# Philippians, Colossians, Philemon

Dennis Hamm, SJ

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# Editors' Preface

> The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord. . . . All the preaching of the Church should be nourished and governed by Sacred Scripture. For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the power and goodness in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons and daughters, the food of the soul, a pure and perennial fountain of spiritual life.
>
> Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* 21

> Were not our hearts burning while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?
>
> Luke 24:32

The Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture aims to serve the ministry of the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church. Since Vatican Council II, there has been an increasing hunger among Catholics to study Scripture in depth and in a way that reveals its relationship to liturgy, evangelization, catechesis, theology, and personal and communal life. This series responds to that desire by providing accessible yet substantive commentary on each book of the New Testament, drawn from the best of contemporary biblical scholarship as well as the rich treasury of the Church's tradition. These volumes seek to offer scholarship illumined by faith, in the conviction that the ultimate aim of biblical interpretation is to discover what God has revealed and is still speaking through the sacred text. Central to our approach are the principles taught by Vatican II: first, the use of historical and literary methods to discern what the


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biblical authors intended to express; second, prayerful theological reflection to understand the sacred text "in accord with the same Spirit by whom it was written"—that is, in light of the content and unity of the whole Scripture, the living tradition of the Church, and the analogy of faith (*Dei Verbum* 12).

The Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture is written for those engaged in or training for pastoral ministry and others interested in studying Scripture to understand their faith more deeply, to nourish their spiritual life, or to share the good news with others. With this in mind, the authors focus on the meaning of the text for faith and life rather than on the technical questions that occupy scholars, and they explain the Bible in ordinary language that does not require translation for preaching and catechesis. Although this series is written from the perspective of Catholic faith, its authors draw on the interpretation of Protestant and Orthodox scholars and hope these volumes will serve Christians of other traditions as well.

A variety of features are designed to make the commentary as useful as possible. Each volume includes the biblical text of the New American Bible, Revised Edition (NABRE), the translation approved for liturgical use in the United States. In order to serve readers who use other translations, the most important differences between the NABRE and other widely used translations (RSV, NRSV, JB, NJB, and NIV) are noted and explained. Each unit of the biblical text is followed by a list of references to relevant Scripture passages, Catechism sections, and uses in the Roman Lectionary. The exegesis that follows aims to explain in a clear and engaging way the meaning of the text in its original historical context as well as its perennial meaning for Christians. Reflection and Application sections help readers apply Scripture to Christian life today by responding to questions that the text raises, offering spiritual interpretations drawn from Christian tradition, or providing suggestions for the use of the biblical text in catechesis, preaching, or other forms of pastoral ministry.

Interspersed throughout the commentary are Biblical Background sidebars that present historical, literary, or theological information, and Living Tradition sidebars that offer pertinent material from the postbiblical Christian tradition, including quotations from Church documents and from the writings of saints and Church Fathers. The Biblical Background sidebars are indicated by a photo of urns that were excavated in Jerusalem, signifying the importance of historical study in understanding the sacred text. The Living Tradition sidebars are indicated by an image of Eadwine, a twelfth-century monk and scribe, signifying the growth in the Church's understanding that comes by the grace of the Holy Spirit as believers study and ponder the Word of God in their hearts (see *Dei Verbum* 8).



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A map and a Glossary are located in the back of each volume for easy reference. The glossary explains key terms from the biblical text as well as theological or exegetical terms, which are marked in the commentary with a cross (†). A list of Suggested Resources, an Index of Pastoral Topics, and an Index of Sidebars are included to enhance the usefulness of these volumes. Further resources, including questions for reflection or discussion, can be found at the series website, www.CatholicScriptureCommentary.com.

It is our desire and prayer that these volumes be of service so that more and more "the word of the Lord may speed forward and be glorified" (2 Thess 3:1) in the Church and throughout the world.

Peter S. Williamson
Mary Healy
Kevin Perrotta

## Note to Readers

The New American Bible, Revised Edition differs slightly from most English translations in its verse numbering of the Psalms and certain other parts of the Old Testament. For instance, Ps 51:4 in the NABRE is Ps 51:2 in other translations; Mal 3:19 in the NABRE is Mal 4:1 in other translations. Readers who use different translations are advised to keep this in mind when looking up Old Testament cross-references given in the commentary.

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# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| † | Indicates that a definition of the term appears in the glossary |
| ACCS 8 | Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament, vol. 8, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, ed. Mark J. Edwards (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999) |
| ACCS 9 | Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament, vol. 9, *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, ed. Peter Gorday (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000) |
| BDAG | *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd edition; revised and edited by Frederick William Danker, based on the 6th edition of Walter Bauer's *Griechisch-Deutches Wörterbuch* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) |
| Catechism | *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd edition) |
| *CBQ* | *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* |
| CCSS | Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008–) |
| Lectionary | *The Lectionary for Mass* (1998/2002 USA edition) |
| LXX | Septuagint |
| NABRE | New American Bible, Revised Edition |
| NIV | New International Version |
| NJB | New Jerusalem Bible |
| NRSV | New Revised Standard Version |
| NT | New Testament |
| OT | Old Testament |
| RSV | Revised Standard Version |

## Books of the Old Testament

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gen | Genesis | Josh | Joshua | 1 Kings | 1 Kings |
| Exod | Exodus | Judg | Judges | 2 Kings | 2 Kings |
| Lev | Leviticus | Ruth | Ruth | 1 Chron | 1 Chronicles |
| Num | Numbers | 1 Sam | 1 Samuel | 2 Chron | 2 Chronicles |
| Deut | Deuteronomy | 2 Sam | 2 Samuel | Ezra | Ezra |


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| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Neh | Nehemiah | Wis | Wisdom | Obad | Obadiah |
| Tob | Tobit | Sir | Sirach | Jon | Jonah |
| Jdt | Judith | Isa | Isaiah | Mic | Micah |
| Esther | Esther | Jer | Jeremiah | Nah | Nahum |
| 1 Macc | 1 Maccabees | Lam | Lamentations | Hab | Habakkuk |
| 2 Macc | 2 Maccabees | Bar | Baruch | Zeph | Zephaniah |
| Job | Job | Ezek | Ezekiel | Hag | Haggai |
| Ps | Psalms | Dan | Daniel | Zech | Zechariah |
| Prov | Proverbs | Hosea | Hosea | Mal | Malachi |
| Eccles | Ecclesiastes | Joel | Joel | | |
| Song | Song of Songs | Amos | Amos | | |

## Books of the New Testament

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Matt | Matthew | 1 Tim | 1 Timothy |
| Mark | Mark | 2 Tim | 2 Timothy |
| Luke | Luke | Titus | Titus |
| John | John | Philem | Philemon |
| Acts | Acts of the Apostles | Heb | Hebrews |
| Rom | Romans | James | James |
| 1 Cor | 1 Corinthians | 1 Pet | 1 Peter |
| 2 Cor | 2 Corinthians | 2 Pet | 2 Peter |
| Gal | Galatians | 1 John | 1 John |
| Eph | Ephesians | 2 John | 2 John |
| Phil | Philippians | 3 John | 3 John |
| Col | Colossians | Jude | Jude |
| 1 Thess | 1 Thessalonians | Rev | Revelation |
| 2 Thess | 2 Thessalonians | | |



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# Introduction to the Prison Letters

We are about to read together three of the four letters of St. Paul commonly known as the Prison Letters—Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. These four are clustered under that label because they state that Paul writes them from some place of confinement. A fifth letter, 2 Timothy, also presents Paul as writing from prison, but because it has been traditionally categorized with 1 Timothy and Titus as a set of three called the Pastoral Letters, it is not usually grouped with the other Prison Letters. This commentary treats only three of the traditional Prison Letters—Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon—because the Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture devotes a separate volume to Ephesians, which is so comprehensive as a summary of Paul's theology that it warrants a commentary of its own.

