

## AGENTS OF RECONCILIATION

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Philemon

### INTRODUCTION

This morning, we're looking at Paul's shortest letter— so short it has no chapters, just 25 verses. Last Sunday, we concluded our study of the letter to the church at Colosse and noted one of the couriers of that letter was a man named Onesimus. His story is an amazing one. This letter to Philemon was carried by him along with Colossians. For that reason, I thought it would be nice to look at this short letter while we were still in the Colossians framework. Unfortunately, those who put the New Testament in its current order did not go about it logically— at least according to my logic. I would think Philemon should be right next to Colossians, wouldn't you? They were written at the same time, sent by the same messenger. But, while the New Testament does group all the letters of Paul into one part (the section after Acts to Hebrews), they are ordered by length— the longest, Romans first, and the shortest, Philemon last. There is logic to that, but not according to the way I think. However, once I learned that bit of trivia I found it a real help in finding the books of the New Testament.

Before we read this letter, I want to fill you in on the story. It takes some reading between the lines, but here's the basic story line. Philemon was a man of some means, living in the city of Colosse in Asia Minor— about 100 miles inland from the port city of Ephesus. Remember, Paul had a productive, two-year ministry in Ephesus, but never went to Colosse. The church in Colosse was established by someone from Colosse who were came to know Christ through Paul's ministry in Ephesus. Philemon was one of those converts— perhaps he was on a business trip to Ephesus. The early church did not have church buildings to meet in, they met in people's homes. Philemon, perhaps having one of the larger homes in Colosse, opened his home to the church. As was generally the case with wealthier Gentiles, Philemon owned slaves. One of those slaves was named Onesimus.

I picture Onesimus as a young man, though there's nothing in the story specifically stating that. He ran away from his master, Philemon, apparently stealing from him as well. Usually any slave who ran away stole something in order to have some means to pay their way in their escape. Perhaps Onesimus stole enough to buy passage to Rome on a ship. In Rome, it is thought there was an "underground community" of escaped slaves helping each other out. Runaway slaves were dealt with harshly under the Roman system— it was a crime punishable by death.

Somehow, Onesimus met Christ through Paul's ministry from prison in Rome. Paul's imprisonment may have been more like we'd consider house arrest, with two Roman soldiers guarding him there at all times. But, from the number of people surrounding Paul at this time, it would seem that a lot of people could come and visit with Paul. Someone brought Onesimus, and

through Paul's ministry he accepted Christ as his Lord and Savior.

So, now you have the picture. Runaway slave, Onesimus, who has broken the law and stolen from his master Philemon, is now a Christian. His master is a Christian. Paul realizes Onesimus must now face-up to what he has done. Onesimus agrees to go back to Philemon and accept whatever his fate may be. But Paul, sends with Onesimus this letter to Philemon, pleading in very strong terms for Philemon to forgive this slave– and accept him now as a brother in Christ.

Let's read this highly personal appeal.

Our text is from The Message's paraphrase of verses 4-7:

*Every time your name comes up in my prayers, I say, "Oh, thank you, God!" I keep hearing of the love and faith you have for the Master Jesus, which brims over to other Christians. And I keep praying that this faith we hold in common keeps showing up in the good things we do, and that people recognize Christ in all of it. Friend, you have no idea how good your love makes me feel, doubly so when I see your hospitality to fellow believers.*

– Philem 1:4-7 (MSG)

### **BE RECONCILED!**

I'm sure most of you know the story of Corrie Ten Boom. In Holland, during WW II, her family hid Jews in their home to save them from the holocaust. As a result the Ten Booms were all arrested and sent to Nazi concentration camps. Only Corrie survived the experience. She documents the horrible cruelties, the suffering, and the marvelous grace of God in the midst of unimaginable human degradation in her book, The Hiding Place. Her life after what is told in The Hiding Place was one of traveling the world, spreading the news of God's power to help us in the midst of suffering, His marvelous grace, and forgiveness. In an article she wrote in "Guideposts," she told of speaking in Munich, Germany in 1947. Her message was that God forgives. At the end of her talk, in that basement room, she writes,

"The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. There were never questions after a talk in Germany in 1947. People stood up in silence, in silence collected their wraps, in silence left the room.

"And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue [Nazi] uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones. It came back in a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man.

"Now this man was in front of me, hand thrust out: 'A fine message, *fraulein!* How good it is to know that , as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!'

