**Philemon 1:1-3**

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/phlm/phlm-1/philemon-11-3/>

Paul and Timothy greet Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the church that meets in Philemon’s house with his signature salutation of “grace” and “peace.” Paul identifies himself “a prisoner of Christ Jesus” without mentioning his apostleship.

Paul begins his letter addressed to Philemon by letting his recipients know who the senders are. There were two authors of this epistle: the apostle Paul and his disciple, Timothy. Overall, the letter seems to be written or voiced from the perspective of a single person, rather than from multiple people. For instance, the epistle uses the first-person plural pronouns “I” or “me” more frequently than the first-person plural pronouns “we” or “our.” There is little doubt that

Paul is the main author. His name is mentioned first, and the letter carries Paul’s voice. It is likely that Paul dictated his thoughts to Timothy who then wrote them down.

Paul described himself as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. Paul wrote and sent this letter to Philemon when he was under house arrest in Rome while he was waiting for his appeal to Caesar (Acts 28:16, 30). Timothy was with Paul while he was a prisoner in Rome, and he was able to visit and meet with him during his mentor’s imprisonment. It is significant that Paul did not introduce himself as an Apostle of Christ, as he does in most of his other letters (Romans 1:1, 1 Corinthians 1:1, 2 Corinthians 1:1, Galatians 1:1, Ephesians 1:1, Colossians 1:1, 1 Timothy 1:1, 2 Timothy 1:1, Titus 1:1). This is significant, because Paul will appeal to Philemon as his equal, not as his superior. He appeals as a prisoner of Christ, not as Christ’s apostle. Paul’s identification as a prisoner of Christ Jesus is one of this epistle’s main themes.

The reason Paul was under house arrest was because the Jews incited a mob to slander him when he entered the temple in Jerusalem (Acts 21:27-22:29). Even though he had demonstrated his innocence in both Jewish and Roman courts multiple times (Acts 22:29-23:9; Acts 24; Acts 25; Acts 26) Paul was not released. His unjust imprisonment went against Roman law. And because Paul was a Roman citizen, he could bring the injustice of his case before Caesar as a final earthly appeal. And that is what he did (Acts 25:11-12).

Paul was under house arrest in Rome awaiting his trial most likely sometime between 60-62 AD. During his time as a prisoner of the Lord in Rome, Paul lived, “in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered” (Acts 28:30-31). He was able to meet with his friends and fellow partners working to promote the good news of Jesus Christ. During this imprisonment Paul wrote and dispatched several letters including the epistles to the Colossians, the Philippians, and Philemon. Paul also wrote and sent another letter to the church of Laodicea at this time (Colossians 4:16); though this letter is lost to us.

The second author mentioned was Timothy our brother. Timothy was a half-Jewish, half-Greek believer from the Galatian town of either Lystra or Derbe. He was respected by the believers in that region. Paul met Timothy on his second missionary journey when he visited the area:

“Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And a disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted this man to go with him;”
(Acts 16:1-3a)

So Timothy joined Paul’s ministry. And he faithfully served alongside or on behalf of his mentor when they traveled to Macedonia at Philippi, and in Thessalonica, in Athens, and in Corinth, among other places (Acts 16:1-18:5).

Timothy was Paul’s disciple and his protégé. They shared a close relationship in their ministry together. Timothy helped Paul write no less than six letters (2 Corinthians 1:1, Philippians 1:1, 1 Thessalonians 1:1, 2 Thessalonians 1:1, Colossians 1:1, and Philemon). Additionally, Paul addressed two personal letters to Timothy (1 Timothy 1:1 and 2 Timothy 1:1) which indicate Paul’s mentorship of Timothy.

Timothy was with Paul while he was a prisoner in Rome, and he was very useful to his mentor. They were able to continue meeting and collaborating for the Gospel’s sake during Paul’s imprisonment. Timothy could deliver messages to and from Paul. And Timothy was able to continue serving as Paul’s secretary by writing his letters during his imprisonment—including this one.

But Timothy was more than Paul’s protégé. Paul refers to him as our brother. This may indicate that Philemon and Timothy knew one another. Or it may be Paul’s way of introducing Timothy to Philemon. Either way, the description of our brother highlights the unalterable fact that all three men eternally belong to the family of Jesus Christ. The description of our brother introduces one of the key themes of this letter. One of Paul’s main points is to underscore the truth that Philemon’s fundamental relationship with Onesimus is not as a master to his slave, but as one brother to another.

This letter is addressed to three specific people: Philemon, a woman named Apphia, and Archippus. And this letter is more generally addressed to the church meeting in your [Philemon’s] house.

