

Passion and Persuasion from Prison

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Date: 12 December 2010

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Lord God, as we turn to your word now, we pray that you will give us eyes that can see the things that you have for us, ears that are open to the things you want to say to us, and hearts that are ready to obey you in every way.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Please be seated. Well, I'd better get on with the really important, controversial question first, hadn't I?

Philemon, Philemon, or any variation of that? Which one is it? Well, I don't know whether Jono reads Greek or not, but I am going to call him Philemon.

And you can argue with me later, but I had several students in Nigeria called Philemon, and I'm more used to saying Philemon than anything else.

So that's what I'll do and argue with me later. I think that the only person who really cares too much at this stage would be his mother, and she's not around.

[1 : 21] This sermon was titled, Passion and Persuasion from Prison.

Passion about what? What kind of persuasion? As I read Philemon, I didn't really get a sense of passion on first reading.

Maybe we need to look at it a bit more. The letter is a very personal one. It's a letter from the Apostle Paul to a friend of his, a convert in Colossae named Philemon.

We have reference to some of the characters in Philemon in the letter to the Colossians. Many think that the two letters were sent together.

Certainly Tychicus and Onesimus took the letter to the Colossians, and most people think that it was sent at the same time.

[2 : 35] It seems like Philemon had a slave. The slave's name was Onesimus, which means useful.

That was a pretty common name for a slave and probably a pretty appropriate one or maybe a hopeful one for some slaves. Onesimus, however, didn't live up to his name.

He'd run away and possibly had stolen some of his master's money before he had done so. So Onesimus, on the run, made his way to the capital, Rome, and there he came across a prisoner, Paul, and by some set of circumstances that we don't know too much about, had become a Christian and had started to help Paul in various ways in his imprisonment.

Now, it just so happened that Paul was a close friend of his former master. What was Paul to do? So Paul sends this former slave back to his old master with this letter.

And Paul, in this letter, asks Philemon not only to pardon his former slave, but also to accept him as a Christian brother.

[4 : 13] Now, that's a big request. And I guess that's why the persuasion is needed. And as we go through the letter, I think we'll see that it's worth not only getting passionate about, but we'll also be able to see why this rather foreign and historical legal matter and household matter, if you like, is relevant to us today.

So let's have a little look at it. I've got extra time, Jono says, because I'm going through a whole book of the Bible. So let's look.

First of all, if you can open to page 970 in your pew Bibles, that will help you. The first three verses are just an introduction, a salutation.

The addressee and the addressor are named, and it seems fairly unremarkable. Let's just get on with the rest of the letter, we might think. But let's pause for a second or two to have a look at it.

First of all, this is unique among Paul's letters in the New Testament, in that Paul introduces himself in a very different way.

[5 : 39] Usually he introduces himself by referring to himself either as an apostle or as a servant of Christ or both, talking about his rank and his role.

Here he doesn't. he introduces himself as Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus and Timothy, our brother. Not that the rank and the role aren't there still, but those descriptors aren't really what he's wanting to emphasise here.

Here he's wanting to make it personal. It's just plain old Paul who happens to be a prisoner of Jesus at the moment. Well, a prisoner at the moment and a prisoner of Jesus.

He is a prisoner of Jesus because he belongs wholly to Jesus. Jesus has captured him.

He's got hold of him. He owns him, you might say. The point is, he's plain old Paul, but what he's saying here is not just a matter of obeying Paul, but of being obedient to the demands of the Gospel and I think he will make that abundantly clear.

[7 : 09] Paul comes alongside Philemon as a friend and co-worker to encourage him to be obedient to Jesus. So, even this first little line is a hint that this is more than just a household matter for Philemon.

Secondly, if it's a personal letter, if I write you a personal letter about a personal matter, I would address it to you and you alone and signed by me.

But that's not what Paul does here. He says, to Philemon, our dear friend and co-worker, good, and Afia, our sister and Archibus, our fellow soldier and to the church in your house is like the whole community is involved.

Although it is a personal matter, it is not a private matter. And we tend to equate those two terms. In our modern culture, we tend to think that what is personal is private. It cannot be anybody else's business. Clearly, Paul doesn't see it that way.

