

Philemon

The Triumph Of Love

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Rome. The city on the Tiber. The "eternal city." Imperial. Proud.

It was ca. AD 63. The great fire of AD 64 was yet to happen. Nero was his embarrassing self, unaware that on June 9, AD 68 he would commit suicide.

Paul, Christ's apostle to the nations, was also in the city, a prisoner for the gospel. Several of his co-workers and companions were also with him.

At the same time, far away in the city of Colosse, in the Lycus River valley of western Asia Minor (now Turkey), a vital issue was coming to a head. But first, let's explore a little background.

Paul had already preached the gospel in Ephesus, an important city by the Cayster River. He stayed there for two years, with the result "that all who dwelt in Asia [a Roman province] heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10).

Paul did not personally evangelize the cities of the Lycus River valley (Heirapolis, Laodicea, Colosse). A man named Epaphras brought them the good news of Jesus Christ and established churches.

It was a time when Gnosticism, a form of Greek philosophy, was expanding its influence. Gnosticism taught that matter is evil. This idea got a foothold among some of the early churches. Its promoters and their followers reasoned that if matter is evil, Jesus could not

have had a physical human body.

This was no insignificant matter. The gospel itself was under attack. If Jesus did not have a physical body of human flesh, He did not bear our sins "in His own body" on the cross, as 1 Peter 2:24 plainly says that He did. That would mean that we have no Savior.

Epaphras was worried, so much so that he undertook the long journey from Colosse to Rome to confer with Paul about the issue.

Meanwhile, a seemingly unrelated drama was unfolding. Philemon was a well-to-do member of the church at Colosse. He was also a slaveholder (more about that later). One of his slaves, Onesimus, had run away, probably carrying off some money he stole from Philemon.

We do not know what ideas went through his mind or what dreams and plans he entertained. Heady fantasies have destabilized many people. Tired of one's responsibilities, the same old routine that seem to tie a person down, a person's mind can start wondering about what is "out there"—a new boyfriend or girlfriend, the big time, Hollywood, Las Vegas, Nashville.

For Onesimus it was Rome. "All roads lead to Rome," they say. Anyway, he wanted to get as far away as possible from Philemon, from the work, from the church, from God!

Rome was a long way from Colosse. How Onesimus got there we do not know. All we can do is picture a likely scenario. He had either to cross over Macedonia or to sail around southern Greece. Somehow he finally ended up in Rome—probably with no money, no friends, no place to go, and no future. Like many others who follow the mirage of their fantasies, he finally arrived where he was headed—nowhere.

His situation was dire, and Onesimus was desperate. What could he do? Then he remembered! Colosse. The church where he reluctantly tagged along with Philemon to the meetings. "Those people who worship Jesus; they're good people. Rome is a big city and some of them must be living here. I know they'll help me. I'll ask around."

Somehow Onesimus found out that Paul was in Rome, a prisoner chained to a Roman guard yet able to have visitors. Very likely someone took Onesimus to where Paul was living and introduced him to the apostle, who led him to Christ.

Such is the faithfulness of God. At the end of our road of rebellion, God is waiting, waiting

for us to get sick and tired of ourselves and our sins, waiting to pick up the pieces and put us together right.

Paul took a big risk in receiving Onesimus. Roman law said that anyone who harbored a runaway slave was legally liable for the owner's loss of the slave's labor for each day the person harbored the slave. Paul's willingness to take that risk was a great act of love—and faith.

Still, there was a situation that had to be resolved. Now that Onesimus was right with God, he had to make things right also with Philemon. Believers are reconciled to God by faith in Jesus Christ; we have to get reconciled to others by works. We cannot run from God and we cannot run from responsibility. We must right wrongs as soon and as far as we are able to do so.

I came to Christ at the age of thirteen. A few weeks before my conversion I had stolen a package of fishhooks at a local store. As soon as I committed myself to Christ in faith, I had peace with God, but I did not have the peace of God until I returned those fishhooks and confessed my deed. I told the owner of the store what I did and that I "just got saved." He had a blank look on his face and mumbled something.

