

Are You Subject To Perpetual Bondage?

Paul's Epistle to Philemon

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The Days of Unleavened Bread, which we have just finished observing by living without physical leavening for seven days, are a memorial to God's law and represent our efforts to rid our lives of sin. Just as we have been de-leavened, we are trying to be de-sinners and it is hard work. The eating of unleavened bread memorializes what God did in releasing us from bondage.

Coming out of sin is something we do and we go through the steps physically and spiritually, but our efforts do not stop there. God expects us to continue to obey His law, to continue to be spiritually unleavened, to continue to strive to overcome sin, to expend effort and energy that put sin out of our lives as it crops up. God does not want us remain in sin because Christ is not a minister of sin.

Galatians 2:17-19 "But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is Christ therefore a minister of sin? Certainly not! For if I build again those things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor. For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God.

So having observed the Days of Unleavened Bread we know that upon our repentance Christ's sacrifice blots out all our sins. He died so that we would not have to pay the penalty of eternal death and therefore we have the responsibility of not continuing to be a slave to Satan, the world, and sin.

In the Bible a slave is the economic asset, legal property, and the complete responsibility of his or her purchaser. From the biblical perspective every person is subject to slavery either to sin or to God. The slave/master relation parallels ours with God because we are called to be accountable to Him.

Psalms 123:2 (NIV) As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a female slave look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till [H]e shows us [H]is mercy.

He also assumes responsibility for us. Those who are a slave to God are His

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responsibility and He takes good care of them.

Romans 14:4 Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.

Are you subject to perpetual bondage? Are you a slave or are you free? Both slavery and idolatry entail bondage and that is complete subjection to a master's will. At the end time Satan will use the Beast power to control his Babylonish world. Everyone is enslaved by this tyrannical system and everyone is soon to become in complete physical subjection to Mystery, Babylon the Great.

Revelation 13:16-17 He causes all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hand or on their foreheads, and that no one may buy or sell except one who has the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.

He will have complete control of human beings, at least physically. Nobody on earth is completely and truly free from the bondage of this satanic Babylonian system, at least not in a physical sense.

The important figurative jump is not from slavery to freedom, but rather from slavery to sin to slavery to God; from darkness to light; from falsehood to truth. Though our Lord and Master's yoke is easy and His burden is light, a yoke still exists as Matthew 11 says:

Matthew 11:28-30 Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

The Bible assumes universal service on earth, but the issue is whether one's master is God or sin. It has to be one of the other, no one rides the fence for very long. In Romans 6 we read.

Romans 6:15-22 What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! Do you not know that to whom you present

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yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness? But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life.

This is talking about going from being slaves of sin to slaves of God and we certainly want to remain slaves to God and stay away from being slaves of sin. All of creation suffers from the bondage of corruption. The whole creation groans, unredeemed sinners are in bondage in sin and specifically to evil power such as religious deities and various lusts. As the apostle Peter points out:

II Peter 2:19 While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage.

Judgment awaits those who falsely assumed that redemption is only about self mastery rather than the freedom to choose God as master. King David wrote that the sons of men have said, "with our tongue we will prevail; our lips are our own, who is lord over us?" The world thumbs their noses at the idea that anyone controls them, when in reality they are slaves of Satan and do not even realize it.

This aspect of perpetual bondage is developed most extensively in the teachings and active examples of Jesus and of Paul. Jesus' parables affirm the slave's subservient and obligatory allegiance to a single master as an illustration of service under God here in Luke 17.

Luke 17:7-10 And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat'? But will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for my

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supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink'? Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.'"

We have a little bit of a hard time understanding this because we do not have servants or slaves in this society, but it is hard to imagine telling somebody to do this or that for you and not even thanking them for it, but we see here under the circumstances that was not required. The servant is not sinful, just merely unprofitable when he does only his duty. Unprofitable equates to unworthiness here.

Jesus exemplifies voluntary slavery, humbling Himself as a human being, embracing death, even symbolically by washing apostle's feet. He teaches that true greatness in Christian service is the humble position of the godly "slave." The last as first principle is an antithesis to the status conscious world. Humility and the status-conscious world are two opposite extremes.

