

Philemon: How the Gospel Sets Us Free

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, is this on? There we go. Good morning. It is good to see you, and thank you Jefferson and Florence for that reading. Let's pray together as we come before God's Word this morning. Father, as we consider this book of the Bible, we want to hear from you.

And God, we pray that your Word will come alive to us. God, we don't just want to be intellectually stimulated. We don't just want to learn new things about your Bible. We want to meet with you and encounter you, the living Word. And so Christ, won't you come and open our hearts?

Won't you prepare our hearts to meet with you? Holy Spirit, won't you come and take these words on the page and apply them to our hearts? And Christ, we pray that as a result of having sung your Word and listened to your Word and prayed your Word, that God, we will love you more deeply more profoundly today and this week. And so we pray this, Christ, in your amazing and beautiful name.

Amen. Amen. Okay. This morning we are in the final sermon in our series, The Supremacy of Christ and our Life in Him, as we've gone through the book of Colossians. And today you might say, why are we in this series? We're not preaching from Colossians? Well, the book of Philemon, in many ways, is a kind of sequel to the book of Colossians. They were both written by the same man, Paul, at the same time, while he's under arrest in Rome. They're both written to the church in Colossae, and they are given to the church at the same time. Colossians is written to the congregation as a whole, and Philemon is written to one of the founders of this church, this man by the name of Philemon. And this whole book, which is one of the shortest books in the Bible, we read the whole book of the Bible this morning, this whole book revolves around this relationship between this wealthy businessman called Philemon and a former slave of his, a runaway slave called Inesimus. Now, before we get into the story, let me, we've got some pictures. There we go. There's Philemon and Inesimus back from eight weeks ago. Now, before we get into the story, one thing that you might, as soon as you hear the word slave, former slave, you might think, hang on, why didn't the early church, you know, lobby the government, protest outside of Caesar's gates, pickets to overthrow slavery? Why do they seem so comfortable with this? It's a good question, so let me just explain for very briefly. When we read about slavery in the Bible, especially in the New

Testament, it's a very different thing to what we think of when we think of the British and American transatlantic slave trade of the 16th to 19th century. That was race-based, it was human trafficking, and that was very humane in many ways. The slavery that happened in the Bible, it's more like a kind of indentured servanthood. So it's a kind of employment. And so what would happen is that if you, a young man or a young lady, you could be trained, you could be well-educated, if you don't have capital to start your own business or you don't have land, you would go to a master, an employer, and work for him for a fixed period of time for a fixed salary as a kind of permanent employment role. And so in Rome, in that day, there were actually many very well-educated professional slaves, or as the ESV says, bond servants, you get doctors, lawyers, teachers, all of these people that had come to a master or an employer and said, I want to work for you. Will you take me in your employment? And so when we read about slavery in the Bible, don't think transatlantic slave trade. That being said, however, the New

[3 : 52] Testament never excuses slavery. And the New Testament writers don't exonerate slaveholders. But at the same time, the New Testament writers weren't trying to overthrow the political system and start a counter parallel economic, you know, political economy on the side. What they always did was they try to find out how do we bring the gospel to bear, the implications of the gospel on both the slave and the slave master. And that's exactly what we're going to see today in the book of Philemon. Okay, now let's recap the story. We did this last week very briefly, but for those of you that may be on you, let me tell you the story of Philemon. So eight years prior to this book being written, the great apostle Paul is in Ephesus. He's preaching the gospel. Many people come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Two of those people happen to be businessmen from a town about 150 miles away called Colossae. One of them is Epaphras and the other one is Philemon. And so these men become followers of Jesus. Paul disciples them for a couple of months, a couple of years. They travel back and forth between Colossae and Ephesus. And eventually Paul says, why don't you guys go and start a church in your hometown? And so they do. They go and they preach the gospel. Many people come to faith and they start a church in Philemon's home in his living room. And Paul never goes to visit, but he is encouraging them. He's there right alongside them. Well, Paul, after some time, leaves Ephesus to go back to Jerusalem. While he's there, he gets arrested for preaching the gospel and Paul appeals to Caesar. He says, I want to appeal to Caesar. And so they say, okay, they put him on a ship and he goes off to Rome. And while he's there in Rome, he's awaiting trial and he's under house arrest. Now, while he's under house arrest in Rome, he meets a young man called

