
Sacrificial Love

SCOTT HOEZEE

Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address changed the world, and it did it in just 272 well chosen words. Paul's little memo to his friend, Philemon did the same thing in just 334 well chosen words. President Lincoln used familiar words in new ways to make people think differently about slavery, and Paul did something similar. Through irony and subtlety, Paul conveyed some very big implications of what it means to be in love with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Short though this apostolic memo may be, it was in its own way revolutionary. Today on Groundwork, we will dig into this short letter to see what it may mean for us even yet today. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and today, Dave, we are beginning a four-part series – kind of a short series – on very, very short letters; in fact, we are kind of calling this series: The Memos of the New Testament.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I like that. You came up with that. I don't know if that was original with you or not, but these are four one-chapter, one page each, tiny, little books, most of them very near the back of the Bible. Most Christians, I would hazard to guess, have not even read all four of them. They are really easy to miss, but we think that, as Paul says to Timothy, all scripture is inspired by God and is profitable; so, that is our goal for these next four programs.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the books, the letters, the memos in question are Philemon, II John, III John, and Jude; and on this program we are going to kind of take them in the order they appear in the New Testament, and so that means we are going to begin with Philemon; and this is one of about four or so letters in the New Testament, Dave, that Paul wrote near the end of his life when he was in prison. In fact, as we will hear in just a minute when we read the first few verses of Philemon, *prisoner* is actually... in the Greek particularly, it is the second word of this particular letter.

DAVE BAST

That is right, Scott. This is one of the so-called "prison epistles" of Paul. Scholars like to debate where he may have been imprisoned. The consensus has always been that he was a prisoner in the city of Rome. It is described at the end of the book of Acts, and while there he wrote Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon; and especially those last two: Colossians and Philemon are very closely connected. Colossae was a city in the Lycus River valley in western Asia Minor. It was east of Ephesus by some considerable distance, and it was part of a grouping of three cities, the others being Laodicea, which we know from the book of Revelation – John addressed a letter there – and Hierapolis. Paul mentions both Laodicea and Hierapolis in his letter to the Colossians, and he mentions many of the same people there that he names here in Philemon; so there is a very close connection.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we think that at least part of, if not most of, the Colossian church may have met in Philemon's house; and a lot of scholars think that this little memo to Philemon from Paul was probably, as it were, tucked in the same envelope as the letter to the Colossians because at the very end of Colossians, in Chapter 4:9, Paul says that accompanying that letter would be someone named Onesimus, and of course, Onesimus is the key figure in the letter to Philemon. So, it kind of looks like Paul wrote Colossians and then he dashed off this memo to Philemon, stuck it in the envelope, and gave it to Onesimus to deliver both.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and it is a very personal letter about a very personal matter, but at the same time, and interestingly, Paul addresses it to the whole church; so it is almost as though Paul is saying: All right; I want to tack on a PS, or this extra memo, to deal with the personal situation involving Onesimus and Philemon, but I want it to be read by the whole church because it has a message – it has a lesson – for the whole church, and that is why we are still reading it today; it was included in the New Testament. It is obviously a genuine letter of Paul's and it has much to say to us; so why don't we get right into it and listen to the opening verses.

SCOTT HOEZEE

¹Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon, our dear friend and co-worker, ²to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house. ³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴When I remember you in my prayers. ⁵I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. ⁶I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. ⁷I have, indeed, received much joy and encouragement from your love because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