Christ's death is the redemptive payment for the deliverance of many from the slave market of sin and His perfect life demonstrates that freedom is not autonomous perfection, but rather a chosen relationship to God that requires obedient rejection of sin's bondage. It is not enough just to say that you are going to obey God from now on, there has to be a rejection of sin in bondage, the control the world, Satan, and sin over you.

Now turn to Galatians 4. What we are doing here is building a background to the book of Philemon. Paul directs the early church accordingly. Salvation is presented as a spiritual freedom from slavery involving a change of masters expressed allegorically as freedom to be Sarah's children of promise who serve Christ in the spirit with a view to total redemption in the new creation. Notice how Paul shows the difference between servitude and freedom as it relates to the two covenants.

Galatians 4:22-26 For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman [Hagar], the other by a freewoman [Sarah]. But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar—for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children—but the

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Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all [represented by Sarah here in the allegory].

Galatians 4:28-31 Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise. But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now. Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman.” So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free.

We are not children of Satan, but children of Sarah, or of the church, or the family of God. Members of the church must not have any compromising relationships with any other masters. Paul’s own testimony illustrates the choice between masters. He confesses in Romans 7 his slavery to sin.

Romans 7:15 For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do.

In verse 25 he chooses instead to be a slave to God’s law in one sense.

Romans 7:25 I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.

It is a constant battle that we have, as members of God’s church, to resist the world. It is not enough just to be obedient that there has to be that resistance to Satan, sin, and the influence of the world.

Also echoing Jesus’ example, he calls himself a slave to all people for the sake of the gospel and further makes his own body a slave. He adds, “so that after I have preached to others I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.” So his life is an example of voluntary slavery.

Paul also handled an unusual difficulty in the early church. In a culture whose slave trade was a primary business, his comparison by representation of sin to slavery had the natural effect of making believers desire social freedom. All these slaves in the Roman Empire wanted to be free when they heard the gospel preached.

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Believers also responded Paul's call to serve each other by volunteering to sell themselves for others freedom. Believing in God's providential placement of his children, Paul's representative principle concerning slavery was to remain in the state in which one was called.

I Corinthians 7:20-24 Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called. Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use it. For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise he who is called while free is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. Brethren, let each one remain with God in that state in which he was called.

Paul clearly states that the primary goal of a slave was not social freedom, but rather spiritual freedom to serve the supreme God.

Romans 14:7-8 For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.

So if we truly are converted, it is perfectly clear we are the Lord's, owned lock, stock, and barrel. The apostle Paul wrote a personal letter to Philemon concerning the same thing, in which he pictures a real-life situation of this issue of ownership and slavery.

Does Christian brotherly love really work, even in situations of extraordinary tension and difficulty? Will it work, for example, between a prominent slave owner and one of his runaway slaves? The apostle Paul has no doubt that it is possible for prominent slave owner and one of his runaway slaves to become one.

He writes, what we might consider to be a postcard, to Philemon his beloved spiritual brother on behalf of Onesimus, a deserter, thief, and former worthless slave, but now Philemon's brother in Christ. What an awkward situation Paul faces here.

Philemon 1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer,

Since this letter is addressed to Philemon, in verse 1 it becomes known as *Pros Philemona*, which in the Greek means "to Philemon." It is that simple. Like Titus and I

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and II Timothy, it is addressed to an individual, but it is also addressed to a family and a church.

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

So houses churches were common for them back in those days as is becoming so now. Onesimus was one of Philemon's slaves who had robbed his master and fled to Rome. By God's hand this runaway slave met Paul who led him to God's truth about Christ.

Legally Philemon could have had his slave put to death for breaking the law, but Paul stepped in to intercede for the new Christian and to save his life. This brief letter speaks volumes to us since it demonstrates in a vivid way the heart of Paul, for one, and that it is written with composure and dignity.

Paul's purpose for writing were: 1) to inform Philemon that his slave was not only safe but that he was a brother in Christ. 2) to ask Philemon to forgive Onesimus. 3) to request that Philemon prepare a room for Paul who expected to be released from house arrest shortly.

Paul's letter to Philemon is about reconciliation and relationships between Christians. We should take note of this because it involves our relationships with each other. Of course the main lesson of the letter is its picture of Christ as to redeemer of lost sinners.

The forgiveness that the believer finds in Christ is beautifully portrayed by analogy in Philemon. In justice Paul was willing to pay the price to save this disobedient Onesimus, so Christ paid the price on the cross for His disobedient children. Paul wrote: "receive him as you would receive me," reminding us that we are accepted in the beloved Christ.

