

“no longer as a slave, but better
than a slave, as a dear brother.”



Undeserved privileges. Unexpected blessings.

In my years as a Christian teacher and pastor, I've experienced plenty of both. Among the privileges has been the ability to partner with and learn from other Christians from around the world. One thing I've learned is that the church—the totality of men and women, boys and girls, from every nation, culture, and century who have put their faith in Jesus—is broader and deeper than I've fully appreciated. Broader, in that it encompasses many traditions and expressions of devotion. Deeper, in that its roots are ancient.

More recently, I've had the honor of serving on the Philemon Project teaching team with several dear brothers. We've been exploring a part of Scripture that tends to be neglected—the epistle (from the Greek word for “letter”) of the Apostle Paul to Philemon—striving to learn what this ancient letter about reconciliation and renewal can say to us as followers of Jesus today.

Along the way I've sought to discover imagery connected with this brief but powerful letter. The following slides are a guided tour of the results. They combine Bible study, art history, church history, even foreign language lessons. My hope is that they will awaken in you the same thing that I unexpectedly found along the way: a sense of wonder. At the gifts the Holy Spirit has given creators of beauty. At the consistent love for God and his Word shown across so many centuries. At the infinite grace of Jesus, which deserves every expression of human creativity, devotion, and praise we can offer.

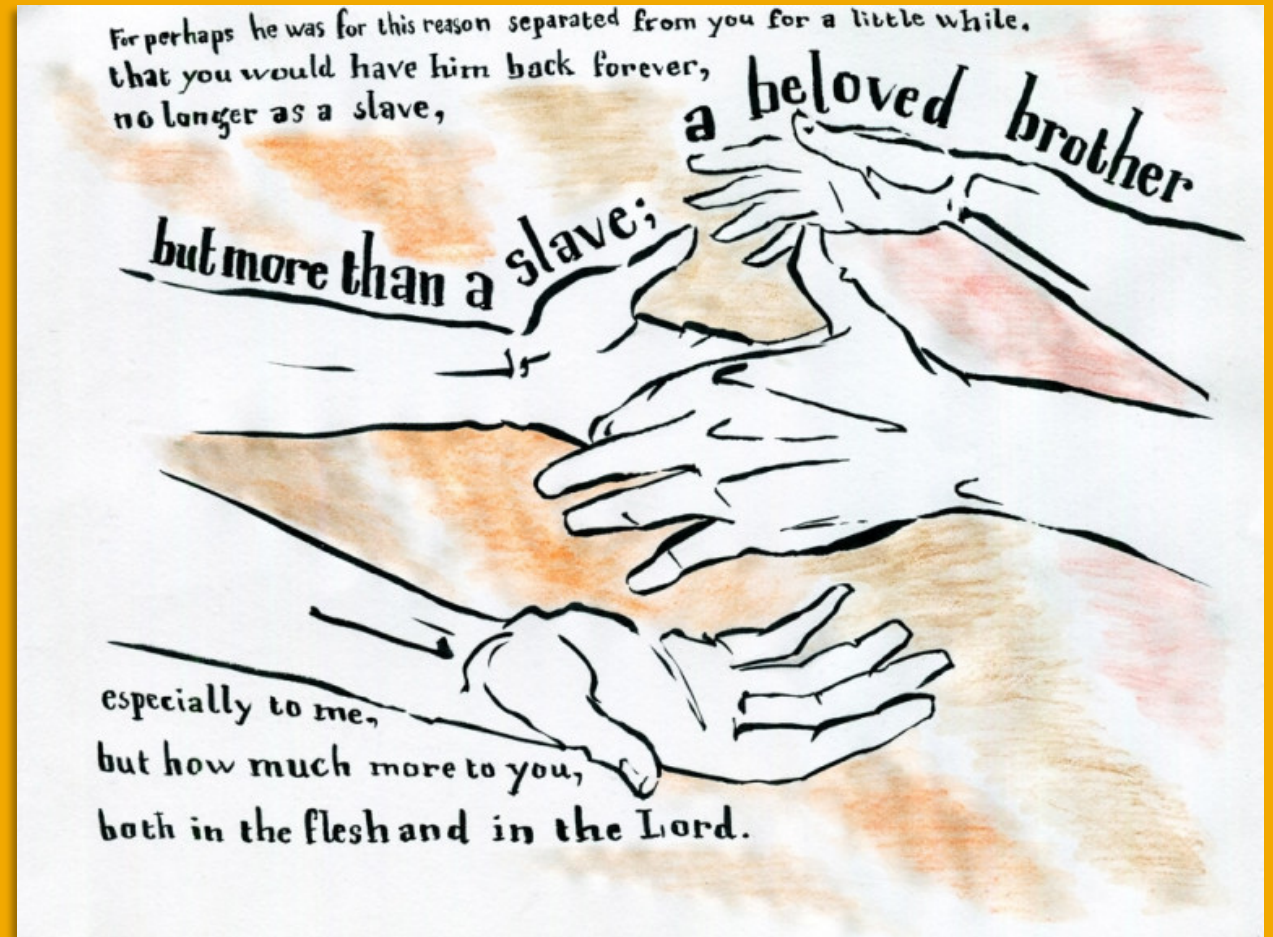
Jimmy Agan
Senior Pastor, Intown Community Church



