

Philemon - the Power of Forgiveness

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[0 : 00] Philemon. Think of relationships tonight. Relationships can break down and we can wonder how to restore them.

! Philemon talks about relationships here.! Really it's Paul's shortest letter.! It's one of the shortest books in the whole Bible. And it shows us how we can work through such situations where relationships are under pressure.

Paul writes while he's under house arrest here. And he's under house arrest because he's been preaching the gospel. And here he is in Rome. And he writes to Philemon.

Chapter 1 verse 1. Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ and Timothy, our brother, unto Philemon, our dearly beloved and fellow labourer.

So Philemon is someone that Paul knew. He had ministered to him. And Philemon had trusted Christ. The name of Philemon means one who loves.

[1 : 04] He's a loving, affectionate man. And Philemon was a believer. A fellow worker, it says, with Paul. And then verse 2, it goes on.

And Paul salutes some others to our beloved Aphia and Archippus, our fellow soldier, and to the church in thy house. So Philemon hosted a church in his own home.

And Paul gave him a warm, prayerful greeting. So these were godly people that Paul is writing to Philemon and these others that worship in his house.

And he says this. He says, Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God making mention of thee always in my prayers.

So Paul says to Philemon, I'm praying for you. He uses this word prayers, which has the connotation of intercession. So he's making specific requests on behalf of this man Philemon.

[2 : 07] And Paul acted as an intercessor, appealing to God for Philemon's understanding and his willingness to forgive Onesimus, as we'll get to. So he says, Grace to you and peace.

And then he says, verse 5, Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast towards the Lord Jesus and towards all saints. Paul's telling Philemon that he recognises that faith is at work in his life. He's seeing the love of God. He's seeing the love that he has towards the Lord Jesus and which he has towards all the saints. It's interesting through the book of Philemon how Christ-centered Paul is. He mentions Christ 11 times in 25 verses. So it's a very Christ-centered letter. And we hear how Philemon was a man who had love and faith in the Lord Jesus.

It says there. And verse 6, it says, That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.

[3 : 11] Paul says to Philemon, he recognises his faith and he also recognises the communication of his faith, that it would be effectual. And this word communication is the word koinonia, which also means fellowship or communication.

Or it can also speak of closeness, of oneness, of the contribution of your faith, which you share in common with other believers. And this is a repeated term too through the book.

The fellowship here. Paul recognises the faith of Philemon. He recognises the fellowship of Philemon. The communication, the fellowship, that was a faith-centred fellowship, that it would be effectual.

And it goes on, verse 7, it reads, For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.

Paul's recognising in Philemon there's joy here, there's comfort, there's love, that the bowels, speaking of the heart of the saints, is refreshed by this brother Philemon.

[4 : 20] And so we see Philemon, he's recognised for his heart, for his heart for others. So he's commended for that. And we ought to have likewise that heart, that compassion. And it says of Philemon, that not only was God's work in his heart bringing that love and joy, but he was also refreshing others.

He was refreshing the hearts of others, reviving the hearts of other saints. So this word bowels, which is the literal word, it speaks of the innards of the heart. And it's used eight times by Paul, eight times in his letters, and three of them are in this small book, which again is another noteworthy theme.

So fellowship is repeated, we see Christ is repeated, we see heart. Heart used three times in this short letter, in verse 7, 12 and 20, variously translated, but of the bowels of the heart.

And God is saying here that Philemon was such a man, a man of faith, that he was refreshing others' hearts, that spiritual refreshing that he gave, that he imparted to other people.

And again, that's a quality we can aspire to, isn't it? That we would likewise have a heart for others, that we would have a love for them, such that we want to see others refreshed and revived in their heart, in their walk with God.

[5 : 43] So Paul commended Philemon for that love that touched people's hearts. Philemon had refreshed others, he'd given them rest and relief by his comfort and encouragement.

What about you and me? Can we be like Philemon, that we've got a heart for others, to refresh their hearts, to see others know that love of God, that faith, that encouragement.

Paul next up presents a challenge to his friend Philemon. He's saying here that he has much boldness in Christ. He had given praise to Philemon, now he's got to give somewhat of a challenge. He's got much boldness, he says, to be commanding him, to telling Philemon something, which is really his Christian duty to do. Out of that godly principle of love, we read that in verse 8, it reads, wherefore though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient.

So he's saying here, look, you're a man of faith, of love, you have refreshed the hearts of the saints, and I could be so bold as to command you about something, but rather he's putting it, rather I would appeal to you.