Onesimus, who is guilty of a great offense, is defended by Paul. Paul is motivated by his own love to intercede on his behalf. Paul lays aside his rights and becomes Onesimus' substitute by assuming his debt. By Philemon's gracious act, Onesimus is restored and placed in a new relationship. That is a key—"a new relationship."

In this analogy we are as Onesimus, and Paul's advocacy for Philemon is parallel to Christ's work of mediation before the Father. Onesimus was condemned by the law but saved by grace. We will never enter God's Kingdom on our own merits when we stand before the Father, and Christ says, "receive him as Myself," just as Paul said in his letter to Philemon, because we have been covered by Christ's righteousness.

We need to remember that slavery was an accepted institution in the Roman Empire. The Romans and Greeks brought multitudes of slaves, old and young, home from their wars, and the buying and selling of slaves was a daily part of life. It was so much of the economy. I am not saying that slavery is okay, I am just saying that it was the reality of Rome at that time.

Paul had a tender interest in slaves encouraging them to be the best Christians possible and to gain their freedom lawfully, if they could. We do not read that Paul specifically attacked the institution of slavery. The gospel itself, preached and lived in the early church, eventually and mostly destroyed the social problem overtime. It took a long time but it had its fruit.

Paul's letter to Philemon shows how Christ changes a home and society by changing lives. It was not that Paul avoided the problems of slavery, but rather he realized that the true solution would be found as men and women submitted to God's law of love and accepted Jesus Christ as the personal Savior. That would do more to rid the world of slavery than anything else.

A spirit-led man will certainly be gracious and tactful. Paul illustrates this attitude in his approach to the problem of this runaway slave. We can all take the note of this when we are dealing with sensitive issues among one another.

Instead of immediately pleading for the man's life, Paul first expressed sincere appreciation for his friend Philemon. This was not empty flattery, it was sincere Christian appreciation. "The love of God shed abroad" in Paul's attitude.

Philemon sounds like the kind of man any of us would want to have as a friend. That may shock some of us because he was a slave owner, but Philemon was also a converted man with great character. He was a man of love and faith. Love for the brethren is one of the best evidences of faith in Christ. Now here in verse 5, Paul commends Philemon.

Philemon 5 hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints.

Philemon did not keep his faith to himself, he shared it with others. Paul had been praying for Philemon that his faith might go to work, be effective, and be a blessing to others. Philemon had a good name, he was a good servant in the church, he was known as a man of faith and love, but yet he was a slave owner. That is a curious

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scenario.

Philemon 7 indicates that Philemon was a refreshing Christian and the kind of man others appreciated and he was about to face a serious test of his faith and love as he learned about the conversion of the slave Onesimus.

I am sure that these admirable qualities of a man, who is also a slave owner, is hard for some people to swallow but one of the things we see in Philemon is that God and the apostle Paul view slavery different than today's society. For one thing the leaders of this world are hypocrites and this is why. While they cry foul for even the slightest hint of slavery, they are aware of and do nothing about the fact that there are tens of millions of slaves today more than any other time in history you would expect. But not so, Rome was worse.

Many of these leaders today use the sex slave industry to fulfill their own perverse sexual desires behind the scenes. In the news recently there were all of those who were caught in the UK in the higher offices who were actually running a sex slave trade. This kind of thing is going on fiercely in a great way among the leaders of the world because it was found that that the sex slave trade industry went around the world.

According to an October 17, 2013 article in the Washington Post it states: "We think of slavery as a practice of the past, an image from Roman colonies or eighteenth century American plantations, but the practice of enslaving human beings as property still exists. There are 29.8 million people living as slaves right now today, according to a comprehensive new report issued by the Australian based Walk Free Foundation."

Here is a shocker, this shows the hypocrisy of this nation and the leaders that we have. There are sixty thousand slaves today in the United States, many of which are in the sex industry or the textile industry or wherever you can imagine.

"The country that is a most marked by slavery though is clearly India. There are an estimated fourteen million slaves in India alone. To give you a visual idea, it would be as if the entire population of Pennsylvania were forced into slavery."

Slavery under evil masters is the most horrible type of physical bondage.

