**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**The Message of Philemon (3): Transformed By The Gospel**

**“A Powerful Plea, Part One”**

**Philemon 8-16**

**December 3, 2023**

In a number of his letters, Paul encourages Christian slaves to do all they can to please their masters (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1; 1 Tim. 6:1-2; Titus 2:9-10). But now that he has met and led a runaway slave to Christ, he shows how consistent he is. Although there was a mutual affection between himself and Onesimus, Paul convinces him to go back to Philemon.

If Paul could have gone with him, he most likely would have, but he can’t. So he writes this letter, requesting that Philemon forgive the runaway. But this is not just a plea for forgiveness; it’s a not-so-subtle hint for Philemon to free the slave and send him back to Paul.

However, this will put Philemon is a very difficult position. Paul is not only confronting the social and economic order of the day, he’s defying Roman tradition as well. He’s also giving a new dignity to the huge class of slaves within the Roman Empire, which at this time was approximately sixty million strong.

The law permitted a master to execute a rebellious slave, but Philemon was a Christian. If he forgave Onesimus (without *any* punishment) and freed him, what would the other masters think? What would the other slaves think? What if *they* “wanted to become a Christian” so that *their* Christian master would free *them*?

So after his introductory salutation (vv. 1-3) and thanksgiving (vv. 4-7), Paul begins the delicate task of making his appeal on behalf of Onesimus. Knowing Philemon as he does, he’s confident that brotherly love and forgiveness will carry the day. Nevertheless, in the verses before us today (vv. 8-16), he is gently and tactfully preparing his dear friend for the direct appeal he is about to make (v. 17-20). There are a number of ways in which Paul does this.

***First***, he chooses not to demand anything of Philemon, but to appeal to him on the basis of love: “*Therefore, 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*” (vv. 8-9a). There were times, of course, when Paul leaned on his apostolic authority to govern the church in matters of faith and conduct. But this was not one of those times.

Paul is writing to Philemon as a friend, and that’s not how one friend approaches another. Orders can be resented, but an appeal from a friend is difficult to resist, especially when it comes from the friend who has led you to faith in Christ, and when it is made “*on the basis of love*.”

As we have seen, Philemon was a man of faith in the Lord Jesus, whose love was for “all the saints” (v. 2). As a committed Christian, he had “refreshed” the hearts of many others because of his generosity and kindness (v. 7). “Therefore” (v. 8a), Paul’s appeal is that this same love would govern Philemon’s response to the request he’s about to make.

***Second*,** he reminds Philemon of who and where he is: “*I, then, as Paul – an old man and now a prisoner of Christ Jesus – I appeal to you for my son . . .* “ (vv. 9b-10a). Paul is now about sixty years old, and by referencing himself as “an old man” he is not asking anyone to pity him. In the ancient world, wisdom and authority were assumed to go with old age (unlike today’s world). Furthermore, Paul never regarded being a “prisoner of Christ Jesus” as a disgrace. To wear “the chains of the gospel” (v. 13) was, for Paul, a badge of honor, like a “Distinguished Service Award” given to a soldier by his commander-in-chief. Such an appeal from an elder statesman in the faith, who had courageously suffered for the cause of Christ, would be hard to turn down!

***Third,*** he describes the remarkable change that has happened to Onesimus: “*I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me*” (v. 10-11). Up until this point Philemon might have been wondering about this “son” of whom Paul is writing. (Just who is this child in the faith?) Now, at last, Paul reveals his identity.

J. B. Phillips paraphrases Paul’s announcement like this: “Yes, I have become a father though I have been under lock and key, and the newborn child’s name is Onesimus!” Literally, Paul writes, “I gave birth to him” (as in 1 Cor. 4:5 and Gal. 4:9, where he uses the image of labor pains to describe the “spiritual birthing” of the Corinthians and the Galatians.)