"And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled with my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course– how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women? But I remembered him and the leather crop

swinging from his belt. It was the first time since my release that I had been face to face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

“‘You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk,’ he was saying. ‘I was a guard there. But since that time, I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well.’ Again, his hand came out– ‘*Fraulein*, will you forgive me?’

“It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do. For I had to do it– I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. Jesus says, ‘If you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.’

“And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion– I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. ‘Jesus, help me!’ I prayed silently. ‘I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.’

“And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bring tears to my eyes. ‘I forgive you, brother!’ I cried. ‘With all my heart!’ For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely as I did then.

Do you know Christians who are estranged from one another? Maybe you have a relationship or two that fits in that category. Is there someone with whom you need to be reconciled? Whether or not you currently need healing in a relationship, we all know how difficult it can be. Forgiving someone who has wronged us and hurt us is one of the toughest assignments for any of us. And, there are times when we are called upon to be a peacemaker between two estranged people. What Paul does here is highly instructive to us.

The implications of what Paul is asking for between Philemon and Onesimus are huge. The issue is serious. Let’s try for a moment putting ourselves in their shoes.

First, consider where Philemon, the slave’s master, might be coming from. While we know slavery is wrong, it was an integral part of the social structure of that day. Nowhere in the New Testament are Christians forbidden to own slaves. We’ve recently looked at that in Col. 3:22-4:1. The only admonition is that masters treat their slaves fairly and with respect, for these slave owners answer to their Master in heaven. And slaves are likewise to work hard, at their best for their masters. From all that is said of Philemon, he was a committed Christian, putting his walk with Christ into practice. We can assume he treated his slaves well, providing for their needs– much better than the non-Christian slave owners in general. Here is his slave, Onesimus, who

doesn't realize how good he has it. He steals and runs away, breaking two Roman laws. It is a deed punishable by death because it has such serious implications. If slaves can get away with running away, the whole institution of slavery would disintegrate. To Philemon this has to feel like betrayal and a slap in the face. Now Paul is forcefully pleading with Philemon to accept Onesimus back, *no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother* (16). I expect Philemon has other slaves. This is pretty risky. What will keep his other slaves from running away or just saying they've become Christians so they should then be like Onesimus?

Now, let's step into Onesimus' shoes. I suspect he had been an angry young man, uncooperative, doing the least he could to just get by. Maybe he had been captured as a child or teenager in the Roman conquest of new territory and sold into slavery—forcefully removed from his family and home. The basis for this conjecture is a wordplay Paul uses in vs. 11, *Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.* The name, Onesimus, means “useful.” So, Mr. Useful was really useless to you. But now that he's a Christian, he is useful. That's why I suggest Onesimus was rebellious and surly as a slave. Now, we know slavery is a horrible thing. For one human being to own another human being created in the image of God is an abomination. In Galatians 3:28, we read,

*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

So, Onesimus could well justify his position as not breaking God's law, merely an unjust Roman law. He could even see his runaway status as courageously fighting injustice for the sake of Christ. Yet, Paul is asking him to go back and voluntarily submit to Philemon and serve him. He goes with no guarantees of what Philemon's reaction will be. Whether he lives, whether he dies, whether he is a slave or set free— he goes back to submit to Philemon.

What Paul is asking for will require considerable humility on both parties. Philemon will need to give up his pride, and relinquish his rights in this matter. Onesimus will have to abandon his fear and “freedom in Christ” to voluntarily submit to his master. This is all so they can be reconciled—brought together as brothers in Christ.

Paul bases his argument to Philemon on the nature of Christian fellowship, captured in vs. 6 of our text. This is actually one of those hard verses to translate. You'll notice the NIV and The Message handle it quite differently. The NIV, along with many translations says, *I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.* The Message gives us, *And I keep praying that this faith we hold in common keeps showing up in the good things we do, and that people recognize Christ in all of it.* The problem is with the phrase, in the Greek, “fellowship of the faith,” using the Greek word, *koinonia* for fellowship. This is a very deep word in the New Testament conveying the oneness, intimacy, and togetherness that we can only experience in Christ. When the NIV translates this *koinonia* as “sharing your faith,” I think it calls to mind for most of us, witnessing. The concept here is more mutuality in common belief. Thus I prefer The Message's, *this faith we hold in common*. The point Paul is making is, Christian fellowship will be translated into living in harmony, being reconciled with one another.

