

Pleading for a Friend Philemon

We start reading Luke today and we will have several weeks in it so this morning, we're going to talk about Philemon, which we just read. It is a small letter, a postcard actually, consisting of only 335 Greek words and 25 English verses. But it expresses the heart of the Gospel: forgiveness & reconciliation.

- a) Introductory Greeting. 1-3
- b) Thanksgiving and Prayer. 4-7
- c) Body of Letter. 8-20
- d) Closing Remarks. 21-25

First: The Storyline

- a) Paul's theme is forgiveness and reconciliation, even though the words never appear in this letter.
- b) While imprisoned in Rome, Epaphras visits Paul with news about the Colossian church.
- c) Paul pens the letter to the Colossians, sending it back with Tychicus and Onesimus (Col 4:12; Phl 1:23).
- d) Paul doesn't state the specific issue, but Onesimus is a runaway, now converted slave from Philemon, a member at the Colossian church.
- e) Rome is a natural place to flee to with its big population giving ample opportunity for hiding but he has evidently been caught.
- f) Paul pens a personal note to Philemon, asking him to forgive and restore Onesimus as a brother, on Paul's behalf.

Note: Time will not permit a full discussion of Roman slavery and the potential issues which concern this situation, but we should know this. As Philemon's slave, Onesimus was not only Philemon's property but was a member of his household (cf. Col 3:18–4:1; Eph 5:21–6:9). As such, he could not leave without permission. As his slave, Philemon was legally allowed to mistreat or kill his slave without real repercussions. Indeed, the alternative of life or death rested solely with Philemon, and slaves were crucified for far lighter offences than his. As a fugitive, a warrant for the arrest of the slave could be taken out containing such things as the details of the slave's appearance, clothing, possessions, and the promise of reward. A Roman citizen could catch the slave who could be legally starved, beaten, raped, and killed. The types of punishment inflicted on a runaway could include Onesimus being resold to a harsher master, scourged, branded, cut, made to wear an iron collar, crucified, thrown to beasts, or killed by some other means. The right to throw the slave to beasts was removed in AD 19 but reinstated under Nero in 61 around the time of Philemon's writing. Sometimes punishments were performed in public; a slave might be beaten and chased across the market by fellow slaves. They also suggest that some were thrown to the wild beasts or forced to become gladiators,

while crucifixion was used for slaves who killed their master. According to Barth and Blanke in *The Letter to Philemon*, One slave owner even fed his slaves to his luxury fish (pp. 16–17). In addition, if Paul did not encourage Onesimus to return he could be found guilty of harboring a fugitive and did not need to give his Roman captors more (and truly legal) accusations against him.

Onesimus is taking a big chance. A slave who returned on his own might be whipped or beaten until he was a cripple as an example to warn others; he might be branded on his head or arms; the skin under his feet might be burned off by glowing iron plates; a metallic collar with his name and address might be fixed around his throat; he might even be killed.

- Notes on slavery from: Witherington, *The Letters*. Barth and Blanke, *The Letter to Philemon*. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Letters to the Colossians and Philemon*.

Second: Praise for Philemon

1. Praise

One of the first things to note is how Paul approaches Philemon -

- V 1 – He calls himself Christ's prisoner.
- V 2 - He describes Philemon in the most glowing terms: as *beloved* and as a *coworker*, a term reserved for his closest fellow gospel ministers including Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke in v. 24.
- V 2 - Although Paul addresses Apphia, Archippus, and the church in the home, from this point on Philemon is his primary audience. In v. 3, he offers all the recipients his common greeting of 'grace and peace.'
- V 3 - With the appeal for reconciliation in the body of the letter, that greeting is intended to express real authority and power.

III – The difference between authority and power. The crosswalk safety officer has the authority to stop your car. He or she doesn't have the power. "Grace and peace" have both authority and power.

Vs 4-7 - Paul's thanksgiving in vv. 4–7 is very personal and glowing—

- V 4 - he thanks God always as he remembers Philemon in prayer.
- v 5 - The basis of his gratitude is Philemon's love and faith toward God and all God's people. He thus appeals to Philemon based on his prior commitment to restoration.
- V 6 - he anticipates the appeal to come, praying for Philemon that he would be even more effective in the fellowship coming from his faith.
- v 7 - He reminds Philemon of the great joy he has had with him due to his generous ministry toward the saints.