[6 : 53] I would appeal to you Philemon on the basis of love. So he's coming to a bit of a challenge point here for his friend. And it reads that in verse 9 there, it reads, yet for love's sake, I rather beseech thee, being such and one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

So here's Paul in his prison cell, under house arrest of sorts there. He's awaiting to see the emperor as he was brought to Rome.

He still had some freedom to minister, to conduct his life, but he was effectively under house arrest. And he's saying to Philemon, I could be so bold as to command you about something, but rather I beseech you.

I appeal to you on the basis of love. And he comes to this point now, he'll talk about Onesimus. So Paul's exhorting Philemon here next about Onesimus.

So this man Onesimus had been one of Philemon's servants. Of course, here in Rome of the day, having servants was a customary thing of that time, of that society.

[8 : 11] It is not necessarily slavery, as some would picture it, as in more recent times, but it was part of the society of the time. And Philemon had this man, Onesimus, who was one of his servants.

But something had happened. Onesimus had run away from home. And in fact, Onesimus had run away hundreds of miles away. And now here in Rome, he chances on coming to meet Paul.

And you can imagine Rome of the day, that capital city, it would have been easy to get lost in the crowd in Rome. Rome's population, they reckon, was at least, at this time, at least one-third slaves. So it was a common thing to have lots of such slaves, servants. Onesimus would have blended right in and got hidden in the crowd. Onesimus had wronged Philemon.

He'd done something wrong. It's not stated. Some serious thing had happened and he'd run off from his responsibilities. And really, this was unlawful. And really, Onesimus could have ended up in some very serious trouble, punishment, even death.

[9 : 21] And it happened that Onesimus came to meet Paul and Onesimus also became a believer. So we could think of that, the chance of that, that some hundreds of miles away, that Philemon, Paul's friend, had been abandoned by this slave, had now come to Rome hundreds of miles away.

Wonderful how God orchestrated this connection now, that Paul happened to meet Onesimus and Onesimus too. became a believer in Christ.

And verse 10, it reads on that Paul exhorts Philemon now, he says, I beseech thee for my son, Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds, which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me.

So as I say, having servants was customary at the time. It was a time when society was quite divided into these classes. It was part of the culture of the day.

Yeah, it's interesting the sentiment here in Paul's letters, in Paul's writings, the sentiment here that in Christ there is no division into such classes for those who are believers.

[10:37] Paul in his writings promotes the principle of spiritual equality between masters and slaves throughout his ministry. And so now Paul is exhorting Philemon to say, our brotherly fellowship in Christ trumps any kind of distinction of place or class that society makes.

And Paul now challenges Philemon, he says, I beseech you, I beseech you for my son. So Paul's telling how Onesimus has now become another child of God by faith.

He has now trusted Christ, his constant faith in Christ while he was with Paul in Rome. And Paul's especially fond of him calling him my son. So he's especially beloved by Paul as a fellow believer. Now, we could think if we're in Philemon's shoes, Onesimus was one that was counted as useless to Philemon because of his actions. He'd left him in the lurch.

He'd just gone off and left him, left his employee, left his service and just gone and done a runner.

[11:48] Paul says to Philemon that now Onesimus was one who could be counted as useful. And it's interesting, the meaning of the name Onesimus is profitable.

That's what his name means, profitable or useful. And now Paul's saying, Onesimus is useful to me. He's actually helped me in the ministry. This man, Onesimus, the servant, has come along and he's helped Paul.

He's come and served with Paul. He's been useful in Paul's ministry. He must have attended to him and helped him in the ministry that he was doing there in Rome. And to Philemon he's saying that Onesimus could also be useful to him.

So Paul appeals to Philemon and he's actually sending Onesimus back to Philemon bearing this letter. So you can imagine these words that we're hearing here, that letter that Paul wrote to Philemon, Onesimus was carrying this very letter back to his master Philemon.

And it reads on verse 12. Whom I have sent again, thou therefore receive him that is mine own bowels, speaking of his heart again, whom I would have retained with me that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel.

[13:06] Paul's asking Philemon here to forgive Onesimus, to forgive him, to welcome him back, now to welcome him back as a brother, as a fellow, beloved brother in Christ.

Receiving back, that's Paul's heart here. Paul's urging Philemon, based on the work of love and forgiveness that God has wrought in his own heart, to now show that same love and forgiveness to this one, this slave, this servant, Onesimus, to show the same love and forgiveness to his escaped and now believing servant.

You can see as it reads here that Paul's saying, actually, I'd rather he stays with me and ministers unto me in the bonds of the gospel but he realises there's still something unresolved here.

