

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Philemon 1-21

Sermon Title: "Two Slaves Set Free" (Need for Repentance Lenten Series)

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{SLIDE 1} Paul's letter to Philemon is one of a few books of the Bible that doesn't have any chapters. All it has is verses. For the other letters of Paul, we usually cite a chapter and then the verses we will read. But in Philemon we just cite the verses and read them. There aren't many verses in Philemon at that, so it doesn't take us long to get through it.

A part of Paul's letter to Philemon is about slavery, which makes it a difficult letter to read. With our checkered past as Americans, even today we find the subject hard to speak about and hard to overcome. We are still trying to overcome the idea that some people are not treated as fairly as others, all because they supposedly look different, whatever that means. Despite what one of the federal government secretaries once said, the slaves of the past were not immigrants. They were slaves, ill-treated, oppressed.

In part Paul's letter is about that uncomfortable subject, because Philemon owns a slave. He has a name, Onesimus. It doesn't help us to know that Onesimus was a family servant, similar to being a

butler to a wealthy family. The subject is still unsettling. It doesn't help us to know that Romans allowed for many forms of slaves, including those who needed to become servants to pay off debts, and then they could be set free once the debts were paid. The subject still makes us uncomfortable. We have a not-so-glorious history as a country, and those not-so-glorious moments continue to pop up and cause us to realize how divided we still are.

{SLIDE 2} Yet, it might make us less uncomfortable to know that Paul has a problem with this particular situation. He has a problem with Onesimus as a slave and Philemon as an owner, and the way an owner might treat a servant after what has occurred.

It is mentioned in verse 8, when Paul appeals to Philemon on the basis of love. Apparently Paul is in prison at the time, and he is unable to visit with his dear friend and coworker, Philemon, personally.¹ It seems Paul would like to speak directly to Philemon and persuade him to act justly concerning the thing he is about to mention, but prison keeps Paul from being face-to-face and so he writes a private letter.

{SLIDE 3} Onesimus has been visiting Paul in prison and Paul has taken him under his wing. But

¹ Cf. Philemon 1.

Onesimus is not visit upon his free will. He has fled from his owner, Philemon. He has taken an unauthorized leave of absence, and it doesn't seem any time soon that Onesimus will return. What's more, Onesimus may have stolen something from Philemon's family before departing. Paul makes this comment in verse 18 in his letter: "If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account." So, something might be in Onesimus's possession that doesn't belong to him. Maybe he stole the thing that he greatly desired and then decided to flee from his owners. Or, maybe he chose to run away from his slavery and thought to take a few items with him to help him on the journey. Whatever the case, Onesimus is gone. His owner, Philemon, may view him as a runaway and a thief. There are great consequences to be paid for stealing and deserting. If one is a slave in Roman times, one doesn't have the same rights as a free person, so anything may happen. Whatever happens to him next may be terrible for Onesimus but legal according to Roman law.

{SLIDE 4} There is the story about the great Roman politician and philosopher, Cicero, who once discovered that one of his slaves had stolen several

important books from his great library.² Cicero searched for the man, and found him in an area not far from one of Cicero's homes. The slave was telling everyone that he was free, because Cicero had given him his freedom. When it was well within his rights to punish the man, Cicero chose not to. "It's not a big thing," he said, and asked the people of that area to keep an eye on the slave. Of course, he fled that area once more, never to be seen again.

However, there is another story of a slave who was carrying crystal goblets on a tray, when he dropped the tray and broke one of the goblets. The owner was so furious that he drowned him in the fishpond in the middle of the court.³

It is a difficult subject to mention, because we have here this man named Onesimus who fled for whatever reason, stole for whatever reason, and is fearful for his life. He knows that the Roman law gives him no rights, and that Philemon has all the cards in his hand to do with Onesimus as he pleases. The Romans did not have a police force to arrest perpetrators. There was not an FBI to investigate criminal cases and bring people to justice. Roman law trusted that each household would deal with their internal matters as

² Mary Beard, *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome*, cf. 331.

³ William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, cf. 310.

they pleased. The head of the household, the father and owner of all things, could make the final decisions, right or wrong.

Onesimus does not know if his owner will be lenient or severe, tender or barbarous. He runs to Paul for help. He hopes that Paul might be able to do something for him. Paul and Philemon know each other so well, had done ministry together, suffered much persecution together. Surely Philemon will listen to him.

{SLIDE 5} Paul hopes that Philemon will listen to him, too. Paul is not happy with the situation. He doesn't like how Onesimus fled with something that didn't belong to him. He doesn't like the Roman system that allows owners to do what they will with their slaves, good and bad. Paul doesn't like any of it, so he writes a letter to Philemon to straighten things out.

Paul appeals to Philemon's better nature. He appeals to a man who knows Jesus Christ, and knows that Christ has freed all people from the oppression of sin. There might be the rules of the land, but there is the rule of God who chooses to call people children and not owners and slaves. In fact, God would want us all to become servants to each other, just as his Son Jesus became a servant to us to the point of

death. God wants us taking the humble view and serving one another in any need.

