

Faces of our Faith: Philemon and Onesimus

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Philemon

Not all of the New Testament letters with Paul's name attached were actually written by Paul. However, several are considered undisputed, authentic letters from the apostle, and Philemon is one of them. The undisputed letters were to churches in Rome, Corinth, Thessalonica, Galatia, and Philippi, all house churches started by Paul and those who worked alongside him.

This letter is written by Paul while in prison, and addressed to Philemon, yet even this letter with a personal message is intended by Paul to be read to the congregation. Paul begins by saying the letter is from him and Timothy, our brother, and is being sent to our dear friend and co-worker, Philemon; **also to our sister, Apphia**, and to Archippus. The strong implication is that Apphia shares leadership in the church, alongside Philemon and Archippus, just as Timothy works alongside Paul.

It's also addressed by Paul:

"to the church in your house."

If you're interested in this sort of thing, this offers a fascinating glimpse into life in the churches during the early decades after Jesus.

The congregation meets in Philemon's house.

When our group of 13 visited Cuba last year, we were guests at a house church in Havana. We crowded, along with the congregation, into a long room in the center of the house. Just as Philemon was the spiritual leader of his congregation, this house belonged to a wonderful, charismatic couple, co-pastors of the church. I'm mentioning that now because, as much as I love this room and all that it holds--sometimes in such a palpable way--doing church together in their home was unusually warm and Spirit-filled, and distinctively powerful. It felt like a New Testament experience. We could not all understand each other, but it didn't matter, because there was such a spirit of love, and a sense that Christ was present in our midst.

The congregation that met in Philemon's house, and that heard the letter from Paul together, almost certainly felt that kind of love for each other.

Timothy, Apphia, Archippus, and the house church in Philemon's home are all acknowledged in Paul's letter for their prominent roles, but:

Paul's message is aimed directly at Philemon, and he's putting his friendship with Philemon on the line.

Before we consider the heart of Paul's message, let's take a moment to let the friendship between Paul and Philemon breathe, and come to life here for a few moments. Paul calls Philemon *our dear friend and co-worker*. He says:

*When I remember you in my prayers,
I always thank my God
because I hear of your love for all the saints
and your faith toward the Lord Jesus.*

*I pray that the sharing of your faith
may become effective **when you perceive
all the good we may do for Christ.***

*I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because
the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.*

It's very likely that Paul and Philemon established this congregation together, working next to each other. Philemon is repeatedly in Paul's prayers, and it has been reported to him what he had already seen up close--how Philemon loves the members of his church. His love runs deep in the life of the congregation and in Paul's own heart, giving the apostle, who is Philemon's spiritual mentor, much joy and encouragement.

These are not casual, fluffy words. They come straight from Paul's heart. He steps into the role of Philemon's spiritual guide when he mentions a growing edge for Philemon. When he says:

I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective **when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ,**

Paul is saying to his friend:

"Philemon, There is more to be perceived than you have yet to recognize, and when you see it and know it to be true, there is much more good that you and I can do for Christ."

If Philemon wonders what *the more good* might be, he does not have to wait long.

Paul writes:

For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love...I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment.

Onesimus is Philemon's slave, probably a runaway slave who sought out Paul in prison. This letter may well be how Philemon finds out about the location of Onesimus. It would be 1500 years before any kind of abolitionist movements. In the Roman Empire, there was no moral struggle over slavery. After a conquest, entire populations could be

enslaved. Someone like Philemon had an unquestioned right to do whatever they wanted with a runaway.

I cannot read about Onesimus without thinking of Ona Judge (Oney), a young woman in Virginia who was a slave because her white father, Andrew Judge, refused to acknowledge her. She was the property of Martha Washington at Mount Vernon, and because of her skills, became Lady's Maid to the First Lady when the Presidential couple lived in New York City, then Philadelphia. When Ona learned that Martha planned to give her as a wedding present to a niece, and that she would be separated from her friends and family, she began to plan an escape. In 1796, while the Washingtons were at dinner, Ona slipped out into the streets of Philadelphia and was assisted in an escape that eventually took her to New Hampshire.

