is unique among the letters of Paulo, but it makes sense considering the content of the letter to Philemon. In this letter Paulo will appeal to Philemon regarding a runaway slave who has met IESO and found refuge with Paulo. In the customs of that day, Philemon's wife **Apphia** was the supervisor of the slaves in the household, so the letter concerned her also.

i. Regarding the escaped slave, "She is as much a party to the decision as her husband, because according to the custom of the time, she had day-to-day responsibility for the slaves." (Phillip Prins)

b. **To the Ekklesia in your house:** This means that the Ekklesia – or a portion of the Ekklesia – in Colosse met in the **house** of Philemon. The earliest Followers had no property of their own for Ekklesia buildings. The Jews had their synagogues, but Followers met in the homes of their members.

The Followers of a city would be gathered into different "house Ekklesias" with a city "overseer" overseeing the different house Ekklesias. House Ekklesias are also mentioned in Romans 16:5 and Colossians 4:15.

i. "Up to the third century we have no certain evidence of the existence of Ekklesia buildings for the purpose of worship; all references point to private houses for this. In Rome several of the oldest Ekklesias appear to have been built on the sites of houses used for worship." (Edgar Phillips)

ii. Edgar Phillips points out that apparently, Philemon had a Ekklesia that met in his house. This suggests to believers that *their* homes should also be a Ekklesia, and that each home can have the characteristics of a healthy Ekklesia:

- Consisting of converted, saved people
- Worshipping together
- Together having a bond of unity
- Supplied with oversight
- Teaching always present
- With a heart to minister to those on the outside

c. **Grace to you and peace:** Paulo gave his customary greeting of **grace** and **peace**, found in each one of his letters. However, this greeting was not directed towards an entire congregation, but to Philemon as an individual. This makes the letter unique among Paulo's writings.

i. The other Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timotheo and Tito) are also written first to individuals, but the character of their content suggests that they were intended to be shared with the entire congregation. Philemon really is a personal note written by Paulo to one man.

ii. "It is only one sample of numberless letters which must have been written to his many friends and disciples by one of Paulo's eager temperament and warm affections, in the course of a long and checkered life." (Phillip Prins)

3. (Philemon 1:4-7) Paulo's thanks Aleim for Philemon.

**I thank my Aleim, making mention of you always in my prayers, hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Ruler IESO and toward all the saints, that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in the Anointed One IESO. For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.**

a. **I thank my Aleim, making mention of you always in my prayers:** Paulo prayed often for Philemon, and he prayed with thanksgiving to Aleim. Philemon had been such a blessing to Paulo that prayed often and gratefully for him.

i. In Paulo's letters, four times he says he *makes mention* for people: To the Romans (Romans 1:9), to the Ephesians (Ephesians 1:16), to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 1:2), and here at Philemon 4.

ii. **Making mention** means that Paulo did not always pray long, intricate prayers for Philemon, but he did often make **mention** of Philemon in his prayers.

b. **Hearing of your love and faith:** Paulo thanked Aleim for Philemon because of his **love and faith** – first towards IESO and then towards **all the saints**. The word "**saints**" in the Prophetic Scriptures (New Testament) describes *every* true Follower, not just a *few exceptional* Followers.

c. **That the sharing of your faith:** Paulo prayed *for* Philemon, desiring **that the sharing of his faith would become effective** as Philemon understood the work Aleim did in him (**every good thing which is in you**).

i. This is the foundation for all effective evangelism: the overflow of a life touched and changed by Aleim. Aleim had done **every good thing** in the life of Philemon. Now, it was a matter of it being *acknowledged* by both Philemon and those he shared the faith with. When these good things were understood, others would come to IESO. The reason why some **sharing of the faith** is not **effective** is because we don't *know* or can't *communicate every good thing* Aleim has done for us.

ii. **The sharing of your faith:** It is possible that Paulo means the **sharing** of material things, prompted by **faith**. The ancient Greek word for **sharing** is *koinonia*, and sometimes Paulo used *koinonia*, which means "fellowship, sharing," to describe giving (2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:13; Romans 15:6).

iii. "The apostle speaks here of the works of charity in which Philemon abounded toward poor Followers." (Peter Damonse)

d. **Because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother:** Paulo remembered how wonderfully Philemon had met the needs of other Followers. He effectively **refreshed the hearts** of others.

