

The Final Appeal, p.1

By Jeff Noblit

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Bible Text: Philemon 1:15-17
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Anchored in Truth Ministries

1915 Avalon Ave.
Muscle Shoals, AL 35661

Website: www.anchoredintruth.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/anchoredintruth

Take your Bibles and let's go to Philemon. That's where we are on Sunday morning, verse by verse through this one chapter book of the Bible, and as we look at Philemon, we need to remind ourselves of a couple of things. First of all, though this is a great treatise on forgiveness, reconciliation and restoration for the body of Christ, that is how Christians should conduct themselves in conflict and in dealing with offenses one among the other, it is unique in that you're dealing with a pastor or an apostle, the Apostle Paul, and you're dealing with a runaway slave, which is somewhat unique, and you're dealing with Onesimus, the runaway slave who is a brand-new believer, and then Philemon, his master. So what I'm trying to say is when you're dealing with forgiveness and reconciliation as a Christian one to the other, there are balancing truths. Sometimes you don't handle everything exactly the same though there are foundational and general principles that the apostle brings out here that are wise the greatest majority of the time.

So once again, let's remind ourselves what has happened here. The Apostle Paul, the author of this letter, is incarcerated in one of Nero's prison huts. He had innumerable numbers of these little shacks all around his palace and he would put his slaves in there, some of his servants in there, and some who were under arrest in there, and the Apostle Paul has been arrested for preaching the Gospel. He is incarcerated there but he can see guests. It's probably a very open air type setting. He's in a lean-to shack of some type and associates are there. Others would come probably for worship times, for instruction times from the Apostle Paul. While he's there ministering in God's providence, a runaway slave named Onesimus stumbles upon the Apostle Paul, and hearing Paul's message of the Gospel, this Onesimus, a runaway slave, is gloriously converted, and not only is he just converted, he becomes a close working associate with the Apostle Paul. Paul begins to trust in him and rely on him. Of course, sometime in the course of that as Paul said, "Now where are you from and who did you run away from?" And he says, "I'm from Ephesus and I ran away from my master named Philemon." And Paul's ears must have perked up for he and Philemon went back a long way. Paul ministered three years in Ephesus. Philemon was one of his converts. Philemon was one of the most trustworthy men in the work in the city of Ephesus. Philemon was a co-laborer with Paul, obviously a generous supporter financially of Paul's work. He would stay in Philemon's home when he was there. So Paul says, "We've got to get this all right." So he says, "Onesimus, you've got to go back to Philemon humbly as a Christian now, yield yourself to Philemon's authority, but I'm going to send you a letter and as you go back to your master Philemon, you give

him this letter and I trust that by the instruction and exhortations of this letter, your new relationship with Philemon is going to be very very different than your old relationship." So what we have as the book of Philemon is the letter Paul gave Onesimus to take back to his master Philemon who is the leader, probably the patriarch, of a church that meets in his house.

So here we come to this next installment. I call this "The Final Appeal." You will remember that Paul, though he says very clearly in this letter, he says, "Now Philemon, Onesimus has brought this letter back to you. I could order you, Philemon, to do what is right. In other words, I could order you to forgive Onesimus, to be reconciled to Onesimus, and now treat him as a brother, no longer as a slave." He said, "But I'm not going to do that. Rather I'm going to appeal to you that the goodness that you're going to show toward Onesimus will come from your heart because you're a Christian and not from some law or some legal edict that I'm going to require you to perform." So he's in this appeal mode and he comes to these final aspects of his appeal as Philemon is reading the letter from Paul delivered by this runaway slave coming back to his master, the slave's name is Onesimus.

So we come to verses 15 through 17 this morning. Let's read it together.

15 For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, 16 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. 17 If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me.