DAVE BAST

So, that is a great beginning, and it is interesting in several ways. Right off the bat one interesting point is the way Paul describes himself. He always started his letters by introducing himself: I am Paul. I am the one who is writing you; and he would often name colleagues who were with him, in this case, Timothy; but he does not say: The Apostle Paul is writing; he says: Paul a prisoner of Christ Jesus... So, it is kind of, right from the get-go, an appeal. He is going to be appealing to Philemon, but he does not sort of come down with his apostolic authority and say: You know, I can order you to do what I want you to do; but he begins with this sort of tug at Philemon's heartstrings: Look, I am a prisoner right now.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and indeed, we will see also in the next segment of this program, Dave, that Paul will return to that theme of being a prisoner and in chains; but for the moment, let's just establish why – and we will find this out very quickly, and we will hear these verses in the next segment – but why was Paul writing this letter? What is the situation that gives rise to it? Well, it is fairly simple and, in Paul's day, probably kind of typical, or not unusual, and that is this: Philemon, Paul's brother, his friend to whom he is writing this memo, had owned a slave named Onesimus. Something went wrong. Maybe Onesimus stole something; maybe they had an argument; whatever happened, Onesimus became a run-away slave. He ran away from Philemon and eventually found his way to Paul, and so Paul befriends Onesimus, and that is the reason he is writing this letter, because he is going to be sending Onesimus back to Philemon, but he wants to send him back in a very particular way. That issue of slavery is why.... It is possible that that issue alone is why the Holy Spirit included this letter – this memo – in the New Testament; but it is certainly one of the reasons it has been of such interest to the Church across the ages because it deals with a very touchy subject. Historically, it has been very touchy – slavery.

DAVE BAST

Right; we can kind of piece together the dynamics of the specific situation – a kind of triangle involving Paul, Onesimus and Philemon. So Philemon is the owner of this slave. He must have been a well-to-do guy. We are going to learn later on that he was converted by Paul because Paul says: You know what, Philemon? Not to put too fine a point on it; I would like to remind you that you owe your very life to me.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right.

DAVE BAST

So, it is most likely that while Paul was working and living in Ephesus for a period of three years Philemon came there, somehow met him, was converted, went back and hosted a house church in his own home. Probably the woman who is mentioned, Apphia, is his wife. The other guy that Paul describes as kind of a fellow soldier, a coworker – another pastor in other words – their son Archippus was perhaps the pastor in Laodicea; again using Colossians for background. So, Onesimus probably stole money from his master. He was kind of a useless fellow at first, Paul says; and he ran away, maybe trying to lose himself in the big city of Rome, but he must have fallen on hard times and knew about Paul, perhaps, from his old master, and so found him, and was himself converted.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and so now Paul needs to send him back; and again, this therefore will touch on an issue which has vexed the Church for a long time. It is still a very much alive issue today in a lot of parts of the world with human trafficking and slavery. What does the Bible say about slavery? As we know, there were long periods of history where people thought the Bible was pro-slavery. I mean, Paul told slaves to obey their masters under the Lord. Jesus did not really ever overtly object to the institution of slavery; so is the Bible against slavery or for slavery? What Paul has to say to Philemon here is a pretty big player in answering that question, and what Paul said and how he said it is what we can look at next.

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

So, let's get right back to Philemon and pick up the reading:

⁸For this reason (Paul writes), though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, ⁹yet I would rather appeal to you (to you, Philemon), on the basis of love – and I Paul do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. ¹⁰I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. ¹¹Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful, both to you and to me. ¹²I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

¹³I wanted to keep him with me so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the Gospel, ¹⁴but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. ¹⁵Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for awhile, so that you might have him back forever; ¹⁶no longer as a slave, but more than a slave; a beloved brother, especially to me, how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. ¹⁷So, if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

DAVE BAST

So, here Paul is dealing with the central issue of sending Onesimus back because it was wrong, in a sense, for him to run away, especially as a thief. He wants there to be reconciliation between master and slave, but he also wants Philemon to change as a slave owner. Real subtle and very almost clever, I think we could say, the way Paul deals with this. He is not going to issue a command. He is kind of finessing what is a tricky situation, but from that we have some larger questions about the whole subject of slavery, as you mentioned, Scott, in the opening.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; the name, by the way, the name Onesimus in Greek means *useful*, and so Paul does a little play on that. He says: Look, he was *useless* to you, but now he is...

DAVE BAST

He must have been a lousy slave, in other words, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I guess so, but he has been *useful* to Paul, and he says he can be useful to you because, look, now he is a partner in the Gospel. He is your brother in Christ. So Paul lays it on pretty thick and is basically saying to Philemon: Look pal, I guess you can do what you want, but if I were you, I would welcome him back as a brother. He is not a slave anymore; in fact, treat him the way you would treat me.

