

The purposes of God, are sometimes completely unknown to we mere humans. Sometimes, the Lord uses evil for good. And sometimes He uses (what are) very tough times for us, for His purposes and for the advancement of the Gospel. And so, when the Apostle Paul was imprisoned (and he was a number of times) he wasn't inactive.

- He preached the Gospel to his jailers;
- He preached the Gospel to his fellow prisoners;
- He taught and trained those who would come to visit him; and
- he wrote letters.

One of those letters he wrote from prison (Rome), we studied 12 months ago. It was the letter to the church in Colossae (Colossians). And when he wrote that letter, he also wrote a second one (the letter to Philemon). And he handed those 2 letters (and probably Ephesians & maybe others as well), to two men, to carry to Colossae. The 2 men who carried these letters, were Tychicus and Onesimus, who he describes as “our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you”....

Onesimus was heading home to Colossae... And so we might assume that he has a spring in his step and “Woohoo!! I’m going home!!!”... But neither the letter to the Colossians or the letter to Philemon, tell us how Onesimus was feeling...

I suspect Onesimus would've been quite apprehensive. And with good reason...

He was a slave (bondservant) and it seems that he had run away from his master (Philemon), and now Paul was sending him back...

I don't mind telling you, that preparing this message today, has been quite difficult for me. The biggest difficulty I've had, was sorting out the opinions and assumptions of preachers and Bible scholars, from what the word of God actually says.

And the second difficulty, is probably why there are so many opinions and assumptions in addition to what the Word of God says.

You see, the two main characters this letter is writing about, are in the relationship of "slave" and "slave owner", and they're both Christians. And in our world, and in our culture, this does not compute... How could a Christian possibly think that that's OK (to own another person)?

We've had the privilege of having 2000 years of:

- Christianity;
- preaching the Gospel;
- the Kingdom of God breaking into this world, led by Christians;
- the light of Christ, shining into a dark place...

And through the transformation of the disciples of Jesus, the light of Christ – the Kingdom of God, has influenced our whole society and changed what western civilisation considers to be just or unjust.

And so, we don't have slaves in our land – we never see them... But, be informed, if you go to an Islamic country, you'll see slaves today. If you go to India, there's slaves there. If you go to China, there's slaves there.

But be in no doubt, it's because of the influence of Christ and His disciples, that we no longer have slaves. Christianity has had an enormous transforming influence on our society..

Now, most of us (myself included), when we read this, “Oh, it's about slavery”. And we look for the message about slavery, and we look for the message about the social evil that slavery is... But you know what? This isn't about slavery. Are there any slaves here today? Are there any slave-owners here today? Well, I'm glad this letter isn't about slavery, because it would be totally irrelevant.

Paul isn't writing about “slavery”. He isn't even writing about this particular instance of slavery. He's writing about fellowship, and brotherly love. And about how the fellowship of the Lord Jesus Christ, brings men and women, boys and girls together, into a relationship of brothers and sisters in Christ. It's a relationship that transcends every social class; every nationality; every level of financial status...

Galatians 3: (ESV) ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

We're in the lead-up to Christmas now, and one of the songs that we're going to be singing this Tuesday night at the combined churches Carols on the Balonne, is "O Holy Night". And in the second verse, it says:

*Truly He taught us
to love one another.
His law is love
and His gospel is peace.
Chains shall He break
for the slave is our brother,
And in His name
all oppression shall cease*

The lesson today, is about fellowship and love for our brother in Christ.

So, **Philemon**, what do we know about him? Not much. He must've been reasonably wealthy, because he owned a slave. In the region around Colossae at the time, more than a quarter of the population were slaves.ⁱⁱ But it was only the rich who could afford one. And so Philemon must have been reasonably wealthy.

But Philemon had become a Christian. And he was an active Christian. Paul refers to him as **our beloved fellow worker**

He talks about the joy that Paul has had, hearing how Philemon has been a man who has loved his brothers and sisters in Christ, and how **their** hearts have been refreshed by what Philemon has done for them.

What about **Onesimus**? Well, he was a slave. We don't know why he was a slave.

In the Roman empire, some:

- were born into slavery;
- had been prisoners of war, and therefore became slaves.
- had been captured by pirates or slavers from other lands... and
- had become bankrupt, and they couldn't afford to pay their bills, they could sell themselves into slavery, to pay their debts.

