

The Pilgrim Way Commentary on the Book of Philemon



by Dr. John Cereghin
Pastor
Grace Baptist Church of
Smyrna, Delaware

March 2025

The Pilgrim Way Commentary on Philemon

by Dr. John Cereghin

PO Box 66

Smyrna DE 19977

pastor@pilgrimway.org

website- www.pilgrimway.org

Apology for This Work

This commentary on Philemon follows in a long line of other works by divines of the past as they have sought to study and expound this shortest of Paul's preserved writings.

This work grew out of over 40 years of both preaching through Philemon in three pastorates in Maryland, Delaware and North Carolina as well as teaching through the epistle as an instructor at Maryland Baptist Bible College in Elkton, Maryland. I needed my own notes and outlines as I taught and preached from Philemon, so this fuller commentary flows from those notes and outlines. Thus, the layout of this commentary is a practical one, written by a preacher to be preached from in the pulpit or to be taught in a Sunday School. It was not written from an isolated study of a theologian who had little contact with people or practical ministerial experience. There are many such commentaries on the market and they tend to be someone dull and not very practical in their application. It is written as something of a theological reference manual to me, filled with quotes and outlines from various books in my library. The layout and format are designed to help me in my preaching, teaching and personal study of this book. I figured there may be others out there who may benefit from this work which is why I make it available, but the work is basically laid out in a selfish manner, for my benefit and assistance. That is why I call this as "reference commentary". You, as the reader, hopefully can find some profit in this!

This commentary cannot be easily classified into any single theological system. I believe that no single theological system is an accurate presentation of Scriptural truth in and of itself. When Charles Spurgeon once wrote "There is no such thing as preaching Christ and Him crucified, unless we preach what nowadays is called Calvinism. It is a nickname to call it Calvinism; Calvinism is the gospel, and nothing else", he displayed a most unfortunate theological hubris. Calvinism is a human, flawed, limited and uninspired theological system, as any other human theological system. There is some truth there, as there is in any theological system, but it ranks no better than other competing systems, such as Arminianism (which is nothing more than a modified version of Calvin's teachings), dispensationalism, covenant theology, Lutheranism, Romanism, Orthodox theology, pre-wrath rapture, take your pick. All these systems are flawed as they are all the products of human attempts to understand and systematize Biblical presentations. They can all make contributions to our overall understanding of the truth but none may claim to be the only correct such presentation, at the expense of all others. Knowing the human impossibility for absolute neutrality and the human love for theological systems, I readily admit that I cannot be as dispassionate and uninfluenced by human teachings in these pages as I would like. No man can be. But I have made every attempt not to allow my own personal systems influence my understanding of what the clear teachings of Scripture is.

This commentary is based on the text of our English Received Version, commonly referred to as the King James Version or the Authorized Version. I believe that this is the most preserved English translation available to us and that it is the superior translation in English. I can see no good reason to use or accept any of the modern versions, especially the current "flavor of the month" of the New Evangelicals and apostate fundamentalists, the corrupt and mis-named English Standard Version. When it comes to these modern, critical text versions, I reject them for a variety of reasons. One major reason is that they have not been proven on the field of battle. I have liver spots older than the English Standard Version, but I am expected to toss

my English Received Text, over 400 years old, and take up this new translation, whose ink is still barely dry? How many battles has the ESV won? How many missionaries have done great exploits with an NIV? What revivals have been birth and nurtured with an NASV? We will stick with the translations and texts that our fathers have used and that God has blessed. It is too late in Church history to change English translations. We are also favorably inclined to the Geneva Bible, Tyndale Bible, Bishops Bible, and other “cousins” of our English text. The Greek text used is the underlying text of our English Received Text and its 1769 revision, which is the text most widely in use today by God’s remnant. This is the Greek text that forms the foundation for the Authorized Version. I have also included the translation by John Nelson Darby as I make heavy use of Plymouth Brethren writings. The fatal flaw with the “Brethren” is they were infected with higher criticism and were not defenders or promoters of the Authorized Version. Darby’s translation is only marginally better than the modern critical text translations.

Each verse is commented upon, with the Received English text. The English grammatical notes are limited to the tenses of the corresponding Greek verbs, for I believe the study of the verb tenses is the most important element of the usage of the Greek text, even more so than word studies. Not every Greek word is commented upon, only unusual or important ones. I am guilty of “picking and choosing” my word studies instead of presenting complete word studies for every word. That system would simply be too unwieldy for my purposes.

I have included some textual studies, mainly comparing the Authorized Version readings with the inferior readings found in the English Standard Version and the Legacy Standard Version, which is an unnecessary revision of the already-unnecessary New American Standard Version. The Legacy Standard Version is the baby of John MacArthur, who financed its publication and financed it heavily through his charitable trust. I also refer to the readings in the English translations that preceded the Authorized Version for sake of comparison and to examine how the English Received Text readings developed from the Tyndale Bible, through the Coverdale Bible, the Geneva Bible and the Bishops Bible.

The presupposition of this commentary is that what the Bible says is so and that we will not change the English Received Text to suit our theological fancy or because we believe there must be some sort of translation simply because we cannot understand a verse as it is given. The text says what it says and that is what we must accept, else we will be found unfaithful stewards of the Word of God, a judgment we fear. We will not amend the Authorized Version text but will take it as it is the best we can.

This commentary certainly is not perfect, nor is it the final presentation of my understanding and application of the book of Philemon. A commentary over 40 years in the making can never truly said to be finished. As new insights are granted by the Holy Spirit and as my understanding of the epistle deepens, additional material will be added and sections will have to be re-written. One is never truly “finished” with any theological book, especially a commentary. As one deepens and grows in his relation with the Lord, so does his theological understandings and that should be reflected in one’s writings.