In 2 Cor. 5:17-18, Paul affirms this truth:

*...anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life burgeons! Look at it! All this comes from the God who settled the relationship between us and him, and then called us to settle our relationships with each other. (Msg)*

Let's look at the model Paul lays out for us here in Philemon. Humility, relinquishment, and obedience to Christ are necessary ingredients to healing any relationship.

### **THE MODEL**

First, note that Paul places himself in the middle between these two estranged believers. That is always an uncomfortable, dangerous place to be. In this sense, Paul is like Christ, who came into the world to reconcile us to God. This is the only time Paul begins a letter simply referring to himself as "a prisoner of Christ Jesus"—nothing more. Generally he begins a letter citing his apostolic authority, but not here. He is simply a brother in Christ, greeting Philemon's wife, Apphia and Archippus, who was probably their son. He is warmly personal, affirming to Philemon, and humble. He writes,

*although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul— an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus ... (8-9)*

Christian fellowship needs voluntary compliance. So, Paul refuses to use his apostolic authority. At the same time, there is a human quality where you see Paul's strong personality. In vs. 18-19, as Paul offers to pay back anything Onesimus owes, he also throws in, as an aside, "remember, Philemon, you owe me your very life," referring to Paul's leading him to spiritual life in Christ. That may sound a bit heavy-handed, but then it reminds us that this is Paul. But he is also putting himself on the line for Onesimus. This runaway slave could mess-up and betray Paul's unconditional confidence in him. Will he be able to go back and live in submission to Philemon? Yet, there's no hedging on the part of Paul. He willingly backs Onesimus 100%, even if it means a strain in his relationship with the wealthy, influential Philemon.

Onesimus is being asked to voluntarily return and submit himself to his earthly master, Philemon, because of his new Master, Christ Jesus. He is submitting to slavery— something not ordained by God, but the law of the land. Could he not return with conditions, with a negotiated outcome to be sure it met what he desired? As Christians, we need to be cautious in exercising our freedom in Christ, especially when it comes to asserting our rights. Martin Luther captured it well when he said,

*"A Christian is the most free lord of all, subject to none.*

*A Christian is the most dutiful servant of all, subject to everyone."*

Onesimus is called to relinquish his rights in this matter for a higher calling. True Christian fellowship demands this laying down of our conditions, our judgements, and trusting Christ. That includes trusting our brothers and sisters in the Lord as well.

When I was in college in Seattle, I was on what was referred to as a "Gospel Team" that went to church youth groups on Sunday nights, at their request, and worked with them for a few weeks to

encourage their ministry. It meant we had to miss the evening meal served at the college. That meant a great opportunity to reward ourselves after our program with hamburgers and milkshakes at Dag's drive-in on Aurora. But, one member of our team said her Sabbath-keeping practice meant not buying things on the Lord's Day— including food. Now, she made it clear she didn't want to impose her practice on the rest of us. We could still do as we desired, but to understand why she would just sit with us, but not eat. In light of Paul's teaching in Romans 14, we all decided to simply fast on Sunday evenings and not assert our "right" to eat at Dag's. That was a healthy submission on our part to enhance and honor Christian fellowship, belonging to one another, in Christ. It blessed all of us and I believe honored Christ.

## CONCLUSION

We aren't told of the outcome of Onesimus's return to Philemon— but we'd assume it went well. There is an intriguing possibility from history that may be a postscript. About 50 years after this was written, Ignatius, one of the early Christian martyrs, was being taken from Antioch to Rome for execution. As he goes, he writes letters— which we still have— to churches from locations near them. When he stops at Smyrna, he writes a letter to Ephesus, dated 110-115 AD. The bishop at Ephesus' name is Onesimus and Ignatius uses the same wordplay Paul does in this letter upon Onesimus meaning "useful." Ignatius writes saying the Bishop is Onesimus by name and Onesimus by nature. Is this the same Onesimus who was a runaway slave? It is possible if Paul's Onesimus was a teenager or young man. I like that possible ending to this story.

Whether that is the way it plays out or not, we can be sure reconciliation is always the right path and the key to spiritual fruitfulness. When we humble ourselves, let go of our lives, and obey Christ no matter the cost, the results are often beyond anything we can imagine.

- Is there someone you need to forgive this morning?
- Maybe you're being called to relinquish your rights for the sake of Christ and Christian fellowship.
- All of us at times are called to lay down our lives for one another and become agents of reconciliation.