But not every slave remained a slave forever. Some slaves still had opportunity to earn some money for themselves, and they'd save that up, in the hope that one day, they could buy their freedom. Others earned their freedom by doing some good deed...

The name "Onesimus" means "useful". That sounds like a strange name to us, but remember slaves were possessions that would be bought and sold and marketed. Some people say "They were like livestock". I think a better analogy (an analogy that country people understand), is they were similar to having a good working dog, or having a good horse.

So, why would he be called "Useful"? I reckon it was probably to do with marketing. *If you go to a shop today,*

- *to buy a set of Allen keys, you might see a set called "Unbrako" – Ah, they've gotta be strong, or they could be "El-bendo".*

- *Or you might be buying detergent, and you might have a tough time choosing between “Cold Power”; “Radiant”, “Sard Wonder Power”, “Dynamo” ...*
- *Or you might want to buy a new planter, and you buy a “Maxemerge”*

If you were a slave trader, wanting to sell a slave, “Useful” would be a very good name...

And in this letter, Paul makes a play on words, “He used to be useless to you, but now he truly is useful....”

Anyway, Onesimus ran away from his master (Philemon). It is possible that Philemon sent him to Paul, but stayed much longer than he was supposed to, but the way the letter reads, it’s more likely that he ran away.

But that’s a very dangerous thing for a slave to do. A runaway slave, once caught, could be whipped, or executed (even by crucifixion). They could be branded on the forehead with the letters “FUG”, for the Latin word “fugitivus” (fugitive – runaway). And so, I suspect that Onesimus may have been a bit apprehensive about returning home to Colossae...

But return, he did.

And we **know** that he’s returning as a Christian, but what we **do** not know, is when he became a Christian. Was he a Christian before he ran away? Or did he become a Christian in Rome? Most commentators say that he became a Christian

when he was visiting Paul in prison. We don't know that. Paul does say, ¹⁰ I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.

And that's why they say "He became a Christian at that point". But Paul could just as easily be describing a deepening of the relationship he had with Onesimus, as Paul taught him and trained him in ministry and mission.

Now, some would say, "It was just a miracle of God that he just happened to stumble upon Paul in a far off place, where Paul was in prison". Maybe... But it's more likely that through Philemon, he met Paul in Colossae, and he went to seek out Paul, because he wanted to know more... Once again, we don't know.

What we **do** know, is the power of the fellowship that we have in Christ Jesus.

Jesus taught us the importance of visiting our brothers and sisters in Christ in jail. In Matthew, He talked about the final judgment, and gave an image of people being separated, like a shepherd would draft the sheep from the goats... And he says to those who are rewarded,

Matthew 25:35-40 (ESV)

³⁵ ... I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. And they wanted to know, when did we do

that? And the Lord will say: ... **as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'**

And Paul really appreciated the ministry and the support and the company of those who visited him in jail... They would've brought him food, clothes, scriptures... And they were present with him, to learn and pray together.

And Paul greatly appreciated the way Onesimus would come and spend time with him...

But the thing is, when you become a Christian, the 'pointy-end' of faith, can be pretty costly. We give all that we are/have for Christ. And when we put our faith (what we believe) into action, **often**, that will require some dramatic and costly alterations to our life.

Sacrifices...

Trials...

Obedience...

Paul would've been teaching Onesimus, "Philemon isn't just your master. In Christ, he is your brother." And he is a brother who has been 'wronged' by Onesimus running away.

You see, the larger letter they carried, written to the church in Colossae, teaches us that whatever we do, (in word or deed), **do everything in the Name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him...** And then he talks about how we are to relate to one another. He talks

about husbands & wives; Fathers & children; and he talks about slaves & masters of slaves.

Colossians 3:22-4:1 (ESV)

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.

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

What an amazing teaching? Do you happen to be a slave? Well, serve as well as you can, knowing that your good service, is for the Lord Christ...

Do you happen to be a slave-master? Well treat your slaves justly and fairly, because you also have a master in heaven...

An amazing teaching... And this is in the letter that Onesimus is carrying, as he returns to his master to face possible consequences.

But as I said, the letter to Philemon isn't about slaves and masters. It's about fellowship.