This book was also written as a theological legacy to my four children. They will need to be mighty for God in their generation for their days will certainly be darker than the generation their father grew up in. This book is an expression not only of the heart of a preacher in the early 21st century but also of a Christian father for his children, so they may more fully understand what their father believed and preached during his ministry.

It is my sincere prayer that this unpretentious contribution to the body of Christian commentary literature will be a blessing to the remnant of God's saints in the earth as we approach the coming of our Lord.

Introduction to Philemon

Philemon has 25 verses and 430 words in our English version.

Authorship- The Apostle Paul. Origen cites the epistle as a Pauline letter addressed to Philemon concerning his servant Onesimus. Tertullian refers to the brevity of this epistle as the "sole cause of its escaping the falsifying hands of Marcion" (*Against Marcion* 5.21). Eusebius refers to it as one of the "universally acknowledged Epistles of the canon" (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.25). Jerome and Ignatius also allude to it. It is quoted infrequently by the Fathers, evidently because of its brevity.

F. C. Baur was one of the few radical critics to deny Pauline authorship. He regarded it as a second-century document which was intended to show the church how to deal with slavery. Very few men would agree with this position.

Date of Writing- Probably the same time as the writing of the other prison epistles, around 62-64.

Place Written From- Rome, from prison.

Addressee- Philemon, who was a personal friend of Paul.

Purpose of Writing- Onesimus, a servant belonging to Philemon, had fled to Rome, and he seems to have defrauded his master (1:18). At Rome he was converted under the ministry of Paul and was induced by him to return to his master. Paul writes to Philemon to ask him to receive Onesimus as a brother. Paul urges that the new convert be no longer considered a servant but also a brother in Christ. Paul also requests Philemon to prepare him a lodging, as he expects to visit Colossae shortly.

Style- This short epistle is a masterpiece of Christian tactfulness and politeness. It has been called "the polite epistle." Luther noted, the epistle exhibits "a right noble, lovely example of Christian love." Verses 17 and 18 of the epistle present a forceful illustration of imputation: "Accept him as you would me," that is, reckon to him my merit; "if he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account," that is, reckon to me his demerit.

Slavery?- Most commentators assume Onesimus was a servant but he is never called a slave (in our English text) by Paul. He is clearly a servant but there is no clear indication that he was a slave. Onesimus was no doubt an indentured servant, so he may have been more than a regular servant but less than a slave. The idea of Onesimus being a slave is from the use of the Greek word "doulos", which is translated in our Authorized Version as "servant" or a "bondservant". This caused almost all of the commentators to assume by the definition of "doulos" and by context that Onesimus was a slave. But the Authorized Version never refers to him as a slave, only as a servant.

“Citing material confiscated and turned over to the police in Orange, California, as part of an investigation into Satanic group crime, *New Age Bible Versions* documents that Satanists mockingly call Christians ‘slaves’ of Christ (pp. 221-225). The word ‘slave’ has very negative connotative associations, ranging from its well-known historical applications to its current debauched meaning among sodomites. Webster defines a slave as, “A person held in

bondage...One who has lost control of himself...a drudge..." *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* states that the words (e.g. slave, slothful, slain, slack) convey a "downward movement...or position." Becoming a servant of Jesus Christ is certainly an upward move (*The Language of the King James Bible*, p. 68). The word slave was first suggested for use in the bible in 1890 by Westcott and Hort's Revised Version and American Standard Version Committee member, James Strong. He buried his opinions about how words should be translated in his Strong's Concordance, in its A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament, hidden in the back. Few realize he created this otherwise useful concordance for "one great object," which was to "index" the changes made to the "Authorized Version" [KJV] by the "Revised Version" of Westcott and Hort, and the "American revisers only" (Strong's Concordance, General Preface, Directions and Explanations, pages not numbered). He admits in item 4 of his "Plan of the Book" that the first Greek so-called 'definition' he gives, is his own; in Strong's Concordance, Preface to the Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Hebrew Bible, Strong admits his Old Testament work is based on Gesenius (a Bible critic) and his definitions are merely his own suggestions for "correcting" the KJV's so-called "wrong translation." His lexical definitions were merely his opinions about how words should be translated in his upcoming ASV, later published in 1901. Some of his ideas were incorporated into this corrupt version; some were not. The word 'slave' was not used, and rightly so. Strong denied the inspiration of the Bible. The Preface of the ASV went so far as to state that the original "Hebrew text is probably corrupt..." (p. vii)...The first time the word 'slave' was actually chained to a bible was in 1961 in the New World Translation of the Jehovah Witness sect. The Catholic New American Bible fell prey to it in 1970. The NIV and NASB submitted to the yoke immediately. The NKJV has a galley of "slaves," including "slaves of God" (Rom. 6:22) and "Christ's slaves" (1 Cor. 7:22). The New Living Translation, Today's New International Version and the Holman Christian Standard Bible were the most recent to sell their readers into slavery (Gail Riplinger, *In Awe of Thy Word*, pages 264-265)."

Names and Titles of Christ in Philemon

- | | | | |
|----------------------|---|-----------|----|
| 1. Lord Jesus Christ | 3 | 4. Christ | 8 |
| 2. Lord Jesus | 5 | 5. Lord | 20 |
| 3. Christ Jesus | 6 | | |

Names and Titles of the Father in Philemon

1. Father 3

Outline of Philemon

1. Introduction and Greetings 1-3
2. Paul's Appreciation of Philemon 4-7
3. Paul Intercedes For Onesimus 8-21
4. Paul's Plan To Visit Philemon 22
5. Greetings And Close 23

Booklist on Philemon

In many booklists and bibliographies, as well as commentaries, Philemon is lumped in with Colossians. There is no good reason to tie Philemon in with Colossians, either in terms of a bibliography or commentary. Philemon deserves to stand alone in commenting.

Comments are that of the reviewer and not necessarily those of the author nor are such reviews automatically endorsed. Not all commentaries are that useful despite these reviews. As always, discernment in choosing commentaries is required.