I will provide a separate introduction to each of the three letters. But before we begin to read individual letters, it seems useful to address a number of general questions these letters naturally raise—questions like the following: Where was Paul imprisoned when he wrote? Why was he imprisoned? Did the people of the first-century Mediterranean world write and read letters the way we do—and if not, how can we adjust our reading of these letters to better understand them? How do we make sense of somebody else's mail? How did someone's †occasional correspondence come to be recognized as the Word of God for all Christians?

To begin with that last question, we get our main picture of Paul's place in the growth of the early Church from Luke's portrayal of him in the Acts of the Apostles. There we meet him as the zealous Pharisee Saul of Tarsus, who is part of the crowd stoning the first Christian martyr, Stephen (Acts 7–8). Though he is not himself throwing the stones, he is minding the cloaks of those who do.

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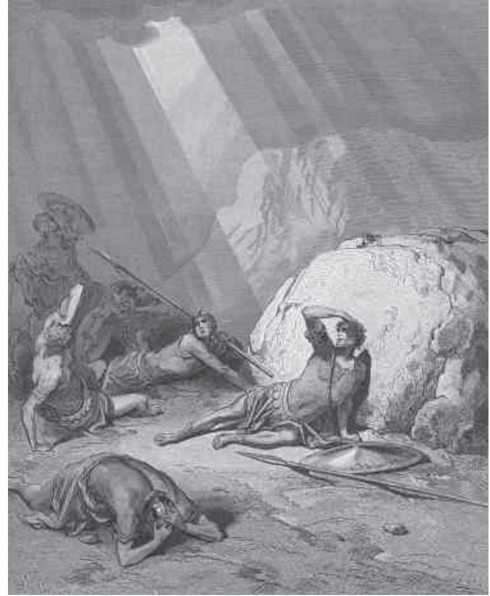

Fig. 1. Gustave Doré's graphic interpretation of Saul/Paul's conversion.

Soon he becomes so convinced that the Jesus movement among his fellow Jews is a threat to Judaism that he seeks and obtains authorization to block the progress of "the Way," as it was coming to be called (see Acts 9:2), by seeking out and imprisoning its promoters. Heading for Damascus on such a mission, he has his famous experience on the road, an encounter with the risen Jesus, who identifies himself with the very communities Paul seeks to eliminate (Acts 9). Shortly thereafter, this persecutor of "the Way" becomes its best evangelist. Luke spends the rest of Acts telling how this Saul of Tarsus, eventually better known as Paul the Apostle, uses his talents for preaching, teaching, and organizing Christian communities. He soon takes his place next to the Rock himself, Peter, as one of the great leaders of the early Church. In highly abbreviated form, Luke sketches the story of Paul's mission journeys, mainly among the Gentiles in the areas we now call Turkey and Greece. Finally, Luke shows how Paul imitates his Master by ending his days under persecution, including interrogations and incarcerations by Jewish and Roman authorities.

While Luke says nothing about Paul's letter writing, Paul put the faith and practices of these first Christians into such moving and memorable words that his letters were early recognized as having a value far beyond the occasions that prompted them and the particular churches and persons to whom they were first addressed. They were recognized as inspired by the Holy Spirit—even as the Word of God.

## Where Was Paul Imprisoned?

None of Paul's Prison Letters names the locations of his various imprisonments. As disappointing as this is to us history detectives, the failure to mention these locations is perfectly understandable. Does a student attending Creighton



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University, writing home, include a sentence like, “I am writing to you from Creighton University, in Omaha”? Just as the student’s parents know perfectly well where their child is going to school, so also Paul’s addressees knew where the Apostle was imprisoned. It was, no doubt, the talk of the church.

Reading his letters two millennia later, we are out of the loop. But we can make educated guesses. First, we can look for clues in the letters themselves. If, for example, Paul mentions “the praetorium” as part of the neighborhood, as he does in Philippians 1:23, then we know he is in a major city that has a Roman governor’s residence, or at least an imperial guard, for these are meanings of “praetorium.” That narrows down the possible candidates but still allows for a number of major cities as the possible location. Or, if Paul mentions several comings and goings between the place of the addressees and the place where he is in custody, our guess should favor a shorter rather than a longer distance between those places. We shall review some of the details of these educated guesses as we deal with the individual letters.

Second, we can seek information in the Acts of the Apostles, which speaks of Paul imprisoned in four different locations—

1. Philippi, overnight, after an illegal beating (16:23–30);
2. Jerusalem, in the temple compound, under Roman protective custody when threatened by some of his fellow Jews (21:27–23:30);
3. Caesarea Maritima, first for two years under Governor Felix (23:34–24:26) and then under Governor Festus (24:27–25:32); and finally
4. Rome, under imperial house arrest for two years, awaiting trial before the emperor (28:16–31).[1]

It is easy to understand why the traditional presumption has been that Paul wrote the Prison Letters from Rome. The very brief incarcerations in Philippi and Jerusalem did not allow time for the writing of letters. The Caesarean incarceration afforded plenty of time but presented a formidable distance from Ephesus, Philippi, or Colossae. However, Paul is portrayed in the book of Acts as receiving visitors “in great numbers” and proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ while under house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:23, 31), which presents an attractive solution to the question of location.

1. When Christians today think of Paul in prison, our cultural experience may lead us to think of him as “serving time,” sitting out a “term” assigned by a judge as punishment for a crime. This list of Paul’s time “in chains” serves to remind us that in the first-century Roman Empire, incarceration was always a matter of being *held in custody* until official judgment led either to death or freedom, not a matter of serving a term.

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Consequently, preachers and commentators have for centuries presumed Rome to be the site for Paul's writing the Prison Letters. But in Paul's list of exploits in 2 Corinthians 11 there is a strong reminder that Paul's Letters and the book of Acts tell only part of the story. Parodying the boasting of the "super-apostles" (see 11:5 and 12:11), Paul lists as his "credentials" his apostolic sufferings:

> far greater labors, *far more imprisonments*, far worse beatings, and numerous brushes with death. Five times at the hands of the Jews I received forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned.
>
> 2 Cor 11:23–25

The mention of "far more imprisonments" surely reaches beyond the four narrated in Acts. The mention of five Jewish and three Roman beatings, while not necessarily tied to imprisonments, refers to punishments that were usually a prelude to imprisonment in first-century Jewish and Roman practices. Luke shows how Saul himself, in his zeal, could imprison fellow Jews he considered heretical (Acts 8:3; 9:1, 14; 22:4). After his conversion, Paul experienced the same from his peers.

In recent scholarship, a new candidate for location has emerged. The city of Ephesus has been proposed as a likely place of the writing of at least the letters to Philemon, Colossians, and even Philippians. While neither Paul's Letters nor Acts explicitly mentions Ephesus as a place where Paul was confined, both provide data that make Ephesus a plausible venue. I consider Ephesus the likely location in which Paul wrote the letters to Philemon and Colossians, and Rome the venue for writing to the Philippians. But discussion of these details can wait for the introductions of the individual letters. It is enough to note here that the question of where Paul was when he wrote the Prison Letters is a matter of educated guesswork. As we will see, the guessing process itself is illuminating.

## Why Was Paul Imprisoned?

A far more significant issue than the locations, and therefore the timing, of Paul's imprisonments and writing is the question of *why* he was held in custody. Paul is almost as uninformative about the ostensible reasons for his arrests as about the locations. As in the case of *where*, the question of *why* was needless for his addressees, who likely knew his situation. Again, we who are out of the loop need to guess at the reasons as well as we can from the available clues.