Paul's final appeal. I. as we unpack this section. Notice how Paul brings out the sovereign purposes. The sovereign purposes. Again in verse 15 Paul says, "For perhaps," in other words, "Philemon, doesn't it seem altogether likely that he was separated from you so, in effect, he would come to faith in Christ and then you would have him back in a glorious and more wonderful and new dimension that would last forever." So Paul brings this aspect of divine sovereignty in view, that it is, "God, in effect, Philemon, who is behind all of this." So Paul is saying, "It's needful for me to send Onesimus back to you so you could now learn to relate to him according to his new true nature as a fellow believer, that is, in Jesus Christ. He's now a brother, no longer just a slave."

Now, Onesimus for sure meant evil against Philemon by abandoning him and running away, but God meant it for good. Isn't God big like that? In divine providence, he can take the evil of men and bring out good for his own name and for his own people. You see, there is a mingling in all the affairs of men of the divine will and divine purposes. As the lines of human activity cross and recross, the Almighty God mends together the tapestry of his own will unto his own glory and unto the good of his dear people, the church. Did you hear that? Everything about our lives, the events of our lives and the series of events of our lives, a masterful, almighty, omniscient hand is guiding everything to form a beautiful tapestry that will glorify his name and be for your good.

My, my, my, how God puts all these things together. In all of these unending series of incidences in our lives, can we not say with Joseph from time to time as is recorded in Genesis 50:2, "As for you," Joseph is talking to his brothers here who sold him into slavery, so Joseph speaks to his brothers, "As for you, you meant it for evil against me but God meant it for good." Remember, Joseph's brothers were shaking in their boots as Joseph now is the Prime Minister of all of Egypt and they come to bow before him to get grain because there is a great famine and Egypt is the only place that has grain because Joseph was wise enough to store up grain for the famine, and they think if Joseph figures out who we are after we sold him into slavery and left him basically for dead, he'll punish us. Joseph said, "No, no, no, wait, brothers, you don't understand. Yes, yes, you're responsible, you meant evil against me but God meant it for good." How often that is true in our lives.

Do you know what the greatest of all illustrations of this is? The death of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. His death. Acts 2:23, "this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death." Notice both aspects: you human beings, you did this evil to Christ, but in back of that evil it was God's foreordained predetermined plan that God would bring good out of this evil you would do. In Jesus dying, his precious children's sins are cleansed and their souls redeemed. All the human actors in Christ's death acted out of evil hatred yet God was at the same time performing his divine purposes for good to redeem the children. Think about it, Judas would kill him out of covetousness. The priests would kill Christ out of envy. Pilate would crucify him to gain power and control because that's what the people wanted, they wanted him dead. Caiaphas, the high priest, would have him die out of fear of him becoming a rival. But God would have his Son die to fulfill the promises of love he made to send his only begotten Son to die in the place of his children that they might be saved.

So here Paul writes to Philemon and he's nudging him. Paul desires that Philemon sees that, "It is God who ordained these events, Philemon. It's God who ultimately put all of this together so that Onesimus would come back to you and this would be a beautiful picture of the Gospel's power that changes everything. He has certainly changed Onesimus. He's been my work associate now for probably many months. Philemon, he's certainly changed you. You were saved under the preaching of my Gospel, Philemon. I've seen the radical change in your life. No longer do you give yourself to the lust and the ungodliness of Ephesian culture, you now devote yourself to the ministry of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And now another great change, Onesimus is coming back to you, Philemon, and this is going to be a beautiful picture if you will follow what the Spirit is telling you for you to show the forgiveness and the reconciliation that builds up the church and causes the church to be the instrument to bring glory to God and to the world." Grace Life Church, are you hearing this, this morning? Every time you die to yourself, every time you say, "Well, that was wrong but I'm going to get over it because God took my sins and put them on his Son and I've been forgiven so much, why can't I just forgive my brother or my sister and keep peace in the body of Christ?" That's where Paul is with Philemon.

