

The photo simulates being taken from 185 miles high.

Introduction to Philemon

1. About Colossae, the town where Philemon lived.

- a. This is a Google Satellite map showing the relationship of Colossae to Ephesus. This is what would be seen from 185 miles up. The former town is now just a mound or *tell*, but the map is within a mile or two of identifying the correct location. We located the village of Honaz and then selected the area about 2 miles north.

- b. The fertile Lycus River Valley is to the west of the town and can be easily seen on the satellite photo. Ephesus is about 100 miles to the west. Colossae is about 1,000 from Rome by the route that the ships had to follow.
- c. The once-prosperous town was in decline in Paul's time and was destroyed by an earthquake shortly after receiving the letter from Paul. It, along with neighboring Laodicea and Hierapolis, was rebuilt after the earthquake. It should be noted that there was not a letter to the church at Colossae among those written to the seven churches of Asia.
- d. The date of the earthquake is set as A.D. 61. Since Paul did not refer to the quake, his letters to the Colossians and Philemon were written before he heard about it. The area is still known for severe earthquakes.
- e. The region near Colossae is very mountainous except for the Lycus Valley. (See the map photo.) The town commanded the road to the mountain pass over the Cadmus Range (8,000 feet). This writer passed through this area after dark. The mountain pass was very disturbing.
- f. Some residents of Colossae may have been present at Pentecost. This area was called Phrygia and Phrygians were in Jerusalem when the church began. Acts 2:10.
- g. It seems that Paul had not visited this church. 1:4, 2:1.
- h. The main source of their Christian development was Epaphras, a co-worker with Paul. Colossians 1:7. He may have brought the gospel to the community after hearing it from Paul in Ephesus. Acts 19:10.
- i. Epaphras had worked for the Lord in Hierapolis and Laodicea, as well as in Colossae. Colossians 4:13
- j. It is reasonable to think that the church met in the home of Philemon. Colossians 4:9 indicates that the newly converted slave Onesimus, a member of Philemon's household, was now part of the Colossian Church.
- k. The church consisted predominantly of Gentiles. Colossians 1:12, 21, 24, 27; 3:5-7. There are very few allusions to the Old Testament because

it was not a part of their heritage and the sins that were distinctively Gentile are mentioned in 3:5 - 7.

2. About Onesimus

a. Helpful Historical Fiction:

IT WAS SOMEWHAT LIKE THIS:

by Wilbur Fields

Two men stood on the rim of a mountain valley in the Cadmus range of Central Asia Minor. A narrow road led from their feet down into the Lycus river valley before them. Spread out below them lay the town of Colossae, the river dividing the city.

The men, wearing Roman togas of very ordinary style, looked at one another and smiled a bit. This was the end of the journey. The one, named Tychicus, held in his hand a rolled-up letter to be delivered to the church of God in Colossae. The other man felt of his robe to make sure a letter was still tucked in his breast.

As the city appeared before him, a swirl of memories foamed up before his mind: his last look at this scene — in the moonlight — going the other way — stolen coins bumping against his thigh as he walked—the weary week of walking at nights, to Ephesus, a hundred miles away — the lonely ship ride, a thousand miles to Rome, suspicious people asking leading questions as he tried to keep to himself—those dazzling buildings of Rome — street gossip about a queer prisoner there named Paul — “Paul?” He’d heard his master speak of Paul back in Colossae! — The crooked gamblers who took his last coin — His meeting with Paul — His burning heart and tear-filled eyes as he heard of God’s love for slaves and for masters — That clean feeling as Paul’s friends had baptized him — Then Paul’s words, “You must go back to Philemon!”

Now he had come back — he, Onesimus, un-helpful Onesimus! He, a slave, who had left his good master Philemon! Slaves simply did not go back voluntarily. But there he was, and there was his master’s house, the corner house, across the river, right over there!

Down the steep path their feet fell heavily; the road levelled, into the city, over the bridge, around the turn, to the house. Tychicus knocked. Footfalls inside. The door opens, and Philemon’s mouth falls open, “Onesimus!”

