

Biblical Themes from Philemon

Last week we walked through the book of Philemon and tried to get it right as it happened. We wanted to get the smaller story right so we could take some of the big ideas from Philemon and fill them out a bit more this week. So, what we will do is take up a few themes here in Philemon and see how they match up to other places in scripture. What I would like for you to do is just keep your place in Philemon. I'll be jumping around a bit, but I'd like you to stay put so you can see how this all matches up.

First with a warning about reading our Bibles and second to find encouragement through the scriptures starting in Philemon.

Prayer

Introduction

Questions abound in our world today. Many of them are aimed at Christians. We stand, as the world sees it, between them and the God of the universe. We are his representatives here on earth. It only makes sense that we should answer the questions that people have. Have you heard any of these questions lately? Let me give you just a few. Why didn't God stop the oil spill? Or tougher, Why did God allow all those people in Haiti to die? Or more personal, How can you say that two people in a loving relationship is sin? How about heart breaking, Why did God allow my child to die? Immediate, Why is God allowing this abuse in my life? No doubt these are tough questions. Even tougher when they are coming from someone you care about. It's easy to blow off the activist on television or the angry columnist who consistently bashes anything related to faith, God, religion, Bible....anything. It's a lot harder when the question comes from someone with a genuine desire to know the answer.

So what do you do? How do you find the answers to tough questions in your life and for the lives of those around you? One way is to do what we did last week - read your Bible to understand what is happening there and then. Another is to do what we'll do this week. Once we discover what a particular passage says in it's time and place we should look around at other passages and see if they match what we found in ours. In doing so we will discover themes that run throughout the Bible. These themes give us a more full view of our answer.

The first theme we'll discuss is forgiveness.

Forgiveness

We pointed out last week that one of the major themes in the book of Philemon is forgiveness. It's worth repeating again this week. Forgiveness is key to understanding not just Philemon, but the rest of Scripture as well. We see in Onesimus someone who built the foundation of his life on his own ideas. He wasn't concerned with right and wrong as the world sees it, much less how God sees it. He struck out on his own in direct rebellion to the authorities over him - the main one being God Himself. He broke the two greatest commandments just by leaving Philemon's house without permission. First by disobeying his master he did not love God with all his heart and by stealing from - and surely causing

hardship to Philemon, he was one slave short after all, he broke the second one by not loving his neighbor as himself. And yet, as we saw last week, Philemon was ready and willing to forgive him. Keep that in your head as I tell you about my story of forgiveness.

You know, many times when I sit under the preaching of someone I don't know well, I wonder, is this guy for real? Does he really mean what he's saying, or has he just gotten really good at splicing together commentaries and giving it his best shot. Some of you may have been thinking the very same thing when I got up here last week. Some of you only know me by sight, or perhaps from your children. You may have thought, "Can I really trust what this guy is saying? Has he been mastered by this text, or is he just telling me something that he really knows little if anything about?"

On this subject of forgiveness - let me tell you what God has taught me and what Philemon makes abundantly clear. We need to be forgivers. See, when I was eighteen years old I had the world in my hand. Didn't we all at eighteen? I was content with life the way it was and gave very little thought to God outside of the occasional trip here with my parents. That all changed in February of 1992. Just before my birthday. I got a call one night in a friends dorm room to let me know that my sister, Traci, had been in a car wreck. It was bad. I made it to the hospital a few minutes after she died. She was killed by a drunk driver. He'd been convicted of the same offense six times.

Sometime later my parents and I went to the courthouse for his first hearing. He sat in a chair, not far away and smiled at the people who were there to support him. To say I was angry would have been a serious understatement. I hated him. I'd never met him, or even seen his face until that day and I hated him with every inch of me. I walked out of that courtroom and onto the sidewalk where I gave what was to be my brother-in-law a hug and told him, "I'll kill him. I don't care how long I have to wait, I'll kill him". And I meant it.

I came to know Christ less than a year later while listening to a sermon from Phillipians 2. I was shown from the word a savior who was humble to the point of death - death on a cross. A savior who as 1 John 1:9 tells us is "faithful and just to forgive us our sins". I was overwhelmed by this. I had done some pretty rotten things in my life, and yet God had forgiven me through the sacrifice of his Son and I was now required to forgive others as God in Christ had forgiven me

Ephesians 4:32 says this, "31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."