Now back to Paul's letter to Philemon. Somehow the runaway slave Onesimus had found his way to Rome to lose himself in the thronging streets of that that great city. But God had put him in contact with Paul and he had accepted God's call and become a Christian. "The child whom I had begotten in my bonds," is how Paul words it.

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Philemon 10 I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains.

Then something happened. It was obviously impossible for Paul to go on harboring a runaway slave, since it was illegal in Rome, and something brought the problem to a head. Perhaps it was the coming of the Epaphras. It may have been that Epaphras recognized Onesimus as a slave he had seen in Colossae and subsequently the whole shocking story came out. Or it may be that with the coming of Epaphras, the conscience of Onesimus moved him to come clean about all his shameful past. We are not told which the case is.

Now in the time that Paul had been with Onesimus, he made himself very nearly indispensable to Paul and Paul would have liked to keep him beside him.

Philemon 13-14 whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. [But Paul will do nothing without the consent of Philemon, Onesimus' master] But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.

So Paul is asking Philemon to voluntarily release Onesimus, even though he has the church authority to demand that he free him. Paul was not approaching it that way because ministers in God's church are not sheriffs, we are shepherds.

A slave was not a person, he was a living tool. A master had absolute power over his slaves and one description of the abuse of what a Roman citizen could do against his slave says this: "he can box their ears or condemn them to hard labor making them work in chains upon his hands in the country or in a sort of prison factory. Or he may punish them with blows of the rod, the lash or the knot, he may brand them up on the forehead. If they are thieves or runaways, or in the end if they prove to be irreclaimable, he can crucify them."

Basically a master of a slave in ancient Rome could do whatever he wanted. The slave was continually at the mercy of the whim of a master or mistress. What made it worse was that the slaves were deliberately held down and there were, in the Roman Empire, sixty million slaves.

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The danger of revolt was constantly to be guarded against. A rebellious slave was promptly eliminated, at the worst he would be crucified to death. If a slave ran away at best he would be branded with a red hot iron on the forehead with the letter “F” standing for *fugitivus* in the Greek, which meant runaway. It is where we get the word fugitive today.

Now Paul knew all this—slavery was so ingrained into the ancient world that even to send Onesimus back to the Christian Philemon was a considerable risk. So Paul gives Onesimus this letter to Philemon and puns on Onesimus’ name. Onesimus in Greek literally means “profitable.” Onesimus was once a useless fellow, but he is useful now, as stated in Philemon 11.

Philemon 11 who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.

So here the man's name means profitable, but he was unprofitable; now that he is a Christian in the church, he is now profitable again, in a spiritual and physical way.

In other words, Onesimus proved himself to be profitable to Paul’s Christian service in Rome and he was now the slave of Jesus Christ. Paul would have kept Onesimus as one of his own fellow laborers, but he wanted to do nothing without his friend Philemon’s knowledge and consent.

Throughout this whole letter we see Paul very concerned, not only about Onesimus and his future, but also about the feelings and emotions of Philemon as well, as his dear brother. This is something that each and every one of us should be concerned about every time we make a comment to one another. Just something to keep in mind to be careful how we treat and how we talk with one another.

Now we might say he is not only Onesimus by name but he also Onesimus by nature. Maybe Philemon lost him for a time in order to have him forever. We see that here in verse 15.

Philemon 15-16 For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you [Philemon] might receive him forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother, especially to me [Paul] but how much more to you [Philemon], both in the flesh and in the Lord.

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Now he must take him back, not as a slave but as a Christian brother. Philemon has something to think about. He is now Paul's son in the faith and Philemon must receive him as he would Paul himself. That is the way that Paul is wording it. Paul lays aside his rights in verses 8-9

Philemon 8-9 Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you—being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

Paul is almost put himself on the footing of a slave, calling himself a prisoner of Jesus Christ and showing the similarity.

Paul might have used his apostolic authority and commanded Philemon to forgive and receive Onesimus, but this would not have been right from Christian standpoint. For one thing it would not help Philemon grow in grace or gain a real blessing from the experience. Law is a much weaker motivation than love and Paul wanted Philemon to broaden his spiritual understanding. This is probably why Paul uses the words "beseech" or "appeal" in verse 9.

Paul's appeal is based on several factors. For one thing he appeals to Philemon's Christian love, a love which Paul had already praised in verse 5. Then Paul called the disobedient slave his own son in the faith, reminding Philemon that Onesimus was now a brother in Christ.