It was customary for the primary recipient to be addressed first. And in this case, it is Philemon. Paul does not mention Philemon in his other letters, neither does the Bible speak of him anywhere else in scripture. Apparently, he was from the town of Colossae. This is deduced from the fact that we know Philemon’s associate, Archippus (Colossian 4:17), and Philemon’s run-away slave, Onesimus (Colossians 4:9) were from Colossae. Incidentally, Paul and Timothy’s letters addressed to the Colossian church and to Philemon were written and dispatched around the same time. They were also delivered on the same journey from Rome: Tychicus, a Colossian believer delivered the general letter (Colossians 4:7), and it is likely that Onesimus who traveled with Tychicus (Colossians 4:9) hand delivered this letter.

Paul and Timothy first addressed Philemon as our beloved brother. This description indicates Philemon is a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. And it continues Paul’s theme of belonging to Christ’s eternal family. The adjective, beloved, reveals the honor, respect, and concern Paul and Timothy have for Philemon. In writing this letter, they are seeking Philemon’s best interest.

Paul and Timothy also referred to Philemon as our fellow worker. This indicates that Philemon is not only a believer in Christ, but one who is actively promoting the kingdom and sharing the Gospel through his life, actions, and resources. Paul and Timothy later commend him for his love and the blessing that he is to all the saints (Philemon 1:5-7).

Another fact that we can deduce about Philemon is that he was wealthier than most people. We know this because he had a slave—Onesimus (Philemon 1:10, 1:16). Most people in the Roman empire could not afford servants, but Philemon obviously could.

A third fact about Philemon is that the church in Colossae met in his house. The English translated phrase, and to the church in your house raises the question—whose house? Philemon’s? Apphia’s? Archippus’s? Or all three? The rules of Greek grammar solve this ambiguity. The word for your is singular in Greek, which indicates the house is owned by one of these people. And the rules of Greek syntax indicate that the house belongs to the first person listed in the group—which is Philemon. Therefore, the Colossian church meets in Philemon’s house. It may have been that the reason the Colossian believers met in Philemon’s home was because he had the biggest house and the most space of anyone in that congregation.

Apphia is not mentioned anywhere else in scripture. Her name means “productive” or “fruitful.” She is described as our sister. This too indicates that Apphia belongs to the family of Jesus and continues Paul’s theme. Apphia may have been a church leader in Colossae and an associate of Paul and Timothy. Women often served prominent roles in the early church era, and likely made up a majority of the church. An example is Priscilla, wife of Aquila, both of whom were prominent leaders in the church at Rome (Romans 16:3). Apphia may have been Philemon’s wife, and Paul includes her in his letter to Philemon because his request affects her household. It is possible, if not likely, that Apphia, like Priscilla, was both Philemon’s wife as well as an influential member of the Colossian church.

Archippus was likely also an influential Colossian believer and may have helped lead the church that met in Philemon’s home. There is speculation that Archippus was left in charge of overseeing the Colossians while their church leader, Epaphras, was visiting Paul during the apostle’s imprisonment in Rome. Archippus was mentioned at the conclusion of Paul and Timothy’s letter to the Colossians:

“Say to Archippus, ‘Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it.’”
(Colossians 4:17)

Some have taken this to speculate that the ministry Archippus was to fulfill is actually addressed here in this letter to Philemon. According to this theory, Paul sent this letter to Philemon because he had a working relationship with Philemon, but not with Archippus. By including Philemon in this letter, Paul was enlisting his help and personal influence to help Archippus “fulfill the ministry” of personally forgiving and releasing Philemon. The thought behind the theory is that it is better to receive a personal and potentially difficult exhortation from a trusted friend rather than acquaintance known mostly by reputation.

On its surface the theory seems plausible, but it is not without difficulties. Its main problem is that Paul speaks as though he had a personal relationship with Archippus throughout the letter. And this being the case would make the middleman of Philemon unnecessary. Additionally, the early church unanimously assumed that Philemon was the letter’s main recipient and not Archippus. Therefore, the most straightforward interpretation that Philemon was Paul’s main intended recipient makes the most sense.

How did Paul and Philemon personally know one another? Even though Paul did not directly found the church in Colossae (Epaphras did, Colossians 1:7) he probably met many of its members when he stayed in nearby Ephesus for two years. It is reasonable to suppose that a wealthy citizen such as Philemon of the small town of Colossae would travel to Ephesus from time to time. And this is likely how the two men came to know one another.

In this letter, Paul and Timothy addressed Archippus as our fellow soldier. In their letter to the Philippians, Paul and Timothy also addressed Epaphroditus as a fellow soldier as well as a “brother and fellow worker” (Philippians 2:25). In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul admonished the believers there to be faithful spiritual soldiers for the cause of the gospel of Christ, and to put on their spiritual soldier uniform each morning (Ephesians 6:10-17). This address to Archippus as a fellow soldier indicates he was a fellow champion and dedicated follower of Jesus whose efforts did much to protect and advance the gospel message to which Paul was appointed as an apostle. The emphasis of this salutation is that they all shared service to a common leader/general (Jesus) in a mission to which they had dedicated their lives.

Paul sent this letter with his signature salutation of Grace to you and peace. Grace and peace come from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

**Biblical Text**

**1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,**

**To Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker, 2 and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**