



"Liberated"

- The Book of Philemon

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1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy [our] brother, To Philemon our beloved [friend] and fellow laborer, 2 to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier,

and to the church in your house: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 4 I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, 5 hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, 6 that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. 7 For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother. 8 Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, 9 [yet] for love's sake I rather appeal [to you] —being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ— 10 I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten [while] in my chains, 11 who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me. 12 I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, 13 whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. 14 But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary. 15 For perhaps he departed for a while for this [purpose], that you might receive him forever, 16 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. 17 If then you count me as a partner, receive him as [you would] me. 18 But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. 19 I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay—not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides. 20 Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord. 21 Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. 22 But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you. 23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, 24 [as do] Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers. 25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ [be] with your spirit. Amen.

This letter from Paul to his friend Philemon presents a picture of gospel grace via forgiveness of one, through the work of another.

Paul was never much for theory and models. It seemed that for Paul, the love of Christ was always to be exercised in “real life” scenarios wherein the participants were called to actually live out all of the theology they had in their heads. For many of us, our Christianity effectually has remained but a philosophy...an ‘ideal.’ Our commitment ...our allegiance, changes very quickly when there is any real call to actually live it out. In this letter to Philemon, we affectively have three players, each being presented with a situation wherein they are challenged in a “rubber-meets-the-road” scenario.

Firstly, Paul calls upon this man Philemon to step up to the plate of Christianity and practice horizontally the forgiveness and restoration that he himself had received from Christ vertically. It is here, in this inevitable scenario, that so many of us come to the 'end of the road' of our faith. *We* want it, we just don't want to give it back. Ah, the 'desperately wicked' heart of man!

Paul was confronting this Philemon...calling upon him to both forgive *and restore* his runaway slave, Onesimus...who was player number two in the story. Philemon was being asked to overcome his anger and his indignation over this ordeal and be like Christ. Paul...*player number three*, would personally throw in on this matter to the degree that he would offer himself as the guarantee for Onesimus, as well as to even offer financial restoration to Philemon if it would come to that.

It seemed that during his time on the run, Onesimus was able to more honestly reflect upon his life and actions, which resulted in his repentance and subsequent salvation. Thus now Onesimus was more than just Philemon's slave - he was now his brother in Christ, because Philemon also was a believer. He had himself experienced God's grace, and now he was being called upon...as we all will, to give that grace in return.

Luther said, "We are all God's Onesimus." For like Onesimus we have all wronged our master, our God. We all have tried to run. We have all have misused His mercy, trampled on His grace, and stolen what rightfully belongs to Him. We have all sought our own way. Yet the fact remains that our "master" has forgiven every debt, and restored us to our place! All because of the intervention, the payment, and the guarantee of another, one Jesus Christ...

All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. Isa 53:6

Slavery was a practice that did not disappear overnight upon the ministry arrival of Jesus Christ. It did, however, begin to change in the thoughts and understanding of those who had been transformed by the blood of Christ. Believers were called upon to treat their indentured slaves well, and even as brothers if they were fellow believers. Slowly, the practice of slavery disappeared largely through the understanding of the Word and heart of Christ. Perhaps we in the greater Christian world could take a lesson from this, and would thus run our politics and our moral activism through this same door.

Chapter 1

1:1-3

Oh, if we could look at our lives through the same eyes, and with the same heart as Paul! For Paul not only acknowledged that he was a "prisoner"...but a "prisoner of Jesus Christ," not the Roman government! Paul knew who was *really* in charge. He understood that if the hand of God had allowed it, then clearly God had a plan, even if he didn't understand the particulars! Indeed Paul was "all about" the plans of God!

It seems that Philemon had evidently found salvation through the ministry and mission of Paul the apostle, and that ultimately, so did Philemon's slave Onesimus. It appears that Paul and Philemon were fairly tight as Paul here refers to him as our "dearly beloved and fellow labourer." Paul always held a clear picture and understanding of the unity ...the unique bond, that exists within the family of God. He was never just a "Sunday-go-to meeting" kind of believer. He was clearly a part of the body of Christ, and he knew it. He was right there alongside of all the other equally important 'parts.' And clearly, he was given the respect and the clout to speak into Philemon's life...even in a challenging way, as his pastor and friend. Such a stance is rare for a pastor these days.

So we see immediately that this letter was more than simply instructional: *it was relational*. Paul speaks through a spirit of friendship, and a bond of brotherhood ...one that operated above and beyond that of mere pastor-to-flock. And as in many of Paul's letters, he begins with those elements found only in Christ, "*grace and peace.*"

1:4-5

As Paul sat in prison, he did not wallow in sorrow and self-pity. Ever so "other-minded," Paul tells them that he was praying "always" for them. And he did so even from the bondage and deep hardship of a 1st century Roman imprisonment! "*Hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints...*" Apparently the reputation of Philemon had gone out before him. He was known on the street as a man of love and faith. What are you known as?

