

SIMPLE STUDIES IN THE SCRIPTURES
THE EPISTLE OF PAUL THE APOSTLE TO PHILEMON
LEADER'S STUDY GUIDE

Dr. Stanford E. Murrell



"Going back to human bondage... in spiritual freedom."

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Philemon

Human Author: Paul

Divine Author: God the Holy Spirit

Date Written: c. AD 61

Key thought: The Greatness of Grace

“If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.”

Philemon 1:17

Book Summary

The story of Philemon is the delightful narrative of an unprofitable slave named Onesimus who stole some goods from his master Philemon and ran away. In the providence of God, Onesimus was converted under the ministry of Paul and befriended by him, perhaps in Rome (Acts 28:30). Paul would have Onesimus do right according to the law of the land and the law of God. Therefore, Onesimus must go back to Philemon.

However, Onesimus was not to return to Philemon empty handed, for Paul gave him a personal letter to Philemon who also happened to be a personal friend.

In his letter Paul does not demand anything from Philemon, but appeals to his brother in the faith to show the former runaway servant grace.

In this wonderful request, a picture of every sinner’s treatment by the Savior is provided. Spiritually, every person is God’s Onesimus, said Luther. Every Christian was once unprofitable and in need of regeneration and forgiveness. The heart once misused the mercies of God, trampled on His grace, and robbed Him of glory by using His gifts of grace for personal good instead of His honor. But the Savior came and restored the soul to fellowship with Himself according to grace.

Now, in the power of the Holy Spirit the Christian can be very profitable in His service.

It is probable that Philemon honored the personal petition of Paul, and thus the outcome to the event was good.

PHILEMON 1

1 Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon *our* dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer,

1:1 Paul. The name "*Paul*" means "*less, or little*" while "*Philemon*" means "*the loving one*." The Little One was writing to the Loving One.

2 And to *our* beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in thy house:

1:2 Apphia. This is a feminine name and probably refers to the wife of Philemon. Archippus may have been a fellow minister and the son of Philemon and Apphia.

3 Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

1:3 Grace to you. As a form of Gentile greeting using the word "*grace*" with the Jewish response of "*shalom*", or peace, the apostle unites Jew and Gentile in his apostolic greeting.

4 I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers,

5 Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints;

1:5 thy love and faith. Love and faith are united by God, not to be put asunder. If there is no Christian love expressed, there is no genuine faith. Faith is manifested by acts of love.

6 That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.

7 For we have great joy and consolation [comfort] in thy love, because the bowels [hearts] of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.

1:7 are refreshed by thee. The gracious spirit of Philemon made him a source of blessing to others. Now that spirit would be put to the test in how he would treat Onesimus.

8 Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient,

9 Yet for love's sake I rather *beseech* [*plead*] *thee*, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

10 I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds [chains of imprisonment]:

1:10 I beseech thee. More than twenty five times in his epistles Paul would beseech those he is addressing to do something. As an apostle, Paul had authority to command and demand but more often he acts as a supplicant. It is a difficult virtue to cultivate, but bow his heart Paul did.

11 Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:

1:11. was to thee unprofitable. In the past, Onesimus was unprofitable to Philemon, but in the future, Paul is confident he will prove to be profitable (Philemon 1:11). Every Christian who lives a Christian life following salvation falls into this category. Billy Sunday was nothing but another rough and carousing baseball player before he met Jesus at the Pacific Garden Rescue Mission in Chicago. Mel Trotter was nothing but a drunkard, desperate enough to steal the shoes off of his dead baby girl until Christ saved his soul. Then he became an effective minister of the gospel. These marred vessels were made again in the Potters hands and became profitable for His service.

1:11. was to thee unprofitable. The reason why Onesimus initially proved to be unprofitable was because of the institution of slavery. Conditions were ghastly among slaves in the Roman world, which is why there were great revolts from time to time. Perhaps Onesimus identified himself in his imagination with those who longed to be free. In years to come one slave in particular who was desperate to be free was the great gladiator Spartacus. Beginning in 73 BC, Spartacus managed to escape and take refuge on the slopes of Vesuvius. He rapidly recruited large numbers of runaway slaves whom he organized and trained to be a remarkable fighting force able to defeat the legions of the Roman army. By the end of the year, his slave-army numbered 70,000.