Third: The Heart of the Letter

- a) Paul's command. 8
- b) Love's appeal. 9
- c) Onesimus became a Christian. 10
- d) Even though he was formerly useless. 11a

This is a play on Onesimus's name since it means "useless." (Why did his parents name him that?)

- e) Onesimus is useful in at least two ways. 11b
 - He will serve Philemon again
 - He will give Philemon the opportunity to grow in grace
- f) He has Paul's heart. 12 – This idea of sinner-saint (the gospel) is Paul's heart
- g) Onesimus is profitable to Paul. 13

Note: In v 22, Paul notes that Demas (popular) is with him. In 2 Timothy 4:10a, Paul writes, *"Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me..."* (Demas is Paul's Judas)

But Paul will not:

- exploit Onesimus by keeping him with him
- deny Philemon the opportunity to demonstrate "grace and peace."
- h) The opportunity for conformity. 14
- i) God' works in mysterious ways.... 15

"forever" = aionios = forever = never ceasing – Ro 6:23; 2 Thess 1:9

- j) Receive Onesimus as a brother, not a slave. 16

In Philemon's eyes, aside from Christ himself, Paul is of the highest status, *the* Apostle to the Gentiles, through whom he came to know the Lord. To receive Onesimus back as Paul himself is not to welcome him as a slave, but to welcome him as an esteemed brother, even a superior, greeted warmly and with lavish hospitality.

Note: This kind of reception resonates with the father's welcome to the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. Despite his having every right under Jewish law to punish the son, the father welcomes him back with feasting, celebration, and great honour. Paul invites Philemon to do the same here for his Prodigal Slave, now turned brother.

There is still, however, the problem of possible costs caused by Onesimus' flight, which is dealt with in verses 18–19 where Paul offers to pay any charges accrued.

Note: Here, Paul makes himself the Good Samaritan who rescues the injured man at his own costs. Of course, the Good Samaritan emulates Jesus who paid the wage of our sin (Ro 6:23).

k) Paul will repay Philemon. 18

Paul's letter is basically an 'I.O.U.' in which he contracts to pay Onesimus's debt.

l) However, Philemon owes Paul an unpayable debt. 19

m) He is confident of Philemon's response. 20

n) Paul is so confident in Philemon, he sends Onesimus with the letter. 21

He is so confident that he names Onesimus in Colossians –

Colossians 4:7-9 - *Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. ⁸ I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, ⁹ and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.*

Fourth: Four Big Themes:

a) **Reconciliation** – Between Philemon and Onesimus

Vs 15-16 - *For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶ no longer as a bondservant^[c] but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.*

b) **Restoration** – Receive Onesimus as a “beloved brother,” and not slave

V 17 - *So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.*

Matthew 25:40 - *Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'*

c) **Restitution** – Forgiveness always costs someone something

Vs 18-19 - *If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.*

- (Does Onesimus not have to pay back Philemon?
- Can another person pay another's restitution?
- This is what Christ did for us, paid an unpayable debt.
- Apparently, someone can 'restitute' on your behalf, but no one can 'forgive' on your behalf).

But there is one more step –

Most commentators say that Paul's primary theme is forgiveness. But I think that stops short of Paul's goal for Philemon, Onesimus and himself. Forgiveness is necessary but only one steppingstone toward refreshment/rest

d) Refreshment –

Paul is not asking Philemon just to forgive Onesimus but to 'cleanse' him also in a 1 John 1:9 way - *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

V 20 - *Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.*

Refresh = anapauo = rest, calm, ease from labor

(This is the heart of the Gospel).

Paul rests in Philemon's work. We rest in Christ's work.

Paul doesn't want Onesimus looking over his shoulder for Philemon to stab him in the back. He wants forgiveness as a means to give rest to everyone at Colossae and himself.