Philemon has a reputation as someone who is filled with love and faith, toward all the saints. And V6 (more than any other verse) helps us to understand what Paul is asking.

⁶ and I pray that the sharing (κοινωνία) (koinōnia) (fellowship) of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.

It's about fellowship.

And Paul says to Philemon, "I could pull rank here, and order you to do what is required"... but I'd rather you do it out of love...

Onesimus was so useful to Paul. And it breaks Paul's heart to send him back. And he says, "I could've kept him, and he could be serving me on your behalf,, but I'd rather your goodness be by your own choice.

For Philemon, this would be an opportunity to have Onesimus back, as a brother in Christ.

When it comes to Earthly relationships, slave and slave-master would have to be the greatest divide on the social strata. How could someone, who owns another, become brothers? That

my friends, is the fellowship that we enjoy, when we are in Christ.

Paul says, ¹⁷ So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.

Onesimus is as much a brother to Philemon as Paul is. Be just as welcoming. And he says, “If he’s wronged you, or if he owes you anything, send me the bill. I’ll pay it”...

Now, most commentaries I read, at this point, say that Onesimus must’ve stolen stuff from Philemon and used the Great Granny’s silverware to pay his way to Rome. But the Bible doesn’t say that.

You see, at one time, Onesimus was an investment for Philemon. And his absence for months or years, equated to work that Philemon had paid for, and it didn’t get done. That’s what Onesimus owed to Philemon... But Paul’s saying, “If that’s what you care about, charge it to me. Because you yourself owe me. What did he owe him? Everything. Paul had preached the Gospel to Philemon, and Philemon’s new life in Christ, is because of what Paul had done...

So, what happened? Did Philemon take notice of Paul and receive Onesimus as his brother? We don’t know... I suspect he did, and I’ll tell you why? Because we’ve still got the letter. I’m pretty sure that if Philemon had not done what Paul

asked, the letter would've been torn in two and thrown on the fire..

Fellowship... I love it...

When it comes to fellowship, and brotherly love within the church, sometimes we struggle with it.

Sometimes those who are higher up the social scale don't enjoy mixing with the plebs...

But I reckon it would be harder for Onesimus to see Philemon as his brother, than for Philemon to treat Onesimus as his brother... And there would be people in this town, who don't feel they're good enough to set foot in a church, because they're not from the same social standing as people in that church.

The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, is the gospel that attracted sinners:

- tax collectors and prostitutes;
- the sick and the broken;
- the beggar and the blind man;
- the slave and the foreigner...

It wasn't so much the rich and the powerful (although they were there too), and they fellowshiped together as one...

The Gospel is the great leveller... Not one of us deserved to be saved. Not one of us could buy our salvation... It was entirely by the grace of God... And every disciple of Jesus has **one** Lord and one Lord only – our Lord Jesus Christ...

And together, we are slaves of the Lord Jesus. (whether we are rich/poor)... Whether we are of high society, or whether we don't even make "blue collar" grade... We are all slaves of the Lord Jesus, serving Him first...

Have you noticed, that wealth is sometimes a hinderance to us being a slave for Christ??? Some accumulate so many things or their business grows so much, they become consumed by it, and then no longer have time to fellowship (share, serve) Christ, and their brothers and sisters in Christ... (their fellowship gets strangled)

Some are too busy enjoying what their wealth affords them, that they find themselves not fellowshipping and not serving as they once used to...

In Christ, we are all children of God. What a marvellous, privileged position. But that doesn't mean that we treat others with contempt – not at all... We all become servants. And serve one another. We fellowship together, as Brothers and Sisters in Christ.

Do you remember when Jesus washed his disciples feet??? The master became the servant.

And we serve, because our Lord served.

Let's pray:

Lord Jesus Christ,
we thank You that we are no longer slaves to sin.
In Your mercy, You have set us free.

And now it is our joy,
to serve You,
and to serve one another.

Lord, forgive us for any time
that we have stifled fellowship.
What a blessed thing it is;
what a joy it is,
to fellowship with one another.

And Lord, we pray for our church,
that You would deepen our fellowship,
and give us a deep connection;
a deep fellowship with all
who go by Your Name.

Lord, help us to grow in love and service toward one
another,
in Jesus' Name,
Amen.

ⁱ Colossians 4:9

ⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery_in_ancient_Rome