

Philemon

THINK & LOVE & LIVE

Past 2: Philemon



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Colossae

As we continue on in our short series on Paul's letter to Philemon, today we focus on its recipient: Philemon. His story is really connected to Paul's letter to the Colossians, for which I have a personal affection.

I first heard the message of the grace of Jesus Christ from Colossians. I remember sitting there with some friends from High School in the upstairs youth room of my church in Sharpville Indiana as my youth pastor read these words: "You, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him..." (Col 1:21-22) These were the only two places I could be: at war with God in my mind or holy in His sight, by the work of Jesus who reconciles me to God by His death. Colossians is beautiful.

Now let me connect a few dots to show how this letter found its way from Paul's pen to Philemon's hand. Philemon was a leader in the church in Colossae. How do we know? Over in Colossians, Paul writes to the church there: "Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I have sent him to you that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, 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." (Col 4:7-9)

This tells us Onesimus was from Colossae. Then when we read the opening verses of Philemon, we discover that the church in Onesimus' hometown, Colossae, met in Philemon's house. If Philemon wasn't the leader there, he was at least one of the leaders of the Colossian church. So when Tychicus stepped into the church in Colossae, he was actually standing in Philemon's home. And right there beside him stood Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave who had stolen from him. And now he was here seeking reconciliation.

There would have been no real notice of their arrival, just the sight of them. And in their hands they carried two letters from the Apostle Paul—one a letter to the church that met in Philemon's home (Colossians) and another personally for Paul about the prodigal standing there before him.

Sometimes our unfinished business gets a visit from providence, and we're left with no choice but to respond. Had Philemon harbored anger in his heart toward Onesimus? Did he feel betrayed? We don't know much about Onesimus and Philemon's past except that they were once slave and master, and then both men came to know Christ. And we know that conversion not only changed who they were, but who they'd have to be to each other. With Onesimus at his door, Philemon had a decision to make. What would guide him: Onesimus' past sins or Christ's ever-present grace? What would you have done? I imagine Tychicus saying, "I have two letters from Paul. One here is for the church but this one is for you, Philemon. It's a personal letter from Paul about Onesimus here. You should probably read it." When Philemon unrolled the letter, here is what he read:

Philemon 1-25

¹Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker ²and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house: ³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, ⁵because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, ⁶and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. ⁷For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

⁸Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, ⁹yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— ¹⁰I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. ¹¹(Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) ¹²I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. ¹³I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, ¹⁴but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. ¹⁵For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

¹⁷So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. ¹⁸If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. ²⁰Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

²¹Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. ²²At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

²³Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings, ²⁴and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, & Luke, my fellow workers. ²⁵The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

A Changed Man

This is a letter Philemon has to do something with. He must either ignore it or take its counsel. Paul is making a point—if Christ is the Lord of your life, everything changes. It changes how we see each other, how we respond to those who have wronged us, how we receive each other when benign things like time, distance and change, or even relationally charged things like sins and transgressions have separated us. It trumps any other definition we may have of who we are to each other.

Philemon knows this firsthand. He is a man whose life has been transformed by the work of Christ. Who he was before Christ—though we know little—is not who he is now. Paul opens his letter affirming this. Philemon is a man with a reputation of love and faith. ⁽⁵⁾ He pours that love and faith out for the benefit of others, and people's lives have been changed by Christ through him. ^(5b-6) Philemon has been a source of great joy and comfort for Paul because Philemon has loved Paul well—and not just Paul either. Philemon has the reputation of being a man who is spiritually refreshing just to be around. ⁽⁷⁾ He is a changed man.

As it happens, by the same grace Philemon is so effective in applying, Onesimus is a changed man too. In his hands, Philemon holds Paul's words about that change. For both men, Christ has overcome their pasts. So now all that matters for these two men is what happens next. That is what Paul's entire argument is asking: if Jesus has changed you, who are you to each other? His answer is they're brothers—nothing less. But, as Paul points out in v. 8, the only way to embrace this is through true love.