Artist Adrien Converse created this illustration of brotherly love using verses 15-16 of Philemon. The translation is from the 1995 update of the New American Standard Bible. Adrien teamed up with author Jeffrey Kranz to identify and illustrate key texts from every book of the Bible.

Members of the Philemon Project teaching team identified this as our favorite image connected to this book of Scripture—though we're open to learning as we discover more!

I'm always drawn artwork that incorporates words and text. I love the way this piece seamlessly merges the verbal and the visual.



From "Bible verse art: one drawing for every book of the Bible,"
by Adrien Converse

[Photo link](#)

For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a little while,
that you would have him back forever,
no longer as a slave,

but more than a slave;

a beloved brother

especially to me,
but how much more to you,
both in the flesh and in the Lord.





Ἡ ΠΡΟΣ ΦΙΛΗΜΟΝΑ ἘΠΙ-
ΣΤΟΛΗ ΠΑΥΛΟΥ.



ΑΥΛΟΣ δέσμιος Χεισοῦ Ἰησοῦ, ἔ-
τιμόθεος ὁ ἀδελφός, Φιλήμονι τῷ ἀ-
γαπῆτῳ καὶ σὺνεργῷ ἡμῶν, ἔ-
Απφία τῆ ἀγαπῆτῆ, καὶ Ἀρχίπῳ τῷ συστρα-
τιῳ ἡμῶν, καὶ τῇ κατ' οἶκόν σου ἐκκλη-
σία· χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη ἀπὸ Θεοῦ
πατρὸς ἡμῶν, καὶ Κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χεισοῦ.

αὶ Εὐχαριστῶ τῷ Θεῷ μου, πάντοτε μνησθῆναι σου ποιούμενος ἵνα α.Θεσ.α.Α
β.Θεσ.α.Α

Printed in Paris in 1550 by Robert Stephanus, this is the Greek text of Philemon 1-4. (The top of the page, not pictured here, includes the final verses of Titus.) The title reads, “The Epistle of Paul to Philemon.”

The Greek font here is simply beautiful, featuring many flourishes and unusual characters. For example, notice the symbol for kai, “and,” at the end of the first line of text—one of three different ways the word “and” is printed in these verses!

The message of Philemon is beautiful. Aren’t we thankful that someone took time to make the letters themselves so lovely?

1550 Stephanus Greek New Testament; Philemon title page
[Photo Source](#)



Ἡ ΠΡΟΣ ΦΙΛΗΜΟΝΑ ΕΠΙ-
ΣΤΟΛΗ ΠΑΥΛΟΥ.



ΑΥΛΟΣ δέσμιος Χεισοῦ Ἰησοῦ, ἔ-
τιμόθεος ὁ ἀδελφός, Φιλήμονι τῷ ἀ-
γαπητῷ καὶ σὺνεργῷ ἡμῶν, ἔ-
ἀπφία τῆ ἀγαπητῆ, καὶ Ἀρχίππῳ τῷ συστρα-
τιώτῃ ἡμῶν, καὶ τῆ κατ' οἶκόν σου ἐκκλη-
σία· χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη ἀπὸ Θεοῦ
πατρὸς ἡμῶν, καὶ Κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χεισοῦ.

α

Εὐχαριστῶ τῷ Θεῷ μου, πάντοτε μνησθῆναι σου ποιούμενος ἵπτι

α. Θεσ. α. Α

β. Θεσ. α. Α



Illuminated Greek manuscript of Philemon; source unknown
[Photo link](#)

“Epistle to Philemon”—so reads the red text in this image. The next lines, what we know as verse 1, feature a “sacred abbreviation.”