So, what was to be done with Onesimus? He was now a born-again son of God. He was useful to Paul. He was also a "hot potato."

Then Epaphras arrived from Colosse. Paul must have been happy to see him. However, what a shock it must have been to Epaphras to meet the miscreant Onesimus!

Even though Onesimus had likely not been on the mind of Ephaphras, he was certainly on the mind of God. Our sovereign God had a plan. All along He had been bringing the various events in that plan together, and they all converged at Rome! (What a fascinating drama or movie this would make.)

So Epaphras was there in Rome with Paul, Timothy, Tychicus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, Mark, Jesus (called Justus), Luke, and Demas (Colossians 4:1, 7 - 14).

Epaphras explained to Paul the gnostic threat to the church at Colosse, and probably to the other churches also. Paul understood the situation immediately. By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he authored the Epistle To The Colossians. Along with it and by the same divine inspiration he composed the Epistle To Philemon. Then he sent them together to Colosse by Tychicus and Onesimus. It is probable that at the same time he authored and

sent what we know as the Epistle To The Ephesians, a circular epistle that could have ended up finally and permanently at Ephesus.

So now, let's explore Paul's letter to Philemon.

"Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer, to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (verses 1 - 3).

The first thing we notice is that Paul does not regard himself a prisoner of Rome but a prisoner of Jesus Christ, that is, for the sake of Jesus Christ.

He and Timothy greet Philemon, beloved friend and fellow laborer; Apphia, sister also beloved and perhaps Philemon's wife; Archippus, "fellow soldier" for Christ and minister of the gospel; and to the church that met at his house. In the Epistle To The Colossians Paul and Timothy ask the church to encourage Archippus, "Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it" (Colossians 4:17).

"I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother" (verses 4 - 7).

Here and throughout the rest of the letter Paul speaks in the first person singular. The letter is Paul's.

He expresses thanks to God for Philemon and assures him that he remembers him regularly in his prayers. Then he gives the reason that he is thankful for Philemon. He has heard of the qualities of Philemon's character: love, faith, and the effective sharing of his faith in (by) full and precise knowledge [*epignosei*] of every good thing that is in him and us in Christ Jesus. His practical works of love brought great joy and encouragement to Paul and Timothy because his generosity refreshed the "hearts" of the saints (literally, *splagchna* "bowels"—innermost feelings, where we feel all the "warm fuzzies"). Paul uses the word three times in this letter (verses 7, 12, 20), and also in Colossians 3:12; 2 Corinthians 6:12; Philippians 1:8 and 2:1. It is found also in 1 John 3:17 Most versions translate it "heart" and "affections."

"Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, 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—I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me" (verses 8 - 11).

Paul comes now to the reason for the letter. He pleads for Onesimus. His plea is so tactful and sincerely humble that his letter has been called "the polite epistle." Paul does not use his God-given, rightful apostolic authority. Instead, he appeals to Philemon in love and on the principles of the gospel. He is "Paul, the aged" (about 60 years of age), Jesus' prisoner. He calls Onesimus his spiritual son, having been used of God to bring about the new birth in Onesimus.

Jesus spoke clearly about the essential agency of the Holy Spirit in bringing about the spiritual, moral, and relational transformation of the new birth (John 3:3 - 8).

Paul wrote about the human agency and also the instrumentality of the word of God that are involved. To the church at Corinth he wrote, "For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel" (1 Corinthians 4:15).

James wrote, "Of His own will He brought us forth [gave us birth] by the word of truth" (James 1:18). Also, Peter says that we have been "born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever" (1 Peter 1:23). Jesus said, "The seed is the word of God" (Luke 8:11).

Paul acknowledges that at one time Onesimus had been unprofitable to Philemon but is now profitable to both Philemon and Paul. This is a play on Onesimus's name. Onesimus means "profitable." He certainly did not live up to his name so far as Philemon and the church at Colosse were concerned. But Paul affirms that he is now doing so. In his Epistle To The Colossians he assures them that Onesimus is "a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you" (Colossians 4:9).