For three years the Roman soldiers pursued Spartacus and his followers. At last, in 71 BC Spartacus had to face on the field of battle the forces of the extraordinary Roman commander Marcus Licinius Crassus. Spartacus fell in battle. Six thousand of his followers were crucified. The slave revolt was over. But the desire for personal freedom lived on in the minds of millions. Perhaps Onesimus dreamed of personal freedom and decided to act upon the natural inclination of the human heart.

It was not right for Onesimus to steal property. It was not right for Onesimus to run away, but he did. Onesimus had planned it all out so that before long, he was in the royal city. "He made his flight right out of Asia, away West, overseas across the Aegean and Adriatic, to Rome, that populous haven of concealment to which many another such fugitive had fled" (J. Sidlow Baxter).

1:11 but now profitable. The name Onesimus means “*profitable*.” There is a play upon words here as Paul says that while Onesimus was once “*unprofitable*” it is possible that he now returns “*profitable*” or helpful and so will live up to his name. By using the word “*unprofitable*” Paul would also be calling attention to what is written in Romans 3:12. Once, all had “*become unprofitable*” due to a sinful condition. It is grace alone that enable a person to become profitable to men and God.

12 Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels [heart]:

1:12. Whom I have sent again. When Onesimus received the gospel, he suddenly faced a moral dilemma and an ethical problem. The Christian message called upon people to make restitution for past sins. When Zacchaeus was converted to Christ, he promised to restore everything he had taken from others with interest (Luke 19:8). But how could Onesimus make restitution? He would be exposed as a runaway slave. He would have to return to Philemon. He would have to apologize. He would have to go back under the yoke of social bondage. Paul, what should Onesimus do?

After careful consideration, the apostolic decision was to send Onesimus back to Colosse and back to his legal master, but under different conditions. Things could never be the same between Philemon and Onesimus, because their relationship would not be only as master to slave, but as spiritual brother to spiritual brother.

True, in the eyes of the civil law, Onesimus was still a slave and Philemon was his owner. True, Onesimus must submit himself to servitude. True, the outward forms of society favored Philemon, and yet in the sight of God, because both men were now in Christ, things were different.

The spiritual dynamics of the Christian life demanded much from each of them. For Onesimus, the challenge would be to return to a place of humility and make restitution for whatever he had stolen.

For Philemon, the challenge would be to receive Onesimus back into his household and not kill him or sell him. In addition, Philemon would be required to forgive Onesimus. That would be the most difficult part. To root out hatred and bitterness in the heart is a divine undertaking.

To help Onesimus return to Philemon, the Apostle Paul decided to write a letter to the man he knew in Colosse. How Paul came to know Philemon is unclear, because Paul never visited the city of Colosse. The best that can be discerned is that while Paul ministered at Ephesus (c. AD 54-57), his sphere of influence was wide enough to reach 120 miles east to Colosse. From Ephesus, Paul was able to lead many men to Christ, including Philemon.

Paul will use specific arguments to persuade Philemon to build a bridge of fellowship with his former slave based upon spiritual principles. Paul wanted Philemon to receive Onesimus again.

13 Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel:

14 But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.

15 For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever;

16 Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?

17 If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.

18 If he hath wronged thee, or oweth *thee* ought [anything], put that on mine account;

1:18 put that on mine account. It is a wonderful day when Jesus says to a soul, “*Charge his sins to my account*”, and in the divine economy the soul can be declared “*justified*” in the eyes of the law because his account has been marked “*paid in full*”! Oh the riches of the mercy of God.

19 I Paul have written *it* with mine own hand, I will repay *it*: albeit [though] I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.

1:19 I will repay. Like Christ, Paul pledges himself as a surety for another. *Hebrews 7:22 By so much was Jesus made a surety of a better testament.*

“My name from the palms of his hands
Eternity will not erase;
Impress’d on his heart it remains,
In marks of indelible grace.”

