

Sermon

Introduction

Paul's letter to Philemon is so small that we usually miss it going on by. I admit that I often have trouble finding it in my Bible...

It's a tiny letter – and a mystery... All the other letters we have in the New Testament were written to churches or to other ministers and missionaries...

Of all the thousands of personal letters the apostle Paul surely wrote in his lifetime (In prison, after all, you have plenty of time to read and write...) – of all the personal letters Paul wrote, why did this one survive?

Tell the Story

Paul's letter to Philemon begins with a salutation that tells us first that Paul is in prison as he writes, and second that Philemon, along with Apphia and Archippus are members of a church, that meets in one of their homes.

Judging from the letter, it's one of the churches founded by Paul himself. It's a pretty safe bet that this is the church in Colossae. Paul closes the book of Colossians with a greeting to what would seem to be this same Archippus.

Colossae was not far from another city called Ephesus. And it appears that Paul may have been imprisoned there – perhaps en route to Rome where he would eventually give his life as a martyr...

One can see the young man, Onesimus... Bright, full of promise... Except that he was a slave – and in this world, likely a slave for the rest of his life...

The events that led up to his flight are lost in the mists of time... Perhaps there was a fight with his master... Maybe he was beaten... However it came to pass, the young man fled into the night...

We don't know about his journey... Stumbling through the dark... Hiding in the shadows for fear of being caught... There were 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire in those days¹ - nearly 30 - 40% of the population - and the Empire took no chances when it came to rebellion. The *lightest* punishment for a runaway slave was to have the letter "F" branded on their forehead with a hot iron... "F" for *fugitivus* – runaway... But a master had it within

¹ Barclay, William.

his power to do more than that. Escaped slaves could receive the penalty of death... by crucifixion.

So the young man hid. Maybe he felt bad about his escape – when the heat of the moment passed and his adrenaline faded... But there was no turning back now.

What we do know is that the slave found his way to Paul – under house arrest, perhaps in nearby Ephesus... Maybe he remembered Paul from the days when he was a guest in his master's house, sharing with anyone who would listen to these strange tidings of a messiah – crucified and buried, then risen again.

Onesimus, the runaway slave, may have come clean right away. Or maybe he stayed with Paul for some time – pretending to be on an errand from his master. He stayed with Paul - and Paul grew fond of him.

But the prisoner Paul could not harbor a fugitive forever... The authorities would come eventually. And so Paul sent him back. He sent him back – with a letter...

The letter

Paul's letter to Philemon is brilliant. It is a study in diplomacy. Paul is a lowly prisoner at the time. And he's writing to a wealthy landowner. We think of him today as [*frame it...*] the great apostle Paul – but back then he was just Paul, a missionary who had started a few churches, including this one at Colossae.

The letter is addressed to the whole church that meets there at the house... He wants to make sure they are all around – witnesses...

Paul begins with a whole paragraph praising Philemon's love and generosity – setting him up for a call to live into that character now even more.

“For this reason, though I am more than bold enough in Christ to command you to do the right thing, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love”

I like how smoothly Paul slips in a command – by saying he's not...

“I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus...”

How can you say no to an old man? In prison for the gospel?

I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment...

Would you take away my child?

Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me...

This is a play on words... The name Onesimus means “useful”.

I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced...

Paul is laying it on kind of thick... But this is really good stuff. Remember he made sure that the whole rest of the church is around listening as this letter is being read.

Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother...

A brother... That’s no small thing. We should not take it lightly when we call our fellow Christians brothers and sisters, siblings in Christ... There is a responsibility to them...

In the Roman world, holding one’s own brother in bondage would be unthinkable...

And just to make sure there is no excuse Paul says that he himself will cover any debts or damages that Onesimus owes...

[with a smile...] *(I say nothing about the fact that you owe me your very soul, Paul writes...)*

I say nothing about it... of course.

I am writing to you knowing that you will do even more than I say...

Paul is sending subliminal messages: “I’m not just talking about amnesty here... Set him free... Send him back to me...”

Oh, and by the way, Paul adds, prepare a guest room for me. I’m coming to visit as soon as I get out of jail. (Read: Don’t think I won’t find out what happens. I’m coming personally to check and make sure you did what I asked.)

Paul closes the letter: Everybody here says “hello”. Bye-bye!

Well what could Philemon do? What could he *do* after that. How could he punish Onesimus? Everybody heard the letter...

That he let Onesimus go is obvious if for no other reason than because the letter survived. Surely Philemon would have destroyed it had he gone on to punish his runaway slave anyway.

Paul’s letter really left Philemon no choice but to set Onesimus free and send him back to Paul. If he let him off the hook on punishment because he had become a fellow Christian,

but kept him around all the other slaves would simply say they had become Christians too and he would lose everything.

There was only one thing he could do. Send Onesimus back to Paul... But here's the beauty of it: Paul had written the letter in such a way that Philemon wouldn't look like Paul had forced his hand. No, Philemon would simply be living into that generous and loving character... Paul was inviting him to change his frame of reference, to see his former slave as a fellow child of God. And that new vision had the potential to turn the world upside down. He calls Philemon to be his best self to live beyond the societal norms into this new vision of brotherhood.

Paul could have commanded - and created a power struggle. Could have demeaned him and filled the system with shame. But instead he calls forth the best in Philemon - and says, "I trust you to do the right thing." Love motivating

The Rest of the Story...

It's a great story. Paul's letter is a model of diplomacy. But why is it still around for us to read today? Paul must have written hundreds of personal letters - but few if any of them got preserved - yet this one did...

So now for... the rest of the story...

A few decades later there is a report of another prisoner headed on his way to Rome... A bishop by the name of Ignatius, following in Paul's footsteps - condemned by the Empire, going to Rome for trial...

The convoy carrying him stops in a city called Ephesus. and members of the church come to greet the imprisoned bishop - to encourage him... Among that delegation comes the bishop of the church in Ephesus himself - the head of the church in that city...

He is a man named "useful" ... Onesimus. Now, we cannot prove that this bishop is the same young man that sat at the feet of Paul all those years before... But there are clues that make it seem very likely indeed...

This same Onesimus, now grown up... continuing Paul's mission of bringing the gospel to the people of Ephesus...

Some time earlier this same church in Ephesus published a collection of letters - a collection of letters written by the apostle Paul before he died... These letters had been preserved by the church at Ephesus. The collection would be picked up by a man named Marcion and become the core of the New Testament...

The New Testament that we have received - built around a group of letters to the churches... and one letter to Philemon about a young slave of his who had run away...

You can almost see the young man now grown holding onto the letters of the one who had helped to set him free... remembering... holding on to *the* letter that had set him free... Preserving those letters for us today...

We never know the consequences of our actions... Paul never knew that standing up for that young man might someday lead to the passing down of his letters to generations upon generations of believers – transforming lives for nearly two thousand years... Paul never knew.

But now *you* know... the rest of the story.

Amen.