The following reviews are taken from the following sources:

Biblical Viewpoint, Bob Jones University

\$ *Commenting and Commentaries*, by Charles Spurgeon

% *The Minister's Library*, by Cyril Barber

* *An Introduction to the New Testament*, by D. Edmond Hiebert

& *The Master's Journal*, The Master's Seminary

** Top 5 Commentaries on the Books of Colossians and Philemon, Keith Mathison, Ligonier Ministries <http://www.ligonier.org/blog/top-5-commentaries-on-the-books-of-colossians-and-philemon>

Listings with no notation are reviews by the author, Dr. John Cereghin

\$ Attersoll, William, *Commentary on Philemon*, 1633. A long comment on a short epistle. The pious author labors to keep to his text and succeeds in bringing out of it a mass of quaint practical teaching.

** Bruce, F.F., *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, 1984. There are certain authors whose work serious students of Scripture should go out of their way to read. F.F. Bruce is one of those authors. Before his death, he wrote on an astounding variety of subjects, covering all aspects of biblical studies. Among these works were a number of commentaries on various books of the Bible. His commentary on Colossians and Philemon is a perfect example of his unique combination of scholarship and readability.

& Callahan, Allen Dwight. *Embassy of Onesimus: The Letter of Paul to Philemon*, 1998. 96 pages. It is refreshing to see Paul's small Epistle to Philemon dealt with in a stand-alone commentary, as too often this small book is relegated to a few pages of brief comments at the end of larger works. This commentary is part of "The New Testament in Context" series of NT commentaries. The author, an Assistant Professor of New Testament at Harvard Divinity School, presents six full pages of bibliography and promises a fresh interpretation as he "put[s] his exegetical hand to the plow" (xi). This work is built on two articles previously published in the *Harvard Theological Review* (*HTR* 86/4 [1993]:357-76, and 88/1 [1985]:149-56). In this work the author spends the introduction defending his thesis that the traditional interpretation (Onesimus as a runaway slave being returned to Philemon with a letter from Paul under whose ministry Onesimus has become a Christian) is false. The basis for this conclusion is, in brief, twofold: (1) nowhere in the text is this interpretative scheme presented clearly (5), and (2) the "fugitive slave hypothesis" is an invention of John Chrysostom, whom all others have simply followed without any critical thought (16). While the reevaluation of any "traditional" understanding can be helpful, the author's reasoning seems to be both subjective and incomplete. A few examples will illustrate. One of the arguments presented is that Philemon could not be a slave holder at all because "Philemon appears throughout the letter as a good and generous man" (5) and that Cruelty of a master towards his slave can never be ruled out in the Graeco-Roman world, where severity bordering on sadism was a common feature of the servile relationship. Mildness and forbearance in this respect would have made Philemon not only an exception but an oddity in his own world, so conditioned by violence against all purported inferiors (*ibid*). This reasoning is patently unsound. Should not the results of becoming a Christian and living according to the Spirit suffice to make one "an oddity in his own world" (cf. Gal 5:22-25). Additionally, although the author seems to wish that Paul was neither condoning nor regulating slavery (xiv, 3, 5), he fails to interact with passages such as Eph 6:5-9 and Col 3:22-4:1 (passages never referenced in the book). He seeks to support his view by stating that "the entire fugitive slave hypothesis

was cogently challenged by John Knox” (6). However, he fails to mention that Knox did not question the hypothesis, only that Archippus, not Philemon was the slave-owner. He states that the traditional interpretation originated as the “imaginative and ingenious hypothesis of John Chrysostom” (16). However, his interaction with the sources and other writings which predate Chrysostom, are superficial at best. The actual commentary on the text is slanted, often forced, to coincide with the author’s predetermination. He agrees that Onesimus and Philemon are certainly estranged and Paul is working to reconcile them, but concludes that he is not trying to reconcile slave and master, but two brothers (ix, 51-54). Throughout the work the author equates the experiences and situation of NT-era slavery under the Roman system and the race-based slavery of 19th-century America. The results are an unsatisfactory commentary built upon a poorly devised theme for the book. This reviewer cannot recommend this work.

* Drysdale, A.H., *The Epistle of St. Paul to Philemon*, 1870. Rich in devotional value, yet a work of scholarly exposition. Full, lucid and abounding in practical applications.

\$ Dyke, Daniel, *Philemon*, 1618. Dyke's remarks are memorably practical and full of common sense. He abounds in proverbs. The work is not very valuable as an exposition of the words but excels in making use of them.

* Ernst, Karl J., *The Art of Pastoral Counselling. A Study of the Epistle to Philemon*, 1941. Philemon viewed as a case in pastoral counseling. Interesting and stimulating.

% Gaebelien, Frank, *Philemon: The Gospel of Emancipation*, 1939. A brief, sympathetic exposition.

** Garland, David E. Colossians/Philemon, NIV Application Commentary, 1998. The NIV Application Commentary series is a mixed bag. Some are better than others. David Garland’s commentary on Colossians and Philemon is one of the commentaries in this series that should not be passed by. Garland offers great insight into the text and its contemporary application. It should be of great help to busy pastors.

* Hiebert, D. Edmond, *Titus and Philemon*, 1957. An exegetical treatment of both epistles in the light of the original.

* Johnson, Philip C., *The Epistles to Titus and Philemon* in Shield Bible Study Series, 1966. A concise, well-outlined interpretation intended as a study guide.

\$ Jones, William, *Commentary on Philemon, Hebrews and 1 and 2 John*, 1636. Very lively, sprightly, colloquial lectures by a Suffolk divine, who thinks the Brownists and Dissenters were not persecuted. Despite his intolerance he says some uncommonly racy things.

* Kelly, William, *An Exposition of the Epistle of Paul to Titus and of that to Philemon, With Translation of an Amended Text*. A careful exposition by a voluminous Plymouth Brethren scholar of the 19th century.