DAVE BAST

But now here is the bigger question, though. Why... and this is a difficult one... why doesn't the New Testament outright condemn slavery? Why is it that they kind of dance around – it seems like they are dancing around the subject of this great moral evil. You mentioned Abraham Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address in the intro to the program. In his second inaugural, you know, he has this wonderful line where he says: We may wonder why some men would attribute their cause to a just God while wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's brows. I mean that, in effect, is the essence of slavery. You are holding another human being to involuntary servitude, and without compensation, you are stealing his labor for yourself – you are getting your bread from his sweat. So, it is troubling to some degree that the New Testament does not condemn this, but yet, that is why we have to remember the whole social situation of the first century on the one hand, where about one third of the population were slaves; where slavery and slave revolts were dealt with brutally and mercilessly; where Christianity was a very small, struggling movement just getting started, and I think the key is to ask: How is it that the Gospel actually does bring social change eventually?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; but you raise the very interesting question, to which I do not have a definitive answer. Why didn't the New Testament... Why didn't Jesus... Why isn't there a verse somewhere that says: Therefore, my beloved, hear you this. On this slavery is wrong, period.

DAVE BAST

Thou shalt not have slaves, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is not there. It may be that the implications of the kingdom were still being worked out. Maybe the full ramifications were still being worked out and realized, and maybe this letter is part of Paul, now as an old man, who had previously written in other letters, you know: Slaves, obey your masters... but maybe he is starting to see that there is something fundamental about the kingdom that is going to undercut this; and in this particular case, as you pointed out a minute ago, Dave, even echoing back to Abraham Lincoln, Paul creates a little irony here because he knows that Philemon is praying for Paul's release from chains, and so Paul is basically saying: What sense does it make to pray that God will release me from chains if you are just going to put Onesimus back in chains, who is also a brother in Christ now? So, there might be something

about the dynamic of the Gospel, and we will think about that in a few minutes, but there might be something that was unfolding... I mean, Jesus said something very interesting in John's Gospel. You know, where Jesus said not that the Holy Spirit would come and just give you all the truth all at once. It would just be a truth dump into your brain. Jesus said the Spirit will lead you into all truth, indicating that there would be progression, maybe, and learning going on.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely. Well, I mean, it took a Christian country 250 years... I am talking about us – the good old U.S. of A. 250 years after our beginning to finally abolish slavery, and it took a huge civil war to make that happen; and even today we have not overcome what some have called America's original sin, which is the fact of slavery; but here, I think it is very important... you talk about the dynamic that is introduced, and look what Paul is doing here. Number one: He is addressing Philemon in totally different terms about the relationship that he has with his slave. The typical master in the Greco-Roman world of Paul's day would have thought of his slave as simply a piece of property – nothing less...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Nothing more... chattel.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; and the only obligation he had was to keep him alive to do enough work as long as he felt like it. He could kill him anytime he wanted with complete impunity. Paul is saying: First, Philemon, you have certain responsibilities. In fact, when he addresses masters in those other passages, such as in Colossians, he says in Colossians Chapter 4: Masters, treat your slaves fairly and with justice; as if to say, slaves have rights, too. They are human. And then when Paul addresses slaves, it is to tell them: You are real persons. And so now, Onesimus is no longer just a slave; Paul says, he is more than a slave, he is a brother. That is a radical, radical insight.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That was more revolutionary to their ears back then than we sometimes realize; so why doesn't the New Testament outlaw slavery overtly? Some of these things that you just pointed out would sound about as revolutionary to the people back then as it would to us today if somebody just made a blanket statement; but, one last thing before we move on to our final segment, and that is the way Paul ends the letter. He says near the end to Philemon: One more thing, prepare a guest room for me for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you; which I think was Paul's subtle way of saying: If you don't treat Onesimus right, I will know because I am coming your way. It was kind of a zinger; sort of like the lawyer in the courtroom saying: Oh, one last question – and that is always the zinger. So Paul is putting a little pressure on him here as well.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely, right; maybe the key to the whole deal is going to be found in the very closing words that Paul writes to his friend and colleague in ministry, Philemon, and we are going to look at those before the program ends, in just a moment.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork where, Dave, today we are digging into what we are calling one of the "memos" of the New Testament – one of the shortest of all letters – Paul's letter to Philemon dealing with the situation of Philemon's slave, Onesimus, and Paul sending him back. We want to wonder about how this is relevant for us also today, and I think we can see that by going toward the beginning of the letter and then the very last line of the letter. The beginning of the letter, here is the basis of Paul's overall argument, and it comes in Philemon verse 9, where he says to Philemon: I am not going to order you – I am not going to bully you into doing this – I appeal to you on the basis of love.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; and that is our familiar Christian word *agape*. It is almost as though Paul is saying as he sort of finesses the situation of the slave that is returning, and frankly returning to slavery, but with an appeal to Philemon to voluntarily set him free, rather than order it, it is as though Paul says: I have to let love work. The love that comes from God through us and then we begin to demonstrate it; and as much as we would like to hurry that process up, it is going to take time to work its way through, so there is a tension between what ought to be and what currently is.