With downturned eyes the slave holds out the sweat-soiled, rolled-up letter. Philemon slowly takes it; its seal snaps open . . . “From Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ . . . unto Philemon . . .”

– Credit is given to Dr. Dean E. Walker of Milligan College, Term., who furnished the inspiration for this article by a sermon, at the North American Christian Convention, 1952.

3. About the Book

This excellent summary of the book is by B. W. Johnson in his *People's New Testament*:

This, the fourth of the personal letters of Paul, differs from the other three, as well as from all other epistles of Paul, in that it is neither doctrinal, nor intended for general church instruction. It has its interest in that it shows by a particular example the application of the great principles of Christian brotherhood to social life. It is written to Philemon, an active Christian of Colossae, a convert of Paul, in behalf of Onesimus, a runaway slave of Philemon, who had found refuge in Rome, had in some way been brought under Paul's instruction during his first Roman imprisonment, and had been brought to Christ. In Colossians 4:9 he is mentioned as belonging to Colossae, commended as a faithful and beloved brother who had been of great service, and it is there stated that he would return from Rome to his old home along with Tychicus, while this epistle explains the occasion of his return, and throws a practical light on the new relations of master and slave, which could not be done by precept alone.

1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved and fellow-worker,

- A. As in his other books, **Paul** identifies himself in the first sentence. It was not necessary to unroll the scroll to identify the writer.
- B. That he is in **prison** positions him to reason with **Philemon** about the returning slave Onesimus. It would be harder to refuse Paul's coming request seeing that he has given so much for **Christ**.
- C. **Paul** thought of himself as a **prisoner of Christ** rather than a prisoner of Nero. He had not broken Roman law, but his devotion to **Christ** kept him in trouble. The Jews were angry over his determination to preach the gospel to the Gentiles.
- D. Paul stresses his affection for Philemon (**beloved**) as well as putting himself on a social level with Philemon by calling him a **fellow-worker**. Philemon's name is related linguistically to **love**.
- E. Note that the confined prisoner Paul was still **working**. **Work** was not put on hold until he could get out and be free.
- F. Wilbur Fields writes:

We do not know in what ways that Philemon had been a fellow-worker with Paul. The observations that the church met in his house, and that he had refreshed the hearts of the saints (Phm. 7) suggest many ways in which he may have been a fellow-worker.

2 and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow-soldier, and to the church in thy house:

- A. **Apphia** is probably the wife of Philemon and is called a **sister**. Paul is saying that she is a believer also.
- B. One writer suggests that **Apphia** was the supervisors of the slaves in their home.
- C. A common view is that **Archippus** was their son and the local preacher.
- D. **Churches** of the first century did not have their own buildings and so often met in member's **houses**.

3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

- A. This greeting and conclusion was common in Paul's writings. It was suitable for both Jews and Gentiles.
- B. Both **grace** and **peace** come from initially following **Christ**, but are blessings that can be increased as well.
- C. It should be noted that both the **Father** and the Son are involved in dispensing these blessings.

4 I thank my God always, making mention of thee in my prayers,

- A. Part of the richness of Paul's life is found in his ability to identify things and people to be **thankful** for. This included Philemon whom he did not know intimately.
- B. Many of Paul's letters opened with **thanksgiving**.
- C. **Mention**. Paul included Philemon on a list of people that he prayed for, but not in great detail.

5 hearing of thy love, and of the faith which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all the saints;

- A. Someone had talked. It was probably Epaphras who was with Paul at the time of this writing.
- B. Philemon had developed a reputation for both his **love** and **faith**. These were directed both vertically toward the **Lord** and horizontally toward the **saints**.

6 that the fellowship of thy faith may become effectual, in the knowledge of every good thing which is in you, unto Christ.

- A. *The Message* translates:

And I keep praying that this faith we hold in common keeps showing up in the good things we do, and that people recognize Christ in all of it.

- B. Paul wanted to see a certain outcome of the **faith** in Philemon's life and that others would see **Christ** in it.