1:6

Paul understood that this Philemon, like himself, was a man who gave God all the credit for who he was and what he had. He seemed to not only *understood* this fact, but went further to make it known to all those around him. Paul hoped that through such a living acknowledgement of God via Philemon's life, that there would be eternal fruit for the kingdom. Yet Philemon was not done...not finished...for he still needed direction and he apparently was willing to receive it from 'pastor Paul.'

1:7

Both Paul and Philemon were evidently men who more than just *believed* their faith, but they also practiced it...*lived it out*... in real life and real situations. Both in word and deed, they blessed the brothers and sisters in Christ that they came into contact with. I wonder why so many of us cannot grasp the understanding that none of this Jesus stuff...this "church stuff" has any value unless it actually plays out in real life?

It is clear that for many of us we are unable... *or at least staunchly unwilling*, to honestly evaluate ourselves. We think that because we go to church, serve regularly, and financially support our mission, that such equals a faithful and even dynamic Christian life. But we fail to see...or are unwilling to see, that the world around us sees so much more than that. They see the marriage problems, the odd priorities in our childrearing, the oft sadness in our continence. They see the rebellious attitude, the priority of career and job over Christ, community, and one's own blood family. They see it all, and so do the faithful brothers and sisters around you, even if you do not.

Paul warned us on more than one occasion about such blindness, and called upon us to "test ourselves." He knew that we can over time become numb to the truth of our heart condition. He gauged his own life and sought us to do the same, via the physical manifest of a life's passion.

1:8-9

Paul was saying that because of his authority in Christ, he could lean heavy on Philemon on this issue, but he was choosing rather to come at Philemon as a friend and brother. He could have commanded, but instead he is asking. And he was doing so out of love.

As the pastor, I understand this heart. I would always prefer that each of us grasp the truth of a situation and respond in humility. That we could always interact in unity and love as brothers. But sadly, there will always be those who in their pride simply don't get it. After all, they have arrived. They are at the mountain top. They are above everyone else so therefore they feel they do not need to abide by or respond to the pastor's messages and direction.

Paul hoped not only that Philemon would do the right thing in this situation, but that the trajectory of his life would be literally altered because of it. That Philemon would change through this ordeal, would be humbled by its outcome, and would be more for the experience. That is a pastor's heart toward his flock in all matters. Some will embrace it, and some will not. How we react to such situations speaks of our 'pride-humility' level as well as our respect for our pastor or the lack thereof.

1:10-13

For brothers in Christ, "I command" becomes "I appeal." That's the grace of God in action.

Paul begins now to speak concerning this run-away slave named Onesimus. According to his letter here, we gather that Onesimus was led to Christ through Paul, even while Paul was imprisoned. It's interesting how many of us can't find the passion or time to serve God and kingdom even in the best of times, while Paul was 'bringing it' even while he was imprisoned in unimaginable conditions!

Reading all of scripture, one quickly realizes that Paul always continued the work of Christ, even through the difficult periods of life. He was not easily distracted from the path he was called to. "Distraction" is one of Satan's greatest tools. He works to just get your eyes far enough off of Christ and the furthering of the kingdom to make you useless.

He invariably makes us "the offer we can't refuse" to turn us from the will and path of God's service. Praise God that some cannot be bought off, and they will go on to move the world, and further, to see it moved by the power of the cross! Its funny that we all like children have what we deem as situations where we feel we can yell "time-out" and everything just stops there on the playground; our serving...our front-line participation, etc. We all have a personal list in this matter. I just can't find that list in scripture!

We don't know under what conditions and situations that Onesimus found Paul. Perhaps he went to Rome with the intent of finding Paul (highly doubtful), or perhaps it was one of those simply inexplicable and seemingly random occurrences that happen in our lives. Even amongst the millions of people on earth, God has a way of guiding and steering to fulfill his plan. How many of us can look back and acknowledge what could only have been "divine intervention?" Divine restoration? Oh, if we could only see life *now* through those same eyes and trust Christ to do a grand work through a difficult situation instead of taking things into our own hands!

Paul was "sending Onesimus back." One might think that such an act was the height of cruelty. But slavery in that day was generally more of a matter of indebtedness. Paul expected Onesimus to pay his debts.

But certainly one might tend to see things differently. That if Paul really loved Onesimus, he would have encouraged him to go elsewhere and "re-invent" himself in some other town. But God's love does not excuse any of us from the 'hard thing' but still expects the right thing! And if Onesimus was really a Christian and really understood what that meant, he would do what was right not what was expedient.