Notice Paul's carefulness here, though, as he talks about, "God is behind every bit of this, Philemon." Notice in verse 15 how he says, "For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever." This is a good word for us, that we must not be rash, we must not be too forceful in claiming a certain thing was God working it out a certain way. We've got to be careful with that. Never in our understanding of the Christian truth can you say, "Well, God told me thus and such." If you tell me, well, God told you, I'm going to say, "Chapter and verse, because if it's not clear in the Bible, we don't know. You might have just eaten too much pizza or something. You're having thoughts you don't need to have." We don't know that. If the Apostle Paul would appeal to Philemon and say, "It sure looks like it, perhaps this is God behind all of this, Philemon, you need to see God's hand in this." That's the way we probably ought to word it most of the time. We see it. I've told you, as pastor I believe God has given us these open doors. I sense these things. But do you know what we found through the years? We were right very often when we said we believe God has led us this way, we believe God has opened these doors and we head through them, and lo and behold, though it was right to head that way, when we got to where we thought God was taking us, we weren't where we thought we were going to be at all. He just kind of massages and changes as you go forward.

But we need to be careful. It is only God who can define with certainty the purposes of his divine will but we do know this: Paul is telling Philemon that, "God has obviously brought good out of Onesimus' rebellion and running away from you." Think about the good. Here's the implication of what Paul is saying to Philemon. "Think about it, Philemon, number one, Onesimus has returned. Had God not saved him and broken him and given him a spirit of Gospel humility, he would have never gone back to you. Secondly, he's not only returned to you, Philemon, Onesimus has returned to you humble and he is yielded to your will. He's willing to come back and say, 'You are my rightful master and whatever you say is what I will do.' Not only has he returned and returned humbly and yielded to you, he's returned not just as a slave anymore but now as a new brother in Jesus Christ. That's all good stuff. God has done good things in all of this."

So here I believe is where Paul is getting to. Here is what he's saying, "Now Philemon, since all this has turned out for good, now you return good back to Onesimus. Now you do the good thing. You do the right thing in return since God has gone behind all these events and fixed everything, in effect. Now you forgive him and you receive him and you receive him back no longer as a slave but as a dear brother in Jesus Christ. You see, if God's providential purposes intended the first half of the equation, Onesimus gets saved, Onesimus returns, Onesimus returns humble and yielded, and Onesimus returns as a brother, all that good, if God did that good first part, well, Philemon, isn't it also understandable that God intends for you to be good on the second half of the equation? You return back good to Onesimus." And here's what's going to happen, this is why I pointed out with emphasis that this letter is not just written to Philemon and his household, it's also addressed to the church that meets in your house. Here's what Paul is saying, "Philemon, you are a spiritual leader. Philemon, you are a faithful one I, as your pastor, could always count on to have a spiritual mind and a spiritual heart. So Philemon, here's your chance to model before the church. Everybody is watching how Christianity

and the Gospel changes everything as you forgive Onesimus, as you receive him back, as you treat him no longer as a slave but as a dear brother."

I couldn't help but think and literally many things came to my heart and mind meditating on this, but I remember a long time ago when we first began to emphasize here at Grace Life that there is no such thing as a genuine or true church without an element of accountability and discipline in the body of Christ, and there was a man in our church who had abandoned his wife and abandoned his children, and at that point he had literally taken his furniture and moved in with a woman he wasn't married to. Well, the men's small group that he belonged to began to reach out to him and lovingly tell him, "Brother, let us help you. You can't abandon your marriage vows. You can't abandon your family. You're a child of God. Let us help you." And he refused the help. He just said, "I'm not changing. I'm not turning back."

So we came to the day and I'll not use his name even though most of you, many of you would know him, that we brought him before the church and we said based on the fact that this is such an open and blatant rebellion, this brother is not trying to hide it, this brother is not trying to repent, if he was trying at all we wouldn't be at this stage, but he's not. He has set his face, he's brazen in his attitude and so we are asking the church to affirm with the church elders that we remove him from membership in God's church. And we did and most of you were scared to death to do it, and so was I. Do you know why? We didn't grow up seeing that. If you had been born 100 or 150 years ago in a Baptist church, you would have seen it all the time, but we've become too cultured and sophisticated to obey the Bible anymore in our churches.