The name Onesimus means “useful” or “profitable,” and was frequently given to slaves in the hope that they would live up to their name. Here, Paul is using a play on words that describes the “before” and “after” of his conversion. By stealing from Philemon (v. 18) and then running away, Onesimus was “useless.” But because of his new life in Christ, Onesimus had now become “useful” – both to Paul and to Philemon.

This change highlights *the transforming power of the gospel*. Onesimus was not just a slave. He was also Paul’s son in the faith and Philemon’s brother in the Lord, something which Philemon would have to consider if he was to honor Paul’s request to welcome him as he would welcome Paul himself (v. 17ff).

***Fourth,*** he suggests how helpful Onesimus would be to him in his imprisonment; “*I am sending him – who is my very heart – back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. But I didn’t want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you will do will be spontaneous and not forced*” (vv. 12-14). Yes, says Paul, I am sending him back to you, and it’s like tearing out my very heart. In sending *him*, Paul actually means, I am sending part of *myself*.

But he now makes it clear what he’s really asking Philemon to do. For Onesimus to continue his service to Paul, Philemon would have to send him back. Only then would the service be rendered by Onesimus on Philemon’s behalf (as his representative). But this “favor” which Paul is asking must be granted freely (spontaneously), prompted by grace and love. It would also require Philemon to send Onesimus back to Paul as a released slave, officially designated as a “freedman.”

***Fifth*** and finally, Paul points to the providence of God as the underlying reason for this remarkable turn of events: “*Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good – no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord*” (vv. 15-16).

Humanly speaking, the “separation” of Onesimus from Philemon was because of what Onesimus had done. But Paul uses the passive form of the verb (he was separated), thereby referring to the separation as though it were something which God had brought about. (The implied subject of the verb is God.) Once again, we see that a sovereign God is in control of even the most difficult experiences of life.

God’s providence is the outworking of His sovereignty for us, as His blood-bought saints. Coming to grips with this teaching requires a massive shift in our perspective – from seeing a God who is “permitting” certain things to happen (and then responding), to a God who is working all things after the counsel of His will (Proverbs 16:33; 20:24; Jer. 10:23; Ps. 139:16; Rom. 8:28; Eph. 1:11). In the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, “All things, in fact, come to us not by chance but from His fatherly hand.”

If so, then a loving God sees all things, plans all things, and weaves all things together for our good (Rom. 8:28). This is precisely what Paul wants Philemon to see. God’s plan “from the get-go” was to use the wrong choices of Onesimus to work for his good, and Philemon’s good, and ultimately for Paul’s good. In the words of F. F. Bruce, “But for the separation, Onesimus would have remained with Philemon as his slave until their relationship was terminated in some way or another – by emancipation, redemption, resale, or death. But thanks to the separation, Onesimus is now a member of Christ as Philemon already was, and a new and deeper relationship was then established which would never come to an end.”

Clearly, Paul expected an entirely transformed relationship between the two of them, based on the fact that Onesimus had returned no longer “*as a slave, but better than a slave, as a beloved brother*” (v. 16b). As noted in our ESV Study Bibles, “Paul could have said more explicitly, ‘no longer a slave’ which would make it clear that he expected Onesimus’s emancipation. The particle “as” . . . allowed more freedom for Philemon to ponder and then choose to do what was right, rather than having Paul command him directly.” Such was Paul’s approach.

No matter where we are on our journey, we can rest assured that God is in control of our lives. He is not a capricious God, manipulating us like pawns on a chess board, or puppets on a string. He is a loving and powerful God who is counting the hairs on our heads and directing the sparrows in the sky, so that not one falls to the earth apart from His will (Matt. 10:29).

That simply means that Providence is for our comfort: (a) we can be patient when things go against us; (b) we can be thankful when things go well; (c) we can have confidence for the future (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 10). Paul knew this, and Onesimus and Philemon came to realize this. What about us?

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,

But trust Him for His grace,

Behind a frowning providence

He hides a smiling face.

(William Cowper, 1774)