

# The Prodigal Slave

July 8, 2018 ~ Philemon 1.8-17

## Bible Basics for Christians

- ❖ It should go without saying that as Christians we want to understand the Bible
  - ✧ Our understanding of Bible guides beliefs, informs thoughts, directs actions
  - ✧ We think (*perhaps foolishly*) that we're open to God's truth every time we read
- ❖ But that's not always (*or even usually*) how we read the Bible
  - ✧ We often merely read it for confirmation of what we already believe
  - ✧ We see only where "**it**" agrees with "**us**" / We don't see anything else
- ❖ Sometimes people do get farther / They see something that contradicts
  - ✧ They're frustrated so they study / But they become more frustrated
- ❖ What happens next is all important
  - ✧ Some will find fault with Scripture / They might say:
    - ◆ The Bible can be so hard to understand / "**I refuse to believe this**"
    - ◆ The Bible is filled with errors / "**I refuse to do this**"
  - ✧ Many just ignore portions of Scripture they don't like
  - ✧ But what we should do is change what we believe . . .
- ❖ A preacher must keep this in mind when studying
  - ✧ We will come under a stricter judgment (*leading people astray*)
  - ✧ I changed what I believe concerning this letter / Let's see what you think . . .

## Paul's Request of Philemon

- ❖ This is such a small letter / 25 verses / 439 words
  - ✧ "**How can we possibly misunderstand such a small letter?**" / But we do . . .
  - ✧ We see what we want to see / We ignore what we want to ignore
- ❖ "**What exactly is Paul asking of Philemon?**"
  1. Is Paul asking that Philemon simply accept Onesimus back into his home?
  2. Is Paul asking that Philemon accept Onesimus back without punishing him?
  3. Is Paul asking that Philemon send Onesimus back to become Paul's helper?
  4. Is Paul asking that Philemon grant Onesimus his freedom?
- ❖ Let me read all of **Philemon** with these questions in your mind
  - ✧ Try and determine exactly what Paul is asking of Philemon
    - ◆ **Read Philemon 1.1-25** ~ "**Paul, a prisoner .. your spirit. Amen.**"

**Xition: I've asked you a riddle . . . But before we answer it we must address . . .**

## Slavery and the Old Testament

- ❖ "What does the OT teach about slavery?"
  - ✧ Read Lev 25.39-43 ~ "And if one .. fear your God" / Hebrews not slaves
  - ✧ Read Lev 25.44-46 ~ "And as for .. your permanent slaves" / Pagans are slaves
  - ✧ Read Ex 21.2 ~ "If you buy .. free and pay nothing" / Hebrews go free 7<sup>th</sup> year
  - ✧ Read Ex 21.7-8 ~ "And if a man .. with her" / Unwanted brides cannot be sold
  - ✧ Read Deu 21.10-11, 14 ~ "When you go .. sell her for money" / Can't sell wife
  - ✧ Read Ex 22.1,3b ~ "If a man steals .. sold for his theft" / Servitude pays debt
- ❖ Bible permitted pagans to be slaves – but not importation of them
  - ✧ Read Ex 21.16 & Deu 24.7 ".. kidnapper shall die .." / Man stealers
  - ✧ Read Deu 23.15-16 ~ "You shall .. not oppress him" / No return of slaves
- ❖ God's law regulated slavery & attempted to limit its abuse of people
  - ✧ Jewish slavery differed greatly (*or should have*) from pagan slavery
  - ✧ But slavery existed within Israel during the Old Testament economy

## Slavery and the New Testament

- ❖ "What does the NT teach about slavery?"
  - ✧ Read Tit 2.9-10 ~ "Exhort bondservants .. in all things" / Slaves obey
  - ✧ Read Eph 6.5-6,9 ~ "Bondservants .. with Him" / Slaves obey – Master warned
  - ✧ Read 1 Tim 6.1-2 ~ "Let as .. and beloved" / Slaves obey believing masters
  - ✧ Read Col 3.22 – 4.1 ~ "Bondservants .. in heaven" / Obey – God will judge
  - ✧ Read 1 Pet 2.18-19a ~ "Servants .. commendable" / Obey even harsh masters
  - ✧ Read 1 Cor 7.20-24 ~ "Let each .. he was called" / Remain as you are
    - ◇ Paul urges slaves to pursue freedom if possible – but on principle
  - ✧ Read Gal 3.26-28 ~ "For you are .. Christ Jesus" / Ugh...!!!
    - ◇ This text abused like general welfare clause of Constitution

