A Prisoner by Providence

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[0:00] Well, Philemon. I don't think I've ever heard a sermon on Philemon. I've certainly never preached one. It's hidden away here in the New Testament, full of lovely surprises.

A private letter from the Apostle Paul to a wealthy man in Colossae called Philemon about one of Philemon's slaves who's run away and has come to Christ through Paul's ministry.
And Paul makes an appeal to Philemon for him. And we put it together with Colossians because when Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians, he also wrote this letter as well.
And he's sending them both at the same time. And this letter of Philemon is wonderful because it is a real life practical example of the difference it makes to be in Christ.
In all the amazing teaching we've had in Colossians about the new humanity, about being transformed from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of his beloved son. And now it becomes very real in a real situation with real family lives, with people of real names who live in Colossae.
[1:07] And there's a great deal we don't know about the background and the circumstances, but I want to summarise what we do know in five quick points. Number one, God had brought Philemon to faith in Christ through the ministry of the Apostle Paul.

He says that clearly in verse 19. We know Paul had never been to Colossae, but he had preached for several years up the road at Ephesus. We even know the address of where he was preaching in Ephesus.
And many came to faith in Jesus Christ from around about, including people from Colossae. We know that Epaphras was one who went back to pastor the new church in Colossae, and Philemon was another.
And it's clear from this letter that Paul and Philemon became good friends during Paul's time in Ephesus about eight years before. Number two, Philemon's conversion was full and genuine and real.
He was obviously a wealthy man. He had slaves in a large household, so large in verse two, he's able to host the weekly family church gatherings.
[2:14] And what amazing gatherings they would have been. Slaves and free. Greeks, Jewish Christians, wealthy patrons, all together worshipping Christ, eating together in love, serving one another with their new hope of glory in Christ.

It's the second point. Number three, Philemon had a lazy slave called Anesimus, who was not a Christian, who did as little as was possible. He took advantage of the kindness of his Christian owner, Philemon, and decided he would run away.
And he likely stole some travelling money so that he'd be able to get as far away as he could. I'm not sure completely about the stealing bit, but it's probably the best explanation of verses 18 to 19, where Paul offers to reimburse Philemon for anything that Anesimus owes him.
And Anesimus took off for Rome. It's a good 2,000 kilometre trek, where he ran out of money, obviously, very fast. Number four, the Apostle Paul was in house arrest in Rome.
That means that he was in a house and he had some freedom to welcome people and people came to see him, but he was still chained to a guard.
[3:33] And the chained to a guard makes COVID protocols look like luxuries. And it's most likely he was freed from the imprisonment soon after this letter, probably returned to the east and visited churches like Colossae, as he says in verse 22 he expects.

But we know two years after this, the fire of Rome, that many Christians were rounded up and thrown into a hideous prison in Rome, where Paul most likely wrote his last letter to Timothy from, and he expects to be executed.

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And Christian historians agree he was likely executed in 68 AD. So Paul is writing this from his first imprisonment in Rome, 61 to 62 AD.
We do not know how, but Onesimus, the runaway slave, finds his way to the Apostle Paul, whether he knew of the connection between Paul and Philemon. And Paul has the great joy, in verse 10, of leading Onesimus to faith in Christ.
And what a change there was in Onesimus. Complete character transformation. Verse 11, Paul speaks frankly about the fact that before he came to faith in Christ, Onesimus was not helpful.
[4:54] He was not useful as a slave. He worked unhappily, grudgingly, minimally. But after he comes to faith in Christ, his character changes. Verse 13, he's been a great gift to Paul.

When you're under house arrest, there are a thousand things you need. And Onesimus could have done them. And he serves Paul superbly. It is as though Onesimus is a new creation.
And fifthly, now Paul is sending Onesimus on the long journey back to Colossae, back to Philemon. Now that he's become a Christian, he'll travel with Tychicus and the book to Colossians, as well as this letter, to face the music with Philemon. And this absolutely drives the commentators crazy. Why does Paul send a slave back to his master? Why doesn't Paul attack slavery head on? Why doesn't he just say, look Philemon, the whole institution of slavery is degrading and dehumanizing and evil.
[6:00] And as Christians, you should just, you should give away all your slaves, set them free and devote the rest of your life to abolition. And historically, commentators have reacted in two different ways to this little letter of Philemon.

