

## **Philemon 4 How Good Is The Gospel?**

A sermon delivered at Calvary Chapel DC Metro  
[www.calvarydcmetro.org](http://www.calvarydcmetro.org)

We've spent a rather unexpected amount of time with the book of Philemon lately. One of the shortest books in the Bible at just one chapter, 25 verses, it's a personal letter from the Apostle Paul to a well off businessman named Philemon that deals with an intensely complex ethical situation regarding a runaway slave.

As we've spent time with this little letter, we've noticed that following Christ often costs us something; that coming to Christ should be, in many ways, an entirely disruptive event. We go from having our lives ordered the way we want, to submitting ourselves to Christ. We are no longer our own masters, we're His servants. And that has real consequences in the real world. It makes a real impact on our lives, and it challenges us to make real decisions about real issues that sometimes make us really uncomfortable.

So far we've seen how following Christ impacted Paul's life – all he lost and all he gained, and we've seen the impact it had on Philemon and how he was being encouraged to respond by showing Christian love to someone he felt had wronged him. Now this morning we'll look at it all through the eyes of the one who will feel this situation more intensely than anyone else – Onesimus. The slave who ran away, is now being sent back to the very home he escaped from, but he's returning as a whole new man – a man changed by Christ.

Read with me:

1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer, 2 to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

4 I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, 5 hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, 6 that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. 7 For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.

We talked about Philemon last week – he was a successful businessman who was saved through Paul's preaching, and the gospel has had a tremendous impact on his life. There is evidence of a real relationship with Jesus – to use Biblical terms, you would have to say this man is bearing spiritual fruit and he's known for it, that's his reputation.

We talked as well about the contrast between Paul and Philemon. Paul was called to give up everything for the sake of following Christ, but Philemon was called to keep something even harder – to keep everything he had, but to use his position, his possessions, and his paycheck for the kingdom of Christ. And obviously, he was doing a great job of it – giving and loving and serving constantly “refreshing the hearts of the saints” Paul says.

But there was one problem, and it was a big one. You see, Philemon was wealthy enough to own at least one slave – and his name was Onesimus.

Slavery was legal in Rome, and it was the backbone of the economy and empire. But, as we discussed last week, Roman slavery was significantly different from the slavery we tend to think of in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century in Western History. Among other differences, Roman slavery was not based on race. There were what we would now consider Italian, Greek, German, British, and Jewish slaves along with many others. The fact is, in the Roman Empire, you couldn’t tell who was a slave simply by looking at the color of their skin.

So, Onesimus was a slave – we have no idea what his ethnicity was – and he belonged to Philemon, which, under the law of the land at the time was legal, but obviously not always desirable for the slave, and so, one day, Onesimus ran away. Thankfully, due to the marvelous providence of God, somehow, in the process of escaping, he came in contact with Paul who led Onesimus to Christ, just as he had led his master Philemon.

It’s one of those incredible, miraculous, circumstances – but it’s also just the kind of thing you know that God can do if you’ve met this God personally – we all have stories of miraculous coincidences in our lives, don’t we? Statistical improbabilities that happened with startling precision. So, Onesimus the fugitive slave surrenders his newly gained freedom only to be enslaved again, this time to Christ...and the consequences of that are something we’ll consider more fully in a moment.

But first, let me consider something interesting with you: we don’t have the exact timeline of events here, but it seems the most likely sequence is that Paul led Philemon before Onesimus ran away.

Now think about that – think of how Paul speaks of Philemon and of his family and the church that meets in his house. Listen to Paul say that Philemon has a reputation for refreshing the hearts of the saints. Does it sound like Philemon would have been a harsh man? A merciless master? I’m not endorsing slavery, nor am I trying to make a hero out of philanthropic Philemon and a despicable outlaw out of Onesimus. But what I am saying is, given the reality of the world they lived in, if you had to be a servant, does it seem like Philemon was really the worst master to have? And yet, Onesimus did rebel.

That’s an important thing for some of you to take note of – you parents who long to see the salvation of your children. You spouses who long to see the salvation of your husband or wife. It is possible that you’re doing everything right, you’re trying to honor God in your home and show love and concern for those under your roof – bending over backward to serve them, and still they choose to flee or rebel. Fear not! God has miraculous, incredible

ways of colliding with people at just the right time in just the right way, when they and you least expect it. Keep praying, keep hoping, and keep watching. They might not come to Christ under your roof, but you can hope, that like Onesimus, God will hunt them down and confront them with His love and win them over.

I wonder what was going on in Onesimus' mind when he chose to make a break for it? What finally convinced him it was worth it?

Laws against runaways were strict. When captured, a runaway slave might be crucified, or branded with a red-hot iron on the forehead with the letter "F" for fugitive.

One scholar notes "Roman law ... practically imposed no limits to the power of the master over his slave. The alternative of life or death rested solely with Philemon, and slaves were constantly crucified for far lighter offenses than this." (Lightfoot)

Harsh punishments were seen as a way of keeping the large number of slaves in the Empire from revolting – you know the name Spartacus – do you remember what he is famous for? He was a slave sent to become a gladiator and eventually led a slave rebellion!