The reasons for Paul's incarcerations mentioned in Acts are clear enough. During the uproar created in Philippi, when Paul and Silas (and possibly Luke)



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Fig. 2. A denarius coin struck circa 18 BC. Left: the inscription around the coin reads CAESAR AVGVSTVS ("Caesar Augustus"). The other side reads DIVVS IVLIVS ("divine Julius"). The image is "the Julian star," the comet that appeared in the evening sky shortly after the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC. The star was taken as a sign of his divinity. [Info taken from NumisBid.com]

threaten the livelihood of the owners of a slave girl by freeing her from a demonic spirit, the city magistrates strip, beat, and lock them up, apparently to pacify the boisterous crowd (Acts 16:16–24). The incarcerations by Roman officials in Jerusalem and Caesarea are a matter of protective custody against Jerusalem vigilantes who appear to be threatening this Saul of Tarsus, whom the Romans know to be a citizen of the empire. The house arrest in Rome is a matter of custody pending trial. In the letters to the Philippians and Philemon, the closest Paul comes to an explanation of the cause of his imprisonment is in referring to himself as "a prisoner for Christ" (Philem 1 and 9) or as suffering "imprisonment for the gospel" (Philem 13) or "for the defense [*apologia*] of the gospel" (Phil 1:16).

But what was it about Paul's presentation of the gospel that provoked imprisonment? The Roman Empire had, after all, come to terms with Judaism as a religion whose practices did not threaten Roman law and order. What in Paul's preaching gave pause to the local custodians of social order? The complaint of some Thessalonian Jews against Paul and company may hold a clue. Luke writes that they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city magistrates, shouting, "These people who have been creating a disturbance all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them. They all *act in opposition to the decrees of Caesar and claim instead that there is another king, Jesus*" (Acts 17:6–7). Like the members of the Sanhedrin who brought Jesus to Pilate with the charge that he was challenging Caesar's authority (Luke 23:1–2), these people knew that the Roman officials in Thessalonica would be disturbed by the Christian claim that Jesus is Lord, with its implication that the emperor is not. As we will see in our study of Philippians, Paul proclaimed exactly such an interpretation, though his challenge to Roman domination was spiritual, not military or political. Any Roman official with a concern for imperial law and order ("homeland security" in our terms) would become suspicious of a traveling teacher exciting groups with talk about the "kingdom of God" and


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claiming that a Jewish anointed one was "Lord and Savior"—language used in Roman emperor worship. While Paul taught cooperation with secular officials (see Rom 13), his talk about an alternative kingdom and the sovereignty of one Jesus would have made him, to use an expression from modern law enforcement, a "person of interest," and even someone to take into custody for closer scrutiny.

## Letter Writing in the Ancient World: Oral Scripts

Although email, instant messaging, and texting now dominate the majority of the world's written correspondence, we still do enough traditional letter writing for formal invitations, important legal transactions, and key moments in relationships (love letters, condolences, congratulations, wedding invitations) to know what is involved in writing and reading a letter. We have *something* in common with the ancients in this matter. Yet when we read the letters of the New Testament, it is necessary to note some differences in the letter writing of the first-century Mediterranean world.

(1) The skills of reading and writing were much further from universal than they are in our world. Good writers and readers were rare enough to warrant the social role of the scribe, a professional who was really good at taking dictation. Some scribes were trusted enough to take a general idea or intent and put it into their words for the author's approval before sending, as many executive assistants do today. We have good reason to assume that Paul was an able writer and reader of Greek, but we know he often used a scribe. For example, while he clearly identifies himself as the author of the Letter to the Christians in Rome (Rom 1:1), just before the close of the letter we read, "I, Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord" (16:22). No one speaks of Tertius as the *author* of the Letter to the Romans; the author is Paul, who in identifying himself as the sender claims authorship (1:1). Yet the scribe Tertius can call himself the letter's *writer*, the one who actually put pen to parchment. This fact reminds us not to make too much of stylistic variations among letters attributed to Paul.

(2) Before the development of rapid transportation and electronic media, a good deal of time could elapse between the writing and the reading of a letter. This meant a couple of things: you only took the time and effort to write (or hired a scribe to write) a letter when it was a matter of importance to you and your addressees, and you wrote in a way that you expected to be intelligible some weeks or months in the future.

(3) Letters were read aloud. (That is true of virtually every document in the Bible—a fact that is important to keep in mind.) While today we mainly



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Fig. 3. Papyrus 46, with the text of 2 Cor 11:43–12:2, the oldest copy of a Letter of Paul (ca. 220 AD), showing what the script of a Greek text looked like to the original readers. Note the space-saving merging of the words into an unbroken sequence of letters.

read texts silently, in the very oral world of the first century, people considered a written text as a score intended for oral performance, that is, as a script meant for some literate person to read aloud. Thus we can expect in the Letters of Paul the kind of wordplay that comes naturally in oral communication (we'll find several examples of this in the Letter to Philemon). We can also expect first-century letters to be organized in a way that helps a listening audience follow and remember what is being said. Thus what is said early in a document prepares for what comes later. This affected the format of ancient letters.

(4) Most of us use a particular format and set of conventions when we write a standard letter, as opposed to an email message or a Post-it note. Our letter format involves

(a) the date of writing at the top; then, in more formal letters,
(b) the name and address of the intended receiver;
(c) a salutation in the form of the word "Dear" followed by the name of the addressee, where *Dear* usually works simply as a pointer, not necessarily as a term of affection;
(d) the body of the letter, carrying the main communication (e.g., information, request, or agreement);
(e) a closing, like "Sincerely yours"; and
(f) the signature of the sender.

Placing the signature at the end certifies that the sender stands behind all that has been written above. This letter format is indicative of a text-centered culture interested in archiving communications, agreements, and information.

The first-century Greco-Roman letter, the kind Paul wrote, had a slightly different format. Letter writers in the ancient world did not seem to be much interested in dating their correspondences; this may simply be due to the

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unpredictable and often lengthy lapse between the time of the letter's writing and time of its reception. Thus, first-century letters usually begin with

(a) a *prescript* identifying the sender, the intended addressee, and some conventional greeting; then, instead of moving immediately into the business of the correspondence, the author uses the device of
(b) a *thanksgiving*, often in the form of a prayer, to communicate something that affirms the personal relationship between sender and receiver—something like, "I thank Zeus that your ankle sprain is healed and you are back on the handball court";
(c) then comes the body, the business of the letter; finally,
(d) to reaffirm that the relationship between sender and receiver is more than the business of the letter, the author usually has a personal note, often about travel plans that will afford face-to-face communication between the parties involved, sometimes followed by greetings from others known to the addressee.

The format of ancient letters reflects the oral nature of the culture in which they were written. If that format seems familiar, it may be that it is close to the shape of a typical phone call, a contemporary form of oral communication. Although no one formally taught us this format, our phone calls typically follow a similar format:

(a) *Greeting*.
(b) *Self-identification*, unless we are calling someone who we know will recognize our voice.
(c) *Specification of addressee*. If we are not familiar with the voice of the one who answers the phone call, we usually make sure we are talking to the intended addressee by saying something like, "Am I speaking with Amelia?"
(d) *Small talk, part one*, functioning like the thanksgiving part of the ancient letter. If I am talking to someone with whom I have a relationship that goes beyond the business at hand, I instinctively affirm that relationship by making small talk about the weather or something else we have in common ("Have you recovered from Saturday's party?") before addressing the reason for the call.
(e) *The business*. Now it is time for the transaction, which is signaled by a phrase like, "Well, the reason I'm calling. . . ."
(f) *Small talk, part two*. Just as it is a bit abrupt to charge into the business at hand without a personal segue, it is also rather abrupt to end the call


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without another personal acknowledgment that there is more to the relationship than the immediate occasion of the call. This is similar to Paul's mention of travel plans toward the end of his letters.

(g) *Sign-off*. Often, we reiterate the agreement ("OK then, I'll come by to pick you up at six Saturday"), but the termination of an encounter requires the following element.

(h) *Some personal valedictory*, if only a simple "Good-bye."

Our reflection on the format of the phone call in our culture helps make sense of the ancient letter—especially the need for self-identification at the start, the cushion of small talk before the business (handled nicely by the epistolary thanksgiving), and something similar ("So-and-so sends greetings") before the closing.

