

A New Year of Freely Forgiving

Last week I wrote about Onesimus – the runaway slave who found freedom by returning to his master as a slave to Christ.

But there's another character in that story. It's the man from whom Onesimus fled: *Philemon*.

In reading the Letter to Philemon in the Bible, it's tempting to judge him by our 21st century values. Philemon is the slave owner; therefore he is heartless. He's a tyrant who must be begged to spare a slave who fled his cruelty.

But that judgment would be unjust. Philemon was a man of his culture – an age and a place where slavery was simply part of life. He gave no more thought to slavery than you give to wearing shoes assembled by third-world workers who earn a dollar a day.

And Philemon had been wronged by Onesimus.

The Apostle Paul wrote his letter to Philemon in order to right that wrong.

Paul met the runaway slave Onesimus while Paul was in prison. It's likely that he was in Rome, living in a house guarded by a Roman soldier. He was free to receive guests, write letters, teach and preach – but not to leave.

And one day a familiar face unexpectedly appeared: Onesimus.

Why did Onesimus seek out this friend of his former master? We don't know. Somehow, God brought them together – and, through Paul, brought Onesimus to know and trust Jesus.

Paul led Onesimus to true freedom through faith in Christ. And Onesimus became like a son to Paul.

But the Apostle knew that Onesimus must return. In fleeing from Philemon, he had broken the law. He also had stolen from Philemon. He had sinned. Legally, Philemon had the right to punish Onesimus, even with death.

Christ calls us to repent of our sins. So Paul sent Onesimus home with a letter in his hand and Paul's fellow minister Tychicus at his side.

The letter Paul wrote to Philemon is a beautiful example of peacemaking. He could have commanded Philemon to spare Onesimus from punishment. After all, Paul had introduced Philemon himself to Christ. Philemon's debt to Paul bore the weight of eternal life.

But instead, Paul reminded Philemon of the grace God had shown in providing peace through Christ (vs.3). He commended Philemon for the love he showed toward Jesus and His servants (vs.5). He thanked him for the joy of his love (vs.7).

Then Paul spoke of Onesimus. Once he was useless – a runaway slave and a thief. But by God's grace, he had become Paul's beloved son (vs.10), as dear to the apostle as his own heart (vs.12). Paul hated to see him go, but he sent him back – so that Philemon might receive him as a brother in Christ (vss.15-16).

Receive him with the love that you have for me (vs.17), Paul wrote. And if he owes you anything, tell me – and I myself will repay it. That's how much Onesimus and his faith mean to me (vs.18).

Is there a bit of a guilt trip in what Paul writes? Perhaps.

But there's also a glorious reminder of our calling to imitate God, loving and forgiving as God has loved and forgiven us, at such great cost (Eph. 4:30-5:2).

Paul didn't ask Philemon to set Onesimus free. But in a letter to Philemon's church, he reminded Philemon that he himself was God's slave (Col. 4:1). How would you like *your* Master to treat *you*, Philemon? Go and do likewise.

There's a beautiful lesson in Paul's letter to his friend.

Like Philemon, we too are wronged by people in our lives. Our temptation is to demand justice – to harden our hearts against those who sin against us until the debt is paid in full.

But that's not how God responded to our sins against Him.

No, God sought us out in love. He didn't ignore the debt – but, instead, He paid it Himself, loading every last bit of that weight onto the shoulders of His beloved Son. All so that we could become His beloved children, in Jesus.

Knowing that, can we continue to bear a grudge against those who sin against us? Can we refuse forgiveness to one who asks? Can we require them to pay the debt in full – and still call ourselves children of our heavenly Father?

With a new year standing before us, let us resolve to love as we have been loved. If anyone has offended us, let us recall how we have offended God – and how He responded.

Then let us give what we have received, as freely as it was given to us.
And our Heavenly Father will rejoice to see His image shining forth through us – whose actions show that we truly *are* His beloved children!