

The letter of Paul to  
**Philemon**

- 02** How to Use This Workbook?
- 03** What is The Goal of This Workbook?
- 04** Introduction
- 07** Salutation
- 08** Praise
- 08** Request
- 10** Promise
- 11** Conclusion

# How to Use This Workbook?

Video text

Bible verses quoted in the text

Bonus explanation

Thematic questions

**To recognize the heavenly things 1:1-11**

For example, he does not start the letter with the usual "Apostle Paul", but instead with "Paul and Timothy"<sup>18</sup> – why is that?

There are three reasons:

1. Because he didn't need to use authority, but wanted to warm their hearts.
2. Since he would be writing about humility, he also wanted to show this in his writing.
3. Because he wanted to show **unity** with another servant, even though he was the main writer.

Then after this, he writes down his prayer. A bit strange, isn't it? But it's deliberate, because he wants to teach them something from this prayer.

First of all, to show them how much fellowship and service with them means to him. This is in relation to **unity**.

Secondly, he didn't want them to have mere blind devotion, but an intelligent affection, that is based on an enlarged understanding of **heavenly realities**. And this relates to the truth of **HEAVENLY CITIZENSHIP**.

**Question**

Paul is showing his love for them and is setting an example.  
Are you praying for every member in your local church?

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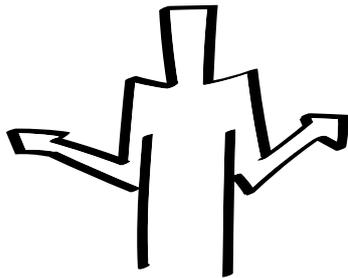
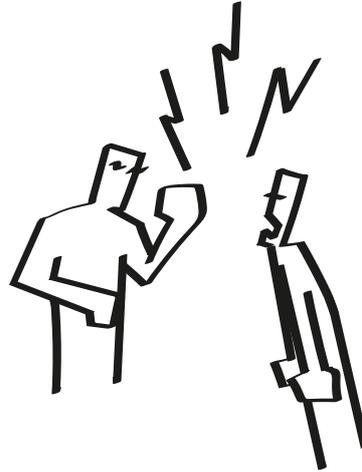
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FEEL FREE TO USE THE MARGINS TO TAKE NOTES. THAT'S WHAT THEY'RE THERE FOR!

# What is The Goal of This Workbook?

How can you biblically solve a complicated situation between two people?

Is it really possible to love someone after a conflict?



Do you want to know what an apostle would do in a conflict?

The operative word is “do,” not what you would “say” or “explain”.

This letter is **not a theological or doctrinal treatise** on a specific topic or question, but rather a letter to a believer who has experienced injustice.

# Introduction

<sup>1</sup>“...that you might have him back forever, 16 no longer as a **bondservant...**” **15-16**

<sup>2</sup>“... I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, **whose father I became** in my imprisonment.” **10**

<sup>3</sup>“...sending **my very heart.**” **12**

Imagine someone leaving his workplace without telling his boss, robbing the safe beforehand, and running off to another city. This is what Onesimus did. He used to be a slave<sup>1</sup>, so his boss was actually his master. Until he ran away.

Finally free, he headed to Rome to see the big, beautiful world.

However, in Rome, he got more than he bargained for. He didn't just see the world, he met a great big God. He is converted through Paul<sup>2</sup>, the man who claims him as a son, calling him his “**my very heart.**”<sup>3</sup>

Praise the Lord! Onesimus is reborn!

But now what comes of that sticky situation of the former slave stealing from his master and running away? Does Onesimus have to go back to Philemon?

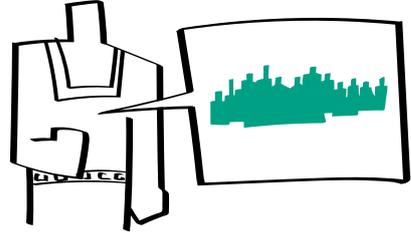
The right answer is ... yes. But not without a little help smoothing things over.

That's where Paul comes in. He doesn't let Onesimus return to face his master empty-handed. He goes with a letter in hand, from the great apostle himself.

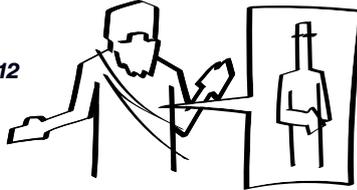
## MY HEART?

You'll find this phrase 3 times in this letter (out of a total of 11 occurrences in the New Testament, which for a short letter like this is significant)! In verses 7, 12, and 20:

"... because **the hearts** of the saints have been refreshed through you." 7



"... sending my **very heart**." 12



"Refresh **my heart** in Christ." 20



This phrase is translated into English in a few different ways: bowels, a part of myself and my heart. The meaning remains the same though. It is the place that is the center of our affections and love.

Why am I explaining all this?

Because we see in this letter that the connection between believers exists on a deeper level of affection. We as believers have been changed (in our hearts) and relate and connect in a much more profound way.