So, if Philemon gets his hands on this runaway – what's he going to do? What punishment could Onesimus face? In the world Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus lived in, the answer was: anything the master wanted. But here's the deal – as Christians they're in the world, but they're no longer of it. This is obviously NOT the way Christ would respond – can you picture Christ ordering a slave to be branded? Crucified? Of course not. So what do you do? Well, Paul begins to intercede on behalf of Onesimus:

8 Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, 9 yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you—being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ— 10 I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, 11 who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.

Since this just came up, let me take a little side trip and ask: is this description true of you? Does your knowledge of Christ make you profitable to others in your life? Does Jesus make you a better mom, a better manager, a better student, nurse, or teacher? Does Christ in *your* life make a difference in the life of the people you serve?

Paul tells Philemon, Onesimus once was unprofitable to you, but now he is profitable to both you and me.

Friends, the Bible says our masters should benefit from having us, as Christians, as their servants. We're told to do all we do as unto the Lord. Do you pray about the work you do? Do you show Christian concern for the people who work for you? Do you ask God to help you perform with excellence? William Barclay wrote, "The last thing Christianity is designed to produce is vague, inefficient people; it produces people who are of use and can do a job better than they ever could if they did not know Christ."

Is that true of you? Are you allowing Christ to make you useful?

Because He's certainly had a real impact on Onesimus – this isn't some manipulative plea to save his hide – it's a real and true transformation. And you know that because there's fruit. There's external evidence of an internal change. Onesimus ran away from serving a Christian businessman and his family in a nice home in Colossae, but now he's willingly serving a prisoner named Paul in Rome, and he's doing such a great job that Paul actually wants to keep him around!

Paul even makes mention of Onesimus in his letter to the Colossians, calling him “a faithful and beloved brother,” (Col 4:9) providing, in effect, a stamp of endorsement for Onesimus in front of the whole church.

So, the gospel has made a difference in Onesimus' life, just like it's made a difference in the life of Paul and Philemon. But now Paul does something really, really hard. He tells Onesimus, look, the right thing for you to do is to go back.

Now let me remind you, it was possible for Roman slaves to purchase their own freedom, and perhaps that is what Onesimus will eventually do, perhaps that's the arrangement they'll eventually come to, but for now, Paul says, the right thing for you to do Onesimus, is to go back and reconcile with Philemon.

Can we pause here for a moment and let me ask: do you really feel this? Onesimus has no guarantee how things will actually turn out. He has no promise that Philemon hasn't backslidden, or that he won't lash out in the flesh, he has no guarantee Philemon's wife won't tell him to show no mercy. All Onesimus knows is that Christ, through Paul, is sending him back to the very home he ran away from.

And now, Onesimus has to decide – do I go along with it, or not?

Of all people, Paul probably has the best understanding of what this will cost Onesimus. Remember, Paul is a prisoner right now himself. He didn't have to be, there were plenty of times when he could have gotten out of the situations he was in. It wasn't fair for Paul. But he knew it was what Christ demanded, and so he saw himself as “Paul, a servant of Christ,” or “Paul, a prisoner of Christ.” He was simply asking Onesimus to see himself the same way – willing to suffer for the sake of our Lord, but knowing, all along, that God is with us in the midst of the suffering and difficulty.

After all, wasn't it our Lord who willingly allowed Himself to be wrongfully taken captive, and ultimately executed, for our sake?

Friends, I want you to know: coming to Christ didn't suddenly changed Onesimus' circumstances. It changed his heart, it brought life to his soul, it changed his outlook on life and his eternal destiny, but it did not change his present circumstances. And for some people, that can be a bitter pill to swallow – if all you're looking for, or expecting out of God

is for Him to make the hurting stop in your life, you may be disappointed. Maybe not, maybe He will. Maybe as you come to Christ and submit to Him everything will change and you will be miraculously healed and delivered – I don't want to rule that out – it happened all throughout the gospels. But that's not always the plan.

In his commentary on Philemon William Barclay wrote: "Christianity is not out to help a man escape his past and run away from it; it is out to help a man face his past and rise above it...Christianity is never escape, it is always conquest."<sup>1</sup>

You see the biggest problem in our life is not the fact that something hurts or that someone has been mean to us or that we don't have enough money – the ultimate problem is that we are separated from God until we find forgiveness and reconciliation through Christ.

Put yourself in Onesimus' shoes – which would you rather have: freedom on earth for the rest of your days, with eternal enslavement to sin, or temporary, though real, and perhaps severe, difficulty on earth, but freedom forever from the guilt and penalty of sin AND a God who offers to walk with you through all your difficulties here on earth?

Well, that's exactly the kind of thing Onesimus has to ponder as he walks 1800 kilometers (1100 miles) from Rome to Colossae. It's the distance from Philadelphia, down through Maryland, and Virginia, and North Carolina and South Carolina and Georgia, on into Florida and down to the southern end of the state. To get from Rome to Colossae would take 210 hours of hiking according to Google maps. 29 hours by car if Onesimus could get his hands on one of those. The point is: it's a long time to think about what could happen. Hoping for the best, but certainly wrestling occasionally with the 'what ifs.'