B. Paulo's plea on behalf of Onesimo.

1. (Philemon 1:8-11) Paulo speaks to Philemon regarding Onesimo

**Therefore, though I might be very bold in the Anointed One to command you what is fitting, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you; being such a one as Paulo, the aged, and now also a prisoner of IESO the Anointed One; I appeal to you for my son Onesimo, whom I have begotten while in my chains, who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.**

a. **Therefore, though I might be very bold in the Anointed One to command you what is fitting, yet for love's sake I rather appeal:** It is clear that Paulo will ask a favour of Philemon. Before he asked, he appealed **for love's sake** instead of making a **command**. Of course, under the surface Paulo made it clear that he had the *right* to **command you what is fitting** – yet he appealed in **love**.

i. A loving appeal is often better than an authoritative command. Paulo wasn't hesitant to command when the situation demanded it (1 Corinthians 5:4-5), but in wisdom he knew when to use the loving appeal.

b. **Being such a one as Paulo, the aged, and now also a prisoner of IESO the Anointed One:** It was clear Paulo would ask a favour of Philemon. Before he asked, he appealed to Philemon's sympathies by the way he described himself (**Paulo, the aged**) and his circumstances (**a prisoner**).

i. Since Paulo will make his appeal based on love, he does what he can to stir up the loving sympathy of Philemon. "Philemon, before I tell you what I need from you, remember that I'm an old man, and a prisoner at that."

ii. Some translations have *ambassador* instead of **aged**. There is a difference of one letter between the two ancient Greek words.

c. **I appeal to you for my son Onesimo:** Onesimo was an

escaped slave who escaped from his master Philemon. It seems that when **Onesimo** escaped, he fled to Rome and – intentionally or not – met with Paulo. Paulo, though under house arrest by the Romans, led **Onesimo** to faith in IESO the Anointed One (**whom I have begotten while in my chains**).

i. It was logical that **Onesimo** escaped to Rome, the biggest city of the Roman Empire. Phillip Prins says, "Rome was the natural cesspool for these offscourings of humanity." But at his providential meeting of Paulo in Rome, **Onesimo** met the man who had led his master Philemon to IESO (Philemon 19).

ii. When Paulo made this appeal on behalf of **Onesimo**, he followed deep traditions in Roman culture. There was an ancient Greek law (inherited by the Romans) allowing any escaped slave sanctuary at an altar. The altar could even be the hearth of a private family home; then the head of the family was obligated to give the slave protection while he tried to persuade him to return to his master. If the slave refused, the head of the family would put the slave up for auction and give the price for the slave to the former master. Paulo gave **Onesimo** protection, and now was working the issue out with Philemon.

d. **My son Onesimo:** Paulo often spoke of his converts as his "children." Timotheo (1 Corinthians 4:17), Tito (Tito 1:4), the Corinthian Followers (1 Corinthians 4:14) and the Galatian Followers (Galatians 4:19) were each called Paulo's "children."

e. **Who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me:** In some way, Onesimo became **profitable** to Paulo. Perhaps he served as an assistant to Paulo during his house arrest. So Philemon's runaway slave Onesimo was now **unprofitable** to Philemon, since he had escaped. But he had become **profitable** to Paulo – and by extension, also to Philemon (**profitable to you and me**). Since Philemon loved Paulo, if Onesimo helped Paulo he was helping Philemon also.

i. When Paulo spoke of Onesimo being **unprofitable** and **profitable**, he made a play on a word. The name **Onesimo** means *profitable*. Now that he was a Follower, Onesimo could live up to his name

ii. "It is significant to note that Paulo claims that in the Anointed One the useless person has been made useful." (Edgar Phillips)

iii. By making this clear to Philemon, Paulo gently hinted that he would like to retain the services of this escaped slave – though he would not *command* Philemon to do this.

