

Pastor Grady Covin
The Mission
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Philemon

Philemon 1:1, 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.

If you have ever been to the emergency room, you have experienced “triage.” Triage is a French word that literally means “to sort out.” It refers to deciding who needs treatment immediately and who can wait.

During World War II, the allies used the system of triage in makeshift hospitals near the front lines. It was the duty of the supervisor to tag the wounded. The color-coded tags would place patients in one of three categories. One color was used for patients who were considered hopeless—where it was believed that nothing could be done for them. Another color stood for hopeful, which meant that the injured soldier would more than likely survive whether he received immediate help or not. So he could obviously wait for treatment.

And then the third colored tag was for patients who were considered doubtful. In other words, these soldiers might survive, but only if they were given immediate treatment. And so most of the attention of the doctors and most of the medical treatment was reserved for soldiers who fell into the category of doubtful.

Well, of the soldiers who had arrived was named Louis, and he was badly injured. One of his legs was completely shattered, and he had lost a lot of blood and he was really in a bad way. And so the triage supervisor who examined him decided that Louis was hopeless. And so he tagged him with the appropriate colored tag for someone who was hopeless and this tag of course would let the medical staff know that he was beyond hope and just to make him as comfortable as possible before he passed away.

Well, the nurse that was assigned to Louis that evening noticed that he was conscious, and so they began to talk. And before long she discovered that they were both from the same town in Ohio. Well, after getting to know Louis as someone from her home town, and realizing that he wasn't just another wounded soldier, she decided to do something that was forbidden.

And later that night, she slipped into the hospital ward and changed the color of Louis's tag from hopeless to doubtful.

Well, the next morning, they transported Louis to a better medical facility where he was taken into surgery and his life was spared. Months later, though minus one leg, he fully recovered. And it was all because this nurse was willing to change his tag and give him another chance at life.

And if you think about it, that's the gospel. Jesus Christ came to this earth and He changed our tag sir that we would no longer be hopeless. Because Jesus knows that no one is beyond the reach of God's forgiveness and grace.

And even though we live in a sick and dying world, there is still hope for the hopeless. And those of us who have experienced that grace and who follow Christ today, we ought to always be on the lookout for people who have lost hope, and people who need a touch from the Great Physician, the Lord Himself.

And so as we embark upon one of the shortest books in the Bible, we're going to witness the apostle Paul change the tag, if you will on a runaway slave named Onesimus.

Now, Paul at the time of this writing is a prisoner in Rome. And though he's in a house, still he's confined to this house. He can't go anywhere.

But instead of sulking and feeling sorry for himself and complaining, he's writing letters of encouragement to others. Because what better way to forget your troubles than try and help somebody else with theirs.

Now, he's actually in the process of writing a letter to the church in Colossae—which of course, we call the book of Colossians. But in the mail along with Paul's letter to the Colossians he sends another letter. It's a very brief letter, really almost like a postcard. And it's addressed to a man named Philemon.

Now, Philemon was a good man. He was a godly man. In fact, the apostle Paul had led Philemon to Christ. And Philemon loved the Lord. He loved Him so much so that he had set up a church in his house. And he and his wife Apphia would welcome people into their home to have church and they would worship the Lord.

Now this was before slavery had been abolished and before it was finally put in its place when the gospel shined its light on it and so Philemon had a slave. And his name was Onesimus.

Well, Onesimus evidently stole some things from his master, Philemon, and so he ran away. He ran away to Rome.

Now Rome, is of course the center of the Roman Empire, also known for its worldly ways and its wickedness. And so Onesimus, a runaway slave, finds himself here in Rome.

Well, it so happens that the apostle Paul, who had led Philemon to Christ, is now in Rome as well. Now, again, he's a prisoner—and he's being somewhat guarded, but he's not in a cold dark dungeon, he's in a house .

Well, it just so happens that Onesimus, who is a long way from home, meets up with the Apostle Paul. Now, we're not told how that happened, whether it was intentional on Onesimus' part or maybe he too got thrown into jail, but as the Holy Spirit would have it, he meets up with the Apostle Paul.

Now, like I said, Paul had already won Philemon, his master to Christ, and so now Paul has an opportunity to win Onesimus to Christ. And of course he does. And that's how God works.

If someone has the least little desire to be saved, God will make a way. And he makes a way for Onesimus to meet Paul and to be saved.

Well, the Apostle Paul's not one to just lead somebody to Christ and then just forget about them. He's evidently discipling Onesimus when he discovers what he has done. Onesimus probably started to feel guilty about what he had done and how he had stolen from his master and so he told Paul about it.

He told Paul how he was a runaway slave and that his master's name was Philemon and he told him how he had stolen from him and that he was sorry he hadn't told him earlier. And he asked Paul, What should I do?

"Well," Paul said, "you need to go back. You need to go back and you need to make it as right as possible with Philemon."

Well, Onesimus knew what the penalty for running away was and that along with the fact that he had stolen from his master could land him a really hard punishment, even death was possibility.

But he knew the Apostle Paul was right and so he agreed.

So Paul told Onesimus, he said I tell you what I'll do. I know your master, Philemon. In fact, I'm the one that led him to Jesus. And so I know he's a good man and a man of God and I know he has compassion for people and I know that if he knows the truth, he'll forgive you.

And then he says, I'm going to write a letter. And I want you to take this letter and I want you to take it back and give it to Philemon. And I'm going to ask the Holy Spirit to help me say all the right things in this letter.