Onesimus was a helper to Paul but Paul wanted Onesimus to resolve this broken relationship with his master, Philemon. Now God's into restoring broken relationships where they can be restored. It was the right thing to do to make that approach, to try to resolve that broken relationship and he appealed to Philemon to also be willing to resolve the matter with grace.

[14:19] Paul could have selfishly kept Onesimus back there with him in Rome as a helper in the gospel ministry but he didn't want to do so without the consent of Philemon so he wanted Philemon to have that opportunity to make things right.

Verse 14 it reads on, but without thy mind would I do nothing that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity but willingly. So again he's saying I could benefit from keeping Onesimus with me but I'd rather get your consent here.

I'd rather have your approval here and I'd rather that forgiveness could prevail here. And really the whole letter to Philemon is about the power of forgiveness. The power of forgiveness to overcome this brokenness to bring reconciliation and restoration because friends God is able to restore that which is broken.

Broken relationships. Here's the most powerful message of this letter. Paul relates how this is perhaps why Onesimus was separated from Philemon for a while that he might receive him eternally not as a servant but as a dear brother.

So we read on there verse 15 it reads for perhaps he therefore departed for a season that thou shouldst receive him forever. So it's like Paul's putting to Philemon okay you've been separated this

man's left you but maybe it's for a reason.

[15 : 49] He departed for a season that now he should receive him that you should receive him that you should welcome him back forever for eternally is the sense of it as a brother in Christ.

So receive him back not as a servant now but as a fellow believer a dear brother and it reads that there in verse 16 not now as a servant but above a servant a brother beloved especially to me but how much more unto thee both in the flesh and in the Lord.

So just trying to unpack this and understand this what application we can make of this we see that God can heal that which is broken broken relationships God can restore and we see the power of faith we see the power of fellowship we see the power of forgiveness these are all powerful truths that are underlined through this letter that Paul writes to Philemon and Onesimus this runaway slave had wronged Philemon in a serious way he could have just taken the position well he's done the wrong thing he should cop it he should pay for it he should wear it but Paul appeals to Philemon he asks Philemon rather forgive choose to forgive him and welcome him back as who he is now your brother in Christ welcome him back Paul's appeal is based on love and the grace of God which is shown to us through the cross isn't it through the forgiveness of our sins through Christ and Philemon is an example here of forgiving others who have wronged us now we can all probably think of people in our lives who's wronged me through my life people that have done me wrong this one person that comes to mind for me there's one time

I had some work to do and the worker said I'll just pay for the materials ahead of time so that he could get the materials and so I gave him the money and then when I went to phone him afterwards I couldn't get a hold of him anymore I gave him stacks of money so he could buy the materials for the job and just mysteriously his phone stopped working and it just blew all that money and you think he really wronged me that man he really wronged me you get people like that don't you people that do the wrong thing by you think they don't deserve forgiveness they don't deserve grace and yet we can think of people in our lives like that can't we people that have wronged us hurt us wounded us done the dirty on us done wrong to us Paul appeals to Philemon now he says forgive this man forgive him welcome him back as to who he is now he's a brother in Christ he's a brother in Christ so he's appealing out of love to extend forgiveness extend forgiveness and sometimes it can be hard to forgive but that's really it is the right thing to do to extend forgiveness and Paul shows here the transformative power of forgiveness think of the opposite of forgiveness if you're not forgiving what are you you're just festering if you're not forgiving you're festering you're steaming you're eating yourself up with anger and frustration and hate and rage and you know that bitterness that eats people up

Paul's saying forgive forgive do the gracious thing do the Christ like thing forgive and there's power there there's transformative power isn't it we think of the love and the grace the reconciliation of God that he should forgive such as we who really have no no deserving of it there's no commending of ourselves yet God so loved us didn't he while we were yet enemies while we were enemies he gave himself for us forgiveness think of forgiveness it's not always easy it can be costly to forgive someone who is wrong does but Paul's letter to Philemon reminds us that the cost of forgiveness is always worth it forgiveness think of it forgiveness brings many benefits it frees us up from all of that frustration that festering that anger that resentment it allows us to move on with our lives to not hold that grudge to not hold on to that that's going to hinder us really from our walk and it can even be such that forgiveness can restore that which has been damaged forgiveness can restore that which has been broken we can let go of that bitterness and it's real for all of us isn't it there's things we can think oh they've really they don't deserve it but there's a healing of forgiveness and it's more for us that we benefit don't we by forgiving we benefit there's healing there for you rather than holding on to unforgiveness and Paul acknowledges that Onesimus had become a changed man through his encounter with Christ this wasn't the Onesimus that had left this is a new man now he's a brand new man he's a brother beloved similarly when we accept Christ as our saviour his transformative power is working in us it's a lifelong process of change conversion