1:19. I Paul have written. In order to persuade Philemon to receive Onesimus in the proper way, the apostle appeals to his friend on gospel terms and spiritual principles. Specifically, there are several reasons why Philemon should exercise a spirit of forgiveness. Study the Doctrine of Forgiveness.

20 Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels [heart] in the Lord.

21 Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.

1:1-19 Some of the motivational appeals can be noted which Paul used with Philemon to receive Onesimus back in grace.

First, Paul alluded to his apostolic authority in Christ, but said he was not going to use that (Philemon 8).

Second, Paul appealed as a humble petitioner (Philemon 9).

Third, Paul argued that Onesimus was a changed man who manifested that change with many good works (Philemon 13).

Fourth, Paul suggested that in the providence of God Onesimus had been led away so he might return a different person (Philemon 15).

Fifth, Paul states he is ready to assume whatever debts Onesimus might have incurred (Philemon 18).

Sixth, Paul reminds Philemon of a debt of love and honor that might be owed to him inasmuch as Paul had also led Philemon to Christ (19).

Seventh, Paul pleads that he might be given a gift of joy from Philemon (Philemon 20).

Eighth, Paul assumes Philemon will do as he requests because it would be the right action to take (Philemon 21).

22 But withal [at the same time] prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given [released] unto you.

23 There salute thee Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus;

24 Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellow labourers.

1:23-24

Five Friends in the Faith

- **Epaphras.** This was the friend who had come to Paul from Colosse to bring the story of the love of the saints, but also the tragic news of certain teachers communicating evil doctrine that was corrupting the doctrinal integrity of the young church (Col. 1:7, 8; 4:12).
- **Marcus.** John Mark was the relative of Barnabas, whom Paul refused to take on his second missionary journey because he deserted the party (Acts 15:37-41). Once unreliable, now he has proven himself to be of value to the church (2 Tim. 4:11).
- **Aristarchus.** Was not only a friend to Paul but a fellow prisoner (Col. 4:10).
- **Demas and Lucas.** These two men are linked together as in Colossians 4:14. However, Demas would leave the ministry and desert Paul in an hour of need because he fell in love with the world (2 Tim. 4:10). Luke would remain faithful to Christ.

25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with your spirit. Amen.

Doctrine of Forgiveness

1. Forgiveness is a cardinal Christian virtue. If persuasion is needed to exercise this grace, several Biblical and practical arguments can be set forth.
2. Christians are to forgive, because of the reputation associated with their character and conduct
 - *Philemon 19 I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.*

In the opening part of his letter, Paul speaks of the Christian reputation Philemon has. He is called "dearly beloved" and a "fellow-laborer" (Philemon 1:1; 1:7). His love and faith towards the Lord and towards all saints has become well known (Philemon 1:1). The only question is whether or not the reputation is well deserved. It will be if it is found to be effectual (Philemon 1:6) in expressing actual forgiveness. Today the reputation of Christians forgiving one another is a joke. More than one person has noted, "The church is the only charitable organization that shoots its wounded." Christians are known today for separation and not co-operation. That can and must change.

3. Christians are to forgive because Christ has instructed His followers to forgive others.
 - *Philemon 8 Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient.*

The question of authority is called upon in this principle. In Philemon 1:8 Paul states that his apostolic authority provides a basis for the request he is about to make. Many parents can understand this concept. Sometimes a parent will say to a child, "Because I am your mother" or "Because I am your father, I am asking you out of respect for my authority to do certain things." So Christ comes and says to the Christian, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which use you, and persecute you, That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5:44-45). Plotting to vote to destroy a person does not fulfill this commandment.

4. Christians are to forgive on the basis of love's appeal.
 - *Philemon 1:8 Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient,*

Paul asserts his apostolic authority, but does not use it. Rather, he will appeal to Philemon to act in grace on the basis of love. Bill and Gloria Gather have written a lovely song which says,

“I am loved,
I am loved,
I can risk loving you.
For the One who knows me best,
Loves me most...”

And there it is. We can forgive "for love's sake."

