

Genesis 50:15-21 (Opening)

¹⁵ When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." ¹⁶ So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died: ¹⁷ 'Say to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you." ' And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸ His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰ As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. ²¹ So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

“I can’t believe he just **took** it! He just took it, and left.”

How many times has something like this happened to you? Someone took something from you. Maybe it was money. Maybe it was stuff. Maybe it was your reputation, or maybe a part of your heart. Maybe it was your self-respect. Or maybe they just said something or did something that took away your trust in them.

Sometimes, the hurt from someone taking something from us like this doesn’t heal for a long time. Sometimes it doesn’t heal at all.

Maybe you’re the one who did the taking. Maybe it was intentional, maybe not; but you may have taken something from someone or done something to someone that hurt them in some way.

We all have done it. We’re broken; we can’t help it. We make mistakes, we mess up. We hurt people. And when we feel bad about hurting people, we want them to forgive us.

Forgiving someone for hurting you isn’t easy, and it’s not immediate. It’s a process. You need to work at forgiving them, and you need to work toward forgiving them. Sometimes it helps to have someone as an intermediary, a go-between to help you both in the process.

Let’s take a look at Paul’s letter to Philemon. In my notes here it’s just over a page long. The book of Philemon in the Bible is unique. It’s the only personal letter included in the Bible. It’s also Paul’s shortest letter. In the Greek, the letter is only 335 words long. It’s amazing that I ended up with about 80 pages of notes to study for my sermon this morning. Bible commentaries can be a little wordy in some ways.

Philemon 1-25

¹ Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our beloved fellow worker ² and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:

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

⁴ *I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers,*
⁵ *because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints,* ⁶ *and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.* ⁷ *For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.*

⁸ *Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required,* ⁹ *yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—* ¹⁰ *I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.* ¹¹ *(Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.)* ¹² *I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.* ¹³ *I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel,* ¹⁴ *but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.* ¹⁵ *For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever,* ¹⁶ *no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.*

¹⁷ *So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.* ¹⁸ *If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.* ¹⁹ *I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.* ²⁰ *Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.*

²¹ *Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.* ²² *At the same time, prepare a guest room for*

me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

²³ *Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you,*
²⁴ *and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.*

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

Paul's letter to Philemon is Paul being that go-between, to help the forgiving process. Paul knew Philemon, or at least knew of Philemon. It's possible that Philemon was traveling through Ephesus when Paul was there, and that he and Timothy were involved in Philemon's conversion. We don't know for sure. Philemon isn't mentioned anywhere else in the Bible.

Paul addresses his letter to Philemon, and he uses the word beloved to describe him; the same word God uses to describe Jesus at His baptism in Matthew 3:17. The Greek word is the adjective form of the word Agape. Paul is saying to Philemon that he loves him with the same sacrificial love that God has toward all of us.

Paul also addresses the letter to two other people; Apphia, probably Philemon's wife, and Archippus, who some scholars think may have been Philemon's son, or maybe not, but was a minister of the Gospel there in Philemon's house (or maybe they met in Archippus' house. The way it's written, it's hard to tell).

Why were Apphia and Archippus included in the greeting of this letter? Because they were going to be just as involved in solving the problem that Paul was about to address as Philemon; Apphia because of her daily interaction with the household business, including the slaves in the house; and Archippus because he was the leader of that congregation.

Paul then explains to Philemon how thankful he is for his brother, how much joy and comfort he gets from knowing of Philemon's love and prayers for him, and from the others there.

Verse 6 is a little confusing in some translations. There's several different ways it could be translated, but probably the best would be that Paul prayed that Philemon would use his knowledge of every good thing in Christ to work out the implications of his faith in the matter that Paul was about to bring up: Onesimus, the runaway slave.

We've talked about slavery during the 1st century before. Slavery was a common practice during this time. Slaves came from three different sources: prisoners from war, someone working off a debt (either their own debt or that of their parents), and being born to a slave. It's estimated that by the first century, about 1/3 of the population of most major cities in the Roman Empire were slaves. In Rome alone, that would have been four hundred thousand people.