But do you know what happened? About two years later my secretary, administrative assistant, Judy said, "So-and-so has made an appointment with you." And it was that man. "He's going to come and see you." I thought, "Oh no." I thought he was going to bring an AK-47 in there and settle the score. He came in that day, I welcomed him, I was warm, I was loving. I would welcome him like I would receive you or anyone else and we sat there and in just a moment he said, "Brother Jeff, God has changed my life. I've repented of my sin. I've destroyed a marriage. I've destroyed a home and I can't fix that now. I am remarried now and I've asked God to forgive me and my new wife, we are trying to seek the Lord and honor the Lord, but can I come before the church, Grace Life Church of the Shoals, can I come before the church and thank them for disciplining me and thank them for doing what the Bible tells us to do? Because that's what has broken my heart and gotten me back right with God and I'm going to spend the rest of my life serving him the best I know how."

And if you were here, you were here the day that he stood before you and literally thanked you for disciplining him, but I thought what powerful things came out of that. What good came out of that. As we began to learn as a church family that, yeah, we have a lot to learn and want to continue to be repenters and learners, but God's word works. God's word is right and we must not rely on our wisdom but God's wisdom. What good came out of that and do you know what we did? That day dozens and dozens and dozens of you came up, many of you weeping, hugging his neck and saying, "We love you,

brother. You're forgiven." It's like it never happened. Because why? We saw God do good and we wanted to return the good in exchange. The sovereignty of God, what he does, and what does that do for our witness? It proclaims to the world that God's wisdom is superior to man's wisdom. God gets the glory. The sovereign design behind these things. Paul is telling Philemon, "Onesimus did these things but Onesimus is saved and God was working behind all of this. Now, Philemon, you return good back to Onesimus."

I came upon this story from the fourteenth century. In the fourteenth century, there was a great scandal in the Roman Catholic religion. It turns out that Urban VI and Clement VII both claimed to be the legitimate Pope of Roman Catholicism. I don't know how much you know about Roman Catholic doctrine and dogma, but that's a problem. Two men cannot represent Christ and speak for God. So you've got this great schism in Roman Catholicism because Urban VI and Clement VII both said, "I'm the Pope." And do you know what they did? Urban excommunicated Clement, and Clement excommunicated Urban. So they both sent edicts out through the whole land, "This guy is excommunicated. He is disciplined. He is out of the church and I'm the Pope." Well, the whole church is in turmoil. People are taking sides.

The ruckus continued on, but God was doing something. At the same time this great scandal broke out, a man in the Catholic Church by the name of John Wycliffe with a few associates had begun translating the Bible out of Latin into English, the language of the common man, something that either Pope would have crushed had they known about it, but the Roman Catholic system and the Roman Catholic hierarchy just sort of ignored John Wycliffe's work because they were too busy in the scandal and Wycliffe and his associates completed that Bible mid part of the fourteenth century, and that Bible began to disseminate among the people and the people began to read the Scriptures and realize the Catholic Church has left the Bible, the Catholic Church is built on power, control and superstition and popery and priestcraft, not on the Gospel, and people started getting saved which led to the great Protestant Reformation that occurred about 200 years later of which you and I are major recipients. The providence of God. Wycliffe would have never gotten away with that, writing and translating that Bible into English for the common man, had there not been the great schism of the church. God meant it for good.

So Paul's point, "This evil of Onesimus running away has come to such a good end, now Philemon, return the good back to him. God was behind all of this." Another interesting use of words and what I want to point out is that I point out all of these ways Paul is gentle, Paul is humble, Paul is appealing instead of commanding. Now let me remind you again, in balance there are times where Paul was very commanding and very harsh and very blunt, but in most cases, brothers and sisters, that's the wrong way to address an issue. In most cases, we need to learn from Paul here, how he gently brings Philemon around. Notice how he says there in verse 15, "For perhaps he was for this reason," run away from you? That's not the word. Forsaking you? Deserted you? No. "For this reason he was departed or separated from you at least for a while, so that you would have him back forever. In other words, God's hand was behind this and it wasn't that he was rebelling against you as much as God was involved in doing something great here."