7 For I had much joy and comfort in thy love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through thee, brother.

- A. Paul had been **joyful** and had been **comforted** as he heard of Philemon's **love** for the **saints**.
- B. Paul spoke very highly of Philemon's hospitality and kindness toward the **saints** who assembled at his home.
- C. Keep in mind that a new one is being added to their ranks, the returning Onesimus.

8 Wherefore, though I have all boldness in Christ to enjoin thee that which is befitting, 9 yet for love's sake I rather beseech, being such a one as Paul the aged, and now a prisoner also of Christ Jesus:

- A. The Message translation is clear:

In line with all this I have a favor to ask of you. As Christ's ambassador and now a prisoner for him, I wouldn't hesitate to command this if I thought it necessary, 9 but I'd rather make it a personal request.

- B. Paul had both the **boldness** and the authority to command Philemon to release Onesimus, but he chose to go the low-pressure way. But then again, there is a reminder of Paul *could* have done.
- C. Paul was by now a senior citizen perhaps about 60.
- D. This is the **prisoner** appealing rather than the apostle commanding.
- E. It would be better for Philemon to make this decision as an equal of Paul's rather than being required to because of Paul's authority.

10 I beseech thee for my child, whom I have begotten in my bonds, Onesimus,

- A. This is the core of the letter and why the letter was written.
- B. Onesimus had been converted by Paul while the venerable apostle was still locked up. He was Paul's **child** in the faith.

- C. People, even low ranking ones, were not just numbers and cases to Paul, they were individually important for him to call this run-away slave his **child**.
- D. For a slave to return to their master voluntarily was probably unheard of so Philemon certainly had some idea about the contents of the letter that could have been handed to him by Onesimus himself.
- E. Onesimus had doubtlessly been immersed by one of Paul's many helpers, even though he couldn't go out because of his house arrest.

11 who once was unprofitable to thee, but now is profitable to thee and to me:

- A. There is a play on words. Onesimus means *useful* or *beneficial*. "He was once useless, but now is useful to both of us." Now he can live up to his name.
- B. The implication is that Paul would like for Onesimus to continue being **profitable** to Paul. Philemon was the man who had power over that outcome.

**12 whom I have sent back to thee in his own person, that is, my very heart:
13 whom I would fain have kept with me, that in thy behalf he might minister unto me in the bonds of the gospel:**

- A. Paul **sent** Onesimus **back** to his owner because it would have been wrong to let him stay without permission from Philemon. The decision to return did not originate with Onesimus. The return of the slave in an issue of property rights.
- B. Onesimus traveled with Tychicus, perhaps to keep him out of the hands of slave catchers. Getting caught was serious business and could have led to his death.
- C. It was like sending away a part of Paul's **heart**.
- D. Since his conversion to Christ, Onesimus has become worth something. This alone would show Philemon that a change had taken place in the runaway.
- E. Paul could have rationalized keeping Onesimus by saying that it was really Philemon's way of **ministering** to Paul in **bonds**.

14 but without thy mind I would do nothing; that thy goodness should not be as of necessity, but of free will.

- A. Paul chose not to continue using Onesimus' help without Philemon's permission so that Philemon was not being forced to do something that he had not chosen to do.

15 For perhaps he was therefore parted {from thee} for a season, that thou shouldest have him for ever; 16 no longer as a servant, but more than a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much rather to thee, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

- A. Paul now takes the larger look at this runaway's story. He uses **perhaps**, not stating decisively God's purposes.
- B. He diplomatically uses **parted** rather than **escaped**. Events are put in their best possible light.
- C. Philemon was **parted** from Onesimus **for a season** and this led to his conversion to Christ and now they will be together **forever**.
- D. Not only has the proximity changed, but the social relationship as well. He was a **servant** but has become a **brother** in Christ to both Paul and Philemon.

17 If then thou countest me a partner, receive him as myself.

- A. Paul was wanting Philemon to receive Onesimus back without punishment. Roman law allowed Philemon to apply any punishment that he saw fit.
- B. Paul raises the bar. If you count me as a **partner**, then receive Onesimus just like you were **receiving** me.