All of this indicates that Onesimus had remained with Paul for some length of time after his conversion and had demonstrated ample proof of the genuineness of his faith. Paul would not have said this about Onesimus if he had been a new convert at the time Paul wrote.

"I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is my own heart, whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. But

without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary" (verses 12 - 14).

Paul urged Philemon to receive Onesimus and treat him just as he would receive Paul and treat his own inmost feelings ("bowels," see note on verse 7). He identified himself with Onesimus. He asked Philemon to do for Onesimus what he would do for Paul himself were he there in person. How could Philemon say "no" to that!

Many years ago I was involved in a boys' and girls' summer camp. One of the older boys came with a very bad reputation, so bad that he was nicknamed "mudhole." The name followed him to the camp. One day the camp speaker arranged a meeting for all the campers—except this boy. The camp speaker firmly told the campers not to call the boy "mudhole" again. He said, "If you call him 'mudhole,' you are calling me 'mudhole'."

Paul wished to keep Onesimus with him. but would do nothing without Philemon's willing consent.

"For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, no 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" (verses 15, 16).

We come now to the most fundamental principle and dynamic of the gospel—love.

God's surpassing love guides Him in the exercise of His sovereign purpose in grace toward His elect. We see human free will in Onesimus in his choice to run away and in all of his choices that eventually brought him to Rome. We see human free will in Epaphras in his decision to go to Paul and in his choices of the means to get there. Still, above it all we see the sovereign guidance of God ruling and overruling throughout all the events, weaving them together in a divine drama.

God knows how to take bad things, including bad things people do, and bring good things out of them as only He can do.

"A beloved brother." This is the "Magna Carta" of true emancipation and liberty. This puts an end to slavery. Slavery and oppression cannot continue to exist under the rule of brotherly love. We cannot enslave one who is our brother, "both in the flesh and in the Lord." Under the gospel of Jesus Christ slavery dies from within before it withers in civil society. It is the quiet revolution.

That is why the New Testament does not teach believers to engage in violent revolution to secure social justice. It is inconsistent with biblical principles and also counter-productive. Here are the biblical principles and instructions.

"Were you called [to Christ] while a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use it. For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise he who is called while free is the Lord's slave. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. Brethren, let each one remain with God in that calling in which he was called" (1 Corinthians 7:20 - 27).

"Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free. And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him" (Ephesians 6:5 - 9 NIV).

"Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism. Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven" (Colossians 3:22 - 4:1 NIV).

"All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect, so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered. Those who have believing masters are not to show less respect for them because they are brothers. Instead, they are to serve them even better, because those who benefit from their [the slaves'] service are believers, and dear to them. These are the things you are to teach and urge on them" (1 Timothy 6:1, 2 NIV).

"Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive" (Titus 2:9, 10 NIV).

"Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are

good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God [because of conscience toward God]. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:18 - 21 NIV).

The preface of the United States Declaration Of Independence affirms as a self-evident truth that "all men are created equal." This is the bedrock spiritual and moral foundation fact on which the United States Constitution was built and the unyielding truth that in time corrected the Constitution's original shortcomings. In his speech at Springfield, Illinois, June 26, 1857, Abraham Lincoln called this "one hard nut to crack" for any possible future tyrants who might appear "in this fair land."

William Wilberforce relentlessly applied on the conscience of Parliament and the people the persistent pressure of the undeniable, self-evident truth of our God-given human exceptionalism with its demand for justice and equality, eventually securing the abolition of the British slave trade.

In the U.S.A. Martin Luther King, Jr. led a non-violent movement that brought about positive and permanent change in public thinking, resulting in sweeping civil rights legislation.

One wonders what might have happened if all the professed Christians of antebellum America—north as well as south—had followed the principles and teachings of the Bible. Perhaps the Civil War itself with all of its horrors might have been prevented.

However, for believers the principle goes beyond our common humanity and resulting civil rights. Love for one another as brothers and sisters in Christ is the far deeper bond of peace. The absence of love for God and others leads to strife and wars, and forces the passage of laws that should have been in place long before.

