

THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL COME, LORD JESUS GOD’S PRISONER *Grace to a Runaway Slave*

God must have a special love for runaways. The pages of Scripture record dozens of people who were prone to flight. From Adam and Eve's attempt to elude God, through Jacob's escape from his brother, past generations of God's people on the run, to that inner circle of disciples who fled from the garden when Jesus was captured, the Bible is a collection of runaway lives. God's special love for runaways is beautifully illustrated in the life of a slave named Onesimus. -- *Life Application Study Bible*.

The book of Philemon is Paul's only private and personal letter that is included in the New Testament. It is short (25 verses and 335 words in the Greek). Although Paul did not have the personal freedom to come and go as he pleased, he did have the blessing of being able to receive visitors. This kept Paul's ministry open to those outside of prison even as they ministered to them.

Last week I mentioned that during Paul's ministry in Ephesus, at least two men from Colossae came to know Jesus, Epaphras and Philemon. Epaphras visited Paul during his Roman incarceration and because of this visit the letter to the Colossians was written. Philemon did not visit Paul but his slave Onesimus did. However, Onesimus was not sent by Philemon. Onesimus was in Rome because he was a runaway slave.

Slavery in the first century was different from slavery in early American history. Slavery did not target a specific race but occurred when Rome took slaves as the spoils of war or individuals sold themselves into slavery to pay off debts. Slavery in ancient Rome played an important role in society and the economy. Besides manual labor, slaves performed many domestic services, and might be employed at highly skilled jobs and professions. Accountants and physicians were often slaves. Greek slaves in particular might be highly educated. Unskilled slaves, or those sentenced to slavery as punishment, worked on farms, in mines, and at mills. Their living conditions were brutal, and their lives short.

Some question why Paul did not speak out against slavery. Paul's purpose in life was to see hearts turned to Jesus – not political or social reform. Paul did not avoid the topic of slavery. He challenged masters and slaves to serve one another in love. In the situation Paul discussed in his letter to Philemon, Paul already knew Philemon's heart and that Philemon would do the right thing when it came to Onesimus – that is forgive him. Also, Paul knew that the institution of slavery was so much a part of the culture of that day that it would not be overthrown by the rebellion of a few. The love of God in the hearts of God's children is what changes everything – not just slavery but all the wrong attitudes toward the sinful things we do. I would like to tell you that slavery no longer exists in our world today. But, the truth is probably more than 40 million men, women and children suffer the exploitation of human trafficking and modern slavery today. Christians need to be sharing Christ's life-changing power.

In most of his letters, Paul referred to himself as an apostle but in his letter to Philemon he called himself a prisoner. **Philemon 1:1 (ESV)** ¹ *Paul, a prisoner for Christ... To Philemon our beloved fellow worker.* As he began writing to Philemon about his slave, Paul was seeking to keep life in perspective – although he was legally a prisoner of Rome, he was in fact a prisoner of Jesus Christ as we have discussed before. Let’s see how Paul handled his message to Philemon.

Appealed to Love, Not Obligation

Read Philemon 1:8-14 (ESV) ⁸ *Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required,* ⁹ *yet for love’s sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—* ¹⁰ *I 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.)* ¹² *I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.* ¹³ *I 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,* ¹⁴ *but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.*

All of us are greatly affected by the ‘tone’ of others. As believers we need to remember that no one likes to be DEMANDED to do something. Paul did not use his authority within the church to “orchestrate” forgiveness in Philemon’s heart. Instead Paul wrote as a beseeching intercessor. As Paul interceded on the behalf of Onesimus, we are reminded of Jesus who intercedes to the Father on our behalf. **Romans 8:34 (ESV)** ³⁴ *Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.* Paul made his appeal to Philemon on the basis of Christian love. Paul did not try to “railroad” Philemon into doing something he did not want to do. As we encourage others to forgive, we must remember that forced forgiveness is not genuine forgiveness. Forgiveness must come from the heart.

We do not know if Paul ever had physical children but he certainly was blessed with children in the faith. He said to Philemon, *I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.* We are not told of Onesimus’ specific sin other than running away from his master. Many believe that he stole from Philemon. But the significant thing in Onesimus’ life is that he came into a right relationship with God sometime during Paul’s incarceration. Their relationship was so strong that Paul claimed him as his own child.

Paul in his position as a church elder and apostle could have demanded that Philemon forgive Onesimus and not give Onesimus what he deserved because of his actions. Paul did not do that. This short letter makes it clear that Paul used great tact in his efforts of reconciliation. Paul was not being two-faced. He was simply acting graciously. That is the way all believers should respond in difficult situations – display the grace of God in our own lives. Remember, the word “grace” is virtually synonymous with the gospel of God’s gift of unmerited salvation in Jesus Christ.