Onesimus. And Onesimus is a bit rough around the edges, but Paul shares the gospel with him and Onesimus comes to faith in Christ. Paul disciples him. And pretty soon Onesimus, this young man, joins Paul's team, starts ministering to his needs, helps Paul along, and in fact, kind of joins Paul's ministry team. And things are working out pretty well. A few years later, Epaphras, the guy that helped plant the church with Philemon, he finds himself arrested in Rome.

Maybe he's in the same house or the same precinct. I don't know, it's Paul. Paul meets Epaphras, and they get chatting. And Epaphras tells him all about the church in Colossae and how Philemon is doing and gives him all the news. And then Epaphras sees this guy, Onesimus. And he says, hang on, Paul, do you know who this guy is? Because Onesimus used to be a slave for Philemon, the guy in whose house this church is meeting. And Onesimus runs away. One day he says, I've had enough, he packs up his bags in the middle of the night, and he runs away. He's a fugitive.

But he doesn't only run away, it also seems like he steals some money, or he steals some kind of household goods in the process. And so Epaphras comes to Paul and says, do you know this guy, Onesimus, who's on your team, who's helping you and serving you? This guy's actually a runaway slave from your old friend Philemon back in Colossae. Okay? And Paul says, don't worry, I know all about it.

And so Paul decides to do two things. He writes a letter, or first thing he does is he sends Onesimus back. He says, Onesimus, it's time to go back to your former master and face up to him. And the second thing he does is he writes a letter. And he gives it to Tychicus, and he says, take Onesimus, take the letter, and go back to Philemon. And that letter that Paul writes is the letter that was read to us this morning. Okay? And so that's what this book of the Bible is all about. It's this heartfelt letter that Paul writes to Philemon appealing to him and asking him to take back his runaway slave and to not treat him as he deserves. Okay? Does that make sense? Okay, great. Now, just before we dive in, I want us to consider a question. I want to ask you if you've ever experienced any kind of relational strain, any relational tension. Maybe there's someone and you just don't see eye to eye, or somebody's done something to you, and you've experienced anything like that. Maybe it's your neighbor. They're drilling in the middle of the night, or they're playing loud music at two in the morning, cheering for their soccer team, and they wake you up, right? Or maybe it's your child, your teenage child. They're becoming independent. They're pushing against you. They want to go their own way, and it just feels like you're rubbing against each other. Maybe it's your parents. When you're growing up, they just drilled you.

[8 : 34] They pushed you, pushed you, pushed you. Always were demanding, but they never told you how much they loved you. Maybe it's your colleague, or your boss, or somebody at work. Or maybe, if you're honest, maybe you're part of the problem. Maybe your relationship with your parents isn't great because you haven't really honored them like they deserved. Maybe your in-laws haven't really treated, you haven't treated them like maybe they deserve. Maybe your boss doesn't like you, but if you're honest, you're part of the problem. Maybe you borrowed money from somebody, and then you haven't quite paid them back like you said you would, or when you said you would, and the relationship is strained. You've experienced anything like this? Well, here in the passage of Scripture that we read today, we've got this relational conflict of the very highest order.

We've got Philemon, this Christian, and Nesimus, this former slave, and Nesimus has stolen from him and run away. Now, let's see what's going to happen. First thing I want us to consider is, let's think a bit about what Nesimus had to offer. What did Nesimus have to offer? Nesimus finds himself in Rome with the great apostle Paul. He's serving, and he's ministering to his needs. Now, this is a great blessing to Paul, because Paul is under house arrest, so he can't go out and work. But Acts tells us that he had to provide his own needs. He wasn't in jail where he had a meal given to him every day.