* Knox, John and Buttrick, George, *The Epistle to Philemon* in The Interpreter’s Bible, 1955. Introduction and exegesis by Knox, exposition by Buttrick. Knox propounds the novel view that the real owner of Onesimus was Archippus and that the purpose of the letter was to secure the return of Onesimus to Paul for his own service.

Lenski, Richard Charles Henry, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, Titus, and to Philemon*, 1966. An exhaustive Lutheran commentary. He defends Paul's authorship (473-484); corrects the KJV (501); discusses the Greek words for prayer (538); disagrees with Calvinists (802); defends the verbal inspiration of the Bible (851-59); argues for baptismal regeneration (946).

** Lucas, R.C., *The Message of Colossians and Philemon*, *The Bible Speaks Today*, 1984. Lucas's commentary on Colossians and Philemon is probably the best introductory level commentary on these two books. Like all of the commentaries in this series, it emphasizes the big picture and the overall flow of the text.

& MacArthur, John. *Colossians & Philemon*. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, 1992. 249 pages. This lucid evangelical exposition with a brief section on introductory matters and a verse-by-verse commentary based on the NASB text has an appropriate title to fit each of its twenty chapters. The volume offers frequent help for teachers of Bible classes, pastors, students, and lay people as MacArthur answers most questions that readers may ask about the text. His fairly full, yet not tedious exposition has meaningful correlations with other Scriptures. On Philemon, a section discusses slavery in relation to Christianity. MacArthur also keynotes forgiveness, hence a threefold outline: spiritual character (vv. 4-7), action (vv. 8-18) and motivation (vv. 19-25). Forgiveness receives copious exposition (207-9), with ten statements that sum it up and a listing of its eight basic elements (218- 20). An illustration of forgiveness at the end will be worth the price of the book for some. Mitsuo Fuchida, Japanese pilot in the attack on Pearl Harbor, later became a Christian. His conversion came after he received profound impressions of Christianity such as Peggy Covell's sacrificial service that displayed to the Japanese people a love that forgives, though the Japanese had killed her beloved parents (232-35). A book may be a fine one, yet not satisfy all readers all the time. Overall, this work is very rewarding. It will prove useful in the frequent cases where it makes special contributions, and many will appreciate what they glean from it.

** Moo, Douglas J., *The Letters to Colossians and Philemon*, 2008. The publication of any new commentary by Douglas Moo is an event. His commentary on Romans is a classic. His commentaries on other books are all outstanding. I was very excited, therefore, to see this new commentary on Colossians and Philemon. What I have read so far has been excellent. If anyone is going to give O'Brien a run for his money, it is Moo. Moo has the advantage of having written in the Pillar series — a much more reader-friendly series than the WBC. His commentary is also able to take into consideration studies published since 1987.

* Muller, Jac. J., *The Epistles of Paul to the Philippians and to Philemon* in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, 1955. A concise interpretation by a conservative South African professor. Seeks to maintain a balance between exact scholarship and the practical import of the letters. Technical matters are confined to the footnotes.

** O'Brien, Peter, *Colossians and Philemon* in *Word Biblical Commentary*, 1987. O'Brien has written the best all around commentaries on all of Paul's prison epistles. He is able to explain well both the details of the text as well as the big theological picture. He doesn't lose the forest for the trees. His commentary on Colossians and Philemon in the WBC series is less technical than his commentary on Philippians in the NIGTC series, but it is made unnecessarily difficult by the WBC format. In spite of the cumbersome format, all students of Colossians and Philemon should consult O'Brien on these two epistles.

Ruckman, Peter, *The Books of First and Second Thessalonians and Philemon*, 2005, 37 pages for Philemon. Based on the King James Version, dispensational comments and applications of a very practical manner.

% Scroggie, William Graham, *A Note to a Friend: Paul to Philemon*. A rewarding and in-depth study. One of the best ever produced on this epistle.

* Vincent, Marvin, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Philippians and to Philemon*, 1897. Greek text. A scholarly, generally conservative interpretation with valuable introductions, word studies and exegetical comments.

Commentary on Philemon

1. Introduction and Greetings 1-3

1 Paul,^a a prisoner^b of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother,^c unto Philemon^d our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer,

1a Paul bases the authority of this letter on personal friendship, not apostolic authority. To refer to himself as an apostle wouldn't fit in with the tone of this letter since it was a personal letter.

Paul is writing from a dreary Roman dungeon but there is no word of complaint or self-pity from his pen. He is not about to let his current distress affect his correspondence and ministry to others.

Although Paul was under the jurisdiction of Rome and that insane nut Nero, Paul considered himself to be the prisoner of Jesus Christ, not of Rome or Nero. Paul was in that dungeon because it was part of the will of God for Paul to be there, so Paul was determined to serve Christ from that dungeon.

1b This is a prison epistle as clearly stated but it also qualifies as a pastoral epistle because it is sent to an individual as was Paul's epistles to Timothy and Titus. It should be called a prison pastoral epistle and classified with the others.

1c Timothy is never called an apostle. Paul only used "brother" for a few men in his writings besides Timothy, including Quartus (Romans 16:23), Sosthenes (1 Corinthians 1:1) and Apollos (1 Corinthians 16:12).

1d A Phrygian name. Philemon may have been a resident of Colossae. His name means "Affectionate or beloved".

2 And to our beloved Apphia,^a and Archippus^b our fellowsoldier,^c and to the church in thy house:^d

2a Was she the wife of Philemon? The Geneva Bible and the ESV identify her as a "sister" while the Authorized Version and the other traditional translations do not.

2b Paul refers to him as "our fellowsoldier", showing that he was probably a preacher or evangelist. Philemon may have been a "Christian layman" while Archippus was in the ministry. He is also mentioned in Colossians 4:17. Other than this, we don't know much about him.