The relationship between Onesimus and Philemon needed to be resolved for more than one reason. If Onesimus continued his life without resolving his problem with Philemon, he would not be setting a good Christian example. What would Philemon feel when he heard through the grapevine that Onesimus was over at Rome taking care of Paul. I doubt he would have been very impressed with his runaway slave.

Paul loved Onesimus so much that his heart's desire was to keep him for himself. But, that would not have been right for Paul to do. You can imagine the Roman guards whispering, "Paul is keeping that slave for himself. That's just not right."

Even if we are not being tempted to hold onto a runaway slave, there can be those people who are so precious to us within the church family we just don't want to let them go. But, we cannot 'hang on' to anyone when they are called to minister somewhere else.

Also, Paul wanted Philemon to personally experience the change in Onesimus for himself. We can hear wonderful testimonies of changed lives but nothing can replace personally experiencing that genuine change in someone. As prison volunteers we sometimes see lives that have not truly transformed by the gospel as we first believed and it is disappointing. But the joy is overwhelming when we do experience someone who turns from their sin to follow Jesus and never looks back.

Accepting a Brother, Not a Slave

Read Philemon 1:15-17 (ESV) ¹⁵ *For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever,* ¹⁶ *no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.* ¹⁷ *So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.*

Christians can be confident that God is in control of even the most difficult experiences of life. Paul wrote in **Romans 8:28 (ESV)** ²⁸ *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* God permitted Onesimus to run away to Rome as a slave so that he might meet Paul and become a brother in Christ not only to Paul but to Onesimus. Philemon surely would have witnessed to Onesimus but sometimes it takes more than one witness to bring a lost sheep into the fold.

The word Paul uses for 'partner' in verse 17 is *koinonia* which means to have in common not only as a 'partner' in business, but one who shares in the partnership of faith – partners with Christ and partners with fellow believers. We should see our relationship with other believers as a divine partnership – not something of this world but instead something out of this world.

Anticipating Grace, Not Duty

Read Philemon 1:18-22 (ESV) ¹⁸ *If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.* ¹⁹ *I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.* ²⁰ *Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.* ²¹ *Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.* ²² *At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.*

Many conclude that verse 18 is an indication that Onesimus had stolen something from Philemon. And that brings us to one of those big 'churchy' terms – that is the doctrine of imputation! The concept is simply really. Paul provides an example when he tells Philemon that any wrong or debt caused by Onesimus should be put on his account. Today, we might say 'charge his bill to me.' Have you ever been in a restaurant when the server

tells you that someone has already paid for your meal?’ We experienced it once and it gave us a special feeling of gratitude.

The reality of imputation began in Genesis. Paul explained what happened in **Romans 5:12 (ESV)** ¹² ... *just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.* It is sad but Adam’s sin ruined our standing before God. The chorus says it like this – we owed a debt we could not pay.

Hallelujah! Like the chorus continues, He paid a debt He did not owe! God did not leave us in our sorry sin-filled state! When God the Son died the believer’s sin was imputed or charged to Christ. In other words, Jesus ‘paid the bill’ for our sin debt. **Isaiah 53:6 (ESV)** ⁶ *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.*

And finally, Christ’s righteousness is imputed or credited to those who accept His great salvation. **2 Corinthians 5:21 (ESV)** ²¹ *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* And that reminds me of another song that says, ‘O, happy day when Jesus washed my sins away!’

As difficult as it might be for him, Onesimus, the runaway slave turned believer, had to return and face his old life as a new person. This letter naturally does not reveal that Onesimus actually did return. So, let’s read what Paul wrote in his letter to Colossae where Philemon lived.

Read Colossians 4:7-9 (ESV) ⁷ *Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord.* ⁸ *I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts,* ⁹ *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.*

Tychicus was Paul’s friend. Part of his work in the ministry included delivering Paul’s mail at times. Dan Hiser has frequently joked about being our ‘mail man’ when he picks up our letters for inmates at the Max. This is just a reminder of the importance of how a simple task such as ‘mail delivery’ for the cause of the gospel is significant.

The Bible does not say what happened between Onesimus and Philemon when the runaway returned. Paul was confident that the reunion would be a happy one – not because Philemon would be obedient to Paul’s wishes but that Philemon would be obedient to loving and forgiving another brother in Christ.

Fifty years later, Ignatius an early Christian writer drafted a letter to the church at Ephesus in which he mentioned a bishop named Onesimus who was useful in Christ. This was the way Paul had described the runaway slave Onesimus in his letter to Philemon. It is not a proven fact that Onesimus became a pastor at Ephesus but it seems plausible. I am once again reminded of the line from a song – a hymn this time: I have ceased from my wandering and going astray, Since Jesus came into my heart; And my sins which were many are all washed away, Since Jesus came into my heart. No matter what age we were when Jesus came into our hearts, let’s pray for a fresh anointing everyday.