Note the horizontal lines over IU and XU, indicating abbreviation of the phrase “of Jesus Christ.” Many Greek manuscripts abbreviate words referring to members of the Trinity, as an expression of reverence.

The figures at left are revered leaders, as their halos suggest. In most ancient art, the Apostle Paul is depicted, as here, with a beard. The other figure could be Onesimus (believed in some traditions to have become the bishop of Ephesus) or Philemon (believed in some traditions to have become the bishop of Gaza).

What caught my eye about this image? The beauty of the Greek script, the bold colors, and the simplicity of the figures.

εὐχαριστῶν καὶ
ἡγάσθησόντες ἡμῶν φησὶν ἡμεῖς
καὶ παράκλησις ἡμεῖς περὶ αὐτῶν ἐρωθῆναι
διὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν ἐπιβολὴν πρὸς φιλήμους



Π αἰγλοσδάμοι
Π ἰούχου καὶ τιμο
θεοσὸ ἀδελφός
φιλήμοι μιτῶσα
την τῶ καὶ σμερ
γῶν ἡμῶν καὶ ἀτ
δία τὴν ἀσπλητὴ καὶ ἀρχιπῶ
πιστῶν ἡμῶν καὶ τ



In this 14th century French manuscript, we see the beginning of the text of Philemon. The illustration shows a messenger receiving the (just-completed?) epistle from the Apostle Paul (identified by a halo). The illuminated upper-case 'P' is the first letter of the Apostle's name. To the right of the 'P' you can find the names Timothy (thymotee), Philemon (philomen), Apphia (aapie), and Archippus (archipe)—all mentioned in verses 1-2 of the epistle.

I love the eager look on the messenger's face, the intricate details in the artwork, and the beauty of the script itself.

Who was the actual messenger who delivered this epistle? It was most likely carried from Paul's place of imprisonment to Colossae by two people: Tychicus and Onesimus himself (see Colossians 4:7-9). I wonder if our unknown French artist thought he was depicting Onesimus?

**Illuminated French manuscript of Philemon;
14th century; held in the National Library of the Netherlands
[Photo link](#)**

qui tota dicitur de manu. Salutem vobis q
no^s aiment en foy. la grace de dieu soit
o^u touz. amen. *Epistre. athymotte*



Ols loiez de l'amour ihesu
crist & freres thymotte.
a philomen nre ami & nre
aideur & a apie nre tres
chere seur. & a archypr
nre ami & a leglyse qui est
en ta maison. vous aiez paix & grace de dieu
nre per & de nre seigneur ihu crist. Je rent
graces touz temps a mon dieu faisant
touz temps remembrance de toy en mes
oraisons oianz ta charite & ta foy q tu

This image, from a Latin manuscript of Philemon, features a “historiated initial”—the first letter of a paragraph, decorated and containing a picture.

Here the picture features the Apostle Paul (with halo), Onesimus (center), and Philemon (receiving Paul’s epistle). Onesimus is portrayed with a tonsure, a partial shaving of the head associated in medieval times with slavery (and thus worn by monks as “slaves of Christ”).

The contrast of rich brown and blue is striking, but what I appreciate most in this image is the facial expressions. Paul looks hopeful, eager; Onesimus looks concerned, anxious; Philemon, startled, surprised. He appears to be looking at Paul, underscoring the boldness of the Apostle’s request: “I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart...that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother...” (Philemon 12, 16).



Detail from illuminated Latin manuscript of Philemon;
source unknown

[Photo link](#)





“To Phile[mon]. To the Hebrews.” Bold red and blue letters tell us that this beautifully decorated (“illuminated,” to use the technical term) page includes the entire epistle of Philemon and the beginning of the epistle to the Hebrews.

A unique feature of this manuscript is the red text that separates sections on the page. The portions surrounding Philemon say, “The argument [that is, summary] of the epistle to Philemon begins.... The argument ends. The epistle to Philemon begins.... The epistle to Philemon ends.” The creator(s) of this manuscript wanted the content to be clear to read and beautiful to see.

So, let’s see Paul (with beard and halo) giving a scroll to someone. Who could it be? The argumentum tells us: “He [Paul] writes a private letter to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus his slave. He writes from the city of Rome, from prison, [sending his letter] by the Onesimus written about above.”