The saint's identification with Christ is wonderfully portrayed here. Onesimus was such a part of Paul's life that it pained Paul even to send him back home.

Philemon 17 If then you [Philemon] count me as a partner, receive him [Onesimus] as you would me.

This is what Jesus Christ says of every true believer, "receive him as Myself." We are accepted in the beloved. Paul says this in Ephesians 1.

Ephesians 1:6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved. [Christ]

Onesimus was not returning home the same old person, he had a completely new

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standing before his master. He was now a brother beloved, identified with Paul and therefore accepted. This is what the Bible means by justification. We are in Christ and therefore accepted before God and this is what Paul was asking Philemon to do, to accept Onesimus, not at the same level of course but in the way of analogy.

Many people wonder why Paul says nothing is in this letter about the whole matter of slavery. He does not condemn, he does not even tell Philemon to set Onesimus free. It is still as a slave that he would have him take him back until Onesimus is able to become freed legally.

There are those who have criticized Paul for not seizing the opportunity to condemn the slavery on which the ancient world was built. Let us look at some more reasons for his silence.

As I mentioned before, slavery was an integral part of the ancient world, the whole society was built on it. Greek and Roman philosophers held that it was in the nature of things that certain men should be slaves to serve the higher classes of men.

I guarantee you that it will happen again, it is already happening if there is sixty million slaves out there in the world. It has already begun and we know that in the tribulation one-third of Israel will go into slavery. So a great deal more slavery is coming in the near future.

It may well be that Paul accepted the institution of slavery because it was almost impossible to imagine society without it at that time. Further if Christianity had in fact given the slaves any encouragement to revolt or to leave their masters, nothing but tragedy would have followed. Any such revolt would have been savagely crushed and any slave who took his freedom would have been mercilessly punished and Christianity itself would have been branded as revolutionary and subversive and not given time to flourish as it did.

So obviously God is in control and this is how He decided it was going to happen, not immediately, but over time as people learn God's truth. I refer to the movie "Spartacus" where all of those slaves rebelled, revolted, and then they crucified them. What a sad sight.

Given the nature of Christian faith, deliverance was bound to come but when the time was right, and to encourage slaves to hope for it and seize it could have done infinitely more harm than good. What Christianity did was to introduce a new relationship between man and man in which all external differences were abolished. Upon

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conversion Onesimus had entered a new relationship.

I Corinthians 12:13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.

We see there that Philemon knew by scripture or by letters from Paul, that whether slave or free, we are all one in Christ.

Galatians 3:28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

It was as a slave that Onesimus ran away and it was as a slave that he was going back, but now he was not only a slave, he was a beloved brother in the Lord, and when a relationship like that enters into life social grades and castes cease to matter.

Probably one reason the most slavery is in India is because they have a very strict caste system, you cannot get yourself out of it in any way. You are stuck permanently, you have to marry within that system and so on. So it carries that through caste systems that there will be a lot of slavery.

The very names master and slave become irrelevant. If the master treats a slave as Christ would have treated him, and if the slave serves the master as he would serve Christ, then it does not matter if you call the one master and the other slave. Their relationship does not depend on any human classification because they are both in Christ.

Christianity in the early days did not attack slavery, to have done so would have been disastrous, as I mentioned, but it introduced a new relationship in which the human grades of society ceased to matter. Christians are one body, whether Jews or Gentile; slaves are free man.

This new relationship never gave the slave the right to take advantage of it. It made him a better slave and a more efficient servant, because now he must do things in such a way that he must offer them to Christ.

Nor did it mean that the master must be soft and an easygoing willing to accept bad workmanship and inferior service. It *did* mean that he no longer treated any slave as a

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thing but as a person and a brother in Christ, if they were both in the church.

There are two passages in which Paul sets out the duties of slaves and masters, one is in Ephesians 6:5-9 and the other is in Colossians 3:22-4:1. Both were written when Paul was under house arrest in Rome and most likely when Onesimus was with him.

It is difficult not to think that they owe much to long talks that Paul had with the runaway slave who had become a Christian. We can guess from history what a Christian master would do, he would free his slave eventually. When he wrote Colossians and Ephesians, he had personal knowledge in mastery and slavery.