## How to Read Someone Else's Mail

No matter how much the media of communication have changed since the first century, a message is still a message. When we recognize a particular text as representing an act of communication between specific persons, we know what is involved in understanding that text. Furthermore, if we are the intended receiver, we usually know or recognize the sender, and the text draws on the preexisting relationship we have with the sender. Local and current-events references do not require explanation. Allusions suffice. Jokes come easily. Much is reasonably presumed. We catch the meaning of a friend's communication because we inhabit the same thought world and share a common history.

Understanding a message that was not originally intended for us is quite another matter. In a very real sense, when we read Paul's Letters we are reading someone else's mail. That is, we are not the addressees the author originally intended. That means we do not inhabit the same thought world and set of experiences as the author. And so we need to do what we would do if we found an opened letter on the sidewalk and dared to enter into the privacy of that correspondence: we examine the text imaginatively to see what the text implies about the relationship between sender and receiver. This is guesswork, but it is guesswork based on the language of the text, which, if it is a contemporary text written in our native tongue, we have a good chance of understanding.

Now, if the text is archived material—say, part of a collection of letters written by the novelist Henry James—if we cared enough, we would use everything we could learn about James's world, especially what we learn from his other letters.


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These strategies—figuring out what the text implies about the sender and receivers and learning about the thought world from other texts and contemporary information—are necessary in the project of understanding Paul's Letters.

There is, however, an important sense in which the letters of the New Testament are *not* someone else's mail. Very soon after their writing, these bits of correspondence were recognized as having value beyond their original occasion and context. For example, even though it is obvious that what we call the First Letter to the Corinthians addresses a very specific set of pastoral problems besetting the Christian community of Corinth in the 50s of the first century AD, it speaks powerfully to the challenges and the faith shared by Christians of any era. The early Church recognized that all Christians could consider themselves addressed by Paul's letter to the local church in Corinth. Indeed, the Church recognizes this text as the inspired Word of God.

This insight can lead contemporary readers to expect a passage from a New Testament letter to speak to them directly, without considering what it meant to the original readers. And often a passage may do that quite powerfully. But recent Catholic teaching—for example, *Divino afflante Spiritu* (1943), *Dei Verbum* (1965), and *Verbum Domini* (2010)—has emphasized the importance of attending first to what a given biblical text meant in the time, culture, and literary form in which it was written. Paradoxically, we scholars find that the more seriously we take that task, that is, looking for the original meaning, the more we discover what that original meaning implies for living the faith today.

## Why Are Some of Paul's Letters "Disputed"?

Anyone who sits down to read scholarly discussions about the writings of Paul soon encounters references to the seven "undisputed" letters (Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon) and the six "disputed" letters (Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus). What scholars are disputing is Pauline authorship. (The Letter to the Hebrews, which has sometimes been attributed to Paul, carries no claim in the text to Pauline authorship, is usually considered anonymous, and therefore is not included among the Letters of Paul.) Since one of the three letters studied in this commentary, Colossians, is among the "disputed" letters, it is good to say something here about that potentially disconcerting label. Most importantly, what is disputed is not their validity and authenticity as inspired Scripture conveying the apostolic tradition, but rather the more specific technical issue of authorship: Is Paul in fact the author of this particular letter? Or


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does this text give evidence of having been written at a later time by another Christian schooled in the Pauline tradition? What gives rise to this dispute is the notable variation in vocabulary, style, and formulation of Christian doctrine that recent generations of scholars have found among six of the letters attributed to Paul. Some scholars attribute those variations to a mix of various causes: the work of Paul's scribes, the development of his own thought over his missionary life, and the diversity of the problems addressed. Others see clues to †pseudonymous writing in such things as the apparent dependency of some letters on others (e.g., Ephesians on Colossians) or an apparent development of thought that seems to require a longer time period than Paul's relatively short career as a Christian missionary.

Since some scholars dispute the Pauline authorship of Colossians, we shall explore this topic more fully in the introduction to that book.

## What Is Special about These Three Letters?

Enforced confinement can foster reflection and introspection. Thus letters from prison often reveal much about their writers. This is surely true of Philippians and, to a lesser extent, Philemon. The same is true of Colossians: even if Colossians is pseudonymous, it reveals Paul's followers' understanding of their model and mentor. So coming to know Paul and, possibly, the early Church's appreciation of him, is clearly one way in which these Prison Letters are of particular interest.

Of special value are the two famous hymns or poems embedded in Philippians and Colossians—the "Christ hymn" of Phil 2:6–11 and the cosmic song of Col 1:15–20. Some scholars have thought that one or both of these passages had an existence prior to the writing of the letters, perhaps as songs sung in the earliest Christian liturgies. And it is undeniable that these pieces have had a life of their own in the centuries *after* the writing of the letters—in private prayer, in eucharistic worship, in the Liturgy of the Hours, and especially in development of the Church's doctrine of the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ—what we call Christology. These days, scholars are beginning to appreciate more and more how these hymns fit into the letters that contain them. Whether Paul composed the poems himself or inherited them, these songs are not simply pasted into the letters; he integrates their vision and imagery fully into the fabric of his respective argument. Each is the kernel of the organic whole of the respective letter. This commentary will give special attention to this aspect of these great sources of the Church's prayer, celebration, and theology.

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There are, of course, further important features of these letters that invite our careful study. We learn much about the early churches in Philippi and Colossae that can illuminate and inspire our own participation in church life today. All three letters speak powerfully of how Christians experience salvation in daily life. The robust prayer that introduces and permeates each document demonstrates the vital part prayer has always played in Christian living.

## A Word about Words

Even though I am not presuming much if any technical knowledge of biblical scholarship, I am presuming that the readers of this commentary are curious and eager to consider the results of the work of biblical scholars. And while I presume no knowledge of Greek on the part of my readers, I think they share my interest in the original Greek words that underlie the English translations. When a passage employs a Greek word or phrase that carries an important resonance from the Greek Old Testament (called the †Septuagint) or in first-century Greco-Roman culture, I will insert the Greek word (in familiar Latin letters, not the Greek alphabet) and will explain what I find especially meaningful, or perhaps hard to put into English, regarding that word or phrase.

For example, it may be a simple matter to translate *kyrie* as "Lord," which many English-speaking readers recognize as a title for addressing God in the Old Testament. But it is helpful to learn that the Greek word was also used to mean "master" in the context of master-slave relationships. Further, it is important to know that in the eastern part of the Roman Empire *kyrie* was used in worship of the emperor as divine. These associations for the Greek word *kyrios* (or *kyrie* in direct address) cannot be expressed in any single word available in English, so we sometimes need to spell out what the original readers and auditors grasped spontaneously. This is something like our need for footnotes to understand the jokes, wordplay, and topical allusions in Shakespeare's plays—meanings that the original audiences caught immediately, without any need for explanation.

These letters may be, in an important way, other people's mail. But they are also *our* letters in that, from early on, our now two-millennia-old community of faith has recognized them as the inspired Word of God. As the house churches of Philippi and Colossae lived in the presence of Jesus whom they recognized as Messiah and risen Lord, so do we. If the times and cultures have changed, the life and mission of the Church we share has much in common with the life and mission of the early churches.



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# Paul's Letter to Philemon

Philemon, the shortest of Paul's letters, is a little gem. A mere twenty-five verses, it nonetheless reveals much about the Apostle's pastoral vision and method, and it provides a privileged glimpse into the life of the early Church.

It is clear from the text that Paul writes from prison, though he does not tell us where. The main addressee, Philemon, is a convert of Paul's, apparently living in Colossae. We surmise this from the reference to Philemon's slave Onesimus as "one of you" in Col 4:9. Given that Onesimus has come to Paul on his own, and given that Ephesus is a mere hundred miles from Colossae, Ephesus is a good guess regarding the location of Paul's imprisonment. Paul writes Philemon (1) to inform him that his missing slave has become a fellow Christian and (2) to persuade him to receive Onesimus in mercy as the brother in Christ that he has become, and to do "even more" (perhaps emancipate him?).

