

The Gospel in Twenty-Five Verses! (vv. 1-25)

A London inner-city missionary was extremely successful in persuading “fallen women” to give up immorality. He was returning to the city after a brief visit in the country and stopped at a country inn for tea. After tea, the matron went to a drawer and took out an old daguerreotype of a beautiful girl. Handing it to the missionary, she said, “This is my daughter, gone, lost. . . . Please take this with you. It is the last memento of the one whom we love so much. If you ever see her, please tell her that her old home still waits for her and her mother’s heart still yearns for her.” These words, of a grief-stricken mother, are a beautiful way of expressing the gospel’s storyline!

The gospel! This expression brings thoughts of joy, happiness, and peace to all who know and understand God’s love. The gospel is a system of thought that has changed civilization, influenced legal codes, and molded nations. One word summarizes the entire story that beckons weary men and women to peace—“grace.”

The gospel story is well illustrated by the book of Philemon. This book, the shortest of all Paul’s epistles, is actually a personal note to Philemon, a wealthy citizen of Colossae. This letter is a warm appeal on behalf of a runaway slave who had become a Christian. The urging of full forgiveness, the exhortation to exercise grace, and the goal of reconciliation all point to the marvelous gospel story of Jesus!

THE EVENTS OF THE STORY

A slave had run away from his master and reached Rome. During his stay in Rome the

slave, Onesimus, had somehow become a Christian through Paul’s teaching. After becoming a Christian, the slave knew he had to make full restitution (as much as possible) of all wrongs—he decided to return to Colossae and to his master. The interesting twist to the story is revealed in the fact that the master was also a Christian as well as a personal friend of Paul (v. 1). Paul wrote the brief letter as mediation for Onesimus.

The status of slaves during this period was precarious. Slaves were viewed as “walking tools,” of value only as to the degree that they were useful to the owners. Slaves could be disposed of for any reason. Scourging, mutilation, and death were common treatments to slaves.

Due to the harsh conditions of slavery, many slaves ran away. For the runaway who was caught, even harsher penalties were enforced. Normal penalties included extreme torture leading to a slow death. Some escaped death but were branded with the letter “F” on their foreheads representing the Latin word *FUGITIVUS*, meaning “runaway.”

If a runaway slave desired to return, a clause in Roman law provided for “advocacy.” This law stated that the runaway could get a friend of the master to intercede and prevent harsh punishment. Some cases reveal that the advocate’s plea was so successful that the returned slave was adopted into the master’s family.

These facts provide the setting behind the twenty-five verses of the book of Philemon. But the story of Onesimus is enhanced because the participants were Christians. The outcome is

generally understood to be alluded to in verses 17 and 21—full forgiveness, total reconciliation, and admission as a family member. If this was the outcome, there could not have been a better ending for Onesimus and Philemon!

THE ILLUSTRATION OF THE GOSPEL STORY

As the story unfolds, observe the following points which illustrate the glorious gospel message.

See a Straying Servant

Onesimus had once served his master, but he rebelled and left the authority of the master. Such is true regarding all men; they have rebelled against God's rule and have forsaken His authority (Isaiah 53:6; Romans 6:23). Unfortunately, man as the erring rebel, forsakes the only way that will bring happiness (Psalms 95:10; Jeremiah 44:5). Countless millions live in the world and are like Onesimus—fugitives from their rightful Master. They are in a desperate predicament!

Recognize the Just Condemnation

The fugitive slaves knew neither security nor peace, for they were always on alert for the *FUGITIVARII*, a group whose business was to recover runaway slaves. The fugitives always had

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the threat of arrest hanging over their lives. How true is this in the lives of all who have run away from God's authority! They suffer the burden of guilt, and harsh punishment hangs over their lives (Romans 5:18a; 2 Thessalonians 1:8, 9). Those who live without God's rule directing them will find only a gnawing guilt, an emptiness of spirit, and a tragedy of existence! They are fugitives who are vainly trying to escape the just condemnation of

their rebellion. The penalty for such is awful—"This is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their works were evil" (John 3:19). Who can feel comfortable under such a penalty?

Observe the Willing Advocate

There were provisions for the runaway slave to escape severe punishment. There was a possibility that the slave could be restored. There is a provision for erring man as well. Erring man, as the runaway slave of God, needs an "Advocate" to plead his cause with the Master. We have access to such an Advocate, who will plead our case before the Almighty Master (1 Timothy 2:5). Just as Paul did for Onesimus, Jesus is willing to do for sinful man. Paul put himself in the place of Onesimus (v. 18). Paul constrained Philemon by love to accept the penitent slave (v. 17). Paul forsook personal rights and acted with humility (vv. 8, 9). In Paul we find a beautiful illustration of what Jesus has done for us! (Cf. Philippians 2:5-10; Romans 5:6-9.)