5. Christians are to find Divine grace to forgive because of the rich tradition of forgiving others.

- *Philemon 1:1 Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer,*

Paul speaks of himself as a prisoner of Jesus Christ (Philemon 1:1). What is the apostle a prisoner for? He is in jail for declaring the gospel of redeeming grace. He suffers in time for telling people about a Saviour from sin. So Paul knows as much about being wronged unjustly as any other person in Christendom. Over the years, Paul has been bloodied and beaten. He has been mobbed and left for dead. He has been ridiculed and misunderstood, and still he writes to tell others to find grace to forgive.

6. Christians are to forgive because of the great trouble it is to bring a soul to the Saviour.

- *Philemon 1:10 I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:*

Paul speaks of Onesimus as a son whom he has brought to Christ though in bonds (Philemon 1:10). He uses the image of childbirth to indicate that the salvation of a soul is difficult. And because it is so difficult to bring someone to faith, great grace is needed for great sinners. Perhaps one reason why the prodigal son was readily forgiven was because of the agony of heart he gave his father for so many years.

7. Christians are to forgive because of the spiritual union that exists among the members of the family of God.

- *Philemon 17 If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.*

Family members should treat each other with special consideration whenever possible. We are to do good to all men, but especially to the family of God. Christians are to forgive believing that the future will justify any exercising of grace.

8. Christians are to extend forgiveness because of the love others might have for an individual.

- *Philemon 1:12 Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:*

Paul states that he hopes Onesimus will be received because he is loved. Paul had thought of keeping him in his own company, but decided that he could not do that without Philemon's consent (Philemon 1:13).

9. Christians are to forgive others because of a fundamental change that Christ can produce in others.

- *Philemon 1:15 For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him forever.*

Philemon has nothing to fear from Onesimus. He can be trusted—forever (Philemon 1:15).

10. Christians are to forgive in order to encourage one another in the sphere of faith (Psa. 101:6).

Nothing will help to mold Christian grace more than to see someone treated unjustly exercising a forgiving spirit. When the story of Corrie or Betsie Ten Boon is read in *The Hiding Place*, then the heart's desire is to want to show grace.

11. Christians are to extend forgiveness because of the pleasure it produces in others.

- *Philemon 1:20 Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord.*

What Forgiveness Does Not Mean

1. Forgiveness does not mean that past public sins are to be passed over without protest.

The gospel call goes forth for people to repent of the evil they have done in tearing the body of Christ apart needlessly. One modern way much evil is being practiced is by forcing congregations to vote on issues that are unbiblical and contrary to the known will of the Lord. Nevertheless, in all situations grace is to season the conversation. Paul acknowledges that Philemon is a runaway thief (Philemon 1:18-19). Yet, he speaks of his past sins with temperance (Philemon 1:11 cf. 1:15).

2. Forgiveness does not mean that repentance is unnecessary.

It is because Philemon is contrite, humble, and willing to make restitution that he should be forgiven. Some people actually believe that God forgives sins arbitrarily. The truth is that the Moral Lawgiver demands repentance as the basis for divine forgiveness. It is because individuals, and nations, acknowledge their sins and show remorse, that mercy and grace are free to flow. The greatest example of this in the Old Testament is Nineveh (Jonah 3:5-10).

3. Forgiveness does not mean pretending the past has never happened.

Sometimes a verbal or physical injury is committed and then never discussed again. That is not right. It is only a matter of time before the old problems will re-surface.

4. What forgiveness does mean is that positive feelings will replace negative feelings of cruelty and hostility; positive thoughts will be emphasized over negative thoughts; and every effort will be made to communicate and be together again.

Leader's Study Guide

Philemon

Review

1. What has Paul heard by way of a good report about Philemon?

Answer.

Paul has heard of the love and faith of Philemon which he has expressed to all Christian believers (Philemon 5).

2. What relationship did Paul have for Onesimus, and how is that expressed?

Answer.

Paul calls Onesimus his “*son*”, whom he has led to the Lord personally (Philemon 10).

3. What was the crime of Onesimus?

Answer.

Onesimus had been an unprofitable servant. Taking advantage of his trusted position, in some way he had escaped. His specific crime is uncertain (Philemon 11).