In my conversion experience, in your conversion experience, did not a sovereign God, did not divine providence orchestrate a number of events, an unnumbered series of events that led you to your conversion? And by the way, your conversion began in the mind of God before the foundation of the world, and then in time and space history, he orchestrated everything about your life, your parentage, your upbringing, wherever you are, whatever you are doing, so that you would hear the Gospel, repent and believe. God was behind all of it for good. Maybe you're like me, maybe you can look at some things in your past in your home life and say, "That was painful and that was difficult," and was that fair? No, God was behind all of it for good. Those were things that helped lead me to Christ. Now here's the point, picking up on the truth Paul is telling Philemon: therefore we live our lives pursuing to do good because God has done such good for us. Just like Philemon has had a very good thing happen to him when this slave comes back as a humble Christian brother, so we have received so much, shouldn't we do good to others? Shouldn't that be our *modus operandi*? Should that not be our first approach? Should that not be the high attitude in our soul? Let's do good to others.

The Bible commands us, the Bible exhorts us that as far as it is possible we are to do good for all men, but especially to those who are of the household of the faith. Now, I love the way the Bible balances things because if you make it your goal to do good to everybody you find with need, you'll not be able to serve God at all anymore. As a matter of fact, that could be a trap of Satan, but as far as it's possible with the priorities God has given you, you've got to be a husband, you've got to provide for your family, you've got to be a wife, you've got to be a caretaker of your home, etc. etc. etc. After you've done what God has told you as far as is possible we are to be people known to do good to all men but we have a special devotion to the household of the faith. Why are we people, Christians, why are we people who are doing good things? It's because we've received such a good thing. God saved us through all of these sovereign purposes.

It should be the Christian pattern of believers, the truly spiritual ones, to flame up bright and hot against evil, but equally so if not in greater measure, beyond all others we ought to be people who show mercy, forgiveness and strive toward reconciliation in any and every event. If somebody wrongs you in the church and you decide, "I'm going to make an appointment with my small group leader, I'm going to make an appointment with an elder or a church staff member about what they did to me." Let me ask you something: is your attitude first and foremost, "This has got to be resolved because we are Christians and we don't want God's reputation hurt," or is it, "I'm going to get what I'm supposed to get."

Paul says, "Philemon, I'm writing to you, to your household and to the whole church because this result of you forgiving Onesimus and this result we are striving for for you to receive him back not as a slave but as a brother, is a great benefit to the church and the church's witness and the glory of God in the world." So Paul is ministering to Philemon in writing this letter. He's helping Philemon to avoid the snare of magnifying his own grievances.

I want to challenge you as your pastor as I have challenged Jeff Noblit this morning: stop it. Stop it. Stop it. Stop it. Stop magnifying your grievances. Do you realize we live in the whole culture today that lives on who is grieved, who is a victim, who has been done wrong. That's completely anti-Christian. Nobody has done anybody more wrong than we've done against our holy God yet he sent his Son to save us. So when you're counseling, when you're helping, when you're consoling a brother or sister, and for God's sake as you're raising your children and your grandchildren, never, never, never help them to magnify the wrongs done to them, but help them to understand we are striving to be forgiving and forgetting and for reconciling whenever possible. Of course there are balances. I say this all the time because some of you are OCD and you'll get on something and you'll forget there is a balance. It was right and I think biblical and good when Andy Griffith told Opie to punch the boy in the mouth if he does it again. I mean, there are some balances to things, amen? But our children should strive to learn the Christian principle of forgiveness and reconciliation if at all possible. That's who we are. That's our nature. That's what we ought to be about.