Illuminated Latin manuscript of Philemon; held at the British Library
[Photo link](#)

AD

PHILEA

AD

HEBREOS

meum sunt omnes. Salutate eos omnes
qui nos amant in fide. Gratia dei cum omnibus
vobis amen. **Explicit epla ad titum.**

**Incipit argumentum in epla ad
filemonem ad filemonem.**

familiares litteras facit. pro
oncsimo seruo eius: scribens ei
ab urbe roma de carcere. p supra
scriptum oncsimum. **Explicit
argumentum. Incipit epla ad file**



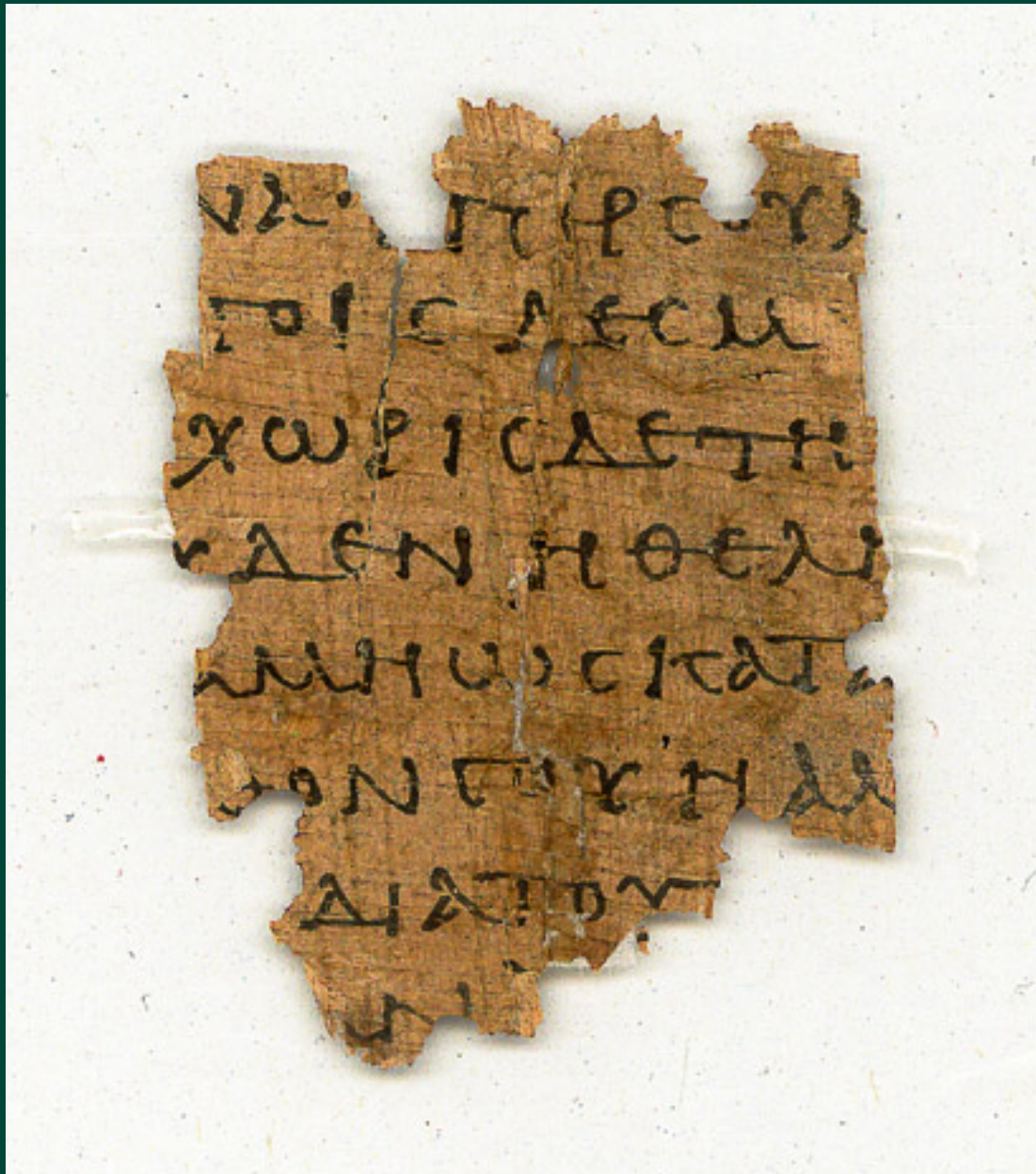
monem.
Aulus ui
ctus iheru
salem et timothe
us frater.
philemoni
dilecto et
adiutori
meo. et appi
e sorori ka
nissime. ar
chippo com
militom