One group we'll call the reactionaries. And they see this letter and they say, you see, slavery is not wrong in itself. It has a place in this sinful world. The very gentleness and ambiguity of Paul's appeal clearly means that it is possible for Christians to accept slavery.
And you'll be very interested to know that in the south of the United States, two centuries ago, this was argued by many preachers. On the other side are radicals.
And I think they have read the letter a little more carefully. Paul so undermines and overthrows the whole idea of slavery in this letter. Some say we should read it as an anti-slavery tract for liberation. However, I think both of these ways of looking at the book are wide of the mark. The book is not really about slavery. And it's important to remember that slavery in the Roman Empire wasn't anything like the transatlantic, transatlantic slavery of 200 years ago.
[7:18] Many people in Rome chose to enter slavery as a way of paying off debts. Something like a third of the empire were slaves at any one time.

And the slavery in Rome had nothing to do with colour or race or ethnicity as it did in the transatlantic slave trade 200 years ago and continues to devastate and dehumanise so many in the world today.
In Rome, freedom also was not something that was as good as we think it was. Freedom often led to poverty and to destitution. Most slaves expected to be freed by the age of 30 and many of the slaves who were freed stayed on with their masters and worked for a wage as part of the household.
Having said all that, I would love to have the power power to wave a magic wand and to make all the cruelty and suffering of slavery disappear, to wipe it from the earth forever.
But the letter to Philemon is a letter of powerlessness. It's a letter about giving power away. It's a letter about empowering others just as Jesus did who came to us with all the power of God and in love gave himself over to death to rehumanise us with the power and glory of God.
[8:48] Philemon is not about political or economic power. Philemon is about three spiritual powers that are very different. It is my view that Paul indeed does call Philemon to free Anesimus.

But Paul is calling Philemon to do much more than that. And the three powers that are in this book lay a depth charge under the practice of slavery.
But before we become too self-righteous, these three powers also lay depth charges under our selfishness and our individualism and our lack of care for others in the body of Christ.
So let's look at what these three powers are in the letter of Philemon. And the first I've called the power of love. Sorry, I know there are lots of sentimental songs about the power of love, but this is a love that runs through Philemon, but it's not romantic love.
It is the unique and specific sort of love that God has for us. There's a unique word for it. It's a love that we don't deserve. It's a love that's willing to sacrifice itself for the spiritual good of the other.

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[9:58] It's a self-giving, a self-emptying love and it is defined by the cross of Jesus Christ. We just look at the prayer in verses four to seven. Deeply personal.

Paul knows Philemon. He says, I love you, I love you, Philemon. And he had heard from Epaphras who'd come to visit him how Philemon had grown in his faith. And the proof of his growth in faith is the practical love that Philemon has for God's people in Colossae, his self-giving love.
In verse four, Paul says, I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints.
And then he gives a very specific example, specific example, verse seven, because you can talk about love and never do anything about it. Verse seven, I've derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.
This word refresh is the word for rest. It's the same word Jesus uses when he says, come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest, refreshment.
[11:15] It's what the power of Christian love can do. It can bring joy and comfort and encouragement and we are capable of bringing the rest of Christ into each other's lives.

That's a power. And it's clear that Philemon did this by putting his resources where his faith was, his home, his finances, not resentfully or grudgingly but out of love.
We know the difference, don't we, when something's done out of love? I mean, you can have someone over for dinner. You can't now because of the lockdown orders but you can have someone over for dinner either as an act of love or to try and impress them.
You can build a house as an act of seeking to love other people or as your dream home. You can lend something to someone either out of love or to try and give them a sense of debt to you.
Part of the way that Jesus gives us his rest is through the refreshment of the practical love of other believers in the Christian community and in Colossae that's what Philemon was doing.
[12:25] And then in verse 8 we begin to have Paul's appeal for Onesimus and verse 8's great. Paul could easily have pulled rank on Philemon and said, listen, I'm an apostle, I'm ordering you to do this but he doesn't.

He empties himself of apostolic authority. He calls on Philemon to demonstrate his love for him and for Onesimus because this is how the power of Christian love works. It doesn't coerce or force.
It's full of kindness and compassion. It's important because we often think of the Apostle Paul as all thunder and lightning, always commanding and telling. But this is a study in gentleness and goodness.
It takes him right up to verse 10 to mention Onesimus and in the original Paul holds Onesimus' name back to the end of the sentence. It reads, I appeal to you for my child whose father I became in my imprisonment, Onesimus.
In verse 12, I'm sending him back to you, sending my very heart, I'm sending a piece of myself. Very striking, isn't it? That Paul says nothing about Onesimus' rights or Philemon's rights.
[13:35] Love has a completely different calculus. Love decides and gives what's good for the other. It's not calculated by how much it'll cost me or whether I will lose face or how difficult it might be.