Paul was practicing Christ love, not worldly love. In his love for Onesimus, Paul expected him to grasp the concepts of mature responsibility as well as community. There would be no running out on this situation, no matter how hard it seemed to be. Such was a test for Onesimus...would he do the right thing? Would he hear Paul and still love him even though he offered no easy road? And for Paul...would he tell Onesimus to go back even though Onesimus may hate him for it, and reject his counsel and friendship?

Paul is saying he would have liked to have kept Onesimus there with him to minister to his needs, but he knew he could not-at least at this point..

1:14-16

Paul wanted him to stay in Rome with him, but Paul never “bent the rules” in his favor when he wanted something. That is what made him such a man of integrity. So he sent Onesimus home. He did, however, remind Philemon that if he found it in his heart to send Onesimus back, it would certainly be a “benefit” to Paul.

Paul practiced what he preached. He knew in his heart that Romans 8:28 was correct, and that “all things work for good, for those who love God...”. Paul’s suggestion was that perhaps all of this occurred so that Philemon could see Onesimus with new eyes...the eyes of a brother instead of a master.

Paul knew what it was to be on the wrong side of things. But he also understood clearly what a transformation Onesimus had gone through. For both of them had at one time been “enemies” of Christ. They both knew redemption.

1:17-18

What a picture of our acceptance in Christ! Christ says to the Father in John 4:17, “*(you) have loved them as You have loved Me.*”

How foolish Onesimus would have been had he thrown away Paul’s letter and tried to plead his case on his own! Or if he had continued to run when redemption was waiting. For he was being offered not only redemption, but a life of freedom that he had not previously known. He could trust his brother’s Paul’s counsel and the power of God in that brother, or he could do things his own way. Ironically, I have found that those who came from the most horrific BC backgrounds and were lifted out of the deepest muck, are sadly often the first ones who venture out in the belief that they have arrived and no longer need anyone to lean on in this life...no longer need direction from a community.

Like a figure of Christ, Paul tells Philemon that if a debt is owed (and with us there certainly was a great debt of sin), that he himself would pay the debt. And it’s a good thing because, like us, I’m sure Onesimus had nothing with which to satisfy the debt himself!

1:19

Paul was saying that he would “square things” with Philemon, just as our “debt of sin” was put on the account of Jesus Christ. He reminded Philemon that Philemon’s own salvation was owed to Paul’s ministry. So in truth he should have a long line of credit with Philemon! Few of us tightly hold such a truth near to us! We laid claim to that “pearl of great price” and then seemingly, quickly, forgot its worth. We fail so often to realize what we already in truth owe Jesus, but continually seek more from Him in worldly gain. We also fail to recognize the debt we have to each other...the body life and community is never really grasped.

1:20

Paul sought reciprocal joy from Philemon. As followers of Christ, we too, are called to bring joy to our brothers and sisters in Christ. And sometimes that comes at a cost to us!

“refresh my heart.” This speaks concerning his “inward” parts. The deep parts of ones being. Not just a temporal and earthly thing, but a deep and eternal blessing!

1:21-22

Paul *knew* Philemon. They were obviously very close! In light of that fact, Paul expected not only forgiveness on the part of Onesimus, but the open arms of brotherhood in Christ toward him AND Onesimus on this matter.

Paul goes on to add personal note. He tells Philemon to open the spare bedroom because he fully expected to be released and was coming for a visit!

1:23-25

Paul wasn't trying to pull a "power trip" or to haughtily insinuate that he was the only servant of God to serve at a price. Here he includes Epaphras who apparently was also being held in prison. And then he goes on to mention his "fellow servants"; those who fought the same battle and risked their lives along with Paul.

And Paul ends his letter with the grace that he began the letter with; *the grace that he expected from Philemon, and the grace that he experienced from God himself*. Philemon now had the chance to **give** the grace that he had long received. What would he do?

Each one of these three men...Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus were being asked to do the "hard thing". All three were being challenged to now actually ***exercise their faith in the real world***, in a real situation. In all of us, sooner or later, our Christianity must cease to be only theory. If we fail in this, we may never really know and understand the cross at all. The gospel will never be real to us!

Onesimus, an apparently brand new convert was being asked to return home to his master who could have him crucified, or branded with a big "F" for "fugitive." Would he do the ***right*** thing even if that was the ***hard*** thing?

Paul was being asked to give up Onesimus back to his owner, though he would have liked to keep him with him in Rome to help him while he was imprisoned. Would Paul sacrifice his own comfort to do right?

And finally, Philemon was being asked to receive Onesimus back home again, and to do so without punishment. He was to receive him not as a thief or a runaway, but a brother in Christ. He was to forgive in mercy and love him in grace.

How about us? Do we know His love to such a degree that we too will not flinch from "doing the hard things" being asked of ***us***?