meo. et ecclesie que in domo tra
a e: gratia vobis et pax a deo patre
meo et domino ihesu christo. Gratias
ago deo meo semper. memo
nam tu faciens in orationibus
meis. audiens kantate tu
am et fidem quam habes in do
mino ihesu. et in omnibus sanctis: ut

um ceteris. si uoluerint. Ita sicut in ei
ideo discessit ad iherosolimam. ut in ei
num illum recipes. iam non ut ser
uum. sed p suo carissimum fratrem. ma
xime mihi. quanto magis tibi et
carne et in domino. Si ergo habes me
solum: suscipe illum sicut me. Si
autem aliquid nocuit tibi. aut dicitur
habe mihi imputa. Ego paulus scripsi
si mea manu. ego ito dicitur: ut no di
cam tibi. quod et te ipsum mihi deles. I
ta fit ego te suar in domino: et fice
uisceia mea in christo. Confidens dole
dientia tua scripsi tibi: sciens quoniam
sup id quod dico facies. Simul autem: et
parati mihi ho spiritum. Nam spiro: p
orones uias donan me uobis. Salu
tat te epaphras captiuus meus in x
pistu: marcus. anstaretus. demas. et lu
cas. adiutores mei. Gratia domini
nri ihesu christi. cum spiritu uiu: amen. **Ex**



PLICIT epla ad filemonem.
**Incipit prologus in epla ad he
breos.**
Primum dicendum e bze
cur aplos paulus in hac
epla scribendo non suauiter
morem suum: ut uerba
um nominis sui. ut ordis
describer dignitatem. hec e
quod ad eos scribens qui ex
cum iherosolima crediderant. qua



Just over a century after Paul wrote his epistle to Philemon, a Christian scribe wrote the letters you see here.

This papyrus fragment is the earliest known manuscript of Philemon. Analysis of the materials, ink, and writing style enable scholars to conclude that this document was created around 175-225 A.D.

It reminds us that early Christians viewed this not as a “private letter,” but as apostolic wisdom for followers of Jesus in every age. Even then, Christians were doing what we still do today: listening to these words read aloud in worship, asking the Lord Jesus to help us live out the truth they express.

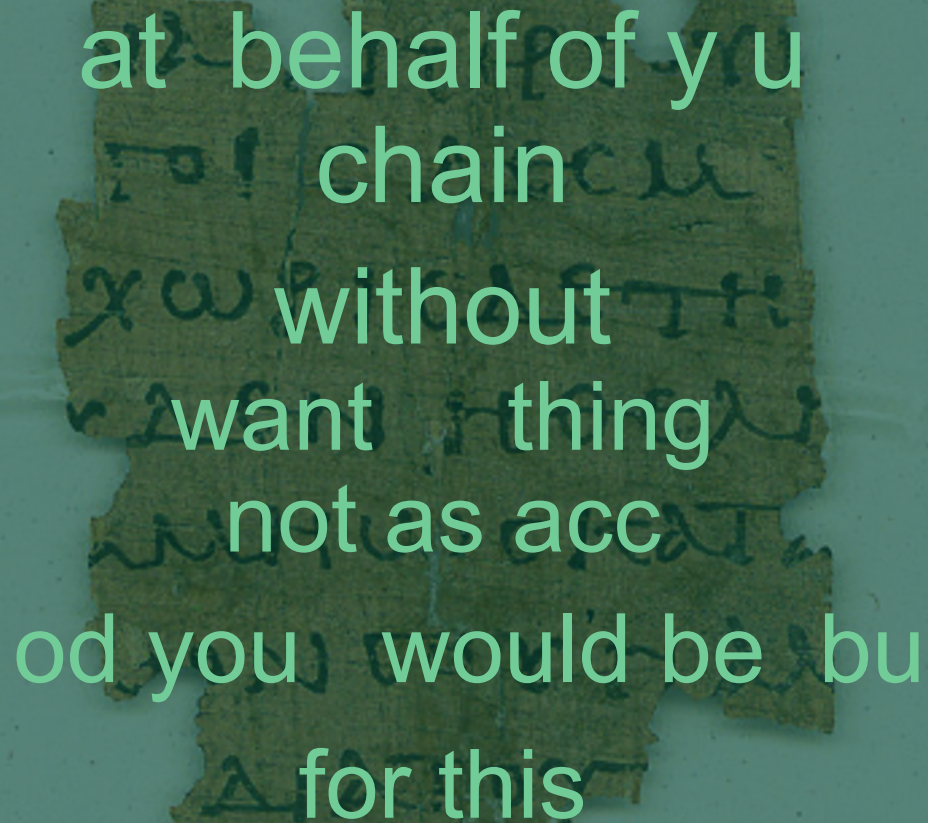
**Papyrus 87, with excerpts from Philemon 13-15;
late 2nd-early 3rd century
[Papyrus 87 - Wikipedia](#)**