So he writes the letter and he gives it to Onesimus and he says, here, take this to Philemon's home and give it to him. You don't have to say a word when you get there. Just hand it to him and tell him it's from me and ask him to read it.

And so this is the letter that we have before us. And that's what this little book is about. This is the letter that Onesimus, a runaway slave took back and gave to his master.

Look at verse one,

**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:**

So the writer is Paul, and Timothy is with him and he writes this letter to Philemon for Onesimus to deliver.

Now, it's addressed to Philemon and Apphia and Archippus. Apphia is no doubt, Philemon's wife and Archippus, who is also mentioned in Colossians chapter 4 and verse 17, is most likely the pastor or teacher. Some Bible scholars suggest that Archippus is actually the son of Philemon and Apphia. But either way, this is a family who is obviously deeply committed to the gospel of Christ.

And then in verse 7, Paul adds a note of personal appreciation for Philemon's ministry and he says;

**7 For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because
the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.**

And then Paul then gets down to the reason he's writing this little note. He says God through His Holy Spirit has brought Onesimus, your slave to my home. And I've not only got to know him, but I've had the pleasure to lead him to Christ, just like I lead you to Christ. And I'm writing this letter to let you that he's not the same anymore. Just like when Jesus saved you and me and we weren't the same anymore, Onesimus has been born again. And he's not the same person as before!

Now, truth is, as an apostle, Paul didn't have to say any of that. He could have just insisted or even commanded Philemon to respond with forgiveness and to give grace to his former slave. But he didn't. Look at verse 8. He says,

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.

So instead of commanding Philemon to accept him back, he chooses to appeal to his heart and he reminds Philemon what Jesus had done for him.

Now, all Philemon knew was that Onesimus had run away. He had stolen something and then he had run away. And so Philemon didn't really know what had happened to him.

And so Paul tells Philemon, how Onesimus had come to him in Rome, and how he's been able to lead him to Christ and how now, he considers him to be a brother in Christ. And also how he now considers himself to be his spiritual father.

So, now he's no longer a run away slave; now he's a brother and spiritual son of the Apostle Paul.

Now, one of the questions you might ask is; if Philemon was such a Godly man with a church meeting in his home, how come he owned a slave?

Well, like I mentioned a few minutes ago and as we've learned before, even though we know that slavery is wrong today, back then that was the culture. And truth is, some slaves back then wouldn't have had it any other way. But as people were taught the word of God, and as the gospel spread all that began to change.

And even for those who still had a slave to master relationship, the Apostle Paul and others were instructing both the Christian servants and the Christian masters how to conduct themselves with honesty and kindness and generosity, where even a master and slave relationship could exist and be beneficial to both parties.

So Paul's not in any way condoning or legitimizing slavery in the Roman Empire. And in his own way he was sowing the seeds of emancipation, so to speak.

Now, in order to understand what's going on here, we need to understand the Roman law regarding bondservants. In Roman law, there was a provision that if a household bondservant and his master experienced some kind of breach—or some kind of a rupture if you will—in their working relationship, then the servant could go to a friend of his master and appeal to him to reconcile their differences.

So it's possible that Onesimus didn't just up and run away to Rome for no reason. It could have been intentional that Onesimus went to Rome and later met up with the Apostle Paul. He could have been looking for him, because he wanted Paul to do just what he did, which was to bring about reconciliation between he and his master.

Now, again, the first thing Paul does to bring about this reconciliation between Onesimus and Philemon is to lead Onesimus to faith in Christ. Because whatever the problem was between he and his master, whether it was the running away, or the stealing, or some other problem, the answer to their problem is Jesus. In fact, He's the answer to nay every problem we could ever have in life.

Now, again we're not told specifically what the problem was. Paul in verses 11-12, just says this. He says,

11 who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.

And then he says so

12 I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart,

Now, again, don't misunderstand what Paul's doing here. He's not supporting slavery by sending a runaway slave back to his master; he's simply writing a letter of reconciliation.

In other words, Paul wants Philemon to change the tag that he had put on Onesimus from "useless to useful".

And then Paul encourages Philemon to make another change in tag. In verse 16, when Paul tells Philemon to welcome Onesimus back, he says and welcome him back **"no longer as a bondservant but more than bondservant, as a beloved brother."**

Now, that probably doesn't mean much to me and you that Onesimus would go from being a household slave to a brother in Christ and to a brother of his master, but I can guarantee you it was something very special to Onesimus.

And no doubt it did something positive for his self confidence and his character. And we're not told this, but it probably made him a harder worker, and no doubt it made him more faithful servant. Not to mention the confidence boost it gave Philemon who could now trust his servant like a brother. And so everybody wins when everybody is in Jesus.

And then Paul writes in verse 17, **"Receive him as you would receive me"**. In other words, he asking Philemon to treat Onesimus as if he were Paul himself.

And then Paul makes an offer to Philemon in verse 18: He says,

8 But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account.

If Onesimus. . . owes you anything, he says, charge it to my account.”

What a great picture of the gospel!

Because this is exactly what Jesus did for us. He told God, whatever Grady owes, just put it on My account. That sin debt he owes, put it on My account, and then He paid it off in full on the cross.

And then in verse 21.

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.

While Paul is confident Philemon will fulfill Paul’s request (verse 21), we are never told what happened next. We are just going to have to wait to get to heaven to find out.

And how do we know we are going to heaven? One reason only: God changed our tag—from lost to found, from outcast to redeemed, from hopeless to heavenward.