[21 : 13] Christ's redemptive work it can restore relationships it can bring healing where there was once brokenness so Onesimus he's a changed man now Paul appeals to follow him and welcome him receive him back show the love of Christ show God's forgiveness what a demonstration of the power of redemption of God's grace the transforming power of Christ we could think imagine a shattered vase completely broken into pieces and there's an art form in Japan called kintsugi where they repair broken pottery with gold the vase is not only restored but it becomes even more

beautiful what a picture that is really of redemption isn't it that we're broken but God restores us and he makes us even more beautiful than before that's salvation isn't it that Christ's redemption can take that which is broken and damaged by sin and put the pieces back together and make us a wonderful whole and safe person radiant made more beautiful than before because of his grace made even more precious because he's restored us taken that brokenness the broken pieces of our lives and made us brand new in Christ and it reads there that if thou count me therefore a partner receive him as myself and that word partner is the word fellowship again koinonia he's saying look if you count that you're in fellowship with me if you're in that fellowship with me that communion with me then here's another brother that we should welcome into that fellowship another word there koinonia partner it's like there's a brotherhood there's a special bond there's a special brotherly fellowship bond it tells us in Galatians 3.28 there is neither bond nor free in Christ there's not really this distinction between servants and masters we're actually one in

Christ there's no classes and distinctions the floor is level at the cross for all of us there's no who have a greater status than another we're all brothers we're all brethren in Christ there's that true brotherhood in Christ amongst us and between us so Paul writes to Philemon of Onesimus this man is now your brother in Christ and we're brothers together just as you and me are brothers says Paul to Philemon so too is Onesimus Paul says receive him as your brother as if he were me we're all in this together it's koinonia it's fellowship there's brotherly unity we're one family in Christ there's neither bond nor free the power of faith this community that we are it's the community that we are today one body one fellowship one unity one brotherhood brothers and sisters together the power of faith makes us a community makes us a fellowship that's why church matters that's why it's good for us that's why there's a blessing when we get together and that's what we meant to have even this one who had been separated and gone off on his own

Paul says welcome him back he's your brother welcome him back into the fellowship so we see Paul writes to the offended about the offender as the peacemaker we see these two parties we see the offended we see Philemon we see the offender Onesimus Paul's in the middle as this peacemaker pulling them together it's reconciliation isn't it and he urges reconciliation and friends that's the heart of God is reconciliation putting the offender and the offender together that's what Christ has done at the cross amen one mediates between God and man we're the offender he's the offended yet he reaches to us and by faith we can trust him and be saved Christ is the peacemaker the reconciliation is made possible because of the cross and friends when you think about it reconciliation is not always easy when the offended and the offender just can't get it together but Paul's letter to Philemon reminds us that reconciliation is always worth it when we reconcile with someone we restore those relationships and we bring healing to both parties both parties get a blessing when there's a reconciliation and Paul was willing to stand by Onesimus and say to Philemon look if there's anything he owes you charge it to me see that in verse 18 Paul's this ultimate peacemaker and he's saying verse 18 if he hath wronged thee or oweth thee ought put that on mine account I Paul have written it with mine own hand and I will repay it albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides of course Paul was due much from Philemon he'd been the instrument that had led him to Christ and he had the blessing of salvation because of Paul as God's instrument giving him the gospel but Paul is saying here if Onesimus has wronged you if you're owed anything by him charge it to me so Paul urges Philemon to forgive Onesimus welcoming back as a brother and forgiveness involves both grace and justice paving the way for true reconciliation it's like there's this bridge that was broken and now it's restored and it allows that bridge to work again it's the same with forgiveness it brings reconciliation doesn't it the bridge is restored and relationships that were once broken can be healed how about us are we an offended one

I could think of my example I could be stewing about that for a lifetime I wouldn't even know what the guy looks like now but I'm not holding it in my heart I'm not dwelling on it it's not eating me up can we be an offended one who isn't taking it on board and dwelling on it or are we an offender maybe we've offended someone we've hurt someone or will we be the peacemaker in this will we be like Paul to help those offended ones and the offender to come together to put ourselves out like Paul did charge it to my account I'll cover the cost here I'm willing to put myself out and put out of my own pocket to make this work if we are one who is offended are we willing to extend grace to others Paul asked Philemon to refresh his heart in Christ by extending grace to Onesimus he says that verse 20 it says yea brother let me have joy of thee in the Lord refresh my bowels in the Lord

