

# Philemon 1:1-3

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*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 runaway 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.**