On this view Paul's epistle to Philemon is a private letter, sent personally by Paul to Philemon, when he sent back his runaway slave; and it was written to urge Philemon to receive back Onesimus, not as a pagan master would, but as a Christian receives a brother.

In Philemon 13, Paul makes it clear that he would rather keep Onesimus with him.

Philemon 13-14 whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.

So Paul was under house arrest and needed help for various things and he maybe even helped him with his writing, but I do not know. In verse 19 he reminds Philemon:

Philemon 19-21 I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay—not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides. Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord. Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

Paul had no doubt that Philemon would free Onesimus. It is possible that Philemon could have resisted this appeal, but in the face of language like that, could he do anything other than send Onesimus back to Paul with his blessing?

Since Philemon was a convert converted member of God's church, it is very likely that Paul eventually got Onesimus back and that he became Paul's helper in the work of the

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gospel. I think you will find these historical facts quite interesting here.

Moving ahead fifty years from the writing of this letter, Ignatius, who some of you have heard of, one of the great Christian martyrs, is being taken to execution from Antioch to Rome. As he goes he writes letters which still survive to the churches of Asia Minor. He stops in Smyrna and writes to the church at Ephesus. In that letter he has much to say about their wonderful bishop. What was the bishop's name? It was Onesimus.

Onesimus and Ignatius make exactly the same pun as Paul made. "He is Onesimus by name and Onesimus by nature; the profitable one to Christ." It may well be that the runaway slave had become, with the passing years, the bishop of Ephesus. Even a lowly slave can be used by God.

It is practically certain that the first collection of Paul's letters was made at Ephesus, about the turn of the century, and it was just then that Onesimus was bishop of Ephesus. It may well be that it was he who suggested and even insisted that this short and personal letter be included in the collection in order that everyone in the church might know what the grace of God had done for him.

Through this Onesimus tells the world that he was once a runaway slave and that he owed his life to Paul and to Jesus Christ. We cannot be certain but it certainly seems likely.

Now the letter to Philemon is extraordinary because in it we see Paul asking a favor which we do not usually see in his writings. Very few men, if any, ever asked fewer favors than he did, but in this letter he is asking a favor, not so much for himself as for Onesimus, who had taken the wrong turn and whom Paul was helping to find his way back.

Let us back up a little bit in this letter. The beginning of this letter is unusual. Paul usually identifies himself as Paul an apostle, but on this occasion he is writing as a friend to a friend and the official title is dropped. He is not writing it up as Paul the apostle but rather as Paul the prisoner of Christ. At the very beginning Paul lays aside all appeal to authority and makes his appeal to sympathy and to love alone.

Philemon 1-7 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer, to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, hearing of your love and faith

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which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.

Apphia is called beloved or literally “the sister.” She was the wife of Philemon and the mother Archippus. She would no doubt be concerned about Onesimus and would be playing an important role in the ministry of their house church.

So Archippus, the son of Philemon, and Apphia had seen Christian service with Paul because Paul speaks of him as a fellow soldier. Philemon was a man from whom it was easy to ask a favor and he was a man whose faith in Christ and love to the brother and was known by everyone and the story of them had reached even Rome, where Paul was under house arrest.

His house must have been like an oasis in the desert because, as Paul puts it, he had refreshed the hearts of God's people and it is a great compliment to go down in history as a man in whose house God's people were rested and refreshed, meaning that he was very hospitable, at the very least.

Now in this passage there is one verse which is very difficult to translate and about which a great deal has been written. It is Philemon 6, and the Revised Standard Version translates it as:

Philemon 6 (RSV) and I pray that the sharing of your faith may promote the knowledge of all the good that is ours in Christ.

The phrase translated “the sharing of your faith” is from the Greek *koinonia pisteos*, and it is very difficult to translate and understand from the Greek to English. As far as we can understand there are three possible meanings of this word.

First is *koinonia*, which can mean ‘a sharing in.’ It can, for instance, mean partnership in a business. So this may mean your share in the Christian faith or it might be a prayer that the faith, which Philemon and Paul share in, may lead Philemon deeper and deeper into God's truth.

The second possible meaning of *koinonia* can mean ‘fellowship.’ This may be a prayer

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that Christian fellowship may lead Philemon ever more deeply into the truth.