he's saying make my heart glad by sorting this out we've received

[28 : 23] God's grace to us because of the cross we've received his great salvation at no cost to ourselves given freely to us by the blood of Christ shed for us and we're called to extend grace to others how can we be like Christ to those who have wronged us can we show mercy like God shows mercy to us instead of wanting revenge or eating up ourselves with hate can we reflect the character of Christ you know these are big questions I know we might be thinking about someone in our own lives and thinking how can I be more like Christ here in this situation Paul tells how he's confident that Philemon will do the right thing and forgive the brotherly thing and restore this broken relationship it reads on there verse 21 having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say Paul saw in Philemon that he would do the right thing he would do his part about this damaged relationship what about you and me when the situations that are hard can we extend grace can we seek healing can we offer forgiveness and receive it will we extend grace and reach out in love and I know for some situations it might be we've done our part and that's that's as best as it can be but how will we respond to the hurts of others do we still dwell on it or do we say actually no I've let that go

I've released them I've done my part I'm not going to fester I'm not going to sit here in frustration anymore I'm in forgiveness now I'm in forgiveness mode when we let go of any grudges of the past of past offences or are we going to hold them against others and stay here stewing friends it can be a heavy burden unforgiveness can't it it can eat us up and rather release that burden the burden of unforgiveness let it just let it drop off of your shoulders and give it to the Lord let go of grudges extend grace be like Christ God helping you to have the graciousness of our Lord you don't have to carry that burden any longer if that's you today there's forgiveness there's release for you and it's liberating to let it go and to know God's refreshing just as Onesimus was once lost and separated from Philemon think of ourselves we were once lost in our sin separated from our God we must recognise our own brokenness and need for redemption Paul urges Philemon to forgive Onesimus in the same way that Christ has forgiven us that's big isn't it it's like the Lord prayed isn't it forgive others their trespasses you know there's there's release for you in forgiving others their trespasses as Christ has forgiven you Paul says pray he says I'm praying he says that he's praying and it just closing verses here it talks about with all prepare me also a lodging for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you so he's acknowledging that that Philemon's praying and prayer can do wonders can't it the prayers of the saints really Philemon is a beautiful testimony to the power of forgiveness and reconciliation think of it for yourself for all of us we all need reconciliation with God we all need redemption and so we should also extend that in practicing forgiveness in our lives the transforming power of Christ so let's extend forgiveness think of it for yourself to have that heart that sensitive heart that compassionate heart that Paul talked about that he talks about his bowels he talks about his very heart the very heart strings the very innards of his compassion he's got the love of Christ there he talks about the fellowship that is sweet that this one who had offended is part of the fellowship now he's your brother in Christ so let's forgive those who have wronged us let's seek to reconcile with those that are estranged from us and think of the example of Christ he accepts us he receives us unworthy as we are he forgives us forgives us of our sin unworthy as we are of his forgiveness and he restores us he makes us like that beautiful vase that it looks even more beautiful than it was before even though sin has damaged we see God's restoring he makes us the wonderful work of art that each one of us are his masterpiece for his glory he restores us and then it closes there with the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ friends it's grace isn't it that's the bottom line it's the bottom line of this letter that Paul writes to Philemon he says grace the grace the grace of our

Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit when we think about it think of God's grace we're saved by grace through faith we see God's grace it it saves us it empowers us to live right to walk in his steps to live out his love to extend forgiveness in such a broken world that we live that we can know God's grace working in our own lives and with those in our lives that we can have that grace and especially we can give him thanks that we can be reconciled to God think of that we that were his enemies he's reconciled he's reconciled he's brought us to his very heart he's made us his very own possession his very own people and brought us into that family that brotherhood that fellowship that is so sweet let us pray our Lord God we thank you that your grace is sufficient your grace is sufficient to save even the worst as Paul counted himself the chief of sinners yet Lord your grace

touched him and transformed him

[34 : 52] Lord that grace is still real it's still relevant it's still available it's still extended to such as we help us Lord to see the reality of forgiveness at work as it was in the lives of Philemon and Onesimus Lord as Paul as that peacemaker brought the offended and the offender back together Lord so too you are that mediator that peacemaker between God and men that you can affect that reconciliation that we can be brought near to the very heart of our father God Lord we thank you Lord Jesus that you are the one who works that work of salvation as we trust you in faith and receive that gift of your shed blood for our sin in our place you died and we can know salvation today by that grace Lord help us to be grace filled people to be gracious people extend grace where we can as much as we can to not hold unforgiveness but rather to receive that restoration of that reconciliation that love that wonderful fellowship that you show to us

Lord and extend it to others in our lives we pray give us the grace to we pray in Jesus name Amen