

Forgotten Letters

Runaway Slave

Philemon

September 24, 2023

HDBC

Letter writing is almost a lost art. We'd rather pick up the phone or click off a text message. In Paul's day it was all about letter-writing. There is no way to know how many letters Paul wrote, probably hundreds. We know of 13 that were divinely inspired as part of God's Word.

Philemon is, without a doubt, the least known & often ignored of those letters. It's one of three ***Forgotten Letters*** that we'll exam in the next 3 weeks. Not really forgotten as much as ignored. Philemon, 2 John and 3 John. Start with Philemon.

It consists of only 300 words but what a gem it is! It was written around AD 64 from Rome, where Paul was held under house arrest for his faith and work in the Gospel. Though experiencing some freedom to live in his own rented house, he was chained to a roman soldier throughout the day and night. It was under those circumstances that he wrote this letter.

Every book in the New Testament has a purpose or story that prompted the author to take up his pen. This is certainly true in the letter to Philemon. It is a story that teaches forgiveness, responsibility, reconciliation. It also points to the amazing power of the gospel to not only change lives but relationships.

Read the Text.

1. Difficult Situation

Philemon was a wealthy Christian who lived in Colossae and who had been converted through Paul's preaching. Philemon had a wife named Apphia & a son named Archippus. He was also a leader in the church at Colossae. They had slaves in their household. Among them was a man named Onesimus.

At some point he not only robbed his master but escaped from slavery. Colossae was not a large town & he would have easily been detected. So, he fled to Rome, where he could likely blend in and start a new life.

In what seemed like a great coincidence, but was actually evidence of the **providence of God**, he came into contact with Paul, the very man who had led his master to Christ. The result was that Onesimus also became a Christian. Paul soon learned of Onesimus' past with Philemon, of his escape from slavery and harm done to Philemon. We can be sure the Holy Spirit was also bringing conviction to the new believer. He and Paul must have had numerous conversations about what to do. It was a tricky situation.

Paul had a deep and long relationship with Philemon. But he now has a deep and devoted relationship with Onesimus. **Note the affectionate way** that he speaks of him. *I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment.* The affectionate reference to Onesimus as **my child** is typical of the warm bond of love, which existed between Paul & his converts.

Christianity is best viewed in the context of relationships. One of the hallmarks of Christianity is the relationship which is forged between fellow-believers. There is a bond that is unlike any other in the world. **The New Testament likens our relationships with each other as that of the various members of the human body. If one member suffers, then all suffer.**

Paul's consuming passion was to win people for Christ, rescuing them from sin and restoring them to a right relationship with God. Once restored and made right with God, he desired **to lead them into spiritual maturity** as they learned to live out their new faith.

He has brought Onesimus to Christ and now leads him to make things right with Philemon. Forgiveness does not negate the need for repairing damaged and broken relationships because of the sin which has been forgiven. He was right with God. Now he needs to be right with people. He could not simply ignore the harm he had done to Philemon.

2. A Risky Plan

Paul would send Onesimus back to Philemon to make things right. The hope was that Philemon would forgive him, receive him as a brother, and free him from slavery. The latter is not explicitly stated but is implied in many ways in the letter. The plan would be incredibly risky, especially for the new believer.

That system of slavery ran deep in the Roman Empire. It was part of the culture that certain men should be slaves. It was not race-based slavery like that practices later in America and England in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries.

There were 60 million slaves. The sheer numbers posed a constant risk of rebellion. This was suppressed through harsh penalties & punishments. The life or death of Onesimus rested totally with Philemon. Slaves were routinely crucified for lesser offenses. Runaway slaves could be branded as fugitives. **But the risk was worth it** for Onesimus. He was now a believer in Jesus. The Holy Spirit was compelling him to make things right with his master.

The Christian life was never intended to be risk-free. In fact, our relationship with Christ often brings us into greater risk than before. I am afraid that we live in a generation of non-risk takers. Too many believers want to play it safe. Our first reaction, especially when it comes to kingdom work, is often more about safety than it is about obedience.

You hear about a mission trip and the first thing that come to mind: ***Is it safe? Is it risky? What will it cost me? Will it require sacrifice?***

Pardon me for being blunt but those questions are not the most important ones. God is calling believers to die to self and follow him, regardless of the cost. We are not called to obey God's call only when it is safe or when it is comfortable.

Shame of us if we take the wide road, the easy road, the comfortable road, along with the masses when the one who bled and died on a cruel cross beckons us to follow Him on the narrow road, the risky road, the hard road, the road of obedience.

It was a Risky Plan. But that's true of the most of what we are called to do as followers of Christ. It's risky for

A young man to stand and preach his first sermon.

You to teach your first class as a small group leader.

You to volunteer as a helper in Kids Church.

You to invest and invite with neighbors or friends.

You to start a gospel conversation with a family member who is far from God.