A careful reading reveals a fascinating and complex set of relationships between Paul, the slave-owner Philemon, the slave Onesimus, and the church that meets at Philemon's house. As a piece of correspondence meant to deal with a specific need on a specific occasion, it is highly unlikely that Paul ever thought this letter was destined to a permanent afterlife as a part of the Scriptures. Yet, as we will discover, this piece of †occasional writing exemplifies such wisdom regarding the life and mission of the Church that it was eventually recognized as the Word of God. It also provides a marvelous example of how attending to what seems to have been the *original* meaning of the letter (what it meant *then*) turns out to be the best way to understand what it can mean for Christians today (what it means *now*).



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Fig. 4. A Roman home big enough to host the weekly gathering of a "house church."

## Ephesus as the Place of Writing: A Reasonable Guess?

Given that neither Paul's Letters nor the Acts of the Apostles explicitly mentions that Paul was imprisoned at Ephesus, it may seem odd to suggest that he wrote Philemon during an imprisonment there. However, a number of facts point toward this capital of the Roman province of Asia as a likely place for Paul to have found himself in chains.

1. Acts 19 describes the uproar Paul's ministry caused in Ephesus, when silversmiths with a vested interest in the reputation of the goddess Artemis and her temple (models of which they made and sold to tourists) accused Paul of speaking against worship of the local idol. The intervention of the town clerk during a riot in the theater, urging the craftsmen to bring charges against Paul in the courts to pursue their grievances, could have led to his incarceration (Acts 19:35–40).
2. Paul's decision to bypass Ephesus on his return from the third mission trip (Acts 20:16–17), asking the Ephesian elders to meet him at Miletus instead, suggests he may have been avoiding further friction (entailing incarceration?) with the civic authorities in Ephesus.



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3. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, exemplifying how he and his co-workers "are endangering ourselves all the time," he makes a passing reference to how "at Ephesus I fought with beasts, so to speak," a strong metaphor for facing resistance in that town, language that could well include incarceration (1 Cor 15:32). And even when, a little later in the letter, he speaks more positively about ministry in Ephesus, he still mentions strong opposition there: "I shall stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, because a door has opened for me wide and productive for work, *but there are many opponents*" (1 Cor 16:8–9).
4. The reference in 2 Timothy 1:18b to the "services [Onesiphorus] rendered in Ephesus," paralleling his visit to Paul during his Roman imprisonment (v. 17), could easily refer to an Ephesian incarceration.
5. Along with this circumstantial support for the plausibility of an Ephesian imprisonment is the relative proximity of Ephesus to Colossae (around a hundred miles). Thus, given that the Letter to Philemon entails a slave who makes his way on his own to Paul, Ephesus is a more likely venue for Paul's imprisonment than the far more distant sites of Rome or Caesarea.

## Literary Features

So short that it does not even call for chapter divisions, this letter still exhibits the epistolary format we considered in the general introduction: a prescript which identifies senders and intended addressees, and proffers a greeting (vv. 1–3); a thanksgiving (4–7); the body (8–20); travel talk (21–22); and final greetings and blessing (23–25).

That this is a communication between friends comes through in Paul's use of wordplay—for example, in his allusion to the literal meaning of the slave name Onesimus ("useful," v. 11) and to its sound (*onaimēn* = "profit," v. 20), and in the punning on "heart," sometimes meaning the *source* of affection (vv. 7 and 20) and sometimes the *object* of affection, Onesimus (vv. 12 and 20).

## Theological Themes and Meaning for Today

This letter has a specific purpose, to reconcile a fractured relationship between master and slave, and probably to free up Onesimus to join Paul's mission project. It is not a teaching letter. At the same time, the communication presumes and implies some profound theological themes. A Christian finds his or her identity first of all in being an adopted child of the ultimate Father, God, in being

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a servant of the ultimate Lord, Jesus, *and* in being brother or sister to all other Christians. This identity, which Paul refers to as being "in Christ," supersedes all other social roles, such as master and slave (as in 1 Cor 7:21–24). Paul's way of communicating here, both authoritative and loving, exemplifies a pastoral style that remains a perennial model for leadership in the Church.



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# Outline of Paul's Letter to Philemon

It is reasonable enough to outline this brief letter more or less as the NABRE editors do, simply naming the conventional parts: Address and Greeting (1–3); Thanksgiving (4–7); Body (8–22); Final Greetings (23–25). This four-part division names the obvious segments. But other scholars, noticing recurrences of words and phrases, have sensed a more elaborate design connecting those segments. The most satisfying and fruitful one is the †chiastic structure described by John Paul Heil.[1]

- A Opening Address and Greeting (1–3)
  Paul begins with a framework of imprisonment and partnership under grace
  - B Thanksgiving (4–7)
    From love, Philemon's partnership can result in doing good for Christ
    - C Appeal (8–10)
      Paul appeals to Philemon for Onesimus
      - D Onesimus (11–13)
        Paul wanted to keep Onesimus, his heart, to serve on behalf of Philemon
        - E Philemon's consent (14), a "free-will offering"
          The good that Philemon can do in regard to Onesimus must be from benevolence

1. "The Chiastic Structure and Meaning of Paul's Letter to Philemon," *Biblica* 82 (2001): 178–206. Accessible online at www.bsw.org/Biblica/Vol-82-2001. For details regarding the verbal parallels that join the parallel members in the chiastic structure, see the article.


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- D′ Philemon's beloved brother (15–17)
  Paul wants Philemon to welcome Onesimus as a beloved brother and partner
- C′ Philemon's debt to Paul (18–19)
  Paul wants Philemon to charge him for any debt Onesimus may owe
- B′ What Philemon will do (20–22)
  From obedience, Philemon will do good in benefiting Paul with Onesimus
- A′ Closing Greetings (23–25)
  Paul closes with a framework of imprisonment and partnership under grace

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# Paul's Letter to Philemon and Everyone Else at His House

This letter's brevity is an asset for students of Paul. Its shortness makes it easy to slow down and linger over each word—to listen carefully for Paul's implied meaning. If we take it seriously as an ancient letter and do our best to imagine the original situation, we will be surprised by what it says to us today. For anyone just beginning a serious study of Paul, it might help to think of it as a training letter, the study of which will provide preparation for reading other, lengthier pieces of Paul's correspondence.

When we struggle with the meaning of a word or phrase, we should first attend to the immediate context, that is, the rest of the letter at hand—in this case a mere twenty-five verses. But since we do learn something of Paul from his other letters, we will draw on whatever light they cast on Paul's style, vocabulary, and themes. There is, of course, the still fuller context of the Greco-Roman world of the first century AD to draw upon as well. For example, what scholars have learned about first-century slavery will also throw light on this ancient text about a master and his slave.

My sometimes-lengthy explanations of the elements of this very short letter may surprise you. My intent is to fully explain the Pauline expressions I know we will meet again in his other letters. Let us begin.

## Who's Writing to Whom? Where? (1–3)

**[1]Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon, our beloved and our co-worker, [2]to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our**



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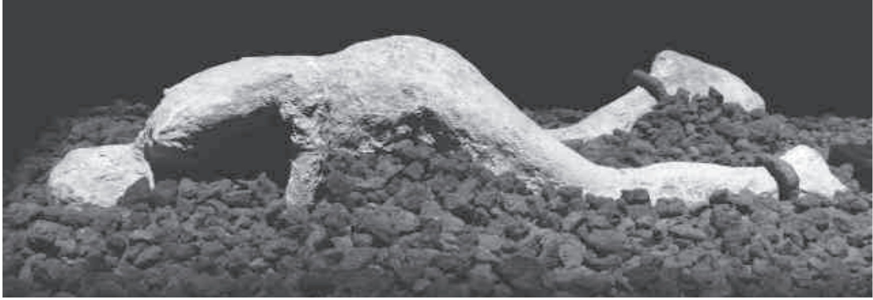

Fig. 5. Cast of the corpse of slave (as evidenced by the manacles that remain on his ankles) found at the ruins of Pompeii from the Mt. Vesuvius eruption, 79 AD.

