

“The Letter of Paul to Philemon”

Saint Paul is serving one of his periodic sentences behind bars. This time he’s jailed in the city of Ephesus around 55 A.D. or about 20 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. While behind bars, Saint Paul meets an escaped slave named Onesimus. Saint Paul discovers that Onesimus is the property of a man named Philemon whose house Paul has stayed at and whose family Paul has converted to Christianity.

Onesimus, the escaped slave, has done his stretch in jail and is about to be sprung. Saint Paul wrote a short letter for him to give to his master, Philemon, when he got back home. Saint Paul writes this letter to Philemon and to all of us over the centuries who have fallen out of relationship with one another.

Saint Paul begins by calling himself a “prisoner of Christ Jesus.” He is in prison because he is a Christian, open and publicly trying to convert others to Christianity. Philemon, on the other hand, is able to maintain his status and wealth because he only worships God within the confines of his own home. Philemon is playing it safe. He will only talk about and confess his faith at home while Saint Paul takes to the streets and goes from city to city on his missionary journeys.

Saint Paul reminds Philemon that he, and Timothy, are “prisoners of Christ Jesus.”

Then Saint Paul calls Philemon his “dear friend and co-worker”, reminding him that they had labored together for the Gospel in starting a church in Philemon’s house. In the first two verses, the church and its leaders that meet in Philemon’s house are greeted.

Then in verse 3, the familiar blessing that I begin my sermons with: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” In this blessing in the original Greek

writing, the “you” is plural. So Saint Paul is addressing the whole church and expects this letter to be read to the gathered assembly in Philemon’s house even though most of the letter is directed to Philemon himself.

When you’re in jail, you have a lot of time to pray. Saint Paul writes that he has been giving thanks to God in prayer for Philemon’s welcoming and providing a place to stay for other Christians who have been passing through. And, not only has he been showing “love for all the saints” with his hospitality, he is also sharing his faith with others.

With verse 7, Paul again compliments Philemon, thereby further preparing the way for the huge request he is about to make. He tells Philemon he has “received much joy and encouragement” not only from Philemon’s hospitality, but also from the love Philemon has shared with the other “saints” or Christians.

This letter to Philemon is the Biblical model for how to write a short letter to a person to convince him/her to do something they really don’t want to do. In the first 7 verses of this letter, Paul has been thanking God and thanking Philemon for his work, his love, his hospitality, and his faith. Philemon has been doing a great job as a newly converted Christian. Saint Paul affirms him in every way.

But now comes the bombshell. Saint Paul is going to challenge Philemon to take his faith in Jesus Christ a step further, beginning in verse 8. As Philemon reads the opening to this letter, he must know Saint Paul is leading up to a request, or maybe even a command. Saint Paul says “though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty...” Saint Paul knows the right choice in this situation and could command Philemon to make that choice. But he’s not going to. He wants Philemon to make his own decision.

Saint Paul again reminds Philemon that he's a "prisoner of Christ Jesus" and then writes: "I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment." While in jail together, Saint Paul has taken this young man under his wing and has helped bring him to faith in Jesus Christ. Saint Paul has become his mentor and teacher.

In verse 11, Saint Paul points out that, as a rebellious and runaway slave, Onesimus has been "useless" to Philemon in the past, but now because he has become a Christian, he has become "useful both to you and to me."

From "useless" to "useful" in verse 11. The meaning of the name "Onesimus" in Greek is "useful". Onesimus, through his conversion, has grown into his name.

Onesimus is no longer a "useless" slave wanting to flee, but a "useful" slave ready and willing to resume his status as a slave. Onesimus now understands that, even as a slave, he is free in the Lord.

Saint Paul wrote to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 7:21-23: Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever. For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of human masters.

This is what Saint Paul taught this runaway slave while they were in jail together. Even if you're a slave, you can be free in Christ. But, if you can gain your freedom from slavery – go for it!

Now Saint Paul is sending back to his friend Philemon a present – a renewed slave, a willing and useful slave. But he is also sending back his "own heart."

You can bet that by now Philemon has caught the drift of Paul's argument. It is going to be very difficult for Saint Paul to watch Onesimus remain a slave. Saint Paul in his letters is never hesitant to share his feelings, especially if it will help convince his readers to make a change.

In verse 13-14, Saint Paul laments about how nice it would be to keep Onesimus with him but that it should be Philemon's decision because he is the property owner. Philemon's "good deed" should not be because Paul made him do it, but instead "voluntary and not something forced." Saint Paul is trying very hard to persuade rather than to command.

Saint Paul begins verse 15 with the word "perhaps" because he doesn't know for sure why all of this has happened, but God is working in our lives giving us opportunities to reconcile relationships we have fallen out of.

Because Onesimus is a Christian, he is now a "beloved brother" "both in the flesh and in the Lord." In our earthly relationship, spiritual equality is not enough.

Saint Paul writes in Galatians 3:28: there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, this is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Saint Paul encourages Philemon to welcome Onesimus into his house church as an equal member of the body of Christ. Paul writes: "Welcome him as you would welcome me."

Then in verses 18-19, it's laughable that Paul volunteers to pay the bill for any financial loss Philemon had incurred as a result of Onesimus running away. Paul is a tentmaker in prison, hardly a man with money. But then Saint Paul reminds Philemon that he owes Paul as the person who was Philemon's spiritual father and helped bring him to faith in Jesus Christ.

We'll call it a wash. I helped you become a Christian. Now you help Onesimus become a free man.

In verse 21, the last verse of our text, Saint Paul expresses his confidence that Philemon will be obedient to the will of God and that Philemon will do even more than what Paul has recommended.

Now, if you were Philemon, how would you respond to this letter from the imprisoned Paul? Would you give Onesimus his freedom and welcome him into your church? Or, not wanting to lose the money, would you keep Onesimus a slave?

A favorite movie of mine, "Amistad", portrays the true story of slaves being brought to America from Africa. The slaves are able to take over the ship and end up in the northern states where some lawyers including John Adams take on their cause and will not allow them to be taken to the south as property. Their case goes all the way to the Supreme Court which rules they are to be returned to Africa. This case was one of the precursors to our Civil War.

Do we free the slaves or not? What did Philemon do?

We find the answer to what Philemon decided in Paul's later letter to the Colossians. Saint Paul is in prison for the last time in Rome where he will die. At the end of his letter to the Colossians 4:7-9, Paul writes... Tychicus will tell you all the news about me; he is a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts; he is coming with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you about everything here.

Not only did Philemon give Onesimus his freedom, but also Onesimus began to travel with Saint Paul and was with him at the end of his life when he was imprisoned in Rome. Saint Paul would send Onesimus back to Colossae and other cities where he had started congregations.

Years later, when Saint Paul was long since dead, another saint was in jail by the name of Ignatius. The Bishop of Ephesus sent some friends to visit Ignatius in jail and Ignatius wrote a letter to the bishop asking if a couple of them could be allowed to stay. Ignatius in his letter used some of the same language that Saint Paul had used in his letter to Philemon as if he was trying to remind the bishop of something. And what was the name of the Bishop of Ephesus he wrote to? It was Onesimus.

Onesimus – “useful” – had grown into his name indeed; from runaway slave to prison, to becoming a Christian, to becoming a free man, to traveling with Saint Paul, to becoming Bishop of Ephesus, and sending others to visit the saints in prison.

It all began with the letter of Paul to Philemon. On this Labor Day weekend, we give thanks for the end of slave labor and the freedom to follow Jesus Christ. And, we are challenged to help one another in our journeys as Paul helped Onesimus and Philemon and as Bishop Onesimus helped many others as a leader in the early church.