[8 : 39] We belong to each other. What is personal and even what is personal to your faith affects your brothers and sisters in Christ.

this points us ahead to one of the real emphasis points of this whole chapter, this whole book, that we belong to each other.

Okay, let's not dwell too much on that. Let's look at the next bit, the prayer. prayer. And as usual in Paul's letters, the prayer anticipates and names the main issues.

Paul starts by being thankful for the ongoing nature of Philemon's belief in Jesus and how that works out in multiple dimensions. Look at this, verse 4, 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 towards the Lord Jesus.

But he goes on, I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ.

[10 : 06] I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother. Now that verse 6, I stumbled over it and I still stumble over it when I read because it's kind of, it's a funny sort of prayer, it's kind of confused and convoluted in the way we have it here.

But I think it's the crux to the whole letter. Any of you who have tried to learn another language or who have grown up bilingual or whatever, if you have an acquaintance with another language, you will know that there are some words that you can't quite capture in English.

There are words that you can't translate easily, you have to use a big long explanation to get the meaning of the word because there's no equivalent in English and that's what's happened here. So the fact that it's convoluted, I think, comes in part because we have one of those words here and I think unfortunately it gives us the wrong impression as well.

The word, when it says in our copies here, I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective. Now that word that is translated as the sharing of is the Greek word koinonia.

[11 : 51] Now that's I'm not just mentioning that to impress but I hope you are but it's because there isn't an equivalent in English.

The New Testament often translates that word as fellowship. But fellowship sort of feels like sort of a warm and fuzzy sort of thing, you know, sitting down with a cup of tea with a bunch of friends. Koinonia is deeper than that. Sharing is the way that it's translated here and I think that that's a little bit ambiguous.

It either makes it sound like apportioning things out or just talking together. Koinonia certainly doesn't mean telling other people about Jesus which is what many Christians, how many Christians use the term sharing your faith.

Telling other people about Jesus is a good thing but it's not what we're talking about here. Paul is saying here that this, he's praying that when this koinonia, this mutual participation in faith, this life together as faith in Jesus really means, when that life together, that belonging together works powerfully, Philemon will realise all of the good things that God has made for us Christian people to do.

[13 : 43] that's a really powerful prayer. As the life together, as the belonging together really works itself out in reality, Christian people begin to see all of the good things that God has for us to do.

Now notice how Paul has shifted from just talking about Philemon to talk about us. In the space of a verse, he goes from saying, I'm praying that you will realise what all of this life together means and when you do, it will show you what all of us can do in Christ.

So, to know, to realise what living together as faith in Christ implies will be a powerful thing amongst us.

Paul will go on to show that this is not really theory but I think that he has set a lot of the theological framework for this in the book of Colossians which, as I mentioned, is probably a twin letter to this one sent alongside.

Listen to Colossians chapter 3 starting from verse 11. In that renewal, that is that renewal of your faith, he says, there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free.

[15 : 31] Now, you can imagine Onesimus and Philemon's ears pricking up because they are slave and free. But Christ is all and in all.

And then he follows that up. As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, bear with one another and if anyone has a complaint against each other, forgive each other just as God has forgiven you, so you all must forgive.

above all, clothe yourselves with love which binds everything together in perfect harmony. Those are powerful verses and Paul is saying, okay, you've got that theory, that's in the other letter. In Philemon now he's saying this is a chance to live it out. he does acknowledge that actually Philemon, it's not just that he's asking that it might start in Philemon, he's asking that it might continue.

Well, look at verse 7, he says, I've indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother. You see, he's already acknowledging, this is already happening, Philemon.

[16 : 56] I'm just praying that you'll realise that the true potential of this living together or this belonging together in Christ.

So he goes on to his appeal and I think there are five different aspects to this. From verse 8 right down to verse 21, Paul makes his persuasion, this is the argument, this is the appeal, that he makes.

It's not five different appeals, it's just five different ways of appealing. And first of all, in verse 8 and 9, he appeals just on the basis of love.

He says, for this reason, although I'm bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love.

