

Philemon 1, 2

A Prisoner of Christ Jesus

In the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord made this important statement, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."¹ It is an absolutely wonderful thing to take two warring factions and help reconcile them, so they become friends. But it is not an easy job.

Solomon, in Proverbs 18:19 wrote, "A brother offended *is harder to win* than a strong city, and contentions *are* like the bars of a castle." In other words, once you have sinned against someone, offended them, defrauded them or hurt them in some way it is extremely difficult to mend their wounded heart. It might be easier to conquer a fortified city than to reconcile with the one you have offended.

The apostle Paul's letter to Philemon is an attempt to reconcile two men so as to make peace. The letter is one of the shortest in the New Testament, but it is full of weighty truths on duty, loyalty, friendship, compassion and forgiveness. The apostle wrote the letter at the same time he wrote Colossians. This was during the time of his house arrest in Rome.² In the letter Jesus Christ is help up as the grand object of our faith. God is mentioned as our Father and words like grace, peace, prayer, love, and joy season the letter.

Paul wrote to a man named Philemon who lived in the town of Colossae. Philemon had come to faith in Jesus Christ years before with the help of the apostle Paul. And the letter is also addressed to Philemon's wife, Apphia and to Archippas, who may have been their son, but was surely the pastor of the church that met in Philemon's home. The letter is addressed to this church as well.

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus,
and Timothy *our* brother,
To Philemon our beloved *friend*
and fellow laborer, ²to the beloved
Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier,
and to the church in your house:
³Grace to you and peace from God

¹ Matthew 5:9

² Paul also wrote Ephesians and Philippians at this time.

our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
(Philemon 1-3)

The goal of this letter is to persuade Philemon, a friend of the apostle, to receive back and not punish a run-away slave named Onesimus, who is now also the friend of Paul. Slavery was very prominent in the first century. Estimates have been made that almost a third of the population, or more, were slaves. It was not like the chattel slavery in the U.S. and Britain in the 17th to 19th centuries. Teachers, doctors, craftsmen, cooks, housekeepers, musicians and more could all be slaves.

In some instances, slaves were better off than free people, because they had a home and were supported. Many slaves could buy their freedom, but others made a free will decision to serve their master for a lifetime. Some were horribly mistreated. And run-away slaves could be killed by their masters if caught, especially those who had stolen from the masters as Onesimus had.

The New Testament never called for the abolition of slavery. Had the church done so, Rome would have brutally crushed both the slave revolt and the early church. But the New testament did sow the seeds of cultural change, because in Christ, the slave and the free became family and equal before God. When master and slave prayed together and worshipped together, the love of God dissolved prejudices and alienation and brought reconciliation.

So Onesimus ran away from Philemon and wound up in Rome. Somehow, by the grace of God, Onesimus met Paul. And Paul learned that he was Philemon's run-away slave. The apostle led Onesimus to faith in Christ and the two became friends. And Onesimus became very valuable to Paul while he was under house arrest, so valuable that he wanted Onesimus to stay and minister to him. But the apostle knew he could not do that without Philemon's approval.

So, Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon with a believer named Tychicus, who also carried this letter and the letter to the Colossians.³ Paul sends the slave back to his master, now not just as a run-away slave, but as a brother in Christ. Let's read the greeting again.

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus,
and Timothy *our* brother,
To Philemon our beloved *friend*
and fellow laborer, ² to the beloved
Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier,
and to the church in your house:

³ Colossians 4:7-9

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Philemon 1-3)

This is the only New Testament letter where Paul designates himself simply as “a prisoner of Christ Jesus.” Usually he begins by calling himself an apostle or bond servant of Christ. But here he leaves out his official title, because even though others in the church will hear this letter read, it is really an open letter to a friend.

Calling himself a “prisoner” would remind Philemon of Paul’s hardship being under house arrest. And it would influence Philemon to follow Paul’s request about Onesimus. The apostle refers to himself as a prisoner several times in this letter.⁴ Here is how Paul became a prisoner.