It's concern for the other. And though Paul would love to keep Onesimus with him, he sends him back so that Onesimus and Philemon can see each other face to face.
And what will happen between the two of them will not be by compulsion but based on Christian love. This is the power of the love of Christ amongst us. It empowers us to ask ourselves, how can I empty myself of my rights?
How can I do something practically for the good of others in my spiritual community? And I think that is a specially important question for us now in COVID. But there are two more powers to go.
The second power is the power of fellowship. The power of fellowship. And I know that the word fellowship in English is a bit of an insipid and weak translation of this important term.
[14:40] Fellowship in the original has the power of God in it. It's like a reservoir of goodness for us to draw on. It's something that needs to be harnessed and used and applied.

And it's used for the first time in verse 6 when Paul tells Philemon exactly what he's praying for. Verse 6. I pray that the sharing that's the word fellowship sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.

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This is the heart of why Paul writes and what he wishes to happen. That the sharing of Philemon's faith he's not talking about his witness to others. He's talking about the fellowship his faith will be energized and empowered and animated so that he and the other Christians in Colossae will experience all the good that Christ has placed in them at Colossae.
Now years ago last century when I was at seminary they said never introduce Greek words into a talk but I want to give you the Greek word and it's well known it's the Greek word koinonia. Sometimes it's translated as sharing and participating in communion or fellowship. The koinonia between the Philemon and the other brothers and sisters in the body of Christ at Colossae is very important because koinonia is not just a partnership between two people where we share the same tastes you know the same love of hockey or whatever it's where two people or more participate in a third thing and that third thing has the power to bind them together in a new way.
[16:30] The New Testament says that we share in Christ we have koinonia in Christ we participate in Christ and that creates a bond between us which is eternal a relational bond that has all sorts of concrete forms.

So in the New Testament it says what we do with our money is an expression of koinonia. What we do with our houses what we do with our prayers is called koinonia. And here wonderfully Paul says that koinonia is meant to become active and operational and effective.
In other words the way we respond to different situations is what can I do in the light of how it's going to affect other people in the body of Christ? When we put our faith in Jesus Christ we become identified with each other we participate in the life of Christ together and that brings great benefits and also great responsibilities to that koinonia that we share.
And now that Onesimus has become a fellow believer in Christ Philemon is now forced to think through the radical social implications of their koinonia. That's why in verse 2 right at the start of the letter the apostle is not just writing a private letter to Philemon he wants it read out to the congregation that meets in Philemon's house because you see Philemon's decisions are going to have consequences for the spiritual life of the whole congregation.
I know we don't really believe this but it's true for us as well that your decisions have consequences for other people in the congregation. In verse 2 he writes to Aphia who's probably Mrs. Philemon Aphia our sister and our kippus our fellow worker and the church in your house and from verses 4 to 22 every you is singular to Philemon and then at the beginning and then at the end here verses 23 onwards it's plural you.
[18:35] Now this is not done to manipulate or shame Philemon into good behaviour it's done because of koinonia because our decisions do affect the whole church.

The whole distinction we're so committed to today between my individual private life and my public life is a recent idea it's not really known in the Bible.
It's easy to see in this situation where Philemon's decision will affect others in the church but the same is true as for Onesimus the slave and for every member of the church at Colossae our decisions affect the spiritual koinonia of the church.
The way in which we make our decisions and live out our lives have deep consequences on the other believers in the body. You may not want that to be true and there are all sorts of ways to ignore this or to reduce our koinonia our fellowship.
I mean avoid problems with other Christians like just evade the issues especially if someone has wronged you that's a good way to do it. Don't deal with those people that you need to forgive.
[19:46] Just make decisions about yourself and your family without thinking about others in the church. Just think about me, me, me. They're all good ways to cut down koinonia.