2c There is a trio of "fellows-" in Philemon:

1. Fellowsoldiers in verse 2. Archippas is mentioned in verse 2 with this title. Epaphroditus is also called a "fellowsoldier" in Philippians 2:25.
2. Fellowprisoners in verse 23. This is Epaphras.
3. Fellowlaborers in verse 1 and 24. Philemon is a "fellowlaborer" in verse 1. In verse 24, John Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke are called "fellowlaborers", although Demas would soon fall away from that.

2d Churches met in houses in this age as dedicated church buildings were unknown until the enfranchisement of the Church by Constantine. This strikes in us a bit of romance in household religion (which every family must practice) and house churches in those areas where no good church is located. Such home churches and house ministries are to be encouraged. The New

Testament pattern is then for churches meeting in homes. As soon as you start putting up dedicated church buildings, you are moving away from New Testament Christianity, for we see no such buildings in the New Testament!

The “church” in this context then is not a building. It never has been. A “church” is made up of a group of people who meet together for fellowship, worship and instruction in righteousness.

AV	ESV	LSV	Darby
2 And to <i>our</i> beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house:	2 and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:	2 and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:	2 and to the sister Apphia and to Archippus our fellow-soldier, and to the assembly which <i>is</i> in thine house.

Darby will not allow a “church” in the house. What do the Plymouth Brethren have against house churches? No doubt their ecclesiology influenced Darby’s wording.

3^a Grace to you, and peace,^b from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

3a This is the standard Pauline greeting.

3b Grace always before peace. No grace of God means no peace with God or peace of God.

2. Paul's Appreciation of Philemon 4-7

4 I thank^{present} my God,^a making^{present middle participle} mention^b of thee always in my prayers,^c

4a As was a custom of Paul’s.

4b Or “remembering you...”.

4c Whenever Paul prayed, he always mentioned Philemon and his house-church.

5 Hearing^{a-present active participle} of thy love and faith,^b which thou hast^{present active participle} toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints;

5a The good testimonies that Paul was hearing of Philemon. The man had a good reputation among the brethren. Did Paul get this from Onesimus? Even though Onesimus wronged Philemon, his master may have had a strong enough testimony that even an unprofitable servant had to testify of it.

5b “This praise, which he bestows on Philemon, includes briefly the whole perfection of a Christian man. It consists of two parts, faith in Christ, and love towards our neighbors; for to these all the actions and all the duties of our life relate. Faith is said to be in Christ, because to him it especially looks; in like manner as in no other way than through him alone can God the Father be known, and in no other than in Him can we find any of the blessings which faith seeks. (John Calvin, *Commentary on Philemon*).”

6 That the communication^a of thy faith may become^{aorist middle deponent subjective} effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.^b

6a AV	ESV	LSV	Darby
6 That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.	6 and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.	6 <i>and I pray</i> that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the full knowledge of every good thing which is in you for the sake of Christ.	6 in such sort that thy participation in the faith should become operative in the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in us towards Christ <i>Jesus</i> .

Most of the versions change “**communication**”. The ESV and Darby are the worst.

6b The deity of Christ is emphasized in this title, as seen in “Christ” being mentioned first. The ESV and LSV omit “**Christ**” and Darby has it in italics.

7 For we have^{present} great joy and consolation^a in thy love, because the bowels^b of the saints are refreshed^{perfect passive} by thee, brother.^c

7a Two things Philemon’s testimony imparted to the brethren:

1. Great joy
2. Consolation

7b We would say “heart” or “affections” today, as the Tyndale and Coverdale Bibles and ESV do. This is the seat of affections.

7c What a great testimony by Paul on behalf of this man!

3. Paul Interceeds For Onesimus 8-21

8 Wherefore, though I might be^{present active participle} much bold^a in Christ to enjoin^{present infinitive} thee that which is convenient,^{b-present active participle}

8a Paul knew Philemon and his spiritual maturity well enough to know that he could speak frankly and candidly to him and that Philemon would react well. Paul still had some hesitation in making his upcoming request for Philemon, knowing that technically, he had no authority to meddle in Philemon’s personal affairs relating to Onesimus.

8b Or “suitable”.

9 Yet for love’s sake I rather beseech^{a-present} thee, being^{present participle} such an one as Paul the aged,^b and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.^c

9a Paul is not going to order, command or throw any of his apostolic authority around to order Philemon to do what Paul wants him to in the matter with Onesimus. Paul is going to appeal to love for Philemon to receive Onesimus and to treat him as a brother.

9b Paul may have been in his mid-late 50s or maybe near 60 years old at the time of this writing. This is referring both to Paul's physical age and his "spiritual" age- he had been saved a long time by now and was a true "elder" in the faith. Age commanded respect. Paul could thus appeal to his age as a factor in trying to sway Philemon.

"Paul the aged" - If we allow St. Paul to have been about 25 years of age at the utmost, in the year 31, when he was assisting at the martyrdom of Stephen, (Acts 7:58) as this epistle was written about A.D. 62, he could not have been at this time more than about 56 years old. This could not constitute him an aged man in our sense of the term; yet, when the whole length of his life is taken in, being martyred about four years after this, he may not improperly be considered an aged or elderly man, though it is generally allowed that his martyrdom took place in the 66th year of our Lord. But the word πρεσβυς signifies, not only an old man, but also an ambassador; because old or elderly men were chosen to fulfill such an office, because of their experience and solidity; and πρεσβυτης, for πρεσβευτης, is used in the same sense and for the same reason by the Septuagint; hence some have thought that we should translate here, Paul the ambassador. This would agree very well with the scope and even the design of the place (Adam Clarke, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*).

AV	ESV	LSV	Darby
9 Yet for love's sake I rather beseech <i>thee</i> , being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.	9 yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—	9 yet for love's sake I rather plead with <i>you</i> —since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—	9 for love's sake I rather exhort, being such a one as Paul the aged, and now also prisoner of Jesus Christ.