18 But if he hath wronged thee at all, or oweth {thee} aught, put that to mine account; 19 I Paul write it with mine own hand, I will repay it: that I say not unto thee that thou owest to me even thine own self besides.

- A. It is likely that Onesimus stole some money from his master in order to make the trip to Rome. Travel then was slower, but still required funds. So he **owed** Philemon. But he had no way to repay.

- B. Slaves were known for stealing from their masters and Christian slaves were instructed to avoid this conduct. Titus 2:9-10.
- C. A slave who ran away could be charged with stealing his master's property because he had stolen himself.
- D. Fields says that even minor offenses against a master could result in crucifixion. However, this would be unthinkable for a Christian master.
- E. Paul says, "Put that on my **account** that I have with you. Here is my signature. I will repay what Onesimus owes you."
- F. "I won't mention that you **owe me** your very life." Philemon may have traveled to Ephesus where he heard the gospel and became a believer. This would have been eight years earlier.

20 Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my heart in Christ.

- A. The New American Standard version reads, "Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ." The word *benefit* is related to the name *Onesimus*.
- B. Do this favor so I can have **joy** in the **Lord** and so my **heart** can be **refreshed** in **Christ**.
- C. Earlier (verse 7) Paul noted that Philemon had **refreshed** the saints that met with him. Now the request is to **refresh** Paul's **heart**.

21 Having confidence in thine obedience I write unto thee, knowing that thou wilt do even beyond what I say.

- A. Paul expressed **confidence** that Philemon would do exactly as he was asked.
- B. In fact, Paul hinted that Philemon might even go **beyond** the minimums.

22 But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I hope that through your prayers I shall be granted unto you.

- A. Philemon's house was large enough for guest rooms.

- B. An added pressure was that Paul was coming to see Philemon provided that God answered Philemon's **prayers** for Paul's release.

23 Epaphras, my fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus, saluteth thee; 24 {and so do} Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow-workers.

- A. We do not know why Epaphras was **imprisoned** if Paul is to be understood literally.
- B. Two of the four Gospel writers were present. **Mark** wrote the story of Christ, probably relying heavily on Peter. **Luke** wrote the Gospel of Luke, researching the story from eye witnesses. He then wrote Acts from both research and his personal travels with Paul.
- C. **Paul, Mark** and **Luke** accounting for the writing of much of the New Testament.

1:25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

- A. This is a common conclusion for Paul's letters.

Concluding remarks:

We do not know how Philemon responded, but he did not tear up the letter because we have it.

Wilbur Fields has identified 17 appeals used by Paul to convince Philemon:

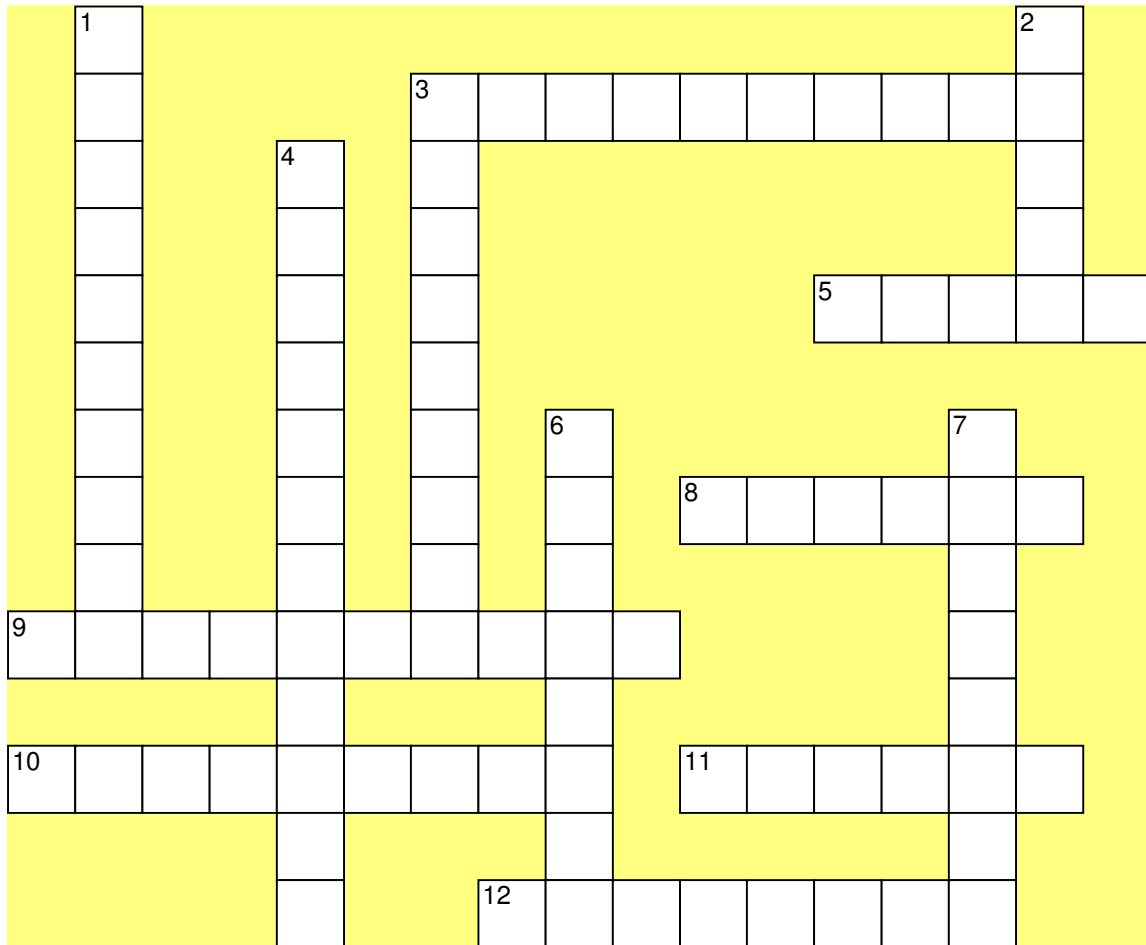
1. I am a prisoner; vss. 1, 9.
2. There is a love between us; vs. 1.
3. I am thankful for you; vss. 4,7.
4. I pray for you; vs. 4.
5. You have refreshed the hearts of saints; vs. 7.
6. I don't command you; I rather appeal; vss. 8-9.
7. I am an old man; vs. 9.
8. I have won Onesimus to Christ; vs. 10.
9. He is now profitable to us both; vs. 11.
10. Sending him back is like sending my own heart; vs. 12.
11. You may now have him forever; vs. 15.
12. He is now your brother; vs. 16.
13. Receive him as you would receive me; vs. 17.
14. I will pay whatever he owes you; vss. 15-19a.
15. Don't forget that you owe yourself to me; vs. 19b.
16. I have great confidence in you; vs. 21.
17. I'm coming to visit you; vs. 22.

What this letter means

Onesimus had committed serious offences against Philemon and deserved serious punishment. Paul reminds Philemon that we all have committed serious offences against God, but He has forgiven us and accepted us into his family. Because of this model, Philemon should accept Onesimus. This will make him "useful" to God and man.

Philemon - Introduction and Text

By Charles Dailey 2006



www.CrosswordWeaver.com

ACROSS

- 3 Paul wanted to avoid it for Onesimus.
- 5 Number of Bible writers present.
- 8 Wife of Philemon.
- 9 Onesimus could not stay without it.
- 10 Son of Philemon.
- 11 Onesimus means ____.
- 12 The little church was predominantly ____.

DOWN

- 1 Happened in A.D. 61.
- 2 Onesimus likely ____.
- 3 Were in Jerusalem when the church began..
- 4 Opened many of Paul's letters.
- 6 Once prosperous town.
- 7 Paul hinted for Philemon to go beyond the ____.