{SLIDE 6} “I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus,” Paul writes.⁴ Not “your slave.” Not “the thief who ran from you.” Paul calls Onesimus his “child,” a title of great affection. Paul sees the potential in the man. He is not a person who can only serve crystal goblets or clean libraries and rooms. Onesimus is a person who has the potential of being saved like anyone else. He has the potential of knowing Jesus Christ, and living for Christ, and living forever because of Christ. Paul doesn’t see a runaway slave; he see a man who need God just like anyone else, and who may approach God like anyone else with all his sin.

“I am appealing to you for my child... whose father I have become during my imprisonment,” Paul says. Paul might be locked away enduring his own bondage, but he will take in Onemsius who is lost and scared. He will take in this man and become like a father to him and teach him the good news of Jesus Christ. Paul reveals to him a life beyond slaves and owners, servitude and hard labor. Paul speaks to him of a life of freedom, freedom in Jesus Christ, who forgives all our sin, rescues us from our bondage, and allows us to

⁴ Philemon 10.

be the people God wants us to be. Onesimus learns that there is more to life for the one who believe in Christ, and that in God's sight they are all seen as equal and special, calls us children.

{SLIDE 7} Paul wants Philemon to do the same. Paul not only tells Philemon how he has treated Onesimus with respect, but also shows him how to be respectful to him when he returns. Paul is the living example that he wants Philemon to be.

Paul must send Onesimus back to his former household. He would like to keep him as a friend and supporter while languishing in prison, but Paul knows that Onesimus must go back for his sake and Philemon's sake. He appeals to Philemon's better nature, his Christian nature. "I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced."⁵ Paul cannot abolish the Roman law when it comes to slavery. It is deeply imbedded in the system and everybody who is free doesn't want people meddling with it. In one Roman household, the servants are treated well, and in another they are treated harshly. Philemon has the legal right to do what he will, when Onesimus returns. However, Paul can help to change

⁵ Philemon 14.

the way one household is run. Paul appeals to Philemon's Christianity and hopes that his home will be transformed. He doesn't want Philemon responding like a Roman; he wants him responding as a disciple of Christ. He doesn't want Philemon applying Roman law but God's grace on the matter. Paul cannot force him to do so, but he hopes he will listen to God, and that God would compel Philemon to hold back his anger and frustration with Onesimus and treat him respectfully just as Paul has.

{SLIDE 8} The subject still makes us uncomfortable. We have a not-so-glorious history as a country, and those not-so-glorious moments continue cause us to realize how divided we still are.

But it might help a little to consider the wacky idea Paul suggests in verses 15-16. We have no clue how God works at times, and sometimes God's ways are mysterious, unexplainable, and even wacky. Paul suggests that God must have done a wacky thing for Onesimus and Philemon that put the whole Roman idea of owner and slave on its head.

“Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for awhile, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a

beloved brother.”⁶ Before all of this it was business as usual. It was Onesmius as servant doing his thing with no real future, and it was Philemon being the head of the household, treating people as he thought he should. Before all of this, there was no transformation. There was no repentance from sin and the desire to seek a new life in Christ.

God in a wacky way turned it all upside-down. Onesmius felt the need to steal and flee, and who does he go to but Paul, a man of God who may speak for God. God may not have arranged for the theft but arranged to get Onesmius to the place where he could repent of it and be freed. And then, this man of God could address the owner, Philemon, and tell him of his sin: “That you, Philemon, are living under an oppressive system, that you are following laws that are not God’s law, that you tolerate cultural norms that God does not tolerate.” Perhaps the time has come for things to change. It is time to let go of Onesmius as a slave. It is time to embrace him as a beloved brother in Christ. Repent and be free, just as your former servant Onesmius ought to be.

{SLIDE 9} It may makes us less uncomfortable knowing that there is a happy ending to this letter to

⁶ Philemon 15-16.

Philemon. The owner is no longer an owner. The slaves is no longer a slave. Both are free in Christ, who holds no distinctions between people. Christ never sees Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, and all the baggage that we might place on such distinctions. Christ sees people who are lost in sin, child of God who are imprisoned by the way the world does things and feel compelled to do the same. Christ sees us who need to break away from it all, unloose the shackles and be reconciled to our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. If we are Christ, it is our hope to work together for Christ. It is our hope to deal with each other on the basis of love: to understand as we understood, to console as we are consoled, to forgive as we are forgiven.⁷ It doesn't matter what we look like, and how we are perceived by others.

There is a life of freedom, freedom in Jesus Christ. Together we live as child of God in this freedom from sin, and together we celebrate the life Christ gives us.

⁷ Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi: <http://www.prayerguide.org.uk/stfrancis.htm>.

The Assurance of Pardon:

The psalmist reminds us in Psalm 40 the theme of redemption: “I waited patiently for the Lord, who inclined his ear and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the desolate pit, out of the muck and mire.” Through Christ, God the Father sets our feet on solid ground. Through Christ, the Holy Spirit puts a new song of love and peace in our mouths. Through Christ, we see and fear God, for we are all forgiven. Thanks be to God! Amen.