3. Persuasive Argument

Because of the great risk involved, Paul intervened in the situation and wrote a letter calling upon Philemon to forgive and restore his former slave and to receive him as a brother in Christ. But he would not send his young brother in Christ back into the lion's den without some support. Sidenote: Onesimus was the carrier of this letter.

Paul explained that he would love to have kept Onesimus with him so that he could assist him and work with him. However, he refused to do so without permission from Philemon. Sending him back was not only the right thing to do but was the necessary step toward reconciliation among them.

Paul used a number of motivating factors in his argument.

A. Love (8-9)

He could have ordered Philemon to comply. But chooses the way of love. My love for you . . . your love for me . . . my love for Onesimus are the basis for this appeal. ***Because of love, please do this thing.*** Love is so much more powerful and effective than force.

B. Usefulness (11)

The name **Onesimus** means **useful**. Paul, who was a master of words, used the meaning of that name to his advantage. Before, Paul wrote, he was useless. Certainly, referring to the time when Onesimus was away. Now he will return and be useful. That's a strong argument.

C. Brotherhood (15-16)

Onesimus was returning not simply as a servant, but as a brother in Christ. Paul is arguing that Onesimus is not the same man that he was. He has been radically transformed by the grace of God. He was now a brother to every believer, including his owner. What an interesting thing. In spite of the cultural and social differences between them, a bond had suddenly been born between them. They were brothers in Christ. He would not simply be coming back as a slave but a brother.

This was radical thinking for the first century; it completely overturned the traditional values of that society. Philemon and Onesimus now had a new relationship that would supersede the one they had before. That brotherhood makes the master and the slave equal in the eyes of God.

Paul takes it a step further. He appeals on Philemon not only on the basis of his relationship with Onesimus but on the basis of his relationship with Paul. ***If you regard me as a partner . . . and I know that you do . . . accept him as you would me.***

D. Forgiveness (18)

Once more Paul ratchets up the stakes. ***If he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account.*** Wow! Paul is doing more than simply assuring Philemon that the debts of Onesimus will be paid, he is reminding Philemon of the **substitutionary atonement provided to us by Christ.**

It was a subtle reminder that we have all had someone step in & take our punishment, pay our debts and set us free. Since you have been **forgiven by Christ**, you can be **forgiving in Christ**. What Christ did for you is far greater than what you are being asked to do for Onesimus.

E. Confidence (21)

Paul has made a very persuasive argument, and he indicates his confident assurance that Philemon will come through and do the right thing. **This statement is not simply a statement of fact but a further motivation.** It is Paul's way of saying, ***Philemon, I believe in you. I have confidence in you. I know you are going to do the right thing.***

The letter ends and we are left to wonder, what happened? There is no record in the Bible of what Philemon did. I agree with Charles Swindoll, in believing he not only forgave Onesimus, but set him free. Fast-forward 50 years.

It's AD 110. The emperor Trajan waits in Rome for a shipment from the East. It contained a special package sent from Antioch of Syria. It was guarded by ten Roman legionaries. When they arrived at the port city of Smyrna they rested before continuing their journey with their package.

The package was **Ignatius of Antioch**. He had been the pastor of the church at Antioch and was being sent to Rome to be fed to lions for refusing to recant his faith in Jesus as Lord. While there, local Christian leaders were granted permission to visit with him. What harm could it do. He had shown no interest in resisting or escaping.

Among the visitors was the renowned Polycarp, head of the church at Smyrna. Years earlier the apostle John had appointed Polycarp as the bishop of the church in Smyrna. Essentially the lead pastor.

Three churches south of Smyrna also sent representatives. **Tralles, Magnesia, and Ephesus.** Tralles sent their pastor, **Polybius.** Magnesia sent their pastor, **Damas.** Swindoll points out that the names of those two men probably carried little weight even in that day. But the pastor of the church of Ephesus was well known, as was the church. Paul had written to that church. **Timothy had served as its pastor a season.** The aged apostle John lived out his last days there. **Who was the pastor of that church who came to visit with Ignatius that day? His name was Onesimus.**

The runaway slave had become a faithful servant of Jesus not only because of the saving grace of Jesus, and because of the appeal of the apostle Paul, but because of the gracious action of Philemon in forgiven and liberating him as a brother in Christ.

Takeaways Like Onesimus . . .

1. We were once fugitives

Like Onesimus, we were on the run from our master and in need of forgiveness, freedom and reconciliation.

2. Our guilt was great and the penalty severe

Onesimus lived under heavy weight of a severe penalty, including death. He was a man in serious trouble, always under the threat of capture.

3. We had an advocate securing our forgiveness and reconciliation

What Paul was for Onesimus, Christ was for all of us, only much, much more.

4. We had to step out in faith, trusting another for grace and forgiveness

I stepped out in faith, trusting Jesus when I was 12. How old were you? Can I get some responses? How old were you when you stepped out in faith?

Today could be your day . . . the day you will remember for the rest of your life. You day of receiving the gift of salvation.