"If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me. But if he has wronged you or owes you anything, put that on my account. 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" (verses 17 - 19).

Paul repeats his request that Philemon receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul himself. Also, in effect he says to Philemon, "Whatever Onesimus owes you, add that to

my account." This created a legal document, signed by Paul himself, that set up an account in Paul's name. When Onesimus's debt to Philemon was charged to the account, it went immediately and probably deeply into the red.

Then Paul by the Holy Spirit employs consummate tact. He is not going to talk about another "account": Philemon's high moral obligation of love and gratitude to Paul for his very self—for bringing him to eternal life through the gospel. Paul had "begotten" Philemon just as he had Onesimus.

No doubt Philemon was quick to get the point. What Onesimus (and now Paul) legally owed him was nothing compared to the eternal value of his own soul. He was saved from spiritual and eternal death, thanks to Paul for bringing him the gospel. That was far more than enough to erase what Paul (and therefore Onesimus) owed him. Such is the triumph of love!

"Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord" (verse 20).

The word translated "joy" (*onaimen*, from *oninemi*) comes from the same Greek root as "Onesimus."—profitable. In other words, Paul says to Philemon, "Let me receive a benefit, a blessing, from you"—the joy of the cancellation of Onesimus's debt and Philemon receiving him as a brother.

Believers are to treat one another just as we would treat Jesus. In fact, as we are treating one another, just so we are treating Jesus. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, "But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ" (1 Corinthians 8:12).

We must give particular attention to how we treat children. Jesus said clearly, "Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me. But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matthew 18:5, 6). In other words, it would be better for him if the Mafia got him!

Just before His crucifixion, as He was sitting with His disciples on the Mount Of Olives, Jesus said that what we do to "one of the least of these My brethren" we do to Him (see Matthew 25:31 - 40).

"Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more

than I say. But meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you" (verses 21, 22).

Paul concludes his appeal to Philemon by expressing his confidence in Philemon's obedience. Paul is saying in effect that he appealed to Philemon only because he had confidence in Philemon's Christian character, implying that he would not have done so otherwise. Paul believed that Philemon was so full of the love of Christ that he would do all that he could do, even if it were beyond Paul's specific request. That "God-kind" of love is described in 1 Corinthians 13.

Paul also makes a request based on his confidence in the effectiveness of Philemon's prayers. He asks Philemon to put his faith into action by getting a guest room ready for him. The evidence we have indicates that those prayers were answered. Paul was released after two years and continued his travels and ministry. It is a reasonable assumption that he had opportunity to visit Philemon and make use of the guest room.

This reminds us of the vital importance of praying for one another, especially for believers in crisis situations. God could have secured Paul's release without Philemon's prayers; however, He wisely requires our participation, especially in earnest prayer and faith.

"Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers" (verses 23 - 24).

Several of Paul's companions and fellow workers joined him in greeting Philemon, even if perhaps some of them had never met him. Such is the bond among believers that we love all fellow-believers everywhere, including those whom we do not know or we are not able to help except through prayer and perhaps giving.

It could be that Epaphras was also arrested, or that Paul might have used the term in a metaphorical sense.

Mark. Mark is now a mature, useful co-laborer.

Aristarchus and Luke. They followed Paul faithfully, through storm and shipwreck.

Demas. Demas became a "wash-out." He had a fatal character flaw. A few years later Paul told Timothy the sad news: "Be diligent to come to me quickly; for Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world" (2 Timothy 4:9, 10).

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen" (verse 25).

Paul climaxes his letter by invoking God's grace on Philemon's human spirit, to help him maintain and express a gracious attitude toward Onesimus. No anger or resentment. No "tightening up" of his brotherly affections. We must not shut up our heart ["bowels"] from a brother in need (1 John 3:17). Some in the church at Corinth had done that to Paul (2 Corinthians 6:11 - 13).

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with *my* spirit—*right now*." That should be our on-the-spot prayer every time we feel our human spirit rising up in unhealthy ways: anger, pride, resentment, impulsive words and actions.

We have God's promise: "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Amen.