Do you help others forgive? Do you seek to remind an offended party that we're all offenders before God and he sent his Son to die for us? Never ever help someone repay evil for evil. Don't help anyone repay evil for evil. You say, "Sweetheart, I know that hurts. Darling, I know that wasn't right. They were wrong but let's strive to remember Jesus died for us when we have done so much wrong. Let's strive to forgive that, be sweet in return." That's what we are. That's what our God is like and that's what Paul is asking Philemon to be like as he receives Onesimus back. Help people to never grow in bitterness, never grow in unforgiveness, never grow in a revengeful state of mind. That kind of attitude is completely anti-God. That's not who we are. That's not our nature in Christ.

The Bible promises that, "Vengeance is mine, says the Lord. I will repay." You know, sometimes I believe some of you are so quick to take up for yourself, so quick to stand up for your rights, so quick to get them back and God says, "Okay, fine, then you keep fixing it and I'll not work on their hearts. You keep straightening your husband out and I won't do anything to him." You keep pounding on your wife to get her right and God says, "Sure, I'll back off and I won't do anything then." You let your boss know what he's got coming then God says, "Then I will not break him and humble him where he will be prone to want to bless you and give you a raise."

I've watched this work both ways for 37 years now. God gives grace to the afflicted. God is for the humble. But God is opposed to the proud. If God is opposed to that proud person that is hurting you, why do you have to take up your own offense? Why don't you let God handle it and see what he might do? Trust me, I've had a few offenders, I've had a few enemies in this ministry, and I'm telling you, after 37 years, I've seen him take care of it. I mean, are you listening to me: take care of it. I don't mean this crassly, I certainly don't mean this with an air of individual superiority, but there are men who are dead today who raised their hand against God's church and God's truth and God's pastor.

Now, that's just my personal experience. God will walk with you, stand with you, and defend you, if you will have the spirit of Christ, but do you know what? Here's what you've got to hope: even if they've wronged you, even if they've hurt you, even if they've offended you deeply, you've got to hope that God will forgive them. You've got to hope that God will reach their hearts. You've got to hope for good for them, amen? Because God meant such good for you when you were such a radical offender. This is a great message, this book to Philemon brings out for all of us.

This morning, who must you – I don't care if you don't feel like it, the Bible doesn't ever say feel like it, you do what's right and your emotions catch up with what's right – who must you forgive this morning? A mom? A dad? An aunt? An uncle? A brother? A sister? A work associate? Classmate? Who must you forgive? I'm charging you for the honor of Christ that this morning you go to God and you say, "God, I choose to forgive and if I slip up in an hour from now, I choose to repent and forgive again. And if I slip up tomorrow morning, I refuse to let that stay on my heart. I'm going to forgive again." Are you hearing me, church? "I'm going to forgive them and I'm going to purpose to approach them for good just like you, my God, have approached me for good when I was the great offender against you." Because no matter what that person has done to you, no matter how vicious or malicious or deep – are you hearing me – if God is your God, he is meaning it for your good. You just don't see it all yet.

Now listen, listen: he's likely waiting for you to respond right before he steps in and gets that guy, that person fixed. He's waiting on you to get your heart right because, you see, it's not about what that guy did to you, it's what God is doing in you through that guy. He's growing you. Joseph would have never become the Prime Minister of Egypt had he grown bitter in that Egyptian dungeon, but Joseph saw, "God must be doing something in all of this and I'm going to trust him and not grow bitter, and I'm going to be forgiving against my brothers," and God said, "Good, Joseph. You've developed the character I'm looking for. Now I will exalt you."

"Philemon, God has done a great good thing. He has saved your runaway slave. He sent your runaway slave back. He's come back humble and yielded to you. He's come back as a brother, not a slave. Now Philemon, you can do something great to make this a glorious and wondrous blessing not only to yourself but to the whole church, and a great witness for God in the community."

Here's what I'm asking you to do this morning: just be a Christian. That's who we are. This is what we do. Amen?