You ask the question – at least, I do: Why didn't Paul simply condemn slavery as an evil? But instead, it seems as though what the Holy Spirit's purpose was was to inject and create this community where love was working so that eventually it would lead to the kind of society where people could stand up and demand social justice and try to order things more as God intends them to be.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it took a while, and it takes a while, and it is still unfolding in the world today, but as we live... What Paul is saying is, as the Holy Spirit comes alongside of us – and by the way, that is the verb “to appeal” in verse 9; it is *parakalo*, from which we get *paraclete* – the Holy Spirit – comes and makes us more Christ-like, and as the... You know, Jesus said the kingdom spreads like leaven in dough, and as the whole Church becomes more leavened with the love of Christ, we are going to stamp out, in our own midst, we are going to stamp out racism – we are going to stamp out slavery – we are going to stamp out making distinctions of all kinds, which put people down; and as the Church, then, as a segment of the larger kingdom of God changes, it then can also change the world, which has happened in the United States and in Canada, in many countries, and is happening today where the Church does stand up and say no to injustice. The whole antislavery, the abolitionist movement was founded on these kinds of principles in Paul, in Philemon; and so, you have this great leavening process whereby we Christians get better and better at seeing all people as the image of God – all people as a sister or brother or potential sister or brother in Christ – and as the Gospel influence spreads, starting in the First Century, and now continuing to this very day, it turns out Paul is pretty revolutionary after all, because hidden in here, again like a kingdom seed – a mustard seed – are all the implications of what it means to be a Christ-like community where all people are loved no matter what the color of their skin, their income level, anything.

DAVE BAST

And it is not easy, as you say; it is a process that takes time. I just put myself back in this story and imagined Onesimus' reaction. You know, we have been focusing on what Paul says to Philemon, but just think what he said to Onesimus: I want you to go back. You've got to go back there. He is still your master, in a sense, and you stole from him. We need to make that good. And by the way, he says to Philemon: Look, if I have to pay for it, I will pay for it myself...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, we did not read that verse, but yes, Paul says: Charge me.

DAVE BAST

You know, if you won't forgive him... and Onesimus says: What? Huh? Wait a minute; I gotta go back? But, yes, somehow these things need to be made right. This relationship needs to be transformed, and for that to happen you cannot just run away and keep on running. So, grace is real, love is real, but it is hard. Paul will actually close the letter by commending Philemon to the grace of the Lord Jesus, and he says: May He be with your spirit; and ultimately I think we all need grace. Our churches need grace as we struggle with broken relationships, as we struggle with dealing with past wrongs that people have done to one another: Can we really treat each other as brothers and sisters? Certainly our communities and our societies need grace and need that kind of *agape* because they are still broken, too. I mean, nothing has changed about human sinfulness...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Even within the Church.

DAVE BAST

It is still there, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you know, we noted at the end of the last segment, Dave, that Paul kind of puts Philemon on notice when he says: Oh by the way, one more thing; prepare a guest room, I am coming; which is Paul's subtle way of saying: If you don't do this right, I will know. When I preached on this once, Dave, I said: What if Paul said that to us today, to any one of our congregations: Prepare a guest room, I am coming. What would Paul find; and our prayer needs to be, and remains, that if Paul came and visited us the way he maybe visited Philemon to see how things were going with Onesimus, that Paul would find our communities full of grace – full of the love of Jesus – accepting one another and widening that influence to all of society and to the whole world that God loved so much that He sent His only Son.

DAVE BAST

Amen to that. Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation today. I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on Groundwork.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/sacrificial-love>

Printed on June 3, 2026