**T**hat is Christianity! That's what it means to be in Christ and a part of the body of Christ. We are not joined together because we have the same intellectual abilities. We are not joined together because we listen to the same music. Believers are a diverse group of people whose hearts are rooted in Christ Jesus and are connected to one another in relationship through Christ. That's why Paul said, "There is neither

Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." He reduces no one to a particular group or color, but instead says, despite all of these outward differences, God has done something in our innermost being, our affections, our hearts!

-A.B.

We see this change here. Philemon is called to no longer treat Onesimus as a slave, but as a brother, as if he were Paul himself. Think about what that means for Philemon... He has to accept Onesimus on the same level as the great apostle Paul, through whom he first heard the gospel and believed, and was saved! How would you accept a brother in Christ, who previously did you wronged you but has since repented?



Although Paul, as an apostle, had the authority to simply command Philemon to, “Receive Onesimus back ... without consequences and as a brother,” he chose a different path: the path of love.

The Epistle to Philemon showcases how to practice love and forgiveness in the face of difficult circumstances. Paul does not simply write about love, as he does in 1 Corinthians - but he himself shows how to practice love.

Here’s his simple, but powerful formula. He starts with **prayer**, where he **praises** Philemon, then he makes his **request**, which he backs up with a **promise**. And this is all bookended with a **salutation** and a **farewell**.



<b>Salutation</b>	1-3
<b>Praise</b>	4-7
<b>Request</b>	8-16
<b>Promise</b>	17-22
<b>Farewell</b>	23-25

# Salutation

## 1-3

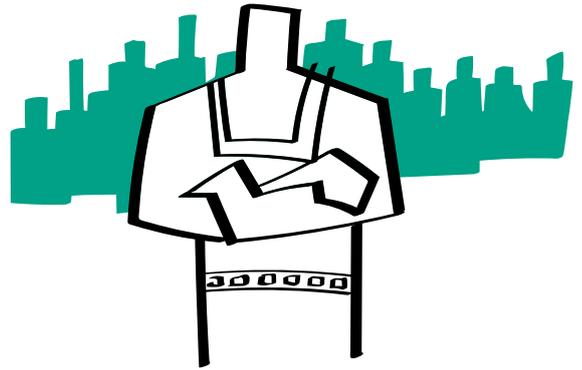
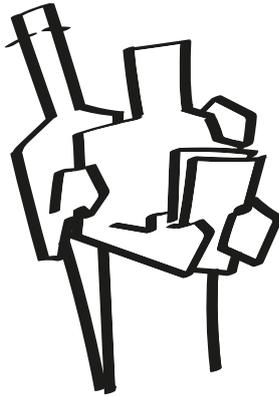
Let's start at the beginning. In his greeting, Paul begins with his identity. But not as an apostle. He reminds Philemon directly that he, Paul, is a prisoner. Just like Onesimus was as his slave. Interestingly, however,

Paul addresses not only Philemon, but also **THE WHOLE CHURCH**.

### The Church

If everyone who met regularly in Philemon's house openly knew what happened between Onesimus and Philemon, it is fitting that the entire local church would have also openly learned of Onesimus' conversion and return. So that there would no longer be any bitterness against Onesimus because he is now a brother in Christ.

We learn here that what has occurred publicly must also be taken care of publicly.



### Question

*We see in the Bible that many problems have to be taken care of publicly. Read the following verses:*

***Jn 21:5-19 | Gal 2:11-14***

*Why were these problems taken care of publicly?*

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*Answer on page 14*

# Praise

## 4-7

After that, he offers praise. He praises Philemon for all the good he has done “for the saints” through the Holy Spirit and with love. He tells Philemon that he always prays and gives thanks for him.

# Request

## 8-16

Only then does Paul bring up his request and address the matter of Onesimus. Paul wants Onesimus to be welcomed back as a brother in Christ, not returned as a slave. He backs up his case with two arguments.

First, Onesimus is no longer the same person. He is reborn. But this is not just theory, you can see it in practice. Paul says, “formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become **USEFUL...**”.

Secondly, Paul asserts that the logical consequence of this rebirth is that Philemon should receive him back as if he were welcoming Paul himself. Onesimus was no longer to be seen as a slave, but as a brother. Paul simply says, “welcome him as you would welcome me.”

### Useful

In this verse Paul uses a play on words. The name Onesimus comes from the Greek, “**onesimos,**” **which means useful.** Exactly what he was not in the past. But now he has become useful, because when someone is in Christ, “...he is a new creation.” (**2 Cor 5:17**).

### Question

*The way that Philemon could receive Onesimus with open arms is also exactly the way that God receives us with open arms. How is that possible?*

**Col 2:10 | 1 Jn 4:17 | Jn 17:23 | Rom 8:1**

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*Answer on page 14*



# Promise

## 17-22

It should be noted that Paul doesn't hide the injustices of Onesimus. In fact, he's insistent that the damage done must be made right. So Paul says, "I will pay for it, put it on my account." He promises to take responsibility for the debt. In doing so, he gives a wonderful example of Christ, who made the same offer when we were slaves to sin and paid our debt for us.