4. On what basis did Paul want his friend Philemon to receive Onesimus back?

Answer.

Paul did not want Onesimus to return to service as a slave but as a brother in Christ, and one that was beloved (Philemon 16).

5. List eight arguments Paul used to encourage Philemon to treat Onesimus with grace.

Answer.

Paul used several motivational concepts to try to persuade Philemon to receive Onesimus back on the basis of grace.

First, Paul alluded to his apostolic authority in Christ, but said he was not going to use that (Philemon 8).

Second, Paul appealed as a humble petitioner (Philemon 9).

Third, Paul argued that Onesimus was a changed man, who manifested that change with many good works (Philemon 13).

Fourth, Paul suggested that in the providence of God Onesimus had been led away so he might return a different person (Philemon 15).

Fifth, Paul states he is ready to assume whatever debts Onesimus might have incurred (Philemon 18).

Sixth, Paul reminds Philemon of a debt of love and honor that might be owed to him, inasmuch as Paul had also led Philemon to Christ (19).

Seventh, Paul pleads that he might be given a gift of joy from Philemon (Philemon 20).

Eighth, Paul assumes Philemon will do as he requests, because it would be the right action to take (Philemon 21).

Reflection

1. Would you have sent Philemon back into a state of bondage? Why or why not?
2. Has anyone ever stolen anything from you? How did you handle the situation?
3. Can you give testimony of how a broken relationship was restored? On what basis did reconciliation occur?
4. Do you think more highly, or less, of Onesimus for returning to his master? Why?
5. Is it right to make people feel guilty in matters of belief and behavior in order to motivate them in a certain direction? What are proper motivational appeals?

Personal Application

1. Do you consider yourself like an Onesimus? Have you been set free from the bondage of sin? Do you feel yourself now a bondservant of Christ?
2. What great sins have you done that you believe God has forgiven?
3. Have you made restitution for past transgressions where necessary?
4. Would you intercede on behalf of someone else as Barnabas did for Paul, and as Paul did for Philemon?
5. What motivational thought causes you to act in a noble manner? Be specific.

Memory Work

Philemon 18 If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account.

Supplemental Material**Charge That to My Account****Philemon 1:1-25****Dr. Stanford E. Murrell**

As the young man moved towards the city of Colosse, which was situated in the Lycus River Valley (100 miles East of Ephesus), his heart beat a little faster. He was going home, which meant he was going back to a life of slavery. How Onesimus became a slave is uncertain. There were many ways to be enslaved in the ancient world. Some of these means were regulated by the Mosaic Law. A person could be sold into slavery as his jealous brothers sold Joseph to the Midianites (Genesis 37:28). A person captured in war could be made a slave as Abraham made servants of others (Genesis 14:21; Numbers 31:9). A poor person could be enslaved by an act of free will (Exodus 21:2-6; Neh. 5:1-5). And there were other methods as well to becoming a slave. While it is not known how Onesimus was enslaved, what is known is that he grew tired of his situation. A plan for freedom formed in mind. He would run away to Rome and get lost in the teeming masses of the city.

To finance this flight to independence, Onesimus needed money and he knew how to get it. His master, Philemon, was a wealthy man. He would steal as much as possible from the master. And that is what Onesimus did. The day came when his daring deed was executed. Being a trusted servant, Onesimus used his favored position to steal the wealth of the family, and then he slipped away. Moving out of the Lycus Valley, Onesimus made his way to the West Coast of Asia Minor, where he found passage on a ship sailing for Italy. Once in Italy he made his way to Rome.

It was while he was in Rome that Onesimus, this deceitful, thieving, runaway slave, began to learn something about the grace of God, and the God of all grace, for Onesimus met the Apostle Paul. Paul was in prison for preaching the gospel of grace in Jerusalem, and causing a riot in the Holy City.

Charged by jealous Jewish officials with being a revolutionary leader and an insurrectionist against Roman authority, Paul had been arrested in the fall of AD 57. Things were not too bad for the Apostle, in that he was kept in custody at the Roman governor's Headquarters in Caesarea for two years. While confining, it was bearable. At the end of that period, Paul appealed to Caesar in order to have his case transferred from the provincial governor's court in Judea to the Emperor's tribunal in Rome. Paul had this right as a Roman citizen. Finally, in the fall of AD 59 Paul arrived in the Royal City where he was again placed under house arrest. Here Paul waited for his case to come up for hearing before the supreme tribunal (Acts 28:30). So he was sent on his way under heavy guard.

