

## Lessons from the life of Philemon

1. Last week we looked at an introduction to the letter to Philemon
  - a. We saw that it is a very unique epistle... different from all his others
    - i. Cast of characters is Onesimus, a runaway slave, Philemon, the slave owner, and the apostle Paul, their spiritual “father”
    - ii. Written by Paul to ask a “favor” of Philemon... to forgive his runaway slave Onesimus and consider sending him back to Paul as a source of comfort and aid.
  - b. And we asked ourselves, what does this letter have to do with us?
    - i. We are neither slaves nor slave owners
    - ii. It is a specific communication to a very specific person with a very specific purpose
    - iii. But it reveals much about the transforming work of God and the place and importance of forgiveness through the lives portrayed in this letter
  - c. So, last week, we also began the process of examining those lives as we looked at the life of Onesimus.
    - i. We saw in Onesimus a picture of ourselves
      1. In our former lostness
      2. In our redemption and restoration
  - d. This week we will continue the process by looking at the life of Philemon.
  - e. Let’s read vs 1-7 *“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker, 2 and to Apphia our sister, and to 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. I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, 5 because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints; 6 and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ’s sake. 7 For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother”*
  - f. So what do we read about Philemon?
    - i. Brought to faith under Paul’s ministry
      1. Phm 1:19 *“not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well”*
    - ii. Head of a believing household
      1. Apphia is likely his wife, Archippus his son

- a. You might remember that a believing household is a requirement for eldership... a mark of spiritual maturity
  - i. Philemon was such a man
- b. Archippus is mentioned in Colossians where he is shown to be active in the ministry at the church of Laodicea.
  - i. Col 4:16 *“When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea. 17 Say to Archippus, “Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it.”*
- iii. A laborer on behalf of the gospel and the kingdom of God
  - 1. Phm 1:1 “To Philemon our beloved *brother* and fellow worker,
- iv. likely fairly wealthy
  - 1. Had a large house Phm 1:2 *“to the church in your house”*; Was a slave owner
  - 2. Did his wealth and social standing lead to pride... as it so often can?
- v. No, on the contrary, his life was characterized by humility, faith, and Christian service
  - 1. Phm 1:5,7 *“I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints... For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother*
    - a. Life characterized by deep and vibrant faith
    - b. Life characterized by deep and fervent love
    - c. Life resulting in joy and comfort to his associates
    - d. Life resulting in refreshment to the saints
- vi. Paul had every reason to believe that Philemon would... from a place of love, godly character and submission... grant his request.
  - 1. Phm 1:21 “Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say.”
- vii. But, he was somewhat unsure of Philemon’s heart toward Onesimus
  - 1. Onesimus was disobedient; rebellious
  - 2. He ran away, apparently stealing from Philemon to finance his escape

3. Onesimus broke the law in doing so, and could rightly be punished for his crimes
  4. It would not be surprising if Philemon had ill-will toward Onesimus, and Paul, out of love for them both, seeks to address the possibility.
    - a. Paul knew Philemon's heart toward himself; he would make a personal appeal
    - b. We will look more deeply at Paul's heart and why he wrote in the way he did next week
- viii.* For now, let us digress for a moment and examine the scene introduced in Col 4:7ff *"As to all my affairs, Tychicus, our beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow bond-servant in the Lord, will bring you information. 8 For I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts; 9 [fn]and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of your number. They will inform you about the whole situation here."*
- ix. Imagine Philemon receiving Paul's letter from the hand of his messenger, Tychicus and beginning to read.
    1. Excitement to hear from his spiritual father and mentor... a man of renown in Christian circles
      - a. *"Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker,*
    2. He hears Paul call him "beloved" and a "fellow worker"... a companion and a brother
    3. He hears Paul's commendation of his life of faith and service, and Paul's thankful heart for him
      - a. *I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, 5 because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints; 6 and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake. 7 For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother"*
    4. He is touched by Paul's prayer on his behalf; that his fellowship...his communion with God and his fellow saints... will be continually strengthened through his reflecting upon God's work in his life

5. He reads that his own life and ministry have been a joy and comfort to this man he loves and respects
6. He then reads these words, *“Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper, I yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you—since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus”*
  - a. Again, we will look at these words from Paul’s perspective next week, but for now, how are these words heard by Philemon?
    - i. Is there resentment? “Who is Paul to even contemplate “ordering” me around?” Of course not.
      1. He is reminded of Paul’s “elder statesman” status and his current imprisonment for the defense and cause of Christ... and his heart goes out to Paul...
    - ii. There is likely an anticipation of granting Paul’s appeal...”Of course, Paul. Whatever you need...”
7. And then he reads the following words *“I appeal to you for my child whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, Onesimus,”*
  - a. It is unlikely that these were the words that Philemon was expecting to read.
  - b. Cognitive dissonance... what I will call an “Onesimus moment”
  - c. “What? Why are we talking about Onesimus? How do you even know him?” “You do know that this is the guy that stole from me and ran away, right?”
    - i. And if I may continue my “poetic license” a moment longer, I can imagine Philemon looking up at Tychicus with a puzzled look on his face, and seeing, at the back of the room, Onesimus, head cast down, awaiting Philemon’s response to Paul’s letter.
    - ii. Philemon’s confusion...unease...increases. “What does Paul mean, “his child”? He is my slave. Wait, has Onesimus come to faith? Do we share a common salvation and Savior?” “What do I make of this?” Can you imagine what was going on in each of their minds This scene might not have happened exactly this way, but there had to be similar moment for both.

8. Philemon continues to read, *“who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me. 12 I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, 13 whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; 14 but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will. 15 For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back 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 regard me a partner, accept him as you would me. 18 But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account; 19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well). 20 Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.”*

a. We have no scriptural account of how this story ends.

i. But I am confident, as was Paul, that the ending was one of forgiveness and restoration.

ii. I hope that Onesimus was able to return to Paul with blessings abounding to all three men.

iii. It is not material whether Onesimus remained a slave or not... God’s blessing and abundance can exist in either state.

2. So, what can we learn from the life of Philemon?

a. Perhaps a more “manageable” example of faith and practice

i. Jesus is our ultimate example...“but He is God! How can I be like him?”

ii. Paul is another example, one we will look at in greater depth and detail next week. But we can still say “But he is Paul! How can I be like him?”

iii. But Philemon... We say, “maybe I can be like Philemon.” He had the same issues and concerns as we do.

1. Husband and father; had to deal with family issues

2. Active in the life of the local church; had to deal with people issues

3. Had to deal with the affairs of the world; had servants, paid taxes, had home maintenance and repairs

4. Probably had to deal with chariot repairs or something similar as well

iv. But look at his example

1. Built a godly household; a God honoring household (vs 1)
2. Gave of his material goods for God's use (vs 2)
3. Trusted companion and friend (vs 1)
4. Lover of God and of His people (vs 5)
5. Obedient to God and to His word (vs 21)
6. A "refreshment" to the saints; a place of rest and refuge (vs 7)
7. A man of prayer (vs 22)
8. But an ordinary man... just Philemon... just like us

b. We can learn to expect our own "Onesimus moments"

- i. Moments when we encounter the unexpected
- ii. Moments of confusion
- iii. Moments where we learn to listen to, and lean on, God
- iv. Moments when we can benefit by the counsel of good and wise friends

3. A friendly warning

- a. There is much here to learn...life changing lessons. But even as the preparer of this sermon, I can see in my heart a tendency to just see this as "good information" or "pleasant words" Let our ongoing prayer be that we are not forgetful hearers of the word but effectual doers, allowing God to change our lives through His word. Let us pray.