The ESV reduces "Paul The Aged" to "Paul, an old man", stripping him of this title. This robs Paul of the dignity of his age and makes him to be just another old man.

9c Paul is using every ace that he has up his sleeve. Would you turn down the request of an old man? Would you turn down a request from a man who is suffering for the cause of Christ?

Paul refers to himself by two titles as the basis for this appeal:

1. Paul the Aged
2. Paul the Prisoner

10 I beseech^{present} thee for my son Onesimus,^a whom I have begotten^{aoist} in my bonds:^b

10a His name means "Useful or profitable."

10b Onesimus had been converted under Paul's ministry while Onesimus was at Rome, thus he was Paul's son in the faith. Somehow these two crossed paths and Paul was able to lead him to faith in Christ. Paul witnessed to him, prisoner to prisoner. This shows the providence of God in all things. If Paul had not been arrested and if he was not in Rome, Onesimus might never have gotten saved. God used the wrath of Nero to save the soul of a servant.

Here we have one bondservant (Paul, the bondservant of Christ) interceding for another bondservant- Onesimus. Since Paul and Philemon were friends, Paul saw no need to invoke any of his apostolic authority. A friendly appeal should have been sufficient.

11 Which in time past was to thee unprofitable,^a but now profitable to thee and to me:^{b-c}

11a For such a man as this to turn from being “unprofitable” to “profitable” is a wonderful example of the transforming power of the grace of God in the life. God specializes in such cases as these. Being unprofitable is our natural spiritual state before God, as Paul says in Romans 3:12. It is salvation that makes us spiritually profitable unto God.

11b The gospel can take the most worthless of men and make them useful and profitable for the kingdom. Onesimus was a different man now that he had been saved! He was no longer the runaway servant and thief who was unprofitable, but now he was very profitable. Paul knew this from firsthand experience since Onesimus had ministered to Paul in Rome after his conversion.

It would seem that Philemon had sent Onesimus on some errand of business and Onesimus had been unfaithful, maybe even running off with a sum of money that his master had entrusted him with. Or it could be that Onesimus ran away from Philemon, maybe with some of Philemon's money or goods, and had gone to Rome to try to lose himself in the crowd of the city. Whatever, he had run away and robbed Philemon. In this sense, he was most unprofitable. He served with eye-service. He loitered away his time and set a bad example to the other servants. Every unsaved man is equally unprofitable in his service to his Master, God. We would wonder just how profitable he might be to his current Master, Satan? Can a man be a profitable servant of a Master he hates and who hates him back?

So how do you go from “**unprofitable**” to “**profitable**”? The first step is salvation. No unsaved man can be profitable in the sight of God. Once saved, you start obeying whatever commands the Lord may give you and you seek to walk in His statutes and commandments. These lead to a life of spiritual profitability. Before, Onesimus was unprofitable. But now, the man Paul was sending back to Philemon was a different man, as Paul was sending back a Christian slave, who would now be profitable.

11d “**Onesimus**” means “profitable”. Before he was saved, he was anything but. But now, he was living up to his name. This is what the Gospel does- it takes a worthless life and gives it purpose and value. There are no hopeless cases in this context or men beyond the reach of the grace of God.

When the Lord goes through all the trouble of saving us, shifting us from “unprofitable” to “profitable”, He expects some return on His investment. The parable of the talents demonstrates that (Matthew 25:15-30, look at Luke 19:12-26 as well). We are to “**work out our own salvation**” (Philippians 2:12) and “**occupy until He comes**” (Luke 19:13) for that end. We are to do things as Christian to profit and benefit our Lord. It may not be much, for not everyone can pastor a mega-church like Spurgeon or win millions to Christ like D. L. Moody, but everyone can and ought to do something for the Lord with the spiritual gifts and abilities the Holy Spirit gave you.

But you must do more than what is simply expected of you, or what was your “duty”. If that is all you do, then you are an **unprofitable servant** (Luke 17:10). You have to go beyond what is expected of you spiritually. Stretch yourself. Inconvenience yourself. Go “out on God”. Don't just do those things that you are supposed to do. Do some things that are not required of you. That's good advice that can be applied to both the workplace and the church-house. Going to church, tithing, praying, reading your Bible are things that you ought to do and that you

are expected to do. When is the last time you did something “above and beyond” the call of duty for the Lord?

12 Whom I have sent again:^{a-aorist} thou therefore receive^{aorist middle imperative} him,^b that is,^{present} mine own bowels:^c

12a What runaway bondservant would willingly and voluntarily return to a master whom he had wronged and stolen from? Although Onesimus was returning to a Christian master, he still had no real way to know how Philemon would react, despite all the assurances that Paul no doubt gave him. But see the power of the gospel yet again, to compel a runaway servant to forsake any hope he had to be a freeman (even if he was also a fugitive) to return to a life of bondage. No doubt Onesimus would have loved to stay with Paul, his spiritual father, and help him in his ministry, but he had other obligations that he must fulfill first.

12b AV

ESV

LSV

Darby

12 Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:	12 I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.	12 I have sent him back to you in person, that is, my very heart,	12 whom I have sent back to thee: <i>but do *thou* receive</i> him, that is, <i>*my*</i> bowels:
--	---	---	--

The ESV and LSV omit the request of Paul to Philemon to receive Onesimus.

12c When Paul returned Onesimus to Philemon, he urged Philemon to receive the servant as "mine own bowels". Paul is asking Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul if Paul were coming unto him. After all, Onesimus was now a co-laborer with Paul who had ministered to Paul and had been sent back by Paul. Onesimus was now closely associated with the apostle.

One thing the gospel does in a man is to make want to “make right” the sins he committed while he was yet a sinner. Yes, he is a new creature and old things pass away and all things become new, but there is still the honorable desire to make things right and to try to undo some of the damage that might have been done in the days of the flesh. It spoke something of Onesimus’ character and to his new heart that he was willing to go back and face his master, in the face of how he wronged Philemon. Only the gospel would compel a man to do that in the face of whatever punishment Philemon would be legally allowed to inflict. Yet Onesimus would not be able to sleep well at night until he had confronted his sin and the man whom he had wronged.