**fellow soldier, and to the church at your house. [3]Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

**OT:** Num 6:24–26

**NT:** Matt 12:46–50 // Mark 3:31–35 // Luke 8:19–21

**Catechism:** meaning of the title Christ, 436–40; meaning of Lord, 446–51

1 The first four words of the letter present our first translation challenge; **Paul** calls himself **a prisoner for Christ Jesus**, literally, "a prisoner *of* Christ Jesus," which is indeed the rendering of the JB, NJB, NIV, and NRSV. The literal rendering sounds like Paul is saying that Jesus has imprisoned him—which might appear to contradict Paul's celebration of Jesus as his liberator! The NABRE translation, "prisoner for Christ Jesus," is true enough, but may obscure some of Paul's meaning. Paul can also describe himself as a "*slave of* Jesus Christ" (Rom 1:1; Phil 1:1; see also Gal 1:10), and he uses this bold imagery to affirm his radical allegiance to and love for Jesus. As we will see, Paul is literally imprisoned in the *cause* of Jesus, but he also claims, in effect, "Jesus has captured me," reflecting a sentiment expressed explicitly in Phil 3:12: "I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ." One suspects that Paul deliberately chose an ambiguous phrase that would be open to the latter meaning.

Why does he include **Timothy** as a cosender of this letter? We know from the Acts of the Apostles that Timothy was a traveling companion and coworker of Paul; indeed, he is the sole *addressee* of two of the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy). Timothy is also named as coauthor of five other Pauline Letters (2 Cor 1:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1; and 2 Thess 1:1). Since this letter will turn out to be primarily addressed to one individual, **Philemon**, mentioning a cosender may seem a needless addition. But as we will see, Paul means this message to be a rather public communiqué. And this well-known companion of Paul, **our brother** Timothy, serves as a weighty witness to the request Paul



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## St. Ambrose on the Paradox of True Freedom

St. Ambrose of Milan, writing in the fourth century, caught the paradox of Paul's identification as "prisoner of Christ." To be "imprisoned" by Christ is to be bound to a master who liberates in that union. There is no other such Master to escape to.

> How many masters has one who runs from the one Lord. But let us not run from him. Who will run away from him whom they follow bound in chains, but willing chains, which loose and do not bind? Those who are bound with these chains boast and say: "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy." It is more glorious for us to be bound by him than to be set free and loosed from others.

is about to make. It is possible, too, that Timothy is acting as Paul's scribe in the writing of this letter. Verse 19—"I, Paul, write this in my own hand: I will pay"—besides being an IOU note, may also indicate Paul's intervention in the physical writing process done by another hand.

When he calls Philemon **beloved** and **our co-worker**, Paul is more than simply acknowledging him as a colleague, the way we today might use "co-worker" to refer to a person in the next office cubicle. For Paul, the mission of the Church is the *work of the Lord*. Indeed, he writes to the Corinthians, "If Timothy comes, see that he is without fear in your company for he is doing the work of the Lord" (1 Cor 16:10; literally, "for he *works the work* of the Lord"). "Coworker" is a name Paul reserves for those who have labored at the work of the Lord, that is, spreading the gospel—people like Aquila and Priscilla, Urbanus, Timothy (Rom 16:3, 9, and 21), Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25), Euodia, Syntyche, and Clement (Phil 4:2–3). So "coworker" here identifies Philemon as a key leader in the Christian mission.

**2** Calling Apphia **our sister** is similar to calling Timothy "our brother." This is the kinship language with which members of the Christian community referred to one another. It is rooted in Jesus' way of referring to his disciples as his true family (see Mark 3:31–35). Paul calls Archippus **our fellow soldier**, the same epithet he uses for Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25), drawing on the metaphor of Christian mission as a battle, as in 2 Cor 10:3–6 and Eph 6:10–17.

Along with the three individuals named as addressees, Paul includes **the church at your house**. The word "church" here translates the Greek term *ekklēsia*, which in the New Testament always refers to a community, not a building. It



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## Roman Custody: What Kind of Confinement for Paul?

When we twenty-first-century readers, schooled in the imagery of cops-and-robbers films and television crime shows, read Paul's references to being imprisoned, we readily picture him confined behind bars in something like a modern jail. This picture is anachronistic. Roman custody came in three versions. (a) The harshest form was confinement in a quarry or *carcer* (from which we derive our word "incarceration"). An abandoned quarry was typically a pit easily transformed into a place of confinement. This severe situation did not allow for ready access for visitors. (b) A more humane form of Roman confinement was *custodia militaris* ("military custody"). In this form of custody, confinement was ensured by the supervision of military personnel and, usually, chaining to the guard on duty. The location was a secondary consideration; it could be an ordinary dwelling. Paul's "house arrest" in Rome, described at the end of the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 28:16–31), is an example of military custody. (c) The third kind was *custodia libera* ("free custody"), where supervision was provided by nonmilitary personnel, sometimes even family, and chaining was not employed.

Given that Paul was a Roman citizen, and therefore likely to be treated with restraint (see Acts 16:35–39; 24:23; 27:3), and in regular communication with friends, he does not seem to be confined to a *carcer* (quarry). But since he refers regularly to being "in chains," he does not appear to be in *custodia libera*. Military custody, then, best describes his situation when he communicates with Philemon.[a]

a. Richard J. Cassidy, *Paul in Chains: Roman Imprisonment and the Letters of St. Paul* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 37–43, 69–76.

shows up in our English words "ecclesiastical" and "ecclesial," and it has venerable Old Testament roots. In the Greek version of the Old Testament (the †Septuagint), *ekklēsia* translates the Hebrew word for the "assembly" of the people of Israel gathered for worship, especially at Mount Sinai and in the Jerusalem temple. So in the New Testament the very term implies that a Christian community is the gathered people of God. In Paul's writing, the word almost always refers to a particular local Christian community.

In whose house does this *ekklēsia* gather? We readers of the English translation might take **your** (in "your house") as referring to Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus, as if they were a family who owned the house. But the possessive pronoun is singular, not plural, in the Greek. That leaves the question, which



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## The House Church in Early Christianity

We noted that "the church at your house" refers to the community that gathers in Philemon's home. This is a helpful reminder that, in the early days of the Christian movement, Christian communities had not yet built special buildings in which to gather for worship. (These buildings eventually came to be called "churches.") Rather, they gathered in homes with a space large enough for a group to assemble.

How large a group a first-century-AD villa might accommodate, we can only guess from the available archaeological remains in eastern Mediterranean sites. Here is how one scholar summarizes the archaeological data from places like Corinth, Thessalonica, and Pompeii:

> If we averaged out these sizes, we would arrive at a villa with a *triclinium* [dining room] of some 36 square meters and an *atrium* of 55 square meters. If we removed all the couches from the *triclinium*, we would end up with space for perhaps 20 persons. If we included the atrium, minus any large decorative urns, we could expand the group to perhaps 50 persons, provided people did not move around, and some did not mind getting shoved into the shallow pool. The maximum comfortable group such a villa could accommodate would most likely be in the range of 30 to 40 persons.[a]

Such dimensions give us reason to picture the church that meets at Philemon's place as a community of some thirty-five persons. Luke gives us a glimpse of this practice when he describes the life of the early Jewish-Christian community in Jerusalem in Acts 2:46: "Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes." In his greetings to the Christian community in Rome, Paul refers to three such house churches in that city (Rom 16:5, 14, 15). The phrase "house church" refers not to the house but to the community that meets there.

a. Vincent Branick, *The House Church in the Writings of Paul* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989), 39–40.

one of the three is the owner? Some scholars, noting that Archippus is the last person named before the reference to the house, take him to be the owner. But the fact that Paul names Philemon first and dubs him **co-worker** identifies *him* as the primary addressee and the owner of the house. As we will see, Philemon is also the leader of the community that meets at his house.