Because he was only under house arrest, Paul was able to receive visitors. They brought him gifts, such as books and clothing, and letters from others who wished him well. And Paul was granted permission to respond to the letters, which he did. In this way, five of his prison epistles were able to become part of the canon of Scripture: Colossians, Ephesus, Philippians, Hebrews, and Philemon.

Of these five epistles, Philemon is by far the most personal and intimate, for Paul has a request to make of his friend Philemon, whom he has led to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. The request is simple and straightforward. Paul wants Philemon to forgive Onesimus for the way he has behaved, and receive him back into his household.

It would not be easy for Philemon to forgive Onesimus. Once he had trusted the man with the keys to the treasures of his household. But that confidence had been maliciously violated. How could Philemon ever hope to have any fellowship with a scheming, ruthless, runaway slave?

From a human perspective, Philemon had a case to make against Onesimus. Far and wide the story had already been told of how a trusted servant, thought to be profitable, was proven to be unprofitable. And now, the slave has returned, and wants, what? He wants to be restored to fellowship and placed in a position of honor? The very concept is breath taking.

If the biblical narrative had ended with the bad behavior of Onesimus and the potential reaction of Philemon upon seeing his runaway slave once more, there would be nothing here worthy of reading, or remembering, for such situations were quite common in the ancient world. And the end results would have been predictable. Under normal circumstances, Philemon would either have beaten Onesimus, killed him, or sold him to someone else.

What Philemon would not have done is to forgive Onesimus for his transgressions. Why? Because it is a manifestation of the fallen nature of man not to forgive others. The truth is that there is a perverse satisfaction in hurting those who have hurt us. There is an animation of the spirit when outrageous behavior is blasted.

There is an unholy joy that touches the heart when it is learned that financial loss, or bad health, has come to a person who has caused un-necessary stress, heartache and grief.

Onesimus has done much harm to Philemon, and now Philemon has a chance to retaliate, for Onesimus has come home. In fact, Philemon has the legal power, under Roman law, to destroy his servant if he so desires. How will Philemon treat his unprofitable slave? That is the question, and the answer is surprising when it is remembered how rare forgiveness is in a world saturated by sin, given to fleshly appetites, and controlled by Satan.

There are four things that make this story about Philemon and Onesimus compelling. First, the intercession of Paul. Second, the conversion of Onesimus. Third, the response of Philemon. And fourth the parallel the story finds in the salvation of every soul that comes to the Saviour.

First, the intercession of Paul. It is hard to imagine that Onesimus would have had the courage to go back to Colosse and face a confrontation with Philemon on his own. He needed someone to go between him and the situation. He needed Paul, and the apostle rose to the occasion. Paul was able to form a bridge between these two men. Jesus said, “Blessed are the peace-makers for they shall be called the children of God.” Matthew 5:9

Paul was willing to be a peacemaker. He was willing to intercede for Onesimus, as Christ is willing to intercede for us today. One of the great offices Christ holds is that of a heavenly High Priest. Hebrews 7:24-26 explains that: “This man, because He continueth forever, hath an unchangeable priesthood. Wherefore He is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him, seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them.

For such an High Priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens;”

What a comfort it is for the Christian to realize that each and every day the resurrected Lord, the Righteous One, is engaged in the great work of intercession, so that there is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.

Like the Lord, Paul was interceding for Onesimus because Paul was willing to take the side of righteousness. Paul did not take the side of Onesimus against Philemon. He could have. Paul could have defended Philemon by telling Onesimus that slave owners should not be surprised if their chattel rise up against them and want to collect back wages by force. Men should not grow rich in a unilateral way upon the backs and sweat of others.

Nor did Paul take the side of Philemon’s against Onesimus and shame the slave for his actions. There was shame enough in the situation and in the public exposure. I doubt if anyone would want their sins to be talked about for the next 2000 years by untold millions.