13 Whom I^a would^{imperfect middle/passive} have retained^{present infinitive} with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered^{b-present subjunctive} unto me in the bonds of the gospel:

13a Emphatic.

13b Onesimus was doing the work of a deacon in his ministry toward Paul. Deacons serve and minister, they do not rule. They have no leadership authority. That is reserved for the pastor and elders. What a blessing to find a man who is content with a ministry of just being helpful! And a young Christian, like Onesimus, at that! Many older Christians never learned how to be a blessing. Everyone can and ought to minister as a deacon, regardless of whether they are ever ordained to the office. And since Philemon himself could not be there to assist Paul, Paul hopes

that Philemon will allow Onesimus to be his replacement. And there must have been something in this man that appealed to Paul for Paul to want to keep Onesimus around.

Since Philemon could not be there to minister to Paul, although Philemon might have wanted to if he could, Paul was hoping that he would allow Onesimus to fulfill that ministry in his stead.

14 But without thy mind^a would^{aorist} I do^{aorist infinitive} nothing; that thy benefit should not be^{present subjunctive} as it were of necessity, but willingly.

14a “Without thy mind...” Paul wanted to keep Onesimus with him in order that he might minister to Paul. Onesimus must really have been very useful (profitable) unto Paul. But Paul realized that Onesimus belonged to Philemon, and he had grounds to keep Onesimus. Paul thus returns him, reluctantly and with regret, but it is the right thing to do.

15 For perhaps he therefore departed^{aorist passive} for a season,^a that thou shouldest receive^{present subjunctive} him for ever;^b

15a Paul does not deny the crimes that Onesimus may have done, nor does he try to defend him in those sins. Paul is very careful in his wording. It’s not “he took your checkbook and ran off”. Paul is more diplomatic in his wording as to not stir up any bad memories or emotions in Philemon as he makes his appeal.

15b Obviously, not through eternity. It means “for the rest of your life.” Philemon and Onesimus would be brothers forever but the master-master relationship ends at death.

16 Not now as a servant,^a but above a servant,^{a-b} a brother beloved,^c specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?^d

16a AV	ESV	LSV	Darby
16 Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?	16 no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.	16 no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.	16 not any longer as a bondman, but above a bondman, a beloved brother, specially to me, and how much rather to thee, both in <i>the</i> flesh and in <i>the</i> Lord?

The LSV uses “slave”. All of the other translations use (bond)“servant” which is much better here. Onesimus was going back as a saved man.

16b Paul asks for Philemon to receive Onesimus “not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, especially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord.” Paul asks Philemon not to punish Onesimus for his sins and crime against him, but rather to forgive and to receive him as the brother that Onesimus was. Why didn’t Paul command this? Because he had no authority to do so. Philemon had every right (before God) to treat his servant as he pleased. Paul was the outsider in this situation. It would be similar to him trying to

tell a husband how to treat his wife or a father his son. Paul could not make a command in a personal relationship like this, so he rather beseeches.

16c Paul's words in Galatians 3:28 ring true here, as there is no "**bond or free**" in Christ. In the eyes of Christ, the despised servant and the exalted master were one, and equals.

16d If Paul felt this way about Onesimus, then Philemon should as well.

17 If thou count^{present} me^a therefore a partner,^b receive^{aorist middle imperative} him as myself.^{c-d}

17a Emphatic.

17b The pre-Authorized Version translations use either "fellow" or "companion". The Geneva Bible's reading is not a good one with "count our things common".

17c Do you count me as a partner and a fellow-laborer in the gospel? Then receive Onesimus as you would receive me. Consider him to be there in my stead and treat him as you would me.

17d Onesimus would go back to Philemon and would be expected to serve as a Christian servant to a Christian master under the command of 1 Timothy 6:2, **And they that have believing masters, let them not despise them, because they are brethren; but rather do them service, because they are faithful and beloved, partakers of the benefit. These things teach and exhort..**

18 If he hath wronged^{a--aorist} thee, or oweth^{present} thee ought, put that on^{present imperative} mine account;^b

18a The Greek aorist tense gives the idea of "if he has wronged you at any time..." not just in this situation or context.

18b Paul signs a promissory note. Paul is also willing to repay Philemon for damages incurred by Onesimus. If Philemon was worried about the money, Paul promises to cover it. Paul here is putting himself up for usury for a runaway servant! That ought to have made a strong impression upon Philemon, that Paul was willing to do to bat for him like this. If Paul is your debtor, you know he will repay.

What a beautiful type and a shadow for the doctrine of imputation here. We were all like Onesimus was at one point- unprofitable thieves who wronged God. But Christ was willing to pay back to the Father any damages that we incurred (and that we could not repay) so that the Father would be willing to restore us again to a position of usefulness. And you find this truth put on display in one of the shortest books of the Bible!

19 I^a Paul have written^{aorist} it with mine own hand,^b I^a will repay^{future} it: albeit I do not say^{present subjunctive} to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.^{c-d-present}

19a Emphatic.

19b This plea, and letter, came directly from Paul and no secretary was used. This underscores the direct appeal Paul was making to Philemon, "man to man".

19c Paul reminds Philemon how much Philemon owes Paul. Maybe not so much in a monetary sense was this debt but spiritual. Paul probably led him to Christ and had functioned as something of his spiritual father. Philemon owed much to Paul. Paul now calls his marker due.

19d “Howbeit in both the Testaments we shall scarcely read of any godly man tainted with covetousness. Luther saith of himself, that though he otherwise had his flaws and frailties, yet the infection of covetousness never laid hold on him (John Trapp).”