3 We might be tempted to bypass the greeting—**Grace to you** (plural) **and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**—as a pious formula of no particular importance. Yet for Paul the greeting is never mere convention. The usual salutation in a Greek letter in those days was simply "Greetings," as in the apostolic letter in Acts 15:23 and at the head of the Epistle of James. But


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## "You" in Greek: Singular or Plural?

In a classroom situation, when I say something like "Are you still with me?" the class does not know if I am addressing the whole class or if I am singling out the sleepy student in the third row. They need a contextual clue, like the focus of my eyes or a pointed finger, to understand how I mean "you." Similarly, when we read "you" in a letter of Paul or a saying of Jesus in the Gospels, it is sometimes not clear whether the speaker or writer is addressing an individual or a group. It is a peculiarity of modern English that the second-person pronoun "you" does not distinguish between singular and plural. For example, in an English translation of the Letter to Philemon, it is often difficult for the reader to know when Paul is addressing the community and when he is speaking directly to Philemon. But the Greek of the original text, like most languages other than contemporary English, has distinct words for you-singular and you-plural.

The Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7) provides another example of the importance of knowing whether the "you" in the text is individual or communal. Jesus' teaching takes on a fresh meaning when one learns that most of the "yous" in Matt 5–7 are plural, signaling that the speech is addressed to the community of those who follow Jesus.

When the context does not make it clear whether Paul addresses an individual or the whole community, this commentary will note whether Paul is using singular or plural "you."

Paul always Christianizes the conventional salutation, as he does here. **Grace** is the free gift of God by which Christians are saved, and **peace**, coming from this Jewish teacher, surely entails the Hebrew sense of *shalom*, the peace and fullness of life whose source is God. Paul may well be alluding to the priestly blessing of Numbers 6:24–26: "The Lord bless you and keep you! The Lord let his face shine upon you and be *gracious* to you! The Lord look upon you kindly and give you *peace*!"[1] That Paul speaks of "peace from . . . the Lord Jesus Christ" might well be heard as a deliberate contrast to the *pax Romana*, the imperial "peace" established coercively by the Lord Caesar. The Greek second-person pronoun is precise: Paul addresses his greeting to you-plural, that is, the church that meets in Philemon's house.

The titles for God and Jesus, **God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**, which we may hear as conventional formulas, also deserve our attention

1. Noted by Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 34c (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 90.



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here. For Paul, to call God "Father" was already part of his pre-Christian Jewish heritage; the Lord God is called "Father" some fifteen times in the Old Testament, though only rarely in direct address (Isa 63:16; 64:7). The paternal title takes on a fresh dimension for Christians; it seems to have been Jesus's habitual way of praying (see Mark 14:36, "Abba, Father"), the form of divine address he taught disciples in the Our Father (Matt 6:9; Luke 11:2), and the common Christian way of praying, even among Gentiles, to which Paul alludes in Rom 8:15 and Gal 4:6. Indeed, understanding God as Father grounds Jesus' own reference to his disciples as a new family of brothers and sisters (Matt 12:50). That background in Jesus' ministry and in the life of the early Church clarifies why Paul, and the early Church generally, uses the kinship language of brother and sister to describe the relationships of Christians to one another.

Paul's use of titles for **Jesus** also entails more than conventional formulas. **Christ** is the English transliteration of the Greek word *Christos*, which means "anointed one." "Christ" is therefore the equivalent of the Hebrew word *messiah*, which also means "anointed one." In Jewish tradition, the anointed one was God's special agent in the glorious events of the age to come. Some thought of the anointed one as a king descended from David; others, as a temple priest; still others as a "prophet like Moses" (see Deut 18:15–18). When the Christian tradition applies the title "Christ" or "Messiah" to Jesus, it acclaims him as the fulfillment of all these expectations, especially in the role of king. This is surely true in the case of Paul. He uses the title "Christ" in other letters where he emphasizes Jesus' fulfillment of the biblical promises of an anointed one, a royal agent of God who would lead a restored Israel (the twelve tribes reunited, as promised in Isa 49:5), the end-time people of God. Far from being a solitary figure, the messiah is a king who rules a people (see the oracle of Nathan in 2 Sam 7). That vision of a people united around, and even *in*, the Messiah is a crucial aspect of the message of this letter, which so emphasizes community. *Christos* occurs eight times in this brief document of twenty-five verses. It frames both the letter's opening and its final greeting, in each case with "Christ Jesus" at the beginning (vv. 1 and 23) and "the Lord Jesus Christ" at the end (vv. 3 and 25).[2]

2. Some scholars hold that when Paul writes to Gentiles, the title Christ devolves into something like a second name, with little emphasis on the Jewish tradition regarding the messiah. However, it should be noted that people in Greco-Roman culture placed great stock in antiquity. Living in such a culture, Paul's readers would have appreciated that Jesus fulfilled ancient prophecies. On this, see N. T. Wright, "*Christos* as 'Messiah' in Paul: Philemon 6," in *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 41–55.

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Finally, the inclusion of the title "Lord" with Jesus Christ has its own special importance. Occurring five times in the letter, "Lord" (*kyrios* in Greek)[3] translates the unspeakable name of God, in Hebrew †YHWH. To apply it to Jesus is to confess that he is divine. But there are other dimensions, obvious to ancient Greek speakers and readers but not obvious to contemporary readers of English translations: *Kyrios* meant "master" with reference to slaves, and it was also a title for the Roman emperor. We shall see that these dimensions of "Lord" pertain to the letter's message in powerful ways.

## Reflection and Application (1–3)

*The individual and the community*. One might not expect the address and greeting of a letter to warrant much reflection and pastoral application. But the exegesis above suggests that there is plenty in these first three verses to ponder and apply. First, there is Paul's sense of the network of relationships entailed in Christian community. Even in a message primarily addressed to an individual, Paul implies right from the start that the news of Onesimus's conversion and his request of Philemon are matters of interest to the whole community. In the shared life of the Christian community, which Paul elsewhere calls "the body of Christ," the quality of any relationship within that community has implications for the rest.

*Church as community and as edifice*. The fact that the word "church" (*ekklēsia*) applied first to the community and only later to a special building in which the community gathers can help us understand the relationship between community and architecture. Today we are likely to link the sacredness of a church building to the fact that the Lord is present there in the reserved Eucharist. This is a reasonable and valid connection, but the church space was considered sacred even before the practice of reserving the Eucharist developed.

Paul teaches that the community itself is the temple of the Holy Spirit (see 1 Cor 3:16–17; 2 Cor 6:16–18; and also Matt 16:18), and the building eventually called "church" was first understood to be sacred because it was the space that housed the temple of the community when it gathered for the celebration of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:18–22).

When it became the practice of the church to reserve the Eucharist after the liturgy for distribution to the sick or to those who were otherwise unable

3. Some Catholics will be familiar with praying the Greek prayer *Kyrie eleison* in the Latin Mass. And the Kyrie is sometimes heard in musical settings at English-language Masses today.

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to participate directly in the community's celebration of the Eucharist, that ongoing presence of the Lord added a further dimension to the sacredness of the building. This history and these realities are part of what warrants the primacy of altar and pulpit in churches and, in many churches, a separate space or chapel for the reservation of the Eucharist for the sacrament of the sick, and as a special space for prayer and meditation.

