

Living Our Faith – Is It In Good Working Order?

The book of Philemon is the smallest book in the bible. It doesn't even have one full chapter. It is identified by verses.. 1-25 And is a personal letter from Paul to Philemon. He was likely the leader of the Jesus church in Colosse. Paul was a prisoner when he wrote this epistle, but his location is uncertain. Three possibilities have been suggested. Ephesus, Caesarea (Acts 24-26), and Rome (Acts 28). But most hold that Paul wrote this letter during the first Roman imprisonment around AD 60, along with the other Prison Epistles, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians.

Philemon was a slave owner whose home served as the meeting place for a local church. Philemon probably lived in Colosse, a city in the Roman province of Asia Minor. He was a convert to Christianity as a result of Paul's ministry, possibly during Paul's stay on Ephesus. The others mentioned in the salutation besides Philemon was Apphia, who was probably his wife, and Archippus who may have been his son, possibly serving at the time as the pastor of church.

Philemon owned a slave named Onesimus, a common name for slaves in that period. Onesimus ran away and had apparently stolen something from his master. Having fled to Rome, the escaped slave luckily came in contact with Paul, became a Christian, and remained with the apostle for some time, serving him in prison. However, restoration and restitution needed to be made. It was agreed that Onesimus would return to Philemon, even though this could result in his death. Paul wrote a letter to his friend Philemon, pleading the cause of Onesimus.

Under Roman law, a slave who ran away from his master could face the death penalty. In spite of this possibility the apostle Paul sent Onesimus, a runaway slave and a recent convert to Christianity, back to his owner Philemon to make restitution. This letter, or as we can call it because it is included in the bible, the Epistle to Philemon is Paul's plea that Onesimus no longer be viewed as a runaway slave, but rather as a "beloved brother"(v16,17;Col.4:9). Obedience to these requests would require forgiveness and restoration, actions which no other slave owner would have to contemplate in the ancient world. But Christians were called to a higher calling, one that contradicted the expectations of the culture at large. While the world pursued power and glory, Christians were to pursue the way of the Cross- the way of forgiveness, servanthood, suffering and love.

In his letter, Paul prays that Philemon's faith will be effective – or to Paul, that Philemon's faith be 'in good working order'. Meaning that 'working faith' is a sharing faith; it is the acknowledgment of what Christ has done in a believer's life. That kind of faith will also result in the sharing of possessions with other believers. As they did in the ancient time. Paul was happy because Philemon loved him, and also stated that he had joy, even when he was in chains. Paul's description of joy was that even when Christians were in trying times, having joy during those

times is a testimony to God's peace. Because Philemon's love comes from the heart, it meant that those in their community could see, and had renewed faith and their hearts too filled with joy.

Paul knew that he could have commanded Philemon to accept Onesimus and forgiven him, but he preferred to appeal to Philemon on the basis of love. Paul now considered Onesimus as his son. Son is the Greek word for 'Child'. He was personally responsible for bring Onesimus to Christ. And considered him someone he would like to keep with him to help him with the work he was doing at the time. Onesimus was very good at it, and enjoyed learning from Paul about Jesus. He was becoming indispensable, so much more that Philemon could have imagined.

But he tells Philemon in vs 12..... "I am sending him back..." it was as if he was referring him back to Philemon to make a decision. He asks him not to view Onesimus as a runaway slave. He had become a part of Paul's heart for the work that he was doing. Paul really wanted to keep him in Rome, and was confident that Philemon would want that to happen, as he himself could not be there to help Paul. And perhaps Onesimus could help where he could not.

But.... Paul desired for Philemon to be involved in the decision of whether Onesimus could remain with him. Therefore, he would act only with Philemon's consent. Philemon's good deed had to be voluntary. Service for Christ should never be forced, but done voluntarily. Paul seems to have given Philemon good reasons to forgive Onesimus. Now Philemon's actions had to be given from his own love. He goes on to tell him that God's plan is always the right plan, even though it is not always thought so. And the runaway slave had been used by God to meet his own salvation, and now to give Philemon the opportunity to grow in the love of God by forgiving him.

Because Onesimus had likely stolen something from his master when he left, and also owed him hours, days or months for the time he was gone. Paul uses a business imagery in offering to pay for any loss Philemon suffered because of his slaves actions. Paul also expresses his desire to be a partner with Philemon, in the Greek word, it means 'fellowship'. So he asked him to accept Onesimus as he would a partner in Christ, as he had accepted Paul as one. And asked to have any owing put on his account. This accounting imagery reminds us of the theological truth that our sins were charged over to Christ even though he had not earned them. Forgiveness, real forgiveness is costly.

Do we have something that is spending time in our thoughts. Is there someone who we might wish was in our lives again. And we parted on unfriendly terms. And it might be the time to take the action to remedy that. Forgiveness is not for the faint of heart. It takes serious thought and a humbling of the spirit to forgive someone. Perhaps that is part of the reason we do not want to forgive. But we must pray for the one we are confronting, as it is likely just as hard for them to ask for forgiveness. Depend on the love and healing of Christ to strengthen and give you compassion. As I said before..... Forgiveness, real forgiveness is costly.

The story of Philemon and Onesimus continues..... with Philemon forgiving his runaway slave and bringing him back into the household with full forgiveness and love. And a change in relationships. We find out that Onesimus served Philemon for a time, then went back to help Paul and the others to bring many converts to the Christian faith.

Ignatius wrote that Onesimus served as the bishop of Ephesus and was instrumental in producing the first collection of Paul's letters. John Knox stated "Onesimus played a major role in ensuring Philemon was included with Paul's letters in Scriptures, and that his voice as a bishop carried weight." Onesimus died around the year 90.

From a humble beginning as a slave to a revered figure in early church, Onesimus' journey stands as a faithful testament to the guiding of the Holy Spirit and the power of faith. His journey challenges us to examine our own lives and to consider the depth of our commitment to Christ. Are we prepared to serve God faithfully, wherever He may call us, and to embrace the work He desires to accomplish in and through us?

Paul was hoping to be released from prison, and at the end of his letter (which we did not read) he says to "prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to spend time with you." And sends greetings from his fellow supporters. Paul did get released for a time from prison, and was later executed with Peter in AD 67.

The letter to Philemon challenges us to discern, in and for Christ, what is the right thing to do. It would be easy if doing the right thing was, for example, taking out the garbage, or helping an elderly person cross the street. It is another when the right thing involves a radical transformation of relationships: of learning to see people that time and experience have led us to view one way in a completely new way. It is another thing when this transformation of relationships asks us to give up what we have come to view as our rights: to willingly let go of privilege. It is another thing when this letting go of privilege leads us to assume a relationship of kinship—of obligation—with those whom we have formerly viewed with suspicion because we now recognize that we are bound together in Christ. Let Christ be in our hearts.

As we reflect on the life of Philemon and Onesimus, may we be inspired to recommit ourselves to a life of devotion and service. May we follow the leading of the Holy Spirit and seek to fulfill God's purposes in our generation. And, like Onesimus, may we be living testimonies to the boundless grace and transforming power of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