Below is a translation of Philemon 13-15. The word order has been modified from standard translations to approximate the order of the Greek text. Green highlights indicate parts of the text that appear on the Papyrus 87 fragment:

I would have liked to keep him with me so that on behalf of you he could assist me while I am in chains for the gospel. But without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that any good you might do would be not as according to force but voluntary. Perhaps for this reason he was separated from you for a little while, so that you might have him back forever...

Papyrus 87, with excerpts from Philemon 13-15;
late 2nd-early 3rd century
[Papyrus 87 - Wikipedia](#)

A photograph of a fragment of ancient papyrus with Greek text overlaid in English. The papyrus is a small, irregularly shaped piece of brown, fibrous material with some darker spots and a vertical crease. The Greek text is written in a cursive hand. Overlaid on the papyrus is the English text: "at behalf of you", "chain", "without", "want thing", "not as acc", "od you would be bu", "for this".

at behalf of you
chain
without
want thing
not as acc
od you would be bu
for this

Here, the portions of the text that appear on the papyrus fragment are overlaid on the image, to give a rough idea of what the surviving Greek text says.

I would have liked to keep him with me so that on behalf of you he could assist me while I am in chains for the gospel. But without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that any good you might do would be not as according to force but voluntary. Perhaps for this reason he was separated from you for a little while, so that you might have him back forever...

When I read an ancient text like this, I feel a deep sense of connection to the earliest generations of Christian believers.

Papyrus 87, with excerpts from Philemon 13-15;
late 2nd-early 3rd century
[Papyrus 87 - Wikipedia](#)

Paul and Timothy write to “Philemon our beloved fellow-worker, and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow-soldier, and the church in your house” (Philemon 1-2). In the larger painting from which this detail comes, Greek text tells us that these figures represent (left to right) Archippus, Apphia, and Philemon.

In Luke 10:1, Jesus sends out a large group of people to spread the good news of God’s Kingdom. In the Western church, these 70 (72 in some texts) are known as “disciples,” and in the Eastern church as “Apostles” or “The Apostles of the Seventy.” Archippus, Apphia, and Philemon are often included in lists and images of the Seventy. Though it is appropriate to honor them as early church leaders, it is most likely that they were converted through Paul’s ministry (see Philemon 19), decades after Jesus sent out the Seventy.

Despite the poor resolution, this image has somehow captivated me. The rich colors, and especially the facial expressions, keep drawing me back. These look like wise and gentle people I would want to shape my life.



Detail of Archippus, Apphia, and Philemon from a larger painting of the Apostles of the Seventy; source unknown

С. ДП. С. С. ДП.
архиппъ апѣла франанови



Here Philemon (center) and Archippus (right) are depicted alongside Cecilia. In some traditions, these three martyrs are honored on November 22, even though Cecilia lived two centuries after the others. All three are believed to have been beheaded for their faith in Jesus.

Eastern Orthodox views of images like this, known as icons, are complex. I don't have to agree with all of those views to appreciate the beauty of the artistry here; or to rejoice that over centuries, there has been a faithful witness to Jesus Christ around the world, extended to a beautifully diverse church—to Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female (Galatians 3:28).

May the beauty of Jesus give us boldness to live, and if necessary to die, for him.



Greek Orthodox icon of Saints Cecilia, Philemon, and Archippus
November 22 Celebration of Saints Cecilia, Philemon, and Archippus

ΚΙΚΙΛΙΑ

ΟΙ ἍΓΙΟΙ
ΦΙΛΗΜΩΝ

ἈΡΧΙΠΠΟΣ



This modern mosaic depicts “Apostle Onesimus.” Its relationship to the book of Philemon is complicated.