*The Church, a new family*. The repetition of titles for Jesus and the parity of the Lord Jesus Christ with God our Father as source of grace and peace serve to underscore what makes the *ekklēsia* a "household" or a new "family." A Christian community is never simply a group of like-minded individuals who decide to join together for a common purpose. The people gathered for worship are there in response to God's initiative. They are "called out" (the root sense of *ekklēsia*) through faith and incorporation into the people of the Messiah. That, and nothing less, is what makes them a community. That they call God "Father" is no accident of patriarchal culture but an affirmation of what makes them a new family united with the risen Son, Jesus. Jesus already anticipates this later reality in his ministry (Matt 12:50). This understanding of Christian community and its source form an important background for the message to follow in the Letter to Philemon.

These considerations have practical implications regarding how we think about "going to church," how we design churches, and how we respond to varieties of church architecture. (1) The process of gathering to celebrate Eucharist is never simply a matter of convenience or efficiency—for example, a single Mass serving the maximum number of people. To gather for Mass is to enact the reality that in the celebration of the Lord's Supper we are indeed being "called out" at the initiative of God the Father to join his Son in serving him together in the Spirit. (2) Attention to the physical structure that houses the church, which is the community, can help our worship. Finding ourselves in a church building whose structure gives us a sense of being joined as one to focus ahead helps us respond to a transcendent God, one who calls us to stretch beyond ourselves and our immediate concerns to relate to the Source of all, whom we cannot see. And when we worship in a structure—a half circle, say, or in the round—we are reminded that the community itself is the new temple and that Jesus the incarnate Word is Emmanuel, God with us, and that we are indeed the body of Christ. Whether the architecture emphasizes the transcendent or immanent aspect of the eucharistic liturgy, we do well to respond to the truth that it conveys and appreciate what it says rather than criticize it for what our taste may find wanting.



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## Thanksgiving, with a Rhetorical Purpose (4–7)

**[4]I give thanks to my God always, remembering you** [singular] **in my prayers, [5]as I hear of the love and the faith you have in the Lord Jesus and for all the holy ones, [6]so that your partnership in the faith may become effective in recognizing every good there is in us that leads to Christ. [7]For I have experienced much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the holy ones have been refreshed by you, brother.**

**OT:** Deut 28:9
**NT:** 2 Cor 7:13–15; Eph 4:12–13
**Catechism:** prayer of thanksgiving, 2637–38; Christian holiness, 2013–14; saints, 823

**4–5** Even though Paul has joined himself with Timothy as cosender, has included the whole community in his address and greeting, and will allude to still others who are somehow privy to this communication, he moves right to I-you language in the singular as he begins the thanksgiving: **I give thanks to my God always, remembering you** (singular) **in my prayers**. This Paul-to-Philemon communiqué introduces the main business of the letter, which the rest of the community is meant to overhear. All of the "yous" in the thanksgiving are singular—the only cue for the non-Greek reader being "brother" in verse 7—and pertain to Philemon. Paul has heard about Philemon's **love and faith** both toward Jesus and toward his fellow Christians—"faith," of course, pertaining to **the Lord Jesus** and "love" toward Jesus but especially toward **all the holy ones**.

That last phrase, also commonly translated "the saints" (RSV, NIV, NRSV, and JB), is an expression Paul often uses in his letters, not referring to exceptional persons but to all members of the local church. "The holy ones," or "the saints," is a term used in the †Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament) to refer to the covenant people of God as a whole. They are "holy" not necessarily in exemplary behavior but as a people dedicated to, in the sense of "set apart for," the service of God. This meaning reflects the word's original use in the context of Israel's liturgy, for example in Exodus 19:6, "You will be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation" (spoken at Sinai), and Deut 7:6, "You are a holy people to the Lord, your God; the Lord, your God, has chosen you from all the peoples on the face of the earth to be a people specially his own."

Although it is God who chooses and sets apart a people for himself, to be called "holy" implies a moral challenge, as shown in Deut 28:9 LXX: "The Lord will raise you up for himself a holy people, as he swore to your ancestors, if you will hear the voice of the Lord your God and go in his ways." Along with other New Testament authors, Paul uses the term to refer to any and all baptized


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Christians. The best rendering of the phrase "all the holy ones" may well be "all God's dedicated people," which catches both the passive idea of being set aside for a divine purpose and the consequent ethical challenge to live according to that purpose.[4] The phrasing of the sentence implies that Philemon loves and believes in the people of his community just as he loves and believes in Christ Jesus.

**6**

With verse 6 Paul's prayer moves from thanksgiving to petition. The blessing he prays for Philemon could be translated "that the sharing of your faith may become effective" (NRSV), but I find the rendering of the NABRE more consonant with the thrust of the letter: **so that your partnership in the faith may become effective**. For, as we will see, the substance of the letter has more to do with Philemon's *living* the fullness of the community's shared faith than with the *communication* of his personal faith to the community.

The adjective translated "effective" (*energēs*) is wonderfully apt. A rare word (used in the New Testament only here and in 1 Cor 16:9 and Heb 4:12), *energēs* connects with the term *synergos* ("coworker"), with which Paul honored Philemon in the prescript and which Paul will use again to describe his companions in the closing (v. 24). *Energēs* is also a reminder that Paul and Philemon are both involved in the work (*ergon*) of God. What Paul is about to ask Philemon to do will further that work, enabling the faith that he shares to become truly *energēs*.[5] This kind of verbal echo speaks more to the ear than to the eye.

And just how is Philemon's effective participation in the faith to show itself? Paul prays that it will be effective **in recognizing every good there is in us that leads to Christ**. If that language comes across as a rather vague prayer, it is because this is the NABRE's solution to a phrase that has constantly stymied translators. A literal rendering of the last phrase would be "in recognition of every good in us *toward Christ* [*eis Christon*]." Compare:

> the acknowledgement of every good work that is in you in Christ Jesus.
>
> Douay-Rheims

> so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.
>
> NIV

> when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ.
>
> NRSV

4. The phrase "all God's dedicated people" is the happy solution of Fitzmyer's translation in *Letter to Philemon*, 93.

5. Note the relationship of *energēs* to our words "energy" and "energetic."

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may come to expression in full knowledge of all the good we can do for Christ.

NJB

The main problem here is unpacking what is implied in the simple word *eis*, which can mean "toward" or "with respect to" or "in honor of" or "for the sake of." It seems to me that the most satisfying solution is to translate the phrase as "toward Christ," taking it as shorthand for the building up of Christ's body, the church—the end-time people of God that Christ has inaugurated through his life, death, and resurrection.[6] This process is later spelled out in Eph 4:12–13, which describes the purpose of the gifted roles within the community: "to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the extent of the full stature of Christ." What Paul is about to ask of Philemon in verses 8–14 will exemplify precisely the kind of community-building that should come from his gifts as leader of the church that meets at his house. Paul, in other words, is about to request that Philemon recognize "the good" they have "toward Christ" (that is, toward the further growth of Christ's body, the church) in the new convert Onesimus.

7 **For I have experienced much joy and encouragement from your love**. This reference to Philemon's effective leadership—his joy and encouragement—indicates Paul's motivation in his prayer for Philemon. Paul affirms the way Philemon has built up this community; and he will ask of him another expression of that gifted leadership.

Paul brings his praise of Philemon to a climax by saying **the hearts of the holy ones have been refreshed by you, brother**. Paul's wording is a bit gutsier than the English overtones of "heart-refreshing" imply. The word translated "hearts," *splanchna*, literally means "innards" or "bowels," and was used in the Greek Old Testament to name the seat of emotions, especially compassion (e.g., Prov 12:10; see 2 Cor 7:15 for a New Testament example). The KJV and the Douay-Rheims both have "bowels of the saints" here. But since the biblical imagery has to do with feelings and not the gastrointestinal references evoked today by the words "guts" and "bowels," contemporary translators rightly choose "heart," which catches the meaning nicely. Aware of the strength of this earthy image, Paul will use it playfully two more times in this brief and personal letter.

6. This is the solution offered by N. T. Wright in "*Christos* as 'Messiah' in Paul." Wright's point is that "Christ/Messiah" always entails the end-time people of God over which the Anointed One reigns.



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