President Washington's efforts to get her back included a kidnapping scheme. Ona offered to return, if promised that her children would not be enslaved. Washington was furious that a slave would try to negotiate with him, and she lived the rest of her life--over 50 years--as a fugitive slave. She never saw her friends and family again.

Our slaveholding founders knew they were on the wrong side of history, at the same time that they were making history. The economic dependence on slavery, shared by Washington, Jefferson, and others, and their unwillingness to free themselves from the sin of slavery at all costs, is a legacy that shows its ugly face in every lynching, every shooting, every white nationalist rally, every horrendous expression of white supremacy and racism.

One objection to this might be:

Well, it's complicated. By the time of the American Revolution, there was a 150-year history of slavery in the colonies. It had become entrenched as a necessary pillar of the economy. If the founders had abolished slavery, there might have been a civil war before the young country was old enough to stand on its feet.

You can look back critically at Washington and company, but-- it's complicated.

No--it's not.

Justice is not complicated. Justice is acting justly, doing what is right, and there is nothing just or right about thinking it's okay to own another human being.

It's not just or right to violate the dignity of another person.

It's not just or right to rip families apart and to destroy communities.

It's not just or right to view another race, another nationality, as inferior.

Philemon did not know that--not when it came to slavery. Almost no one did. He would have nodded vigorously if told that he was obligated to love the members of his congregation, and to treat each person with respect. At the same time that he was acting as spiritual leader of the congregation in his home, serving as a model of how to love the people in his church, he viewed Onesimus, and probably other slaves in his

household, **as not equal**, and **never questioned whether his relationship with Onesimus, and his relationship with Christ, had anything to do with each other.**

After Paul's letter, Philemon knew better, and he could no longer go about business as usual.

Paul makes it clear that he holds Onesimus in his heart, that his affection runs deep for Onesimus, as it does for Philemon. The apostle recognized, as we see in other letters, the revolutionary impact of Christ on **institutionalized contempt**. The old systems of oppression are shattered by Christ. As Paul said in his letter to the Galatians:

*There is no longer Jew or Greek,
there is no longer slave or free,
there is no longer male or female;
for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*

Paul brings this home to Philemon:

I am sending Onesimus, that is, my own heart, back to you.

*I wanted to keep him with me...but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. 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 a beloved brother**—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.*

So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

Near the end of the letter, Paul writes:

One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.

When Paul writes:

Welcome Onesimus as you would welcome me,

then says:

Prepare a guest room for me,

he is saying to Philemon:

Everything is different now because of Christ. I want you, but more importantly, Christ Jesus wants you, to welcome Onesimus back into your home, not as a slave, but as a beloved brother, and even more than that, welcome him as you

would an honored guest. Welcome him into your home, and into your heart as one who is beloved.

And let's remember. Paul intended for this to be read to the congregation, so he's also telling all of them that the return of Onesimus will give them an opportunity to practice a new kind of open-hearted hospitality.

Paul's letter to Philemon is tucked away between Titus and Hebrews. It's only one page, and is easy to miss.

But it's explosive.

There's one postscript to the story of Onesimus and Philemon. In Colossians, a letter written later, probably after the death of Paul, there is a reference in the fourth chapter to "*Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you.*"

It appears that Philemon and his congregation took Paul's words to heart, and did the right thing, by opening the door and their hearts, to Onesimus.

No one deserves to be abused, humiliated, or abandoned. The work of our congregation is to keep listening, keep paying attention, stay open to what it is about the work of justice that we have not yet perceived. The one thing we can do now, as we stay open to the future, is to love one another, **and** to welcome as honored guests those who come into our midst.

I will end this sermon as Leah did hers last Sunday:

We are all God's beloved children.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.