The third possible meaning *koinonia* can mean the 'act of sharing.' In that case the verse will mean: "it is my prayer that your way of generously sharing all that you have will lead you more and more deeply into the knowledge of the good things which lead to Christ."

The third meaning is probably the correct one, the act of sharing. Obviously Christian generosity was a characteristic of Philemon and he had a love for God's people and in his home they were rested and refreshed and now Paul asks the generous man to be even more generous.

There is a great spiritual principle here. If this interpretation is correct it means that we learn about Christ by giving to others. It means that by emptying ourselves we are filled with Christ. It means that to be openhanded and generous-hearted is a sure way to learn more and more of the wealth of Christ.

The man who knows Christ is not the intellectual scholar, not even the saint who spends his days in prayer, but the man who moves in loving generosity among his fellow men as Christ would. Prayer is important, but so is loving generosity to one another.

Paul being Paul could have demanded what he wished from Philemon but instead he only humbly requests it. A gift and must be given freely and with good will, if it is coerced it is no gift at all. Philemon makes his request here in verses 10-11 once again, and it is for Onesimus.

Philemon 10-11 I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.

We notice how he delays pronouncing the name Onesimus until verse 10, almost as if he hesitated to do so. He does not make any excuses for him, he freely admits he was a useless character but he makes one claim, "he is useful now."

It is significant to note that Paul claims that in Christ the useless person had been made useful and the last thing true Christianity is designed to produce is vague, inefficient people. It produces people who are of use and can do a better job than they ever could if they had not known Jesus Christ.

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There is a double meaning in Philemon 12. Paul says:

Philemon 12 I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart.

The verb there, which is *anapempeim*, does not only to mean send back, it also means to refer a case to. So essentially what Paul is saying to Philemon is: “I am referring this case of Onesimus to you, that you may give a verdict on it that will match the love you ought to have.”

Onesimus must have become very dear to Paul in these months under house arrest because he pays him a great tribute saying that to send him to Philemon is like sending a bit of his own heart. Then comes the appeal. Paul would have liked to keep Onesimus but he sends him back to Philemon, “for he will do nothing without his consent.”

Notice something significant here. Christianity is not out to help a man escape his past and run away from it, but rather it is out to enable him to face his past and rise above it. Onesimus had run away, now he must go back and face the consequences of what he did, accept them, and rise above it.

Christianity is more conquest and then an escape. We are intent on victory, not on running from the world in defeat. In I John 5, John writes:

I John 5:4-5 For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

But Onesimus comes back with a difference here. He went away as a heathen slave and he comes back as a brother in Christ. It was no doubt hard for Philemon to regard a runaway slave as a brother but that is exactly what Paul expects because Philemon was a man of faith.

Philemon 15-17 For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me.

In other words Paul says “if you (Philemon) agree that I am your partner in the work of Christ and that Onesimus is my son in the faith, you must receive him as you would receive me.”

Again I want to point out that this is something very significant. We must always welcome back the person who has made a mistake and then repented of it. Too often we regard the one who has taken a wrong turn with suspicion and show that we are never prepared to trust him again.

We believe that God can forgive him but we find it too difficult. When a person has made a mistake, the way back can be very hard and God cannot readily forgive the person who, in his self righteousness or lack of sympathy, makes it harder. Nevertheless God will do whatever it takes to help the believer who has lost his way and we should be willing to do the same.

Philemon 18-19 But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay—not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides.

Now what about the Roman law that says that the slave cannot just be released? And what about the money that Onesimus took? How was Philemon to forgive if there was to be no restitution? This kind of forgiveness would only make him the accessory of a criminal by Roman law. By saying “I will repay; put that all my account,” Paul satisfies the Roman law.

Christ found us as runaway slaves, lawbreakers, and rebels but he forgave us and identified us with Himself. He died for us and paid the debt for us. Christ satisfied the penalty of the law for us. We will read Romans 4.

Romans 4:6-8 just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin.”

To impute means to put on one's account. Our sins were put to Christ's account and His righteousness was put to our account when we accepted Jesus Christ as our personal Savior. We repent of our sins, and symbolically in baptism, we have our sins washed away by the shed blood of Christ.

We must keep in mind the distinction between “accepted in Christ” and “acceptable to Christ.” The one who has trusted Christ for salvation is forever accepted in Christ. Whenever a converted person sins, he is still accepted but his actions are not acceptable, he must be cleansed. It is necessary to confess that sin to God and receive Christ’s cleansing.