Some ancient lists include a man named Onesimus in the list of “The Apostles of the Seventy” (see earlier slide). One such list indicates that this “Apostle Onesimus” is different from the Onesimus mentioned in the book of Philemon. On the other hand, many traditional sources assume that the two are the same person. Historically, that doesn’t fit the timeline of the New Testament: Jesus sends out the 70 before 30 A.D., while the Onesimus mentioned in Paul’s letter doesn’t come to faith in Jesus until decades later (see Philemon 10).

While this image may not relate directly to the book of Philemon, it reminds me that the church has always celebrated leaders who spread the message of Jesus’ saving work.

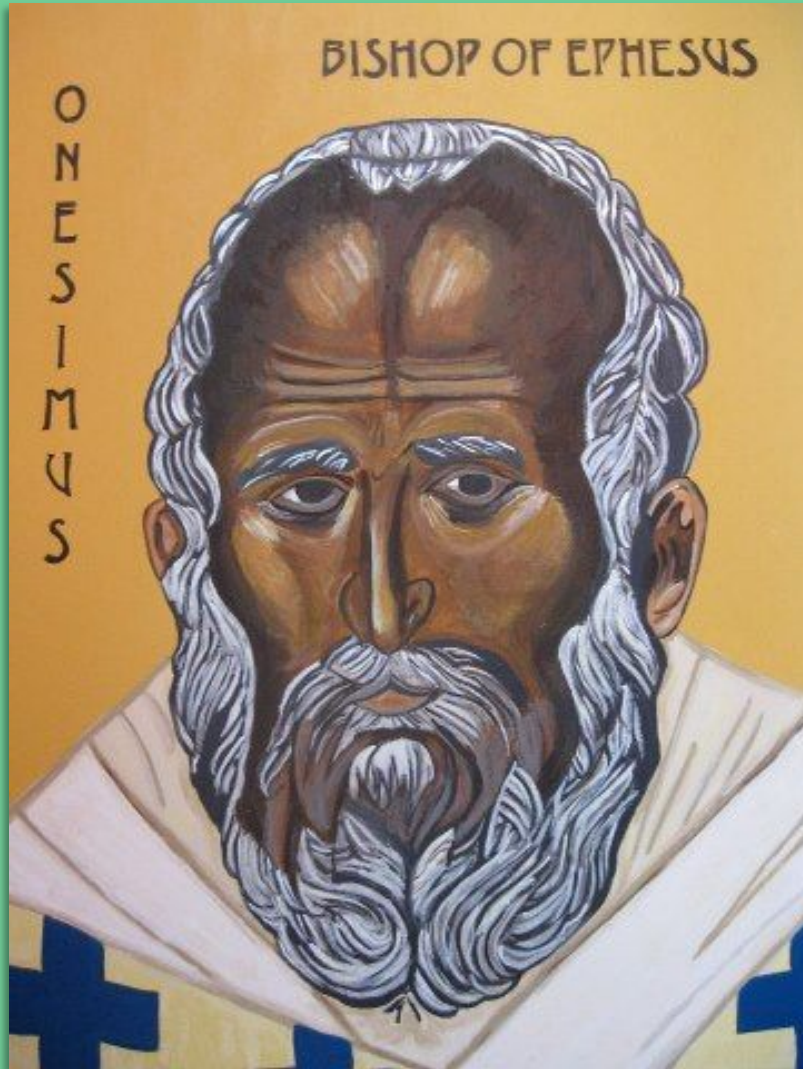


Mosaic of Apostle Onesimus, by Djuro Radulovic;
St. Petka’s Chapel, Belgrade, Serbia
[Photo link](#)



ΑΠΟΣΤΟΛ

ΟΝΙΣΚΑ



Here we see a modern image of Bishop Onesimus. Did the man once enslaved to Philemon become a leader in the ancient church?

Greek Orthodox tradition has maintained that the answer is yes, supported by two ancient texts. One second-century document mentions “Onesimus, a man of inexpressible love,” and goes on to use language similar to that found in Paul’s letter to Philemon (Ignatius, Epistle to the Ephesians, 1.3). And a fourth-century source says that Onesimus “appears to have been” ordained “to high office” after being released from slavery (Apostolic Canons, 82). I’m inclined to accept the tradition as accurate, though modern scholars are divided on the question.

