

The Intercessor  
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**Bible Verse:** Philemon 1  
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Well, it's a delight this morning to begin a brief study of a new book that we've never looked at at Truth Community Church before, it's the short book of Philemon found just before the book of Hebrews in your Bible, and I would invite you to turn there and find this one chapter book so that you can follow along as we study it here together this morning. We'll be here for a few short weeks, I would suppose. And as we approach this letter, speaking this morning to those who are true Christians, those who have been born again, I think there is something that will help you understand and appreciate the spirit of what lies behind this letter and, friend, I would invite you to remember your state before you became a Christian, to remember what you were like in the eyes of God before you were saved. You had wronged God the Father. You had broken his holy law and he had a right in his position as Judge and Governor of the universe, to punish you; not only to punish you but to punish you severely because an eternal God who has an eternal law requires eternal punishment when his law is violated and each and every one of you were in that condition. You were in that state and you were helpless before a holy God. There was nothing that you could do to earn your way into the graces of his favor. There was nothing that you could do by way of ritual to cleanse yourself. You couldn't splash water on yourself from a fountain inside a church to cleanse yourself from sin. There wasn't an appeal to your own righteousness. You were hopelessly and miserably lost with no one to come to your aid. And it was in that position where you were helpless, where you had nothing to commend yourself, you could only appear before God with your own guilt clinging to your account, oh friends, it was when you were like that that our Lord Jesus Christ interceded for you; when the Lord Jesus Christ mediated for you; when he stepped in on your behalf and made a case for you before a holy God and allowed reconciliation to take place.

If you're in Philemon, go one book to your right in the book of Hebrews 7. What happened for you as a Christian was that an intercessor came to your aid. In the midst of a broken relationship between you and God, someone interceded and took up your case and your cause before someone that you had offended and that was the Lord Jesus Christ. Chapter 7, verse 25 of Hebrews says that, "He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer

up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself."

Here's what the Lord Jesus did for you if you are a Christian: there you were clothed in the rags of your own unrighteousness and in your guilt standing, as it were, before a holy God who could not receive you, who cannot simply wink at your sin and say, "Ah, come on in. It's all right." It doesn't work that way. You see, justice, the justice of violated law, must be satisfied before you are going to be reconciled to God and you had no way to do that on your own. You were guilty and guilty people cannot absolve themselves of their own sins. There had to be someone to intercede and what did Jesus Christ do? He suffered for sins on the cross. He took the wrath of God that should have gone onto your head, onto your shoulders, he went to the cross and he received the full brunt of God's anger against your sin there at Calvary. He drank the full bitter cup down to the last drop in order to intercede for you, in order to save you from your own guilt. Then what does he do? What does he do? Having lived a life of his own perfect obedience to the law of God and being perfectly acceptable in his own right and merit before God, having paid the full price for sin at the cross, what did he do? In essence, having satisfied divine justice in his own body on the cross, he takes you, as it were, gently by the hand and brings you to God the Father, and on the basis of his completed work, he appeals to the divine love of God and says, "Receive this one as you would receive me." And that's what God did when you were saved. He received you not on the basis of your good works. We're not saved by works, Ephesians 2 and many other places make plain. He did not set aside the law and say, "I won't regard my own justice." No, he received you because Jesus Christ had fulfilled the law. He had satisfied divine justice on your behalf. He had interceded for you. And on that basis of his own work and his own merit, he says, "Father, I appeal to your love for sinners and based on what I have done, I pray that you would receive this one into your kingdom." And what happened? God did exactly that. God received you. God accepted you gladly because an Intercessor of perfection had come on your behalf and reconciled you to God.

That should do a couple of things in your heart. 1. it should cause you to bow low all over again before the Lord Jesus and say, "Lord, thank you for what you have done for a sinner like me. You took up my cause. You took up my case that I couldn't make on my own and because you did that, now I am reconciled and received by a holy God when I couldn't have done it on my own." For those of you who aren't Christians, that's what you rely on to come to God. Not your good works. Not your promises to get better. Not even your regret over your past sin. You come to God and say, "I rely on Jesus Christ alone. I trust in him. I ask you to accept me based on the work of your own Son." And that's a prayer that God always answers because he receives those who come to him in repentance through the righteousness and shed blood of his Son Jesus Christ. No other way to God. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but through Me." Acts 4:12, "There is salvation in no one else for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved." And so God accepts us based on the intercession of Christ on our behalf.

Now, friends, what I want you to do is to keep that picture in mind as we now turn our attention to the book of Philemon, the little letter of Philemon, because that picture helps you understand the dynamic that is at work between the three central players in the letter, and as you remember that, what you're going to see is that what plays out before us in the book of Philemon is a picture, it is an illustration of that which saved you eternally. This is not simply about reconciliation between aggrieved parties on a human level, this shows us the Gospel as we look at this wonderful book together.

In general what we can say about Philemon just to help you get oriented to know what's going on in this book, the Apostle Paul writes to a fellow Christian with whom he has had a long and fruitful relationship and that man's name is Philemon, and he says, "Philemon, I want you to receive this former slave of yours that I have gotten to know, I want you to receive him favorably even though he has wronged you." So Paul is writing on behalf of this slave named Onesimus who has wronged his former master, and now comes back to his master and takes with him this letter from Paul and it is handed to Philemon and Philemon reads it and it is Paul's appeal to Philemon to receive this slave who has wronged him. That's the general picture of it. There are three principle men in this letter: a party who had done wrong brings a letter from the Apostle Paul and appeals to this Christian to receive him and to forgive him. That's basically a short picture of the theme of this letter.

What I want to do this morning, we're just going to introduce the letter. We're not going to really get into the bread and butter of it until a week or two from now. What I want to do is just get you acquainted with it, with the hope and the expectation that in the coming week you'd read through Philemon two or three or four times and get it more into your mind and have this ability, have a framework to process it and to get to the heart of it quickly based on what we say here today, but we're looking at the intercessor, in the ultimate sense, the great Intercessor is our Lord Jesus. Here in Philemon you see Paul acting as the intercessor on behalf of Onesimus to his former master, Philemon. So what I want to do at the start here, I want to introduce the three men involved in this letter.

First of all, we're going to introduce Paul to you, introduce Paul as he appears in the context of this letter. I realize that you know who Paul is, that Paul was the apostle that met the Lord on the road to Damascus, was wondrously saved and was appointed to ministry on behalf of Christ. He saw the resurrected Christ, he went out and he proclaimed Christ. He suffered greatly on behalf of Christ and was imprisoned for him as we see in the book of Acts, and wrote a substantial portion of the New Testament which gives us guidance to how we are to be as a church even here to this day. He was a man, an ambassador of the Lord Jesus Christ. What I want you to see just very briefly from this letter as it pertains to this time that brings us together, is that he was writing this letter from prison. He was under Roman custody at the time. He had been charged with crimes simply because he had preached Christ to those who needed to know him and so he is suffering for the Gospel. His life liberty has been taken away from him simply because he proclaimed the same Gospel that you and I have believed unto salvation. Paul is in prison as he writes.

Look at verse 1 where he says, "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus." In verse 9 he writes as he appeals to Philemon, he says, "I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus." Verse 10, he says, "I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment." Verse 13, "I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel." Friends, this letter is only 25 verses long in our English version, four times in those 25 verses Paul alludes to the fact that he is in prison as he writes this letter.

We'll say more about that later but here's what it