## Liberal Views of Philemon & Slavery

- ❖ IVP New Testament Commentaries c/Philemon – Bible Gateway
  - ✧ " Clearly, Paul steadfastly resists thinking of Philemon as Onesimus's legal owner. The story behind Paul's appeal is a profoundly religious one and has social implications: Philemon is to regard Onesimus as his Christian "brother" (v. 16) and "partner" in the faith (v. 17), which makes their owner-slave relationship no longer possible. So Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon for their reconciliation; they are both his spiritual sons, and he is the religious patron and responsible for the nurture of both. In my view, under these new and revolutionary circumstances Philemon's only real option is Onesimus's manumission."
- ❖ Paper titled "Of Slaves and Masters" by Linzay Rinquest, Cape Town Baptist Seminary

- ✧ Quoting an evangelical commentary by JJ Muller (1955)
  - ✧ "The letter offers an illustration of the reforming power of the gospel which seeks to reach its purpose, not by compulsion but by inward persuasion" yet does not see slavery incompatible with Christianity, but as something that could be "sanctified by the Christian faith (v16)".
- ✧ Quoting T Hart in "Imagination and Responsible Reading" (2006) and WM Swartley in "Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women", 1983
  - ✧ "Provided with the aforementioned hermeneutical honesty by traditional commentators we now move to suggesting a refinement of their very own discoveries into a more focused methodological motivation. It is when hermeneutical methodology comes short in presenting us with a clear cut answer in solving current ethical dilemmas, that we have to engage in the process of "reading between the lines".
- ❖ Liberals twist the Bible to support their agenda / Same abuse of Constitution
- ❖ **Quote:** "As goes the church, so goes the nation"

### What is God's view of slavery . . . ?

- ❖ Jesus is God – What's His view of slavery? / He was never asked about it...
  - ✧ But Jesus was asked about divorce / And the answer to both is similar
- ❖ So "what is God's view on divorce?"
  - ✧ **Malachi 2.16** tells us, "God hates divorce"
  - ✧ When asked why Moses allowed divorce, Jesus said: "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so." (**Mat 19.8**)
- ❖ Slavery is like divorce / God hates it – but he sanctions it to deal with men's sin
  - ✧ God hates slavery because it's necessary in addressing man's irresponsibility

### Rushdoony on Divorce

- ❖ Slavery doesn't reflect man's natural state – It reflects his fallen state
- ❖ Spiritually all men are slaves
  - ✧ Non-Christians are enslaved Satan (**Read 2 Tim 2.24-26** ~ "And .. do his will")
  - ✧ Christians are enslaved to God (**Read Rom 6.22** ~ "But now .. everlasting life")
- ❖ The slavery of the unregenerate extends into this world
  - ✧ This is why slaves taken from pagan lands could be regarded as property
- ❖ But God repeatedly warns His people against becoming enslaved again
  - ✧ Paul says in **1 Cor 7.23** ~ " You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men."
- ❖ In "**Institutes of Biblical Law**" Rushdoony writes (**Read pg 251**)

**Xition: Before we return to the text I have another question...**

### Where is Paul When He Wrote this Letter?

- ❖ Most everyone regards options as: 1) Ceasarea Philipi, 2) Ephesus, or 3) Rome
  - ✧ Ceasarea Philipi is unlikely for many reasons
  - ✧ Ephesus is a possibility: 1) 100 miles west of Colosse, 2) Paul there 2+ years, 3) Closer for Onesimus to escape to, 4) Paul plans to visit (**v22**)
- ❖ Rome is very likely due to people mentioned (**v23-24**)
  - ✧ All these same people with him in Rome
  - ✧ Paul thought to have written Ephesians and Colossians from there too
- ❖ **Read Col 4.7-9** ~ Tychicus and Onesimus delivered Colossians & Philemon letters

### How did Onesimus and Paul Meet?

- ❖ No "proof" that Paul personally visited Colosse (*Acts doesn't mention*)
  - ✧ Yet, in **v22** Paul invites himself to Philemon's home in Colosse
  - ✧ This seems to indicate that Paul has been there before / Met Onesimus
- ❖ Rome is over 1,000 miles west of Colosse
  - ✧ It seems amazing that Onesimus runs away and runs right into Paul
  - ✧ But is this really an amazing coincidence orchestrated by God?