Three things are certain: 1) There was an ancient bishop named Onesimus. 2) This name was common for slaves. Even if he wasn’t the man mentioned in Philemon, bishop Onesimus was likely a former slave. 3) Many Christians, from many centuries, have celebrated what was unthinkable in Roman society—the possibility that a freed slave could become a key leader in a new kind of society.

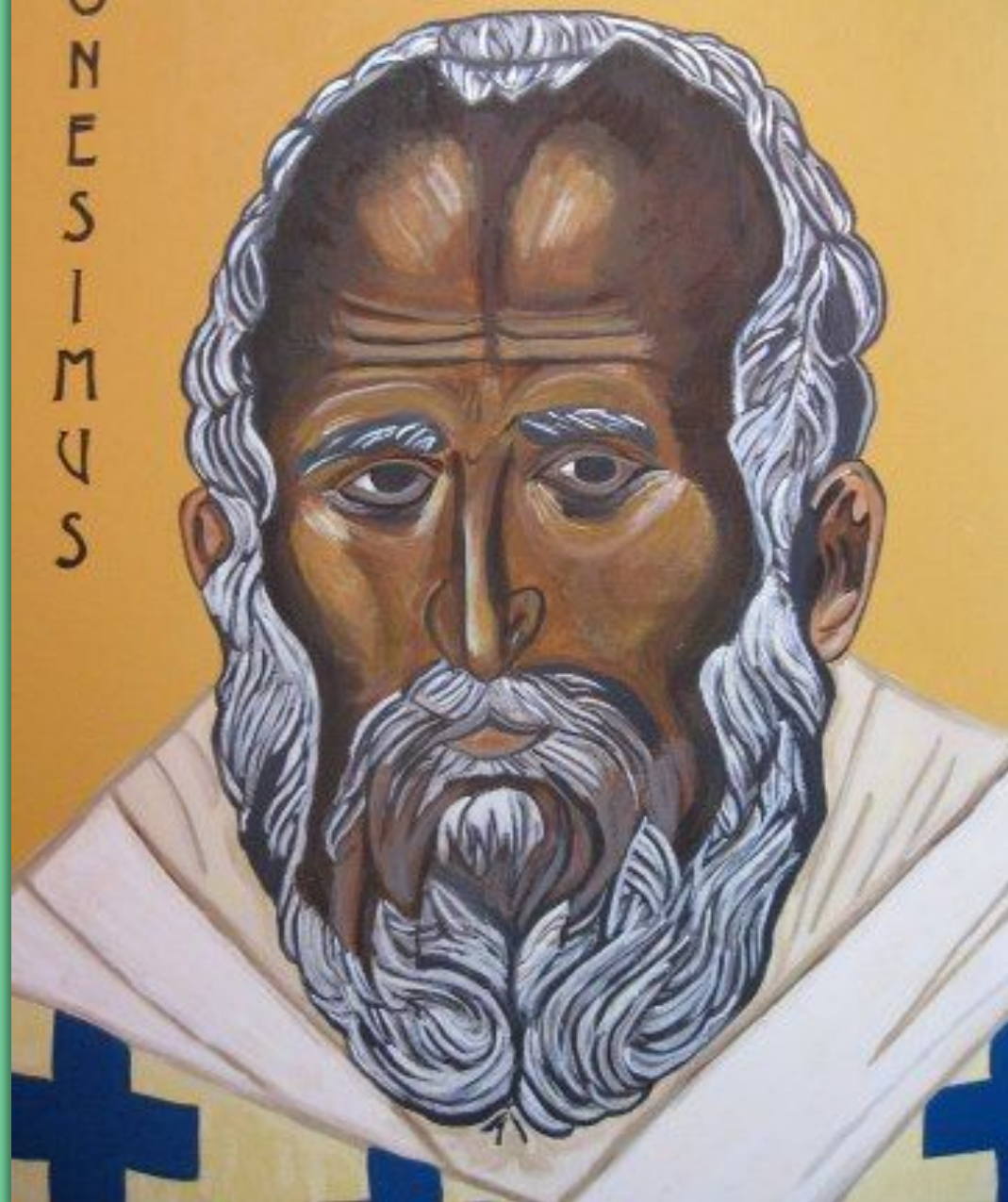
Can we trust the power of Jesus to do the unthinkable in our day?

Modern Orthodox icon of Bishop Onesimus;
source unknown

[Photo link](#)

BISHOP OF EPHESUS

O
N
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**Intown
Community
Church**

