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# A Redemptive Story

## Philemon

### Introduction

*“... leaving the 99 He went in search for the 1 that went astray...”*

Through His people and His Word God searches for and rescues His wayward people and brings them safely home. Like a spellbinding drama, this played out in front of me sometime back. The couple whom you would not know came to me hardened and hopeless. As we sat down she said...

“I have had it! 23 years I’ve been good to him. 23 years he has treated me not as I deserve. I know what he is about to tell you. Don’t believe him. He has said he was sorry repeatedly. Nothing changes! His drinking continues. His prescription drug abuse remains undercover. His craving for immediate gratification lurks around on the internet. He hasn’t changed. He won’t change. He owes me big time!”

Now I ask you congregation, what would you do if a good friend came to you and surprised you with this problem? How would you talk with her? What could you say to him? Is there a way to avert divorce and pursue reconciliation? Here is how I proceeded.

After about an hour of consolation giving and information gathering I asked this troubled couple to turn in their Bibles to Matthew 18. The first 20 verses were for the husband. He needed to see how his sin was heinous to God, hateful to his wife and harmful to himself. He needed to see also that God was out to get him...by pursuing Him with a relentless, rescuing love in order to take him away from the dangerous cliffs and bring him back to the fold. He needed see his great sin and he needed to see his greater Savior. As we stayed within these twenty verses for about a ½ hour he began to weep. The strong man was as a little child. Considering his rebellion, confessing his sin, committing to change he looked over at his cynical wife and said, “Oh, have mercy on me. Please forgive me”.

His confession was like rain on clay. She needed a tour of verses 21-35. And so, we took another half hour or so walked through these verses to see how God had forgiven her through Jesus Christ on the Cross. She began to notice afresh how God released her from the penalty of her sin. She was set free. She was justified by faith in Je-

sus Christ. Full and forever forgiveness was her gift from God through Jesus Christ the Lord. And then it happened. She began to see how she was treating a brother in Christ who was pleading for mercy. She desired justice. She longed to twist his neck until the debt was paid in full. Now when she saw this, it stunned her. She saw herself in the Scriptures as one who wanted to be forgiven but did not want to forgive. God through His Word was recapturing her heart and drawing it into the arms of Himself & her husband. Reconciliation was occurring.

Though the counseling continued for another four months, this was the in breaking of grace-producing repentance, faith and fresh obedience. This was a refreshing reminder that through His people and His Word God searches for and rescues His wayward people to bring them safely home.

Where are you in this story?

- Are you wandering from God and his people sampling activities and substances which are displeasing to the Lord? Then this morning's message is for you.
- Are you caught in thoughts of revenge and anger because you were used and sinned against? Then this morning's message is for you.
- Perhaps you are here today somewhat accidentally. You are just wondering what in the world am I talking about. You aren't trusting or treasuring Christ. You never have been given a compelling reason to do so. You are simply here out of religious duty or relational courtesy. Then this morning's message is for you.

Embedded in the smallest letter of the Apostle Paul's 13 epistles we find a story with a cast, setting and plot. It is a story that brings heart-changing power to people riddled with guilt. It moves toward a badly-treated person with hope. This is a story that delivers people from the power of sin. This story restores relationships interrupted by mistrust and brings them to a destination of joy. The drama to which I invite you has the power to involve each of us in its central truth. And His name is Jesus Christ.

Please open your Bibles to Philemon located in the New Testament just before the book of Hebrews and just after the letter to Titus.

(Read the letter)

## The Content of the letter

The occasion of this letter written about A.D. 60 is fairly clear. A slave named Onesimus had wronged his owner Philemon who was a Christian (due to Paul's preaching) living at Colossae. Likely Onesimus had stolen money from His master and had run off. Onesimus somehow came in contact with the Apostle Paul who was in prison in Rome. Paul took pity on him and talked with him about the gospel. God was merciful to Onesimus and caused him to be born again. Onesimus became a Christian. Though Paul developed great affection for his new Christian brother, he did not have a right to keep him in his ministry. And so, he wrote this letter to Philemon to take back his slave as a beloved brother. He likely sent this letter to Philemon by the hand of the one who dishonored and discredited him; his run-away slave transformed by the gospel; Onesimus.

### Scene 1: Philemon owes Paul

Our drama opens in v.19. Philemon owes Paul a debt. It is his own conversion. Philemon had heard the preaching of the Apostle Paul sometime prior to Onesimus's conversion. Philemon began to sense his sin and the plight and penalty of it. As Paul continued to preach Philemon was granted by God awareness of the badness of his sin and the beauty of His Savior. He turned from his old way of life and began trusting and treasuring Jesus Christ. Philemon became a Christian! His circumstances had not changed. He still had a useless slave named Onesimus. But his heart had changed. He was no longer treating his slaves unjustly and unfairly. He now recognized that he too had a master; a Master in heaven. The grace of God was shaping his behavior to be Christ-like; even on the job site. He was a new creature; the old was gone and the new was here.

### Scene 2: Onesimus owes Philemon

In scene two we see the Apostle Paul in prison at Rome likely. He was imprisoned for the gospel according to v.13. Around him are gathered men who are gracious and helpful. They all saw the hardships as opportunities to speak graciously the Truth to those whom God brought across their path. And look what God brought in. He had Paul put in jail so that he was strategically placed for a run-away slave (See this in v.10). Onesimus was in debt to Philemon as noticed in v.18. In God's providence, Onesimus runs away from Philemon traveling approx. 900 miles to cross the Adriatic Sea. He then carried on (likely by foot) another 350 miles to get to Rome where he was apprehended and thrown in jail. Is life going well for Onesimus? Here in Rome he reached Paul. He, like Philemon, heard the gospel from the apostle and received the grace of God through the apostle's Word.