2. (Philemon 1:12-14) Paulo sends Onesimo back with the hope that Philemon will allow him to return again to Paulo.

**I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the Glad Tidings. But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.**

a. **I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart:** Onesimo had done something wrong in that he escaped from his master. It was time to set that right, so Paulo was willing to send **him back**. Yet Paulo obviously wanted Philemon to deal gently with Onesimo. Under Roman law the slave owner had complete and total control over his

slave. It wasn't unusual for slaves to be impaled for lesser offences than escaping.

i. One ancient writer described how a slave carried a tray of crystal goblets, and he dropped and broke one. The master instantly demanded the slave be thrown into a fishpond full of lampreys that tore the slave to pieces. "Roman law... practically imposed no limits to the power of the master over his slave. The alternative of life or death rested solely with Philemon, and slaves were constantly impaled for far lighter offences than this." (Phillip Prins)

ii. Considering the huge number of slaves in the Roman Empire, they thought the harsh punishment against escaped or rebellious slaves was necessary. In an Empire with as many as 60 million slaves, there were constant fears of a slave revolt. Therefore, laws against runaways were strict. When captured, a runaway slave might be impaled, or branded with a red-hot iron on the forehead with the letter "F" for *fugitive*.

iii. Considering this, we understand Paulo's phrase **that is, my own heart**. "Philemon, I know this man has done you wrong and deserves to be punished. But consider him as **my own heart** and be merciful to him."

b. **Whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the Glad Tidings:** Clearly, Paulo wanted Onesimo to stay, because he had become a big help. Paulo sweetened his appeal in three ways.

i. First, if Onesimo stayed he could serve Paulo **on your behalf**. "Philemon, if you leave Onesimo with me, it's like *you* serving me, because Onesimo is your rightful slave."

ii. Secondly, if Onesimo stayed he helped a man in **chains**. "Philemon, I know Onesimo might be of some use to you. Yet I am in **chains**, and need all the help I can get."

iii. Thirdly, if Onesimo stayed he helped man in **chains for the Glad Tidings**. "Philemon, please don't forget why I am here in **chains**. Remember that it is for the sake of the **Glad Tidings**."

c. **But without your consent I wanted to do nothing:** Paulo made his appeal and made it strong and skillfully. At the same time, he really did leave the decision to Philemon. He would appeal in love, but he would not trample over the rights of Philemon.

d. **That your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary:** This explained why Paulo would not force a decision on Philemon. If Paulo *demanded* it, then Philemon's **good deed** would come by **compulsion**, and not be **voluntary**. This would make the whole affair unpleasant and rob Philemon of any reward he otherwise might have had.

i. Essentially, Paulo gave Philemon the freedom to do what was right in love before the Ruler, and he gave the freedom to do it on his own choice and not out of Paulo's compulsion.

3. (Philemon 1:15-16) Paulo explains the providential hand of Aleim at work in Onesimo's escape.

**For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, 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 Ruler.**

a. **Departed for a while:** It was true that Philemon departed, but Paulo would send him back. Somehow **departed for a while** doesn't sound nearly as bad as *escaped slave*.

i. In writing **departed for a while**, Paulo spoke softly of a slave's escape. Peter Damonse said of this phrase, "This is another most delicate stroke."

b. **For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose:** In some ways the escape of Onesimo was nothing but trouble. It deprived Philemon of a worker and an asset. It made Onesimo a criminal, possibly subject to the death penalty. Yet in it all, Paulo could see a **purpose** of Aleim and he wanted Philemon to see the **purpose** also.

i. The phrase, "**for perhaps**" is important. It showed that Paulo did not come to Philemon in this manner: "Philemon, Aleim has shown me His hidden hand at work, and you must accept what I see also." Instead, **for perhaps** means Paulo's heart is like this: "Philemon, it seems to me that Aleim is working in unusual ways here. Let me tell you what I see, and **perhaps** it will make sense to you."