At the end of the letter, Paul puts quite a bit of positive pressure on Philemon by announcing that **HE WANTS TO VISIT** Philemon.

For Onesimus, this was an encouraging end to the letter and would have given him the confidence to return to his master with this final bit of good news.

**Although short and to the point, this letter artfully showcases how to handle sticky situations.**

*"... charge that to my account. I, Paul [...] I will repay it." 18-19*

### He wants to visit

This is an important point. Philemon must deal with Onesimus, knowing that he will soon see Paul face to face. Similarly, you know that you will one day see your Lord face to face.

**Are you living here on earth in the light of that truth?**

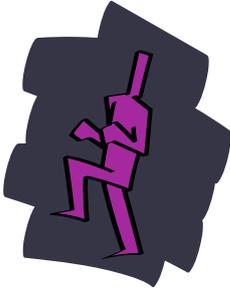
*"...because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure."*

**1 Jn 3:2-3**

## THE GOSPEL IN PHILEMON

### Onesimus

### You and I



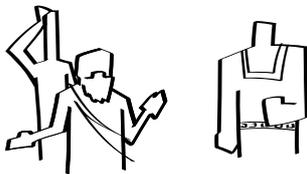
Onesimus **runs away** and doesn't want to acknowledge Philemon's authority over him.

*"All we like sheep have gone astray; **we have turned—every one—to his own way.**" Isa 53:6*



Onesimus meets Paul and **repents** for his sins.

*"I have not come to call the righteous but **sinner**s to repentance."* Luke 5:32



Paul acts as a **mediator** between Onesimus and Philemon.

*"For there is one God, and **there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.**" 1 Tim 2:5*



Paul is willing **to pay the debt** of Onesimus, and asks Philemon to receive and accept him, just as he would receive **Paul himself**.

*"Christ Jesus, who gave himself **as a ransom for all.**" 1 Tim 2:6*

*"... so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because **as he is so also are we** in this world." 1 Jn 4:17*

Naturally there are differences between the example of Onesimus and Philemon and our relationship with Christ, but is it clear to you, that you are in Christ and that God accepts and receives you as if you were Christ himself? That he loves you as if you were Christ himself? He does, because **YOU ARE IN CHRIST!**

## POINTS TO REMEMBER

- 1** **Prayer is the foundation** to building up genuine love between spiritual brothers and sisters.
- 2** In any kind of public situation **the entire local church should be informed.**
- 3** Whoever is born again is **a totally new creation and has been changed**, and should therefore be seen in a new light.
- 4** **Spiritual relationships** are just as important as biological ones.

# Appendix

## Answers to the questions

### Question p. 6

**1 Thess 2:11-12:** Spiritual fathers want their children, above all else, to live for the glory of God. They encourage, comfort, and exhort them.

**2 Cor 12:14-15:** Spiritual fathers are prepared to be loved less by their children if it's for their own good.

**2 Tim 1:1-6:** A father prays every day for his children and wants to see them. He leads and challenges them spiritually.

### Question p. 8

**Jn 21:15-19:** Peter publicly denied Jesus. We know that Jesus showed himself to Peter after his Resurrection. **(1 Cor 15:5):** Peter publicly denied Jesus, and because he wanted to publicly serve him, this matter had to be dealt with publicly.

**Gal 2:11-14:** Here Peter acted inappropriately in public, such that Paul had to correct him publicly, "before them all."

### Question p. 9

**Col 2:10:** We are filled and perfected in Christ. And that's exactly how God sees us.

**1 Jn 4:17:** The same is shown here. God sees us in Christ already (right now!), and he sees us exactly like he sees Christ himself.

**Jn 17:23:** The Lord says it plainly: God loves us, exactly like He loves His Son.

### Question p. 10

**1 Cor 1:4-8:** Paul thanks God because the Corinthians received much grace from God. There were not a lot of positive things to mention about this church, but Paul begins nonetheless with thanksgiving for the Corinthians.

**Eph 1:15-16:** Paul rejoices and thanks God for their faith in the Lord and for their love for one another.

**Phil 1:3-5:** They were partners in the work of the gospel and also helped Paul financially.

**Col 1:3-6:** Paul thanks God for the faith and love of the Colossians.

**1 Thess 1:2-4:** Here Paul mentions again the faith, love, and hope of the Thessalonians.

**2 Thess 1:3-4:** Paul mentions that their faith is growing, that they have true love for one another that is increasing, and that they are steadfast in their faith despite persecutions.

We can therefore learn the following from these prayers:

Firstly we see that Paul often thanks God for two things. The trust that the believers had in God. The love that they had for one another.

Secondly, even when Paul wrote to correct them on certain points, he always told them first that he prayed much for them and thanked God for them. He was moved out of love for God and the believers.

That's how they knew that Paul truly loved them and wanted their good.