### Onesimus Was a Bad Slave

- ❖ **Read v11** ~ This is a pun using Onesimus' name – meaning "*profitable*"
  - ✧ Paul refers to Onesimus as having been unprofitable to Philemon
  - ✧ Could Philemon have told Paul this? Maybe – But perhaps Onesimus did
- ❖ Onesimus is widely thought to have stolen from Philemon and then run away
  - ✧ **Read v18** ~ "*But if he .. on my account*"
  - ✧ **Read v15** ~ "*For perhaps he departed .. receive him forever*"
  - ✧ But what if this is not true?

### Interesting Aspects of Philemon

- ❖ Paul says "*I am sending him back*" in **v12**
- ❖ Then 3 times afterwards he states "*receive him*" (Read **v12,15,17**)
  - ✧ Paul's concern appears to be that Philemon will reject Onesimus
    - ◆ This makes sense if Onesimus stole from him and fled
    - ◆ But it doesn't address why Onesimus wants to return – or why he met Paul
  - ✧ This makes more sense if Philemon had ejected Onesimus in the first place
- ❖ I think the commentaries have it all wrong / They obsess over slavery

**Xition: Here's what I think happened . . .**

### Is This How it Happaned?

- ❖ Onesimus was a bad slave – he was lazy, he lied, he stole things
- ❖ Philemon was a kind Christian master who's patience wore thin
  - ✧ Philemon ejected Onesimus from his home as incorrigible
- ❖ Onesimus is afraid and alone – he goes in search of help (Paul...!)
  - ✧ He learns where Paul is and seeks him out
  - ✧ He knows Paul has influence over Philemon
- ❖ Onesimus finds Paul / But he gets far more than he bargained for
  - ✧ Paul leads Onesimus to the Lord and trains him to be industrious
  - ✧ Onesimus is a very willing pupil
- ❖ Paul writes the letter to the Colossians and has Onesimus go with Tychicus

### New Sermon Title

- ❖ The title was "**Son or Slave**" / I'd intended to emphasize changed relationship
  - ✧ I believed Onesimus remained a slave but used "or" to force E/O dilemma
- ❖ The new title is "**The Prodigal Slave**"
  - ✧ While meditating on text I saw a parallel – even before theory of ejection
- ❖ Parallel with "**The Prodigal Son**" story
  - ✧ Son leaves home willingly – Slave leaves home unwillingly
  - ✧ Father gives son property – Master gives slave nothing (Slave may have stolen)
  - ✧ Son goes to far country & parties – Slave goes to Rome and finds Paul
  - ✧ Son comes to his senses – Slave comes to the Lord
  - ✧ Son returns home as Slave/Son – Slave returns home as Slave/Son

- Everybody assumes Onesimus hated life as a slave**
- But the truth is he took advantage of it as cushy life**
- Everybody wants to see Paul lobby for Onesimus's freedom**
- But Paul instead labors for Onesimus' salvation**
- "What does a it benefit a man if he gains his freedom but loses his soul"**

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling,

And to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy,

To God our Savior, who alone is wise,

Be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever.

Amen \*pause\* Go in peace . . .

## The Prodigal Slave



1. What do you think Paul was requesting of Philemon? \_\_\_\_\_
2. How far away is Colosse from Ephesus? \_\_\_\_\_ From Rome? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Tychicus delivered the letters of Philemon and \_\_\_\_\_
4. Hebrews, who became indentured servants, typically served how long? \_\_\_\_\_
5. For what reason would a Hebrew typically become an indentured servant? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. What does Paul urge slaves to do throughout his letters? \_\_\_\_\_
7. What one exception does he give to this advice in 1 Cor 7.21? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. If God hates slavery why does He allow it? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. What else does God hate but still allow? \_\_\_\_\_
10. What concerns Paul most about the behavior of slaves? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
11. Of masters? \_\_\_\_\_
12. Did Onesimus run away from Philemon's home? \_\_\_\_\_
13. What do you think Paul was requesting of Philemon? \_\_\_\_\_