What Paul did do is to take the side of the gospel, which calls upon Christians to act in a responsible manner, and to behave according to gospel terms when sin saturates a situation. In his act of intercession, Paul had a chance to tell Philemon that Onesimus was a changed man, and so the prior perception of this person must also change. Onesimus is not the man he used to be.

Heaven, listen to this and rejoice. A sinner has been converted. Onesimus is no longer a thief. There is a new name written down in glory and it is spelt O-N-E-S-I-M-U-S. Philemon, listen to me. I have seen this man changed I have tested him, and have found him to be faithful. Philemon, I want you to receive him—forever! (1:14).

And now the big moment in this great drama has arrived. What will Philemon do? Will Philemon receive his runaway slave in order to retaliate against him? That is what most people expected. Or, will Philemon surprise many by showing Onesimus matchless mercy?

There is every reason to believe that Philemon did receive Onesimus back into his household according to gospel terms (note 1:21). Herein is the Divine ideal. God wants His Church to know something about forgiving others, which is one reason why He provides ample opportunities for this to happen. How can individuals be like Jesus unless there is a measure of iniquity to overcome?

In moments of special cruelty, the world is always surprised when Christ-like grace and forgiveness is extended to an offending person, because it is so rare even among Christians. The late Dr. Francis Scherer was profoundly correct when he said, “The Church today needs not only an orthodoxy of doctrine. It needs orthodoxy of community.”

In other words, the time has come for the implications of the gospel to be lived out in deeds as well as words for then, and only then, will the world be made to wonder like it once did fourteen years ago. “In January, 1984, the world sat up in astonishment when it saw that John Paul II had gone to Rebibbia Prison in Rome and offered his pardon to Mehmet Ali Agca, the 26 year old, Turkish born terrorist who had tried to kill him a little more than two years earlier.” This simple act of forgiveness sent shock waves through the world’s news media, and prompted Time magazine to devote a cover and seven full pages of its January 9, 1984, issue to the question, “Why Forgive?” In that issue, Time senior writer Lance Morrow wrote:

“Christ preached forgiveness, the loving of one’s enemies. It is at the center of the New Testament. Stated nakedly, superficially, the proposition sounds perverse and even self-destructive, an invitation to disaster.... Forgiveness is not an impulse that is in much favor. It is a mysterious and sublime idea in many ways. The prevalent style in the world runs more to the high-plain drifter, to the hard, cold eye of the avenger, to a numb remorselessness. Forgiveness does not look like a tool for survival in a bad world. But that is what it is in.” (A Forgiving God In An Unforgiving World by Ron Lee Davis)

If there is a lesson to be learned from this small epistle it is that those who have been shown much mercy should show it to others as well. Those of us who know Jesus Christ as Saviour have been shown much mercy. Martin Luther reminds us that, “We are all God’s Onesimi.”

By nature we were once rebels against God. Like Onesimus, we wronged our Lord, misused His mercies, and were unprofitable to Him (Rom. 1:12). Sin raged in our soul to the point that we trampled upon His grace, and robbed Him of His honor in order to pursue selfish purposes. And what did God do? The Bible says that “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should never perish but have eternal life.” The Bible says that while we were still His enemies, Christ paid our debt and discharged our obligations. Today, He is able to point to His own and say of their sins, Put that on my account.

Forgiveness. It is not easy to extend forgiveness to others, nor should it be, for then forgiveness would lose its value. The greatness of forgiveness is to be measured against the nobility of soul of the one offended. The forgiveness that God extends to sinners finds its great value in the nobility of the One who paid the cost of sin at a place called Calvary.

Have you ever been forgiven? I have known very little human forgiveness in my life, but I have known something about God’s forgiveness in a hostile world. And so I can say,

“Free from the Law; oh, happy condition!
Jesus hath bled, and there is remission!
Cursed by the Law, and bruised by the Fall,
Grace hath redeemed us—once for all!”

If you want to know something about God’s forgiveness, then come to Christ. Receive Him as your Lord and Savior. He will not turn you away.