I John 1:9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Because we are accepted by Him we have a sonship and as we live lives acceptable to him we have fellowship. Philemon 19 illustrates the common form of an “I owe you” back in Paul’s day.

Philemon 19 I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay—not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides.

Paul was actually taking Onesimus’ debt upon himself. It is one of the laws of life that someone has to pay the price of sin. Now just as Jesus Christ shouldered the sins of mankind and paid the ultimate debt, so also there are those who, in love, are prepared, on a physical level, to help pay for the consequences of the wrongs of those who were dear to them. For example, parents often bail their children out of financial difficulties because of the mistakes they have made.

Onesimus must have stolen from Philemon as well as run away from him. If he had not helped himself to Philemon’s money it is difficult to see how he could have ever recovered the cost of the long road to Rome. So Paul writes, “with his own hand that he will be responsible and will repay in full.”

It is interesting to note that this is an exact instance of a *cheirographon*. It is a Greek word and it is the kind of handwriting acknowledgment met in Colossians 2:14. This is a handwriting against Paul, an obligation voluntarily accepted and signed.

Colossians 2:14 having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

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So Paul was talking about a certificate of debt. That debt was the penalty of the breaking of the law which is the death penalty.

Onesimus broke the law and he was going to receive the death penalty according to Roman law most likely. It is also interesting to note that Paul was able to pay Onesimus' debt. Now and again we get a glimpse which shows that Paul was not without financial resources. For example, Felix kept him prisoner because he had hopes of a bribe to let Paul go.

Acts 24:26 Meanwhile he [Felix] also hoped that money would be given him by Paul, that he might release him. Therefore he sent for him more often and conversed with him.

Also Paul was able to lease the house during his imprisonment in Rome.

Acts 28:30 Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him.

It was also Paul's rule to expect the best from others, he never really doubted that Philemon would grant his request. It is a good rule to expect the best from others. In contrast, if we make it clear that we will expect little we will probably get just that. In Philemon 20-22, Paul speaks with optimism here.

Philemon 20-22 Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord. Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.

So obviously Paul was very close in friendship and brotherhood to both Philemon and Onesimus as we should be with one another in the congregation and within the greater churches of God.

In Philemon 23-24 there is a list of greetings from the same friends as were in Colossians and so there becomes a blessing. Philemon and Onesimus alike are commended to the grace of Christ.

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Philemon 23-25 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

So Paul closed with personal greetings to Philemon and his household, reminding his friends of the many obligations that they had to him. He was sure that Philemon would go the extra mile and do even more than he had requested.

This brief letter illustrates what Christ has done for the members of God's church. There are two phrases that summarize the letter. First, "receive him as myself" in verse 17. This is our identification with Christ. The second identification, "is put that on my account" in verse 19, and this imputation is in the form of our sins being laid on Christ.

Imputation of sin on Christ and of righteousness on believers come only by faith and the imputation of divine righteousness is the essence of what it means to be justified. We are justified by faith in Christ, but it is God who does the justifying.

Galatians 2:16 knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.

A final important aspect of slavery in the Bible is that it is only temporary. Slavery is a temporary status without choice to be a bondservant, a slave is not owned for life. Advancement is also possible. Truly, slaves of God are raised to the permanent status of adopted sons by God.

John 8:34-36 Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."

Spiritual freedom only comes through Jesus Christ. In the scope of eternity slavery is a temporary condition. Now turn to Galatians 4.

Galatians 4:1-7 Now I say that the heir, as long as he is a child, does not differ at all from a slave, though he is master of all, but is under guardians

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and stewards until the time appointed by the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.

What Paul teaches, not only in his letter to Philemon, but also elsewhere, is that the love coming from both sides, masters and slaves, is the only solution. The love is the response of God's love for His child, whether that child is black or white, bond or free.

It is this love of God that melts cruelty into kindness and in doing so changes despots into kind employers, slaves into willing servants, and all who accept it into brothers in Christ. The kingship or rule of God works from within outward, not from without inward.

The living of God's way of life will do far more to solve social problems than any number of secular laws, guns, or riots. The world rebels against the very thing that would free them from the effects of sin. If Christ Jesus makes you free you are totally free to live God's way of life—eternal life!