He has to provide for his own needs, but he's under arrest. And so Nesimus is a great help to him. Nesimus can go and work. He can bring in an income. Nesimus can also take letters around, and Nesimus joins his team and serves Paul as he continues his ministry. In fact, in verse 10, Paul says, he has become like a child to me. I've become like a father to him. And remember in Colossians, Paul writes and says, Nesimus is a faithful and beloved brother. Well, not only was this working out well for Paul, this was also working out pretty well for Nesimus. In the ancient world, if a slave ran away from their master, they were often hunted down and returned to their masters for a ransom, for a reward. And upon going back to their masters, they were either whipped, sometimes they were tattooed or branded with a branding iron saying, fugitive, beware. Sometimes they were even killed. And so it was very dangerous for a slave to now go into the open market and make himself available for employment. There were people looking out for runaway slaves everywhere.

And so Nesimus, now he's got quite a good arrangement. He's found this man, Paul. He's working with him. He's under his care. He's under his protection. Paul is taking care of this man. As Paul says, I've become like a father to him. And so this relationship is working out pretty well. In English, we have a saying, all's well that ends well. Do you know that saying? Everything's working out pretty well.

Except Paul and Onesimus realized that while this is good and convenient for both of them, this isn't the way that things are meant to be. In fact, they realized that while this arrangement is pleasing for them, it's not pleasing the Lord. Because there's another brother called Philemon, and there's unfinished business between Philemon and Onesimus. And so they decide to do something about it. Look at verse 13. Paul writes this, and he says, I would have been glad to keep Onesimus with me, dear Philemon, in order that he may continue to serve me on your behalf. But I prefer to do nothing without your consent. So Paul realizes this is working out well for us, but you, Philemon, haven't had a say in this. You haven't said whether this is right for you. And so Paul and Onesimus decide they need to do something about it.

[12:10] Well, the first thing I guess he could have done is Paul could have said, listen, it's been a long time now. There's too much water under the bridge. Philemon's now a very long way away. And anyway, it's typhoon season. The ships are not going to be sailing across the Mediterranean. Let's just all pretend it didn't happen. You know, let's just, the past is the past, time to move on. He could have done that. He could have, I guess, written a nice letter and said, my dear brother Philemon, you'll never believe what happened. Remember that old slave, that one you always moaned about, because his name means useful, but he was actually pretty useless to you. Well, you'll never guess what happened. I happened to run into him here in Rome. And actually he's proving pretty helpful to me. Now I know he was useless to you and he actually just got in your way. So let's just call things quit. I just wanted to let you know. Okay. He could have written a nice letter like that.

Well, whatever happened, for some reason, Paul decides that that's not the way to go. We may be tempted to think that that's how forgiveness works. Didn't Jesus say we should forgive one another? If someone slaps you on the cheek, you should just turn them to them, the other cheek. Didn't Jesus say that we should all, you know, oversee and overlook each other's offenses? Well, friends of nobles, that sounds, that's not quite what Jesus said. Remember, Jesus says, if you as a follower of Jesus have an issue with your brother or your sister, you should go and talk to about it. You should go deal with it. In fact, Jesus says, if you as a Christian know that somebody else has got an issue with you, before you continue worshiping, you go and talk to them and you deal with the issue between you two. Friends, look what Onesimus and Paul do. They realize that a wrong has been committed and that for reconciliation to take place, Onesimus needs to own up to his stuff. He needs to address the issue that's before them and he needs to go back to Philemon. Friends, can I ask you, have you ever experienced somebody apologizing to you when you felt like they didn't really mean it? Kind of a half-hearted apology. They kind of want to keep the situation just smooth and so they'll half mention a kind of apology but soon followed up with all sorts of excuses and explanations and blaming actually it was that person over there. Do you know what I mean? That ever happened to you? Okay, just me. Well, let me know when it happens to you, okay?

Well, look what Onesimus does. Whether it was Paul's urging or Onesimus' own idea, one way or another, Onesimus agrees to it and so he goes down to the docks, he buys himself a ticket for Ephesus, he takes the voyage to Ephesus, he then takes the 150-mile journey to Colossae and he goes to meet his former master. And friends, I want us to consider the hopelessness of Onesimus' situation. Here he is, he arrives at Philemon's door and what does he have to offer? What has he got in his hands?