And then he makes it personal. And I, Paul, do this as an old man and also a prisoner of Christ. It's not that I'm going to pull rank here. I could do, I could command you, get with it, but on the basis of love, do it as we know love for each other.

[18 : 15] And that's basis enough in itself. But he goes on and he talks about Onesimus. Finally, he gets to talk about Onesimus. And he talks about the worth of Onesimus first in verses 10 to 14.

I am appealing to you for my child Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he's indeed useful, both to you and to me.

I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to see him with me, I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel.

But I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. Now, this letter is a really very witty letter actually and it contains a number of different word plays that are sort of sustained throughout the letter.

You remember that I said that Onesimus' name was useful. So here in verse 11, Paul says, he was called useful, then he became useless to you and now he's indeed useful to both of us.

[19 : 41] So he's using the name of Onesimus as a bit of a pun, a link and he's saying he is useful.

When I was in school, I was one of the, you know, you have to, you talk about people who really can't do sport very well as having two left feet.

Well, if there could be possible to have more than two left feet, I had them because I was one of the, well, I was always the last pick to put it that way. No matter what the sport was, I was, and I got, people, kids weren't hesitant to tell me that I was useless at sport.

And I was, there was pretty fair assessment really. But unfortunately, that assessment got carried over into the rest of my life.

And I got to see myself as useless. And that's taken me a while to get my head straight on that.

[20 : 59] But you see, God, if we really believe that God has created each and every one of us in his image, how can we be useless?

Does God make useless things? Is God's image useless? useless? And in fact, if we need any emphasis as to whether it's true or not, this time of Christmas should tell us surely that we are not useless.

Because God sent his only son into this world to tell us, you are loved, you are worth it. You are not useless. useless. Jesus died for us.

We are not useless. There is none of us that are useless. God values all people.

We are those for whom God became human. we are those for whom Christ has died. If we are of great worth to the creator and master of the universe, then how dare we say that anyone is useless?

[22 : 32] us. And as brothers and sisters in Christ, we need to look at each other with those eyes.

You are the one who Jesus died for. You are the one who Jesus died for. that is the appeal on the worth of Onesimus.

Then Paul goes on though. He doesn't stop there. Verse 15 he says, 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 more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, and how much more to you, both in the flesh, and in the Lord.

Onesimus' status is another reason why he ought to be accepted back. You see, Onesimus is a slave. Onesimus was in that degrading and terrible condition of slavery where people are regarded as objects.

Unfortunately, that's still that curse, that scourge still remains today. I saw a statistic not so long ago that there are still over 27 million people in slavery around the world today.

[24 : 14] There are many countries where slavery has only recently been deinstitutionalised, made illegal. people. You would think that if faced with this, Paul, that great theologian, would come out with some strident and really condemnation of the whole institution of slavery.

slavery. But he actually does something a lot more powerful. You see, Onesimus, as a believer, has a new status and Philemon must relate to him differently.

Before, Philemon could look at Onesimus as an object, someone to order around, someone to use, useful, then use him. Paul says, no, that's no longer possible, Philemon.

You've got to welcome him back as a brother, as someone who belongs together, just as we all do, just in this koinonia.

You belong to Onesimus, Onesimus belongs to you. You've got to entirely new relationship with him. In fact, Philemon should now welcome Onesimus, the slave, as he would welcome Paul himself.

[26 : 03] Verse 17, if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. What he's actually saying, again, this is an ambiguous translation, because what he's actually saying, if you have koinonia with me, welcome him as you would welcome me.

If we are together in Christ, if we are fellow Christians and we relate as Christian people, brother and sister together, then you also relate to Onesimus like that.

Wow, this is starting to become a powerful letter, isn't it? Paul doesn't even stop there. Verses 18 and 19, he keeps going.

If he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it.

I say nothing about your owing me your very own self. sort of a little by saying he won't say it, he said it. But his point, I'm willing to be out of pocket rather than let anything get in the way of proper Christian living together.

[27 : 38] Living together as Christians, as we are redeemed to be in Christ, is more important than money. And Paul's perfectly prepared to express that practically.