Slavery was not just common, it was expected. If you were wealthy, you owned slaves. Slaves were counted as a part of your wealth, so normally they were well cared for, and treated well. They were still property, and of less value than normal people, but they were treated well, usually.

The problem comes when a slave does something wrong. Punishment for slaves was usually much harsher than for anyone else; and the punishment for a runaway slave that is caught, while it was left up to the master, could range from flogging to even execution. In Colossians 3:22-4:1, Paul tells Christian slaves and masters how to behave in their relationships with each other.

Colossians 3:22-4:1

²² *Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.* ²³ *Whatever you do, work heartily,*

as for the Lord and not for men,²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.²⁵ For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

¹ Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

Starting in verse 8 of Philemon, Paul starts explaining the main purpose of his letter to Philemon. I imagine Philemon was a bit surprised to hear that Paul had met up with Onesimus (or more likely, the other way around). Another surprise would have been that Paul addresses Onesimus as “my child,” “whose father I became in my imprisonment.” Paul tells Philemon that he could command him to do what was right, but because of their mutual sacrificial love mentioned earlier, he would only appeal to his Christian nature for Onesimus.

Paul tells Philemon that he should accept Onesimus back. Onesimus means “useful” or “profitable”. The reason Philemon should accept him back, Paul says, is because he will be useful to him now, just as he has been to Paul, because he is now a brother, not just a slave. Paul seems to imply here in verse 15 that Onesimus running away may have been good for both of them, because now he is a Christian, and is willing to face whatever punishment Philemon would give, in restitution for what he’s done.

Again Paul steps in as the go-between. Paul talks about how if Onesimus owed Philemon anything, that he, Paul, would repay it. Not only should Philemon accept Onesimus back, but he should do it as if Onesimus were Paul.

Something that’s important to notice here is that Paul never says that Philemon should give Onesimus his freedom. Paul isn’t trying to undermine the entire Roman economy here by saying all slaves must be released; that would have caused extreme political unrest and possibly

slave revolts like back in the days of Spartacus (yes, the movie was based on actual events). Everyone involved in this situation understands their respective positions in life, and in this event. Paul isn't saying to release Onesimus, just to accept him as a brother, return him to his position, and treat him as he would any other Christian brother.

Jesus tells a similar story to what Paul is expecting from Philemon; expecting, but not demanding.

Luke 15:11-24

¹¹ And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. ¹³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants." ' ²⁰ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and

celebrate. ²⁴ *For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.*

I’ll leave off the older brother’s reaction to his brother’s return, because I don’t know that there was someone in this situation that fits in that role. This is the example that Paul is hoping that Philemon will follow; accepting his slave back, but as a brother.

Why should Philemon accept Onesimus back? After all, it was his right to punish his runaway slave any way he saw fit, including executing him. Why shouldn’t he exercise that right?

Well, because that’s not what God would do. It falls outside of agape love. There’s no self-sacrifice there, there’s only selfishness. Jesus says in Matthew 25:40:

Matthew 25:40

⁴⁰ *And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’*

Jesus expects us to treat people, no matter who they are, no matter what their position in life, with respect and sacrificial love; agape. That’s what Paul expects from Philemon, too.

Reading this example that Paul is giving us, his stepping in and covering Onesimus’ debt, I can’t help but think about what Christ did for all of us as Christians. We were useless to God. In fact, we were more than useless, we were a hindrance; we got in the way of God’s truth. But Jesus intervened for us. We met Him, and He changed our lives. He speaks to God on our behalf, and says “I will repay it”. The debt is ours, but He pays it for us.

There are two sides in this situation; Onesimus and Philemon. Both sides have to give in on something. Onesimus has to do what’s right by returning back to his master and possibly face punishment. Paul is

asking Philemon to do what's right by not punishing Onesimus and accepting him back as a brother, not just a slave. Both sides benefit from the result Paul is asking for, and Paul says that he knows Philemon will do even more than he is being asked to do.

In many ways, we're like both Onesimus and Philemon. We do things to hurt people, and we are hurt by people. I think the reason we have this personal letter in the Bible is because we need to know, through someone else's experience, that we need to forgive others and ask to be forgiven by others.

James 2:14-17 (Closing)

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? ¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.