In Acts 20 Paul traveled to Jerusalem to bring an offering to the suffering church there. Many people advised Paul not to go himself, but to send a delegation with the money. But Paul made the trip. And word got out that Paul was in the city and zealous Jews began to riot over his presence. He was almost killed, but a Roman garrison of soldiers stopped the riot and took Paul into custody.

Paul was eventually taken to Caesarea and put into prison. And he remained there for quite a while pleading his case. You can read about all of this in Acts 21-28. While in Caesarea and getting no where legally, as a Roman citizen Paul appealed to be judged by Caesar. Here is what happened when he arrived in Rome.

Now when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard; but Paul was permitted to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him. (Acts 28:16)

Paul was under house arrest. But according to Roman law he was chained to a Roman guard night and day. Every six hours one of the Praetorian Guard was relieved and another guard was chained to Paul. Acts 28 then ends this way.

Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received

⁴ Philemon 1, 9, 10, 13

all who came to him, ³¹ preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him.
(Acts 28:30, 31)

Now, even though Paul was under house arrest, he made known the good news of Jesus Christ and the coming kingdom of God to anyone who would listen. And many people came to faith in Christ, including Roman soldiers, all the way up to Caesar's household. We can read this in Paul's letter to the Philippians.

But I want you to know, brethren, that the things *which happened* to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, ¹³ so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ; ¹⁴ and most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.
(Philippians 1:12-14)

And,

Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren who are with me greet you. ²² All the saints greet you, but especially those who are of Caesar's household.
(Philippians 4:21, 22)

Caesar's household was not limited to his family members. It would also include guards, princes, judges, cooks, builders, diplomats, accountants and on and on. So, even though Paul was confined to what would be considered today a very small apartment, and though he was chained to a soldier both day and night, he still shared his faith in Jesus Christ.

Sometimes we think, I can't share the good news, I'm a failure at this or that. I don't have a job, or the right kind of job. I'm not popular or powerful. I am too young. I am too old. I have a disability. I am in a place where no one will

really believe. There can be a hundred excuses. But Paul was a despised Jew, a prisoner of Rome, a criminal of the empire. But he taught about sin and the love of God and salvation through the cross of Christ and the hope of everlasting life in the coming kingdom of God. And some people listened and believed—all the way from the Praetorian Guard to Caesar's household!

In Acts 1:8 Jesus Christ said that when we receive the holy Spirit we receive power to bear witness for Christ. We receive power to share the good news in both Word and deed. And when we speak and live God's Word there is God's power. The Word of God is powerful and effective because it is **God's** Word.⁵ His power is at work in His Word and people do not come to faith because of our position in life or our eloquence.

Paul's circumstances were so awful that he could have given up. But he made known Jesus Christ, because in Paul's heart of hearts, he was not so much a prisoner of Rome as a prisoner of Christ. He began his letter to Philemon in this way, "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus."

The word "prisoner" refers to someone held in bonds. The Romans had Paul in chains, but he was really bound to Christ. Jesus Christ gave his life for Paul to redeem him from sin, to grant him everlasting life and bring him to glory. And Jesus had called Paul and ordained him to bring the good news to the world.

To what are we bound? Are we bound to our fears, our circumstances? Or are we captivated by Christ? If we allow ourselves to be in prison to our fears or circumstances we will be miserable people. If we allow what other people do or say or our circumstances to determine how we think, feel and act, we will be a prisoner to these things. If we allow set backs and problems and the disruptions and disappointments of life to prevent us from living lives of faith, hope and love, we will miss out on serving the Lord.

Paul will plead for Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother in Christ. The apostle's task was not easy. He has to convince Philemon and the church that meets in his home to change their cultural viewpoint about slavery. Paul wants Philemon and the church to be like Christ and forgive Onesimus. And to realize that all people are new and clean and equal in Christ.

This would be like trying to convince a slave owner in a white church, in the southern United States during the civil war to accept a returning black slave as a brother in Christ and a full member of the church. If Paul could persuade Philemon to forgive his slave and to accept him as a brother in Christ, the word might spread like wild fire. Love like this, the love of God in Christ for sinners, heals

⁵ Isaiah 55:10, 11; Romans 1;16

wounds and brings glory to God. As Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God."