And then finally, his earnest appeal at the end, verses 20 and 21. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. Now, the word plays continue because actually what he's saying, this word benefit, yes, brother, let me have this benefit.

it's a variation on Onesimus. Let me do this useful thing for me, is what he's saying.

It's again sort of bringing up the whole pun of Onesimus. This is something you can be useful to me in. In verse 7, Paul had commended Philemon for his ministry of refreshing the hearts of the saints.

[29 : 01] And here he's saying that accepting Onesimus back, you'll refresh my heart. In other words, this act of expressing the oneness of God's people is a ministry.

It's a way we can minister by being as we are supposed to be in Christ, by relating to one another. Paul says that he's confident of Philemon's obedience and even more.

And tradition has it that Onesimus was accepted, that he was freed and later became a bishop of the church. But whether that's true or not, clearly the letter was received with some approval.

It wouldn't have survived if Philemon had thought, it would have torn it up. So we do have some indication that Paul's confidence was well placed.

Paul goes on with his personal sort of interaction with Philemon and talks about coming to visit him etc. And it moves into the final greetings.

[30 : 31] And even in those, Paul is very pastoral, he wants and he's aware that beyond the standard sort of greetings etc.

that there is a theological point to be made. Even the very last verse, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. What sort of grace would it have taken for Philemon to make this step? Remember that it's easy for us to sit back and say oh well that's just Christian duty. But this would have been totally against the culture of the day, totally unexpected.

It would have been beyond or denying his legal rights. grace. It would have been incredibly difficult for Philemon to take this step.

And Paul is saying the grace of Christ is there for you to actually put this into practice. And actually when we think about it, when we think about the reality of doing this, of living this way, it's incredibly difficult.

[31 : 39] but the grace of Christ is there for us. So I want to just mull over for a few seconds just exactly how this can affect us today.

And I want to do it by asking a few questions. If this mutual participation in faith, this life together that faith in Christ implies or the fellowship, the sharing together, the partnership, if that really is true and really does work powerfully in our lives, as verse 6 says, what will that look like?

It'll mean that we see every one of our fellow believers as part of our own life, as that personal faith of ours affects our fellow believers, affects us all as a church.

What happens to me matters to us? If we with Paul believe that life together is more important than money, what does that mean for our generosity to other believers?

Or things that benefit other believers churches and congregations other than ourselves? You could mention the building fund at this stage.

[33 : 42] If we are really all created in God's image, and further to that, as Ephesians 2 says that as Christian people we are God's workmanship, or God's masterpieces, if you like, created for good works in Christ.

If we are really that, let's make sure we treat each other like that. We must never talk about each other as useless.

how we express our living together, our koinonia, our faith life together, our belonging to each other. It can be, in Hebrews chapter 10, it talks about encouraging one another, spurring one another on to love and good works. How many people have you spurred on to love and good works recently?

Koinonia, living together, belonging to one another, means honouring and supporting each other, from the senior pastor down to the smallest Sunday school child.

[35 : 17] whether in their presence or not. We get an excellent chance of expressing that in the Lord's Supper.

Our oneness in Christ, as we all share the one bread together. if we really do start to realise that in our lives and in our life together, it's going to be something really powerful.

Because as verse 6 says, then we start to see all the good that we may do in Christ Jesus. That's amazing. Let me just tell you another little application that I've thought of from preparing this sermon.

Several years ago, I memorised these verses from Colossians that I read out. From Colossians chapter 3 verses 12 to 14.

I used to know them, well, off head as they say in Nigeria. But my head gets messed up and full of other things.

[36 : 48] My application is that I'm going to re-memorise these verses. Colossians 3, 12 to 14. Maybe I could challenge you to join me in doing that.

Because when things start to get laid down in our memories and we start to mull over them, they start to get expressed in our lives hopefully as well. Let's pray together.

Lord God, Heavenly Father, we thank you. We thank you that you have called us. You have shown us that we are worthwhile, that we are not useless.

helpless. You have loved us and you've called us to be your people together. Help us to express that togetherness and to realise the power to do the good works that you have for us that comes with that.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Scripture is Now I bet is to be you