It's interesting isn't it in verse 6 Paul assumes that Philemon already has koinonia with others in Colossae and his prayer is that the koinonia will become effective and active and energised and actualised and when it does it enables the Christians at Colossae to experience every good thing that is in us amongst us for the sake of Christ.
when we come to Christ he binds himself to us and he creates this force of koinonia and the force of koinonia activates the goodness amongst us.
It's not possible apart from Christ and the goodness that we have in this koinonia is like a reservoir as I said earlier and it needs to be encouraged and supported in living out our communal life together.
So we make our own moral decisions and the community of believers have to be in mind. The spiritual community of the church has a say in our personal lives and our business decisions.

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[21:06] I know it's heresy today isn't it? I realise how ridiculous it is saying it to you. We're so committed to individualism and privacy it's almost too hard for us even to understand what Paul is saying.

But the book of Philemon is teaching us the consideration of other believers in the body of Christ takes an important role in decision making. It doesn't mean if you're trying to decide who to marry you submit the names in triplicate for an open session of the board of the church for a vote but it does mean this that in our home and in our work and in our relationships the good of the body of Christ is part of our decisions.
We are to make decisions just like Philemon or Anisimus partly based on what is good for the spiritual community community and when we do that we come to a greater knowledge of the good that we share together in Jesus Christ.
I think this is one of the hardest things about COVID right now. It's harder to experience and express this fellowship together and unless we pray and resist our own selfishness the great gift of koinonia will not be active and it will become increasingly dormant amongst us.
Our koinonia is reduced right now and so is our experience of the goodness of Christ. It would have been so easy for Anisimus to have played the victim.
[22:30] I mean he'd been a slave who'd escaped. It would also have been easy for Philemon to have played the victim. He lost the work of Anisimus and his reputation wasn't looking good in the community. And I know says Paul in verse 17 I want Anisimus I want you to go to Philemon and Philemon I want you to roll out the red carpet for this new man.

Verse 17 If you consider me your partner literally if you and I are having koinonia receive him as you would receive me.
Actualize that fellowship. This is way more than just giving a slave a second chance. In verse 21 he says Paul says I know you will do even more than I say which likely means that he will provide for Anisimus in a particular way.
I need to get on. We've seen the power of love. We've talked a bit about the force and the power of fellowship. And thirdly there's the power of providence. There's this lovely thing about this book.
The providence of God is his active directing of all things in creation for his own personal purposes.
That means that all of us who belong to the Lord Jesus Christ aren't the victims of blind chance.
[23:49] But the providential hand of God is often hidden from us. But even we learn from the scriptures even when evil things happen to us God uses those for his purposes.

Remember what humans mean for evil God means for good and the greatest illustration is the cross of Christ. That's why Paul starts the letter the way he does.
He hasn't started any other letter in this way conscious of the providence God. He says Paul a prisoner for Christ Jesus. Nowhere else does he say that. He says I'm weak and I'm vulnerable and while it may look like I'm a prisoner of Caesar's he looks at his circumstances through the eyes of God's providence.
In the deeper sense he says I'm a prisoner of Jesus Christ. You know in the same way you might feel like you're a prisoner of COVID but faith in Jesus Christ changes how we see things.
Even the most difficult things that come to us come from the hand of God. But the providence of God I think is most clear in verse 15 when the apostle looks at Onesimus running away from Philemon and he traces the finger of God in it.
[25:05] Verse 15 this perhaps is why he was parted from you Paul writes for a while that you may have him back forever.

The only reference to Onesimus running away but again Paul interprets it in the light of God's good purposes. He sees the hidden hand of God at work and now since Onesimus has been gripped by the grace of God perhaps this is why the whole thing has happened.
He recognises that Onesimus was at fault Paul's willing to repay that but God's intention was eternal and good and whatever the nature of the parting was now they are brothers together.
And this is where I believe we can see that Paul requests for Philemon to free Onesimus. Look at verse 16 Paul says receive him back no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant as a beloved brother especially to me and now much more to you both in the flesh and in the Lord.
Your relationship with Onesimus has changed forever he says to Philemon it's now dictated by Christ and his body receive him back no longer a slave but an equal and not just an equal but a brother and not just an equal brother but an equal beloved brother and not just as a beloved equal

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brother in the Lord but in the flesh as a human being.
[26:49] And these are the three powers that are at work in Christ today. The power of love to build others up and to be the instrument of Christ's love to others for refreshing them.

The power of fellowship the reservoir of good that Christ has amongst us that needs to be constantly activated and the power of providence where I can trust God in everything and for everything to him be the glory Amen.
Amen.

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