Notice the Grace Extended

What could Onesimus have done to have avoided the punishment he justly deserved? Nothing! There was no way out for him. What can fallen man do to avoid the penalty of his rebellion to God? Nothing! (Isaiah 64:6a; Ephesians 2:9). In each instance, the only factor preventing the harsh and just punishment was grace! (Ephesians 2:8, 9). Here then is the "Good News" that all fugitives long to hear. Amnesty is available! But we must be careful that we understand the conditions of God's grace (Isaiah 1:18-20). The amnesty, the absolute freedom from a just condemnation, is conditioned upon one "obeying" God. This "obedience" is clearly explained in the New Testament. There must be a personal willingness to no longer live as you want, but a willingness to restrict your lifestyle to exactly the way God directs—this is called repentance (Luke 13:3). There must be a joyful confession of the deity of Christ (Matthew 10:32). There must be a change in relationships—a "death" and a "resurrection" by which the old lifestyle is buried and the new lifestyle is put on—baptism for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16). Once this "obedience" occurs, we are made free from the condemnation of sin! (Romans 8:1).

Ponder the Accomplished Reconciliation

Philemon's house was reunited and a great spirit and unity were found. Harmony, peace, and happiness reigned (v. 11). A similar effect is evident when wayward man is reconciled to God through faith by grace. The obedient soul finds great joy because God's grace has justified him (Luke 15:10; Romans 5:10, 11; Galatians 4:5).

CONCLUSION

How does the story of Philemon, Onesimus, and Paul apply to us two thousand years later? It reveals the preciousness of the gospel message. In this touching narrative we have true-life elements: One embarks in life and rejects authority, resting only upon personal choices. Such choices only lead one to a dreary and hope-forlorn wandering in sin and the futility of resting upon man's strength and wisdom. The wanderer eventually finds a willing advocate who offers hope, rest, intercession, and peace. Such is the gospel's "Good News"! Those who are worn and battered by the world can flee to Jesus for refuge and help. In Christ the wanderer is born again and finds a way to have all debts cancelled. In Christ the rebel finds an Intercessor to plead his case. The Intercessor is effective and persuades the Father to accept the wanderer as a son. How marvelous is the sinner's acceptance, and how wonderful is the sinner's restoration with God. The message of the gospel is beautiful and simple!

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A sick Tennessee soldier signaled to a hospital visitor and said, "Stranger, the man lay on the cot next to mine was taken out this morning and I have the same sickness. I don't know how soon my turn will come. I want you to tell me what I need to do to be saved." The visitor began to explain the way of salvation. "Stranger," interrupted the earnest soldier, "couldn't you make it very plain to a poor feller that never got no schoolin'?"

There can be no simpler way of telling the gospel story than by reading 1 Corinthians 15:3, 4 and illustrating that message with Philemon and Onesimus.

The blessings of the gospel can be yours today if you will respond "from the heart" to the glorious "Good News" of the gospel story (Hosea 2:23; 2 Corinthians 6:16b-18; Micah 7:19).

You are like Onesimus. The sobering question is this: In what condition are you like him? Are you like him as a fugitive slave? Running from God's authority, trusting your own choices and direction, plagued with guilt, and harboring emptiness? Or, are you like him as a restored slave? Have you returned to God's authority, submitted to His will, accepted the intercessions of Christ, and been adopted into God's family? Please be honest in your answer (Isaiah 1:18, 19).

The London missionary went back to the inner city in search of a young woman. The message he carried was sent from a parent's broken heart, "Tell her that her old home still waits for her and her mother's heart still yearns for her." These words describe well the tender desire of the Father in heaven. He is anxiously waiting for all fugitives to return and be restored to Him!

—John Kachelman

A Servant's Stewardship (Philemon 7)

Philemon was a beautiful servant of God. He had obeyed the gospel and had accepted the stewardship of serving his brethren in the church. The way he performed as a servant caused Paul to focus on his service. All would do well to imitate Philemon as a servant.

1. The *motive* of serving—"your love" (cf. v. 5).
2. The *object* of serving—"to refresh the spirit."
3. The *reason* for serving—"brother" (fellowship in Christ).
4. The *gift* of serving—when we serve we give a gift that is blessed—"great joy and encouragement" will be given to all who hear of our service.

Once you see these facts about servants serving in the church, how can you fail to serve one another? (Galatians 5:13; Philippians 2:1-8; etc.).