This letter offers an amazing window into Paul's method of persuasion. Some might even argue Paul is being manipulative. Maybe he is, but not in a dishonest way. Paul is leaning into the full force of the truth of what Christ has done, knowing if Philemon doesn't respond from the heart, his response will be futile. Paul conveys, "Look, I could command you to do what I'm about to ask, but I don't want to. I want to give you room to deal with this on a heart level. I want you to think, to love and to live under the banner of the truth that Christ changes us." ^(my paraphrase of 8-9)

Notice it isn't until v. 10 that Paul even uses Onesimus' name. Paul is preparing Philemon to hear his appeal for mercy. He is reminding Philemon of the eternal truths of the transforming power of grace before he asks Philemon to live by it. And then, in mentioning Onesimus, he talks of who this runaway slave has become to him. Paul's language is deeply affectionate. Onesimus is "my child, whose father I became in my imprisonment." ⁽¹⁰⁾ This is no doubt a reference to the fact that Paul was in the room when his spiritual son was born for the second time.

And Onesimus gave himself in service to Paul—for which Paul is grateful to God. This is where we get a hint that Onesimus had the reputation of being a pretty useless servant before coming to Christ. Paul says he was useless, but now has become useful. ⁽¹⁰⁻¹¹⁾ And in fact, he has become Paul's very heart. ⁽¹²⁾

A Debt of Love

One key reason Philemon must do something with this letter is because Paul didn't just send him this note about Onesimus: he sent Onesimus himself with it. And as it is with any relationship, its going to cost Philemon something. Relationships are costly regardless, but for those in Christ, love must rule over them. It is Christ who gives us to each other. It is the love of Christ that binds us together. It is the grace of Christ that guides us through this life we live as His people. In Christ, we are more deeply joined to each other than I suspect any of us understand.

For love's sake, Onesimus and Paul agreed Onesimus needed to be reconciled to Philemon. As his drive to escape led Onesimus to flee 1,200 miles to get away from Philemon, the drive to be reconciled has now set him on a 1,200 mile return trip. Paul would've been glad to keep him, but they recognize there is a debt they owe Philemon. They owe it to Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother. They cannot withhold that from him.

In the next part we'll dig into Paul's articulation of this debt in more detail, but for now, notice that what it boils down to is that before Christ, their relationship was where one existed to serve the other, but now both exist to serve the Lord. Will this leave Philemon feeling that he is still owed something or that he is happily coming out ahead? Paul thinks he knows the answer here—that Philemon "will do even more than I say," ⁽²¹⁾ And history suggests he was right about that.

Forgiveness is the work of liberation. Every one of us has, at one time or another been enslaved by someone else's anger, bitterness or disappointment, just as we have taken others captive by ours. This is where forgiveness comes in. To forgive is not merely to dismiss an offense. It is to release someone to live in freedom. Forgiveness is not neutral. It is a fuel that spurs us forward. That's how Paul characterizes the choice before Philemon. If Philemon forgives Onesimus, he takes him back no longer as a slave, but as a beloved brother. ⁽¹⁶⁾ Not only is his past pardoned, but his future finds a renewed purpose.

Robert Rayburn wrote, "There is a spectacular sequel to this letter. It cannot be proved as a certainty, but there seems to be no reason to doubt the account of early Christian documents that years later, Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, while being escorted to Rome to face martyrdom, wrote a letter to the Church in Ephesus. In the opening few lines of that letter he mentions having been visited on his journey by their bishop, one Onesimus, 'whose love,' Ignatius says, 'is beyond words.' What a wonderful thing to think: that Philemon welcomed his runaway slave back as a brother, granted him his freedom, saw him established in the church, and then Onesimus...proved himself to have been, perhaps even beyond Paul's own imagining, a true co-laborer in the gospel with the great Apostle."

I can't say for certain that Philemon's Onesimus was the same man Ignatius spoke of. He well may have been. Jesus is stronger than our pasts. But I have to believe Philemon embraced Onesimus as a brother, and the reason is because this letter still remains. Had Philemon ignored it, what future weight would it have carried? Who would have passed it down? And yet we have it. The fact that we don't know exactly what happened is an application in itself—inviting us to substitute Philemon's name for our own. Embrace the work of Christ in each other's lives. Forgive where there are offenses. Love each other in a future-bound direction. "I know you will do even more than I say."