Onesimus was changed. No longer was he useless. He now is useful. He now is his master's brother in Christ. The apostle Paul sees what God is up to and sends his newly-converted friend back to his master. He knows that Onesimus will be of great help to Philemon. But there is more here than this. He understands that those whose sins are forgiven are brought into God's family. And in God's family brothers and sisters in Christ mustn't be at odds. Therefore, Paul sends Onesimus back not empty-handed. Onesimus hand-delivers God's word and grace in order for a master and a slave to be reconciled; no longer as master/slave but as brothers in Christ.

### Scene three: Left to our imagination & application

Scene three is left to our imagination as well as our application. Onesimus arrives at Philemon's home...with Paul's letter. Philemon reads the letter. And as evidence strongly suggests responded with loving obedience. He forgave Onesimus. He received him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave as a beloved brother (vv.15-16).

Clearly we can see that *through His people and His Word God searches for and rescues His wayward people and brings them safely home.*

Philemon came to trust and treasure Jesus Christ. Onesimus came to trust and treasure Jesus Christ. And both of these came to new life in Christ through the Apostle's gospel. This newness of life in Christ brought the two; master and slave, into one family in which there is no distinction. They were brothers now in Christ. They were reconciled. The focus thus is on relationships: Paul and Philemon; Paul and Onesimus; Philemon and Onesimus.

It would be easy to reduce this letter to human relationships and how coming together in reconciliation is a beautiful thing. But that is not really what this letter is all about. So far we've highlighted people. The apostle Paul and his message. The master who was born anew through the message. The slave who was born anew through the message. And how the two; master and slave, came together to live in harmony forevermore. Though this summary is true it is incomplete. There is something missing in our talk this morning. And it is to Him that we now turn our attention.

## The Structure of the letter

To identify the central drama of the letter we need to notice how Paul arranged his material. He appears to have composed this letter in such a way that the second half of the letter takes up the same themes as were present in the first half but in reverse order. So for example, notice the greeting and closing of the letter (read vv.1-3; 23-25).

### Vv.1-3 and 23-25

The first three verses include the names of five persons; Paul, Timothy, Philemon, Apphia, Archippus. We further see that the last three verses (vv.23-25) conclude with the names of five persons: Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke. Notice also that the pattern of vv.1-3 is five names plus the phrase “Grace...of Lord Jesus Christ”. This pattern is mirrored by vv.23-25; five names plus the phrase “grace of the Lord Jesus Christ”. The greeting ends with “the Lord Jesus Christ”. And the conclusion of the letter ends with “the Lord Jesus Christ”. Between the opening and the closing we find this tender plea of the apostle on behalf of a slave whose name was Onesimus.

Paul, Timothy, Philemon, Apphia, Archippus – members of the church; Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke – members of the church. Within the church, something new is occurring. Within this God-created family we sense a life-changing newness that cares not about social status or economic rank. This Christ-centered, life-changing power happens in the midst of sinful choices and troubling circumstances. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ frames this letter. In the midst of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ what do we see happening?

### Vv.4-6 and 22

People confidently praying

### Vv.7-8 and 20

People effectively loving

### Vv.9-11 and 18-19

People supernaturally changing

### Vv.12 and 17

People affectionately partnering

### Vv.13-16

People forgiving willingly

## The Meaning of the letter

What is this letter about? What does a story about Onesimus; once enslaved and useless but now forgiven and restored to his master as a result of another's intercession mean to us this morning? Are your eyes opened to the main character? Can you see Him?

This letter is all about Jesus Christ the Lord and how He paid our debts in full through His suffering on the Cross. It is about how this Christ-purchased grace effectively changes hearts. This story is about how these heart-changed people begin to pray for each other and partner up with each other. The drama of this letter is about how grace overcomes sin and pays debts so that God's people will come to one another and forgive each other not reluctantly but freely. This letter is about far more than what one can gather on a quick read. It is about how God uses damaged relationships to display divine realities. Are your eyes opened to these divine realities? Do you personally know what this letter is about?

## Conclusion

Let's close this morning by taking inventory of our own hearts. Ask yourself these questions. If you are able to answer the following four questions with a resounding YES; you are witnessing the grace of Jesus Christ the Lord powerfully working in your life. You are able to see evidence that you are a believer in Jesus Christ. You can have full confidence that He who began a good work in you will complete it to the end. If you are not able to answer all four questions with a confident YES, then ... (explore this hesitation & call for their repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ).

1. Do I

see that I am Onesimus; once enslaved and useless but now forgiven and restored to my master as a result of another's intercession?

2. Do I

believe that "another's intercession" is the Lord Jesus Christ who died for my sins, was buried and was raised from the dead to intercede for me and come back for me?

3. Am I

convinced that His grace is found and enjoyed in a Christ-centered, Bible-saturated, grace-empowered, people-loving local church?

4. Am I

becoming a fellow worker in this local church by turning from my self-centered lifestyle and praying for one another, freely forgiving one another, gladly serving one another, evangelizing the world with one another?