

“A Personal Letter”      Philemon

3/13/16

When I lived in the Washington, D.C. area, I often listened to WMAL radio, a very popular station. During the afternoon drive, a duo named Trumble and Core entertained us with jokes, news, weather, and traffic reports. Chris Core still has a show on WMAL. Anyway, one of the bits they did worked like this. Trumble would say, “Did you know...?” and Core would respond, “Did I know...” And Trumble would come back with some interesting bit of information. We’re going to try that this morning. I’ll say, “Did you know...?” And you’ll respond, “Did I know...?”

Ready? OK. “Did you know?...that there is a book in our Old Testament that has as its main point that life is meaningless? (Ecclesiastes) Did you know... that there is also a biblical book devoted to the celebration of romantic, erotic love? (Song of Solomon) Did you know...that there is another book in the Old Testament in which God is never mentioned? (Esther) Last one. Did you know... that there are some odd and interesting books in the New Testament, including one which is a strange little letter from the Apostle Paul to a man named Philemon who lived in the city of Colosse, Greece. It doesn’t deal with theology and says almost nothing about Jesus. Instead it deals with a very personal and practical matter- the return of a runaway slave! So, why on earth was it

included in the Bible? And what could it possibly have to say to us today?

I hope to answer those questions this morning!

There are three main characters in the letter:

The Apostle Paul, who is under house arrest in Rome, awaiting a trial before Caesar.

Philemon, a wealthy man, who had become a Christian under Paul's ministry.

And, Onesimus, a slave who ran away from his owner, Philemon, and then also became a Christian under Paul's ministry! At the time of this letter, he was serving Paul during his imprisonment. Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus.

OK. From the outset, it's important to understand that slavery was very common in the Roman Empire, with an estimated 60 million slaves! In fact, it is believed that 50% of the people living in the ancient city of Rome were slaves.

Because there were so many of them, there was always a fear of a slave rebellion. Therefore, runaway slaves like Onesimus were treated very harshly. At a minimum they were branded with the letter "F" on their foreheads, standing for fugitivus, meaning "fugitive" or "runaway." Or, they

could be executed by crucifixion. This letter, therefore, deals with a very serious, life-threatening problem.

Listen as I read, beginning with the first verse of Philemon.

*Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, <sup>2</sup>to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: <sup>3</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup>When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God <sup>5</sup>because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup>I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. <sup>7</sup>I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother. (Philemon 1-7)*

Paul begins by sending greetings to Philemon, calling him a “co-worker.” This may be because the church in Colosse meets in his house. Paul is thankful to God for Philemon because of his “love for all the saints and faith toward the Lord Jesus.” You’ll notice that these qualities in Philemon reflect the two great commandments that Jesus taught- to love God and your neighbor. Paul believes that Philemon is living these commandments out. He’s walking the talk! This is a very typical beginning

for Paul's letters, with a salutation, greeting, and prayer. Now we come to the purpose of the letter.

*<sup>8</sup>For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, <sup>9</sup>yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. <sup>10</sup>I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. <sup>11</sup>Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. <sup>12</sup>I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. <sup>13</sup>I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; <sup>14</sup>but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. (Philemon 8-14)*

I think that Paul is absolutely masterful here in making his appeal. He notes, that as an apostle, he could command Philemon to do what he wants, but says that if Philemon truly loves him, surely he will do it. He points out that he is an old man and a prisoner! Paul is really laying it on thick.

What does he want? Paul is sending Onesimus (who he calls his “very heart”) back to Philemon, carrying this letter with him. But Paul wants Philemon to send Onesimus back to him. He calls Onesimus his “child,” for

Paul was his spiritual father, having nurtured him in the faith. Then Paul uses a little play on words. In Greek, the name “Onesimus” means “useful.” In verse 11, Paul notes that Onesimus was once “useless” to Philemon- not a very good slave. But now, he is “useful” to Paul, helping him as he is in prison.

This little play on words goes to the heart of the gospel, doesn't it? All of us are of little use to the Kingdom of God and sometimes even to one another in our natural, self-centered, sinful state. Left to our own devices, we often create pain, distrust, callousness, violence, and even war toward one another. But the good news is that God loved us too much to leave us in that state. In Christ, everything old has passed away; We are now new creations in Jesus Christ. We are becoming useful to God and to one another. We are learning to truly care about others. We are becoming people who seek to reduce pain and suffering, repenting from our role in causing it. We are developing soft hearts that are sensitive to the plight of others. We are becoming useful to God and his work in our world.