He's got nothing. He's got no excuses, no explanation. He's got nothing in his hands. The only thing he has is a letter from Paul and the mercy and the kindness of Philemon. He comes before me, he doesn't have all the explanations. He can't say, well, this person may be doing it and I'm so sorry, you know, my bank didn't pay me properly and all these kind of reasons. He comes and he stands before him with nothing.

And what about Philemon? What is Philemon going to do? We know that Onesimus would have heard the stories of how these runaway slaves were treated when they returned. Sometimes beaten, sometimes branded, sometimes tattooed, sometimes killed. What is Philemon going to do? How is he going to treat Onesimus? Well, here was Onesimus knowing that he had nothing to offer, no defenses, no excuses, and he binds himself to the mercy of Philemon asking for his forgiveness. One commentator said it like this, he deserves punishment. All he can offer is nothing. But what about Philemon?

[16:12] Philemon? What did Philemon have to pay? Notice the cost that Philemon pays here. Philemon receives this letter with Onesimus standing in front of him. Now remember, there are no emails, there's no telegraph forewarning him saying, just to let you know, you know, Onesimus is going to arrive at your door any day now. Just be gentle with him, right? So he opens the door and there is his former runaway slave saying, I'm back. Surprise. And what is Philemon going to do? And so Philemon reads this letter. And I want us to think about the enormity of the forgiveness that Paul asks of Philemon.

It's not a small thing that he's asking him to do when he asks to take him back. Look at verse 10 and 12 with me. He says here, I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in imprisonment. Verse 12, I'm sending him back to you. In fact, I'm sending my very heart. And then in verse 17, he says, so if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.

Now remember, Paul is writing this in a time when for Philemon, the idea of forgiveness, the idea of mercy is not an admirable attribute. That's not the kind of thing that society approved on thought, what a wonderful man. In that day and age, forgiveness and mercy is considered weakness.

That's not a good thing. You're weak if you know how to do that. All his peers, the other neighbors, the other masters would have thought, who is this man that lets his slaves run all over him?

He just, they can do whatever they want and there's no consequences. And so what Paul and Onesimus are asking of Philemon to do is culturally a very shameful thing to do, a humiliating thing to do.

[17:57] Even more so given Philemon's status in society and his position in the church. Remember how much Philemon has given for the sake of the church, his hospitality, he's opened up his home. He said, you can meet in my home. Everything that Philemon has given for the sake of the church. And now Paul comes with this audacious, almost rude request saying, won't you receive your former slave back?

What kind of precedent would this set for the other slaves? Would Philemon be quietly encouraging their rebellion in the ranks? Did Paul know just how much he was asking Philemon to do? And as if this isn't enough, look at what he says in verse 16. He says, I hope you'll receive him back, verse 16, no longer as a bondservant, but even more than a bondservant, a beloved brother.

Now friends, think about this. Paul has the audacity, the goal to ask Philemon to take Onesimus back. But more than that, he says, I want you to receive him. But in fact, I want you to improve your relationship with him. Take him back, but take him back better than you, than he left you. In other words, don't just take him back as a slave. Now take him back as a brother. So think about this.

You work at your office, right? You've got a team of people that work under you, that report to you, some employees. One day, one of them resigns. He resigns suddenly and he says, I'm going to work for the competitor. But not only does he do that, that's fine, I guess. He secretly copies all of the confidential files from your system onto a hard drive and takes it with him, right? How does this happen to you? So employer leaves you to go to the competitor and he takes all the confidential documents, financial statuses, strategies, plans, where you're going to open a new store. He takes them to come to a competitor. A year later, he knocks at your door. I'm back. And imagine he arrives with a letter from the apostle Paul. I want you to receive him back, but I also want you to give him a raise and a promotion, right? You'd be like, are you joking? Well, look at what Paul says. I want you to receive him back, but not as a servant, not as a slave. Receive him back as a brother, as a brother.