I'm not sure how long it was after God saved me that my parents received a letter from the man who killed my sister. All I remember was that the plan was to go to the prison and tell him about Jesus. His letter had stated that he knew he could never be forgiven for what he had done. That would not do. Dad was determined that he would know the Gospel. No sin was unforgivable, no matter the pain his actions had inflicted on our family. So we went, we walked through the prison gates and met the man who had so changed our family. And with our former Pastor we talked with him for quiet some time, gave him the Gospel, some reading materials and came home.

Years before I wanted nothing more than to take that mans life with my own hands. Yet, now, I felt no animosity toward him at all. What changed? Jesus is what changed. He had changed my heart and shown me my offense against Him. How could I, a rescued rebel, stand in anger over another? I could not.

Here is where our warning lies. We see in Philemon the same thing we see in 1 John. We see a forgiving God. How many times have you heard in our modern culture that you first need to forgive yourself? Have you ever heard someone, even someone claiming to be a christian, say, you can hold on to anger and bitterness because the sin against you was so great?

How do these statements look when compared to Scripture? They fall sinfully short, don't they? We cannot take what sounds good and pragmatic and say that it honors God. We must search the scriptures for what is true and right. We must conform our lives to the image of Christ if we are to please God. Settle for nothing less than what Scripture says, lest you be striving against it. As Philemon has shown us, and my life has proven to be true. We should be forgivers.

Well, that's the warning. Now on to two themes that I hope will encourage you greatly. First, redemption.

Redemption v. 18 & 19

What is it to be redeemed? What is redemption. We hear it a lot around here. Have you ever heard any of our Pastors talk about the "redemptive historical" meaning of the text. Ever wonder what that really means? I think we can all put together in our heads what "historical" means, but sometimes I think we're a little fuzzy on the "redemptive" part.

First, let's look at the word "redeem". A dictionary definition of the word is this, "to free from captivity by payment of ransom". Ohh, that sounds Biblical doesn't it. We know about things like "freeing the captives" and certainly we've sang songs about "payment of ransom". Let's concentrate on being freed from captivity. Remember what it was that Paul said in Philemon 18 and 19. Look with me there. He says this,

18 If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. 19 I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.

Paul is taking on Onesimus' debt so that he can be forgiven. If there is anything in the way of Onesimus' good standing, Paul seems to say, let me take care of that. Let me pay for his freedom from his captivity. Does this mean the Philemon is going to free Onesimus from his slavery, possibly. However, if we're following the flow of the text it's more likely that Onesimus is being freed from the consequences of his sin. Remember last week we said that by running away Onesimus had risked his life. Roman law said that runaway slaves could be punished by death. Paul is redeeming his life from sure condemnation.

Now, let's move it out into the bigger picture of the Bible. What are we redeemed from, or set free from captivity to? Sin, right. Romans 6:20-22 says, "For when you were *slaves of sin*, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become *slaves of God*, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life." How do we obtain this redemption? How can we go from being "slaves to sin" to "slaves of God" and have "eternal life? Someone has pay the ransom and set us free. Someone must redeem us. This is a desperate state we humans are in. We have to be redeemed to be set free, but we, like Onesimus, have no means of payment. We simply cannot redeem ourselves.

But listen to Colossians 1:13 and 14, "He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." Who is this beloved Son? It's Jesus! Not only, like Onesimus, has our debt been paid - and if that were all it would be glorious - but we have been "delivered...from the domain of darkness and transferred...to the kingdom of his beloved Son" You, Christian have been given the Kingdom! You have been redeemed.

Now let's listen to your redemption as it happened. Mark 15:16-39,

"16 And the soldiers led him away inside the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters), and they called together the whole battalion. 17And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on him. 18And they began to salute him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" 19And they were striking his head with a reed and spitting on him and kneeling down in homage to him. 20And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. And they led him out to crucify him.

21 And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross. 22 And they brought him to the place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull). 23And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. 24And they crucified him and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take. 25And it was the third hour when they crucified him. 26And the inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." 27And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left. 29And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, 30save yourself, and come down from the cross!" 31So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. 32Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.