20 Yea, brother, let me have joy^{aorist middle optative} of thee in the Lord: refresh^{aorist imperative} my bowels in the Lord.

20a Or “affections”. We might use “heart” today.

21 Having confidence^{a-perfect active participle} in thy obedience I wrote^{aorist} unto thee, knowing^{perfect active participle} that thou wilt also do^{future} more than I say.^{b-c-present}

21a The Greek perfect tense shows Paul’s absolute confidence in Philemon that he will do as he asks.

21b Yes Philemon had been wronged. He had every reason to be upset with Onesimus. Onesimus had fled and stolen money. But Paul is urging forgiveness. After all, how much has God forgiven us? How much have we sinned against Him? And how much as He forgiven us? Forgive Onesimus as God has forgiven you!

Might this “more than I say” be a round-about way of Paul hinting that Philemon release Onesimus? Paul would not be so bold as to come right out and suggest it but he might want to hint at it and place that thought in Philemon’s head.

4. Paul's Plan To Visit Philemon 22

22 But withal prepare^{present imperative} me also a lodging:^a for I trust^{present} that through your prayers I shall be given^{future passive} unto you.

22a Paul intended on visiting Philemon after he got out of jail, so spruce up the guest room! Travelers, especially the itinerant preachers (the evangelists) were often so lodged by God's people, since there were no hotel chains and the Christian would not have wanted to lodge with heathen in their inns and lodges.

5. Greetings And Close 23-25

23 There salute^{present middle-passive} thee Epaphras,^a my fellowprisoner^b in Christ Jesus;

23a Is this a shortened form of the name Epaphroditus?

23b Paul refers to Epaphras as "my **fellowprisoner**", even a “prisoner of war”, who was also serving Christ in jail along with Paul. Epaphras also appears in Colossians 1:7 (where he is a **fellowservant**) and in Philippians 2:25 (where he is a **fellowsoldier**).

24 Marcus,^a Aristarchus,^b Demas,^c Lucas,^d my fellowlabourers.

24a This is John Mark, the nephew of Barnabas and author of the second gospel. We see Mark mentioned in 2 Timothy 4, just before Paul died. He is also mentioned here in a favorable sense, showing that Paul had reconciled himself to Mark by this time, Paul was upset when Mark left the first missionary tour in Acts 13 and refused to take him on the second. But Paul had gotten over that now as Mark had proven himself to be a profitable servant of Christ.

You have to love the example of Mark. Here is a young man who failed in the ministry. It was his first missionary trip (or first pastorate or whatever) and he failed. At that time, Mark was “unprofitable” to Paul. But Christ reclaimed him. Mark did not waste that second chance. He served faithfully along with his uncle Barnabas and distinguished himself so much that Paul wanted to see him again before he died (2 Timothy 4:11). He was “profitable” (see verse 11) to Paul now. He even went on to write the second gospel.

How is that for “reclamation?” Paul had some practical experience in what he was asking Philemon to do with Onesimus.

Which preacher hasn’t failed somewhere? Noah got drunk. Abraham “shacked up” with Hagar. Jacob was a cheat. Moses was a murderer as was David. Solomon apostatized. Peter denied the Lord and swore and cursed as only a commercial fisherman can do. Jeremiah wanted to quit. Paul disobeyed the Lord in going to Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit told him not to go. And on and on we could go. I know I have failed the Lord so many times that I wonder that He still keeps me on His bread-wagon. If you will be honest with yourself, you’ll say “Amen, and I’m even worse!”

24b He was a Thessalonian, alluded to in Acts 19:29; 20:4; 27:2, a companion of Paul, at least for part of the way, on his trip to Rome. He is also mentioned as a “fellowprisoner” in Colossians 4:10. He was also with Paul up to the end (2 Timothy 4:11).

24c Demas had yet to fall away and return to the world, as he would do later. (2 Timothy 4:10). He was still profitable at this time. Demas is the anti-John Mark. He also “fell away: and failed in the ministry. We do know why Mark quit in Acts 13 but we know what Demas’ problem was- he fell back in love with a world system that he was supposed to have abandoned as a Christian. Demas left and never came back. If he was saved, he became a totally worldly and carnal believer, totally worthless to Paul and the kind of ministry he was involved in. Demas became unprofitable and remained that way.

24d The Beloved Physician and author of Acts and the third gospel.

25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.^a

25a This is the typical Pauline ending.

AV	ESV	LSV	Darby
25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ <i>be</i> with your spirit. Amen.	25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.	25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.	25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ <i>be</i> with your spirit.

The versions omit the “amen”.

Bibliography

Calvin, John, *Commentary on Philemon*

Clarke, Adam, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*

Riplinger, Gail, *In Awe of Thy Word*

Trapp, John, *A Commentary On The Old and New Testaments*

About the Author

Dr. John Cereghin was saved on February 9, 1978 at the age of 13 after being raised in the Roman Catholic church. He was saved after listening to a program on missionary shortwave radio station HCJB from Quito, Ecuador. He left the Catholic church in 1983 and joined Maranatha Baptist Church in Elkton, Maryland in 1985. In 1986, she transferred from the University of Maryland to Maryland Baptist Bible College, earning the first doctor's degree awarded by the school in 1995. Dr. Cereghin also earned his Master of Theology degree from Foundations Theological Seminary in 1994.

Dr. Cereghin's ministry background includes working at Radio Station WOEL in Elkton, Maryland (1986-1998), teaching in various capacities at Maryland Baptist Bible College in Elkton, Maryland from 1988-1998, also serving as Dean of Men, Registrar and Academic Dean, and pastoring Queen Anne's Baptist Church, Centreville, Maryland (1989-1990), Charity Baptist Church, Mebane, North Carolina (1994-1995) and Grace Baptist Church in Smyrna, Delaware (1998-present).

Dr. Cereghin is married to the former Teresa Piggot of Greenwood, Nova Scotia and they have four children and four grandchildren.