So Paul writes:

12 I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, 13 whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. 14 But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary. 15 For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, 16 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.

17 If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me. 18 But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. 19 I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay—not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides. 20 Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.

---

<sup>1</sup> Barclay, 281.

21 Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. 22 But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.

23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, 24 as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers.

25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

Paul finishes writing the letter, rolls it up, and hands it to Onesimus to carry back to Philemon. What was that moment like? When they looked into each other's eyes and Onesimus took the scroll from Paul? Was there nervous laughter? Was it completely silent? Were there any tears? How much confidence did Paul have that Philemon would really accept Onesimus back – was he sending a man to his own death or intense suffering?

And what about Onesimus – what was going through his mind?

Do you think he understood anything about what he had been told of Jesus? How on the night before He was crucified, He went out to the Garden of Gethsemane and prayed, "Father, if there is anyway, let this cup pass from Me, nevertheless, not My will, but Your will be done."

Friends, honestly, this little letter has been wrecking me – whether you look at it from the perspective of Paul, or Philemon, or Onesimus, you see that God was stretching each of these men.

I sit and wonder sometimes, what did Onesimus know of Christ? What had he experienced of God that would make him choose obedience over freedom? He was probably tempted, just like all of us, to find a way to make both happen – to try to have our way and try to have a little bit of God too, to find a way that didn't require being too 'radical' or taking things so far. There has to be a compromise doesn't there?

Friends, what did Paul know, what did Onesimus know, of Christ that they would say yes to Him and accept whatever the consequences may be? I want knowledge like that.

Isn't this what Paul was trying to tell the Philippians when he said he counted all his past accomplishments and resume worthless for the sake of the knowledge of Christ? And then he said:

Phil 3:12 Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.

13 Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, 14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

There is a progressive knowledge of God that comes only with obedience. You don't really know how good God is until you have, by faith, trusted and obeyed Him.

And so, there is a sense in which we cannot know any more of Christ than we are willing to know. I can practically guarantee Onesimus trembled when he decided to go back. I can practically guarantee there were times when he had the little conversations in his head – what am I doing? You know that at least one other person tried to talk him out of it, and I'll bet their reasons sounded good.

How can I be so confident? Because it's what happens to all of us. Each of us, at some point in our lives is asked to do something hard for God. We're asked to do something that might hurt. We're asked to do something uncomfortable. And as we face that challenge we struggle, we wrestle, we wonder, "is it worth it?"

What I want you to see from this letter this morning is that that's normal. It's not unique, you're not alone – but throughout history men and women have proven time and time again that God can be trusted. He is worthy. Even if things don't turn out well, even if it's hard. God is worth it. And we never walk alone – He's there with us, every step of the way.

I don't have the time to tell you all the details of just some of the stories I know but let me share with you some modern examples of the spirit of Onesimus.

- "Unbroken" - Louis Zamperini, a WWII POW who became a Christian and returned to Japan offering forgiveness to his captors

- Jacob DeShazer – a Doolittle Raider, became a POW held by the Japanese in China – became a Christian in the camp and returned Japan as a missionary for 30 years eventually leading Captain Mitsuo Fuchida to Christ. Fuchida was the lead pilot on the first wave of attacks at Pearl Harbor and after being saved he and Deshazer occasionally preached together.

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as Hitler and the Nazis rose to power, he chose to return to Germany from working and studying abroad in order to strengthen the church, something people said he could do from outside Germany, but he felt Christ calling him to be with his people and so returned and was eventually executed for his efforts to oppose the Nazis on theological grounds.

- Argaw, grew up in Ethiopia, illegally immigrated to Europe – was saved, went to Bible College and God told him to go back home

- Jean and Melissa had good jobs here in America, a good marriage, and had just celebrated the birth of their first son when God called them to return to Haiti

Do you think these people really believed Christ was worth it? Following Christ cost them something, but they seem to have gained something as well – something that made obedience worth it.

What about us? Is God really, really, enough for you? Or, is He just a helpful tool to help you reach what is really enough?

Do you know enough of Christ to willingly follow Him wherever He calls you to go? Is He worth that much to you? It's something for you to consider as we celebrate communion today. Take a moment to consider – that what you're about to do was enough motivation for a man to walk 1100 miles back to what he had run away from and face the consequences with Christ. There is power in the blood of the Lamb.

And if you're here with us this morning and you don't know Christ but you're hungry for Him – you see all of this and you know what you're getting yourself into but you're absolutely convinced, you'd rather be a slave of Christ than a slave to whatever is your master right now – then bow your head and pray – talk to God and tell him what's in your heart and mind. Maybe say something like this:

Almighty God – would you cut off my chains today? Would you free me from my sin, and make me a part of Your family? And then, whatever You want to do with me, wherever You want to send me, I'm Yours. I want to find freedom and forgiveness in Christ, but I want to know You like Onesimus did – to be so overwhelmed by You and what You've done that I would follow You anywhere. Reveal Yourself to me, in Jesus' name I pray, amen.

If you prayed that prayer, or one similar to it, today or any time before please take the communion elements as they pass and hold onto them and we'll all partake together in a moment.