33And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. 34And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" 35And some of the bystanders hearing it said, "Behold, he is calling Elijah." 36And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." 37And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. 38And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. 39 And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

That's what it took. That is the ransom for your sin and mine. And with that we come to our next theme. Freedom.

Freedom v. 15 & 16

Listen as I read verses 15 and 16.

15 For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, 16 no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

We see in the book of Philemon a man longing to be free. We know from the back story that Onesimus has run away in search of freedom. Freedom from slavery. Freedom from rules. Freedom from authority. And ironically enough he ends up visiting or actually being locked up in for a short time a Roman prison. And isn't that the way it is. We search for freedom in the strangest of places we humans. We images of God, who fight so hard to be free from his authority. Remember Eve in the garden. Can you just see here marching around with her 1960's type protest sign that reads "FREEDOM FOR THE MIND". After all she wanted to know what God knows. What did it get her? Remember? Yeah, death. How's that for freedom?

Remember Braveheart? What was it that he said to his troops at Stirling, at least as the movie recalls it? He says, after one man speaks up for the "run and live" argument. "...dying in your beds many years from now, would you be willing to trade all the days from this day to that for one chance, just one chance to come back here and tell our enemies that they may take our lives, but they'll never take our freedom!" Wow! This guy, and all with him, were willing to give up their very lives for some sort of freedom.

How about the Civil Rights movement? What about Martin Luther King Jr.? His freedom call certainly comes the closest to that of an enslaved Onesimus. Mr. King righteously fought for the equality that is God given to human being. But sadly, as I read some of Mr. King's speeches he seems to stop at freedom on this earth. Though surely he mixes those references with spiritual ones. He ends one of his more famous speeches like this, "when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!" Here again he mixes the earthly and the heavenly. Allow me to read you the real words to that song.

Free at last, free at last
I thank God I'm free at last
Free at last, free at last
I thank God I'm free at last

Way down yonder in the graveyard walk
I thank God I'm free at last
Me and my Jesus going to meet and talk
I thank God I'm free at last

On my knees when the light pass'd by
I thank God I'm free at last
Tho't my soul would rise and fly
I thank God I'm free at last

Some of these mornings, bright and fair
I thank God I'm free at last
Goin' meet King Jesus in the air
I thank God I'm free at last

Folks, that is true freedom.

Watch in your mind as our brother Onesimus walks up to the door at Philemon's home. With a death sentence hanging over his head, he is free to seek forgiveness. Without a care in

the world for his human body he risks it all to obey the one who has set him free. Look what he is doing. He is returning to slavery to be freed! Did you catch that? Let me say it one more time. He has returned to slavery to be free! Chains can no longer hold him. Slavery can no longer enslave him. Death can no longer defeat him. NO! He has been "made alive" (Col. 2:13) [He is] more than [a] conqueror[er]! (Romans 8:37) "no weapon that is fashioned against [him] shall succeed (Isaiah 54:17). The TRUTH has set him free! And that truth's name is Jesus. As I imagine the song writer, J. W. Work, who penned "Free at Last" knew freedom is not the earthly ability to choose. It is Heaven come down to earth and choosing. Setting God's people free here on earth - even those in slavery - and for all eternity. Praise God!

Read with me if you will John 8:32-38

³¹So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³²and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."
³³They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?"
³⁴Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. ³⁶So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. ³⁷I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you.
³⁸I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father."

You see! Their father was who, the Devil! The world and the flesh have a wrong idea of freedom. We are selling each other a lie. We tell each other that sexual promiscuity will set us free. Riding a motorcycle on the open road will set us free. Having millions of dollars will set us free. And it's all a bunch of whooey! Celibacy, lack of two wheeled transportation, and poverty are not the cause of your enslavement. Sin is. And the only one who can set you free is Jesus! The Truth!

If you are a Christian here tonight you have reason to rejoice. You have been forgiven. You have been redeemed. You have been set free!

Reflect and Respond

In conclusion I want you to think on these things.

Forgiveness: Have you been forgiven? Or do you stand in your sin before the God of the universe? That is a scary place to be. Jesus stands ready to forgive you.

Redemption: Have you been redeemed? Or do you still held captive? A slave to sin and without hope in this world or the next? Jesus stand ready to redeem you. To pay your ransom.

Freedom: Have you been freed from your sin? Have thrown off the definition of freedom the world has for you as Onesimus did?