That's what Paul says has happened to Onesimus. He has undergone a major transformation from a useless, runaway slave and thief, to someone who has become very useful to Paul and to the gospel. Paul is sending him back to Philemon in the hope that Philemon will do the right thing and willingly return him to Paul! The letter continues.

<sup>15</sup>*Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever,* <sup>16</sup>*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.* (Philemon 15-16)

Now we come to the issue of slavery. Some have wondered why Paul didn't just condemn the entire institution of slavery here and in his other letters when he addresses slaves and masters. There is a very practical reason. It would have spelled the end of the church. If Christians were seen as fomenting a slave rebellion, the entire force of the Roman Empire would have come crashing down on them. It would have been suicidal. The Romans would have rightly seen that the end of slavery would have undermined their entire society and they would never have allowed that to happen. And, frankly, I'm not sure Paul had the vision to see that the institution of slavery was entirely evil.

However, in this letter and in his other letters, he planted seeds that would eventually lead to the end of slavery in many places. You see, he refers to the escaped slave, Onesimus, as a brother in Christ. That was a radical idea. Slaves in Roman times were never thought of as brothers, as equals; They were property and could be used, abused, and even put to death at the whim of their owner. Paul undercuts that entire understanding of this class of people by calling Onesimus, and later other slaves, brothers

and sisters in Christ. They can no longer be treated as just property, things, even though that's still what they were legally! In the church, they have equal status. You see, Paul is taking a much more subversive and effective approach to abolishing slavery than a direct challenge.

We should also point out that slavery and human trafficking continues today. I've read that there are more people in slavery now than there were in ancient times. It is very common in parts of Africa and Asia, but it can be found in Europe and even here, especially sexual trafficking. It is a horrible, degrading, unjust thing. There are several Christian groups that are actively working to counter this evil, and I'm looking for ways we can get involved in this battle for justice here in Gettysburg. I'll let you know what I find out. The letter concludes.

*<sup>17</sup>So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. <sup>18</sup>If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. <sup>19</sup>I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. <sup>20</sup>Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ.*

*<sup>21</sup>Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. <sup>22</sup>One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you. <sup>23</sup>Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, <sup>24</sup>and so do Mark,*

*Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.* <sup>25</sup>*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.* (Philemon 17-25)

Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul himself! And you have to assume that Paul would have been received with great honor! Paul is asking a lot from Philemon. He is asking him to forgive Onesimus, who broke the law, abandoned him, and probably stole from him. Paul can ask this because of the new relationship that now exists between Philemon and Onesimus. They are now brothers in Christ. And, Christians are to forgive one another even when forgiveness isn't deserved.

And then Paul literally writes an IOU to Philemon, promising to pay for anything that Onesimus may have stolen from him, while saying he won't even remind Philemon that he owes his very soul to him (though he just did!). "Confident of your obedience," he writes, "I know you will do even more than I ask!" He's laying it on pretty thick again, isn't he!

And just in case Philemon is wavering in his response, Paul adds this little PS. "*Prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.*" Paul is hoping to visit Philemon, at which time I'm sure there would be plenty of time to talk about how Philemon responded to Paul's request!



And that's the end of the letter. We just read the whole thing. What happened next? Did Philemon honor Paul's request to return Onesimus to him? The New Testament doesn't tell us. Some commentators think he must have, or this letter wouldn't have been included in the Bible. And there is one very interesting historical footnote. About 50 years later, a Christian bishop named Ignatius wrote letters to several churches he was helping to oversee. One of these letters mentions the wonderful bishop of Ephesus, a city near Colosse. The bishop was named...Onesimus! Could this be the same Onesimus, the runaway slave, saved and transformed by the grace of Jesus Christ? We don't know, but it might be another explanation for why this letter was included in our Bible!

The letter also raises important issues for us to consider. Jesus can transform lives. How has your life been changed by Jesus? What still needs to be changed? Who do you know who needs to experience the changes that Jesus can make? How can you introduce them to Jesus?

The letter reminds us of the importance of forgiveness. How are you doing with that one? Is there someone you need to forgive? And the letter reminds us that Christian faith has implications for all parts of our lives, not just what happens on Sunday. Paul's request to Philemon would have been costly, and it reminds us that Christian faith touches on our work,

wealth, family, and business practices. How is your faith impacting those areas?

As we continue a time of self-examination this Lent, I encourage you to read Philemon on your own and see what God may say to you through it.