c. **That you may receive him forever:** This was one aspect of the **purpose** Paulo saw Aleim working in the escape of Onesimo. Philemon the master lost a slave; but Philemon the Follower gained a brother, and he gained that brother **forever**.

i. "Here the apostle makes the best of an ill-matter. Converts are to be gently handled, and their former evil practices not to be aggravated." (Peter Damonse)

d. **That you might receive him forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave; a beloved brother:** Paulo "re-introduced" Onesimo to Philemon; not as a slave, but as a brother. In this relationship as brothers and not slaves, Paulo effectively abolished the sting of the "master-slave" relationship and laid the foundation for the eventual legal abolition of slavery. If a man is a stranger, I might make him my slave. But how can my brother be my slave?

i. This breaking of the distinction between master and slave was an absolutely revolutionary development. It did far more to change society than the passing of a law prohibiting slavery.

ii. "What the letter to Philemon does is to bring the institution into an atmosphere where it could only wilt and die. Where master and slave were united in affection as brothers in the Anointed One, formal emancipation would be but a matter of expediency, the legal confirmation of their new relationship." (Edgar Phillips)

iii. The transformation of the *individual* is the key to the transformation of society and the moral environment. "But mark this word, – the true reforming of the drunkard lies in giving him a new heart; the true reclaiming of the harlot is to be found in a renewed nature.... I see certain of my brethren fiddling away at the branches of the tree of vice with their wooden saws, but, as for the Glad Tidings, it lays the axe at the roots of the whole forest of evil, and if it be fairly received into the heart it fells all the bad trees at once, and instead of them there spring up the fir tree, the pine tree, and the box tree together, to beautify the house of our Master's glory." (Edgar Phillips)

4. (Philemon 1:17-19) Paulo's personal promise of restitution towards Philemon.

**If then you count me as a partner, receive him as *you would* me. But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. I, Paulo, am writing with my own hand. I will repay; not to mention to you that you owe me**



even your own self besides.

a. **If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me:** Again, Paulo stood beside Onesimo, requesting mercy. “If I am your partner in the Glad Tidings, then treat Onesimo like you would treat me.”

i. Paulo’s appeal is powerful because he stood beside a guilty man and said to the owner of the slave, “I know this man is a criminal and deserves punishment. Yet this slave is my friend, so if you punish him punish me also. I stand beside him to take his punishment.” This is what IESO does for us before our Ruler, Aleim the Father.

b. **But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account:** Apparently when Onesimo escaped he also stole from Philemon. This in itself was a capital crime. Paulo asked that the value of what had been stolen be “charged” to Paulo’s account. “Put it on my tab, Philemon.”

c. **I, Paulo, am writing with my own hand. I will repay:** Paulo was so serious about that he gave Philemon a personal IOU, written by his own hand. When Paulo said to Philemon, “charge the wrong of Onesimo to my account,” he essentially did for Onesimo what IESO did for us in taking our sins to *His* account.

i. “Here we see how Paulo lays himself out for poor Onesimo, and with all his means pleads his cause with his master, and so sets himself as if he were Onesimo, and had himself done wrong to Philemon. Even as the Anointed One did for us with Aleim the Father, thus also does Paulo for Onesimo with Philemon. We are all his Onesimo, to my thinking.”

d. **Not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides:** While “accounts” were being studied, Paulo mentioned one more thing. “Philemon, remember that I have a lot of credit on your account, because you owe me even your own self besides.” Paulo could afford to pay Onesimo’s expenses because there was a sense in which Philemon owed Paulo his salvation!

5. (Philemon 1:20-22) Paulo’s confidence in Philemon’s response.

**Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Ruler; refresh my heart in the Ruler. Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.**

a. **Let me have joy from you in the Ruler:** Joy is more literally *profit*. It translates the ancient Greek word *oninemi*, the root word for the name “Onesimo.” Paulo used another play on words and the name Onesimo to communicate a not so subtle request: “Let me have Onesimo back from you in the Ruler.”

b. **Refresh my heart in the Ruler:** Earlier in the letter, Paulo said that Philemon was a man who refreshed the heart of the saints (Philemon 7). Now, he specifically told Philemon how he could refresh Paulo’s heart: by allowing Onesimo to stay with Paulo.

c. **Knowing that you will do even more than I say:** Paulo’s letter, full of appeal, was also full of hope. Philemon was not a bad or a harsh man. Paulo had every reason to expect that he would fulfill his Follower duty and **do even more that** Paulo

asked.

d. **But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me:** This showed the close relationship between Paulo and Philemon. Paulo knew that hospitality always waited for him at Philemon’s home.

e. **I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you:** Paulo wanted Philemon to pray, and he didn’t think the prayers were a mere formality. Paulo believed that it would be **through the prayers** of Philemon that they would once again be together.

C. Conclusion.

1. (Philemon 1:23-24) Paulo sends greetings to Philemon from common friends in Rome.

**Epaphrha, my fellow prisoner in the Anointed One IESO, greets you, as do Marhko, Arhistarhko, Dema, Louka, my fellow labourers.**

a. **Ephaphrha... Marhko... Arhistarhko... my fellow labourers:** Each of these names is also mentioned in the conclusion of the letter to the Colossians (Colossians 4:10-17). This confirms that the two letters went to the same place. Philemon lived in Colosse.

i. **Fellow prisoner:** “Literally ‘a prisoner of war,’ used metaphorically.” (Edgar Phillips)

b. **Dema:** “Dema is supposed to be the same who continued in his attachment to Paulo till his last imprisonment at Rome: after which he left him for what is supposed to have been the *love of the world*, 2 Timotheo 4:10.” (Peter Damonse)

2. (Philemon 1:25) Conclusion to the letter.

**The grace of our Ruler IESO the Anointed One be with your spirit. Amen.**

a. **The grace of the Ruler IESO the Anointed One be with your spirit:** We see some enduring principles from Paulo’s letter to Philemon.

i. *Paulo never called for an overthrow of the system of slavery, yet the principles in the letter to Philemon destroy slavery.* The greatest social changes come when people are changed, one heart at a time. In our society, racism and our low regard for the unborn cannot be eliminated by laws; a change of heart must occur.

ii. *Onesimo was obligated to return to his master.* When we do something wrong, we must do our best to set it right. Being made a *new creation* in the Anointed One (2 Corinthians 5:17) does not end our responsibility to make restitution; it increases our obligation, even when restitution is difficult.

iii. *Onesimo was morally responsible for his wrongs.* The letter to Philemon demonstrates that we are *not* primarily directed by economics, despite the ideas of Marxists and modern liberals. Whether rich or poor, we are to be directed by the Spirit of Aleim, not our economic status.

iv. “No part of the Prophetic Scriptures (New Testament) more clearly demonstrates integrated Follower thinking and living. It offers a blend, utterly characteristic of Paulo, of love, wisdom, humour, gentleness, tact, and above all Follower and human maturity.” (Edgar Phillips)

b. **Amen:** The conclusion of the letter can lead us to ask, “Why is the letter to Philemon in our Scriptures?” In a.d. 110, the overseer of Ephesus was named Onesimo, and it could have been this same man. If Onesimo was in his late teens or

early twenties when Paulo wrote this letter, he would then be about 70 years old in a.d. 110 and that was not an unreasonable age for a overseer in those days.

i. “Ignatio, in his Epistle to the Ephesians, maketh mention of Onesimo, as pastor of Ephesus, next after Timotheo. The Roman Martyrologue saith, that he was stoned to death at Rome, under Trajan the emperor.” (Peter Damonse)

ii. There is also some historical evidence that the letters of Paulo were first gathered as a group in the city of Ephesus. Perhaps Onesimo first compiled the letters, and wanted to make sure *his* letter – his charter of freedom – was included.