Hebrews 4:1 - *Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. ² For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. ³ For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said, "As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest,'" although his works were finished from the foundation of the world. ⁴ For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: "And God rested on the seventh day from all his works." ⁵ And again in this passage he said, "They shall not enter my rest." ⁶ Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, ⁷ again he appoints a certain day, "Today," saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." ⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. ⁹ So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, ¹⁰ for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. ¹¹ Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.*

Fifth: Who is Profiting Here?

- a) Onesimus is forgiven and reconciled

Reconciliation means 'to be restored, with more.' – Slave to brother to beloved to co-worker

- b) Philemon becomes the model for Christ's saving work
- c) Paul gains rest

Everyone profits from forgiveness and reconciliation.

Conclusion:

In his book, *Why Read?*, Mark Edmundson writes, *"The ultimate test of a book, or of an interpretation, is the difference it would make in the conduct of life."*

The ultimate test of our belief in the Bible is "the difference" it makes in "the conduct" of our lives.

Does Philemon make any difference?

Luke 12:48 - *Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.*

Colossians 3:13 - *as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.*

Why? For them, for you, for everyone.

Community Groups:

- 1 – How are you?
- 2 – What gives you joy?
- 3 – What pains you?
- 4 – How can we pray for you?
- 5 - Read the book of Philemon together
- 6 – Who and where is Paul?
- 7 – Who and where is Onesimus?
- 8 – Who and where is Philemon?
- 9 – What's the point of Philemon?
- 10 – What will it cost Onesimus to be forgiven and reconciled?
- 11 – What will it cost Philemon to forgive and be reconciled?
- 12 – Why does Paul have such faith in Philemon to send Onesimus back to him?
- 13 – How does Paul's appeal summarize the gospel?
- 14 – How is Onesimus reconciled – restored with more?

15 – How will Onesimus’s ‘bill’ be paid?

16 – How does this demonstrate the gospel?

17 – How does ‘refreshment’ for Paul, Philemon and Onesimus look like?

Two notes:

1 - A word about peace loving, peace keeping and peace making.

Peace keeping people mind their own business in the hope everyone else will live in peace. They tend to build walls, do not sow discord, and avoid conflict.

Peace making people build bridges, engage, and resolve conflict. They get involved in the business of others. They stand between enemies and help them come together.

In this letter, Paul is acting as a peacemaker.

2 – In the *Lexham Bible Dictionary*, Lorne A. McCune and Derek R. Brown, note

The name Onesimus appears in the early church lists as a bishop of three different cites: Constantinople, Boroëa, and Ephesus. Whether the Onesimus of Philemon was one (or any) of these bishops is debated.

Constantinople - An Onesimus is identified as the third bishop (64–58) of Byzantine (Constantinople), prior to Polycarp (ad 69–155). This Onesimus was martyred under the Emperor Domitian in the year 95 (Delahaye, *Legends of the Saints*, 103).

Boroëa - The Apostolic Constitutions identifies an Onesimus as the bishop of Boroëa in Macedonia. However, Butler labeled this ancient document “spurious” (ANF 7:478; Butler’s *Lives of the Saints*, 1, 349).

Ephesus - The view that the Onesimus of the book of Philemon was the bishop in Ephesus is the most likely of these three. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch (d. ad 107/115; ANF/, 1:45; Schaff, *History of the Church*, 2:49) referred to a man called Onesimus as the “bishop” and the “pastor” of the Ephesians (ANF, 1:49–50, 52, 101, 112, 114). Later, Eusebius (ad 265–340) noted that Ignatius called Onesimus the “pastor of the Ephesians” (Eusebius, *Post Nicene Fathers*, 1, 4) and cited Polycarp (ad 69–155), a contemporary of both Onesimus and Ignatius, in support of the genuineness of the letters of Ignatius (NPNF 1:168).

Summary: One understanding of these statements is that Paul’s Onesimus was freed, became the bishop at Ephesus after Timothy, and was martyred by the Emperor Trajan (ad 98–117) in ad 107–108 (ANF 1:49–50). Lightfoot observed, “It is not altogether impossible therefore that the same person ... may be intended”; Bruce concluded that, “one might go farther and say not improbable” (Lightfoot, *Philemon*, 316n2; Bruce *Philemon*, 201–202).