In other words, he's asking Philemon to not just welcome him into his home, but into his heart. And think of the implications of this. I mean, how is Philemon to treat Inesimus going forward? He gives him some money to go to the market and to buy some goods. When he comes back, should he double count the change? Should he ask the accounts team, the finance guys, just to, you know, double check all Inesimus' books going forward because you can't quite trust this guy? In a sense, he's asking him, Paul's saying, take him back, but treat him as if he's done nothing wrong. Look what he says in verse 17. He says, so if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.

[20 : 55] In other words, imagine I came to stay with you. I came to your home. That's how I want you to treat your runaway slave, Inesimus. Friends, do you think Paul had any idea just what he was asking Philemon to do? It feels like he's pushing the limits of a friendship, right? And well, this all sounds nice, but then of course there's the small matter of the money. What about the money that Inesimus owes? Well, look at what Paul says in verse 18.

He says, and if he has wronged you at all, or if he owes you anything, charge that to my account. Well, notice what Paul's doing here. Paul is saying, he's not saying, listen, the past is the past. Let's just pretend it didn't happen. You know, money's not that important.

Let's just write it off. He doesn't quite say that. He does acknowledge that there's a debt. He acknowledged that the just thing to happen is for the debt to be paid. So he says, listen, let's talk about this matter of the debt being paid. There is a reality to that. Your debt does need to be paid. That's right. But then he says, charge it to me. I'll take care of it.

Now just think about this for a second. Here is Paul. He's an old man. He tells us that earlier on. He's in prison in Rome for preaching the gospel. Do you think Philemon is really going to charge the account to Paul? Do you think Philemon is going to read this and say to his auditors, listen, just write a bill for \$200,000 and just send it to Paul in Rome. He said he's going to take care of it, right? What's he going to do? He's going to say, sorry, Paul, let's just call it quits.

He's going to absorb the cost himself. Now friends, you might think, why does Philemon have to bear the cost? He's the one guy in the story that hasn't done anything wrong. Why should he have to bear the cost of the other man's guilt? Well friends, that's how grace works. That's how grace works.

[22 : 46] You see, friends, here before us today is a great picture of just how much it costs to forgive someone. What Paul is asking Philemon to do was a very costly thing. And friends, I want to remind us what Graham said. Graham and I didn't talk about this. Forgiveness is always very, very costly.

When you forgive someone who has wronged you, it'll cost you your pride. When you forgive somebody who has mistreated you, it'll cost you your right to retribution. It'll cost you your right to justice.

When you forgive somebody who owes you a debt, it'll likely cost you financially. Friends, when you forgive someone who's taken advantage of your kindness, it'll cost you your comfort and your convenience. Because every week as you see that person again, you'll be reminded of how uncomfortable they made your life. Forgiveness is always very, very costly. And this is what Paul is asking Philemon to do. Philemon, I want you to absorb the cost and forgive Onesimus. Well, consider the audacity of Paul's request. Friends, I want you to imagine that you were Philemon. Most of us know it's good to forgive, but imagine you were in Philemon's position. Do you think that possibly you or I would feel slightly indignant, slightly offended by Paul's request? I mean, Paul does get quite pushy, doesn't he? I mean, he gets pretty close to manipulation. Look at what he says here in verse eight. He says, though I'm bold enough to command you to do what's right, yet for love's sake, I prefer to appeal to you. I have Paul now an old man and a prisoner for Christ Jesus. In other words, he's saying,

I could command you, but I won't. Well, we all know what that means, right? And look at what he says in verse 12. He says, I'm sending him back to you. I'm sending my very heart. I'm sending my child back to you. And in verse 17, if you consider me your partner, look, I'm not putting it on you, but I'm just saying, if you consider me your partner, won't you do this favor? Won't you receive him no longer as a slave, but as a brother? And then he kind of ups the ante. Look at verse 19. He says, I won't even bring up the matter that you owe me your very life. I mean, he is kind of bringing it up, but he says, let's not even talk about that. And then finally in verse 21, he says, I'm confident of your obedience, knowing that you will do even more than I ask you to do. I mean, Paul's getting a little pushy, isn't he?

Friends, you think Philemon might've been slightly offended by Paul's pushiness? Friends, I want to put it to us that I think Philemon would have had every reason to be offended, every reason to feel dishonored. If he had understood everything there is to understand about the church, if he knew the way the church worked, if he knew his Bible, if he understood Greek and Hebrew, if he knew that there is justice and there's right and there's wrong, and that we have to be held accountable for our actions, if he understood all these things, but not the gospel. Because if he had, if Philemon himself had encountered the grace of God, if Philemon himself had encountered or been confronted by his own depravity and his own sin, if Philemon himself had ever been brought to his own knees about the wonder of grace and Christ's mercy towards him, if Philemon had ever been stopped in his tracks that Christ should forgive a sinner like him, surely he would have understood Paul completely. Surely he would have known where Paul is coming from. And so look at verse six with me. He says this, Paul says,

[26 : 19] I pray that the sharing of your faith will become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that we have in Christ. And so where Paul says here in verse six, the sharing of your faith, he's not talking about evangelism. He's not saying, as you share your faith with an unbeliever, I pray that as you do that, you will understand more of the gospel. Now it is true that when you share your faith, when you evangelize an unbeliever, you do understand the gospel deeper. That is true.

That's not what Paul is saying here. The word sharing here is the word for fellowship. It's the word participation with the other believers. In other words, he's saying this, when you share what Christ has done in your life, when you share the gospel, when you live out the gospel with other believers in the community, I pray that the result of this is getting the gospel, the grace of God, the mercy of God deeper into your own heart. I pray that you'll understand more fully just who Christ is and what he's done for you. Friends, in this tiny letter, one of the least known and least read of all Paul's epistles, we have before us in a miniature version, this masterpiece picture of what the gospel is really like. We have the whole story of the Bible, everything that the Bible is about. You see, friends, you may be one of the greatest Bible scholars. As we said, you may understand Greek and Hebrew. You may have gone to seminary and finished top of your class. You may even be an elder in your church. But friends, if you, when you read this letter, it offends you. If you think, no, that's impossible. Now, Paul's asking too much. I don't understand how he could do that.

Friends, you don't understand the gospel. And you may not even be a Christian at all. Because in this letter that we read today is the gospel. Friends, in this letter is our story. This is the reason why we come to church week in and week out. It's why we sing the gospel and pray the gospel and watch the gospel being broken before us and the bread and the elements. It's why we listen to the gospel week in and week out. Because Anesimus' story is my story and it's your story. This is our story.

Friends, the one who made us for a relationship with himself, Christ Jesus, we've all gone our own way. We've all left our master. And not just once upon a time when we stole candy from the store or when we cheated on our homework. Day after day, week after week, the disposition of our own hearts is, Christ, I want to be my own master. I want to be my own Lord. And so we follow Anesimus by going to look for our freedom in all sorts of other places. It's the reason why we sin. It's the reason why we hold on to bitterness. It's the reason why we pursue illegitimate relationships.

It's the reason why we love and serve money. It's the reason why we love and serve all sorts of idols in our lives. Because we think that freedom is found in those places. We think that that's where the good life is found. And yet, friends, the message of the Bible is that those things that we think will set us free actually enslave us. The things that we hope will deliver us actually dominate us.

[29 : 21] The things that we hope will liberate us end up binding us and controlling us. But friends, the extravagant, stunning message of the gospel is that while we, like Anesimus, had run from our master and gone our own way to find our own freedom, only to be enslaved by the things we thought would set us free, Christ our master didn't sit back and wait for us to come to him. He came after us. And he left heaven to come to earth, to die on the cross and to pay the price, to bring us back to himself, to reconcile us to himself. Consider how this letter is a picture of the gospel.

Paul writes and he says, If Anesimus owes you anything, charge it to my account. Well, friends, what did Graham remind us Jesus said on the cross? It is finished.

Or another way of saying that is it is paid in full. Your debt has been paid in full. Consider how Paul doesn't just want to see Anesimus forgiven and then getting on with his life. For him, that's not sufficient. He wants to see the relationship stored. He wants to see reconciliation.

Wasn't that what we read about a few weeks ago in Colossians 1 where Paul writes and he says, You who once alienated from God because of your evil deeds, God is now reconciled through himself, through his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.

Consider how Paul urges Philemon to treat Anesimus as he would treat Paul. He says, Treat him not as he deserves, but as I deserve. Treat Anesimus as the way you would treat me.

[30 : 54] Well, friends, in the gospel, Jesus comes to God the Father and he allows us to come before the holiness of God and the justice of God and the perfection of God. And he restores relationship, not because of our merit, not because of what we deserve, but because of Jesus' righteousness, because of what Jesus deserves.

Friends, consider how Paul sees the sovereign hand of God. How God can turn even Onesimus' sin around for good. Look what he says in verse 15. He says, Perhaps this is why God had him part from you, for a little while, that you might have him back forever.

Friends, I'll tell you today that even in humanity's darkest hour, even in our most wicked moment, when we, humanity, took the only sinless man, the only one who never deserved to die, and out of our jealousy and our envy, we nailed him to the cross, even then, God in his sovereignty took what we intended for evil, what we intended for death, and he brought life out of it, that we might live.

Friends, consider how Paul says that Onesimus is no longer a slave, but a son and a brother. Well, friends, don't you see how Jesus Christ took us back from being slaves? Slaves to sin, slaves to destructive patterns of behavior, slaves to our desires, slaves to destructive patterns of thought, slaves to addictions, and he sets us free.

And now he calls us sons and daughters. Jesus, in a very unusual way, says, I'm not ashamed to call you my brothers. And friends, consider finally how Paul, though in prison for no crime of his own, mediates on behalf of a guilty man so that the guilty man can be set free.

[32 : 32] Friends, can't you remember Jesus? The Lord Jesus Christ, the only guiltless man who ever lived, made himself a servant, going to the ends of servanthood, even dying on a cross.

Jesus gave himself up for slavery to mediate on our behalf so that we, the guilty, could go free. Friends, I want to ask you, why is this very small book of the Bible included in the Scriptures?

Why did God, the Holy Spirit, see it fit to include this personal letter? Why have all the other letters that Paul wrote, many of them got lost throughout the way? Why did God preserve this one and fit it into the canon of Scripture?

Friends, it was to show us the gospel. It was to show us our own sinfulness, the hopelessness of life spent in pursuit of freedom apart from Christ. But more than that, it was included to show us the stunning extravagance of Christ's mercy.

Friends, will you come to him now? Will you come and bind yourself to Christ? Will you come as Onesimus came, empty-handed, with no excuses, no explanations, no blaming anyone else?

[33 : 35] Will you come to him empty-handed and say, Christ, I come to you? And bind yourself, cast yourself in the forgiveness and the mercy of Christ our King. Let's do that together now.

Will you pray with me? Can I invite you to stand with me? And let's pray together. Let's close our eyes.

Oh God, we are so grateful for your sovereignty that this little letter written 2,000 years ago was preserved by you and found in our Bibles that we, God, may get a small picture, a minute picture of the extravagance of your grace.

Jesus, thank you that though we, like Onesimus, have run away, we've gone our own way, we thought that if we could find freedom, God, the wonderful truth of the gospel is that when we come to you and we submit ourselves to you in that place, we find our hope, we find our freedom.

God, I pray for us this morning for those of us that are in the throes of relational tension, those of us that have been hurt or let down, those of us that need to forgive, or those of us, God, that need to ask for forgiveness.

[34 : 59] God, won't you get the gospel deep in our hearts? Won't you remind us, Jesus, of just how much you forgave us? Won't you remind us, God, of the incredible cost that you gladly and willingly paid for us so that we, God, can endure a very small cost when we forgive those that have hurt us?

Forgive us, God, as we forgive those that have sinned against us. Christ, I pray for those of us that don't know you, those of us that have never been born again, those of us that have never encountered your life-transforming grace.

O God, bring us to our knees, we pray. Christ, help us to see just how lost we are apart from you, and yet how wide open your arms are to welcome us home.

Jesus, we may never know how Philemon responded to this letter. We may never know how he responded to Onesimus, but we do know your extravagant grace, how you respond to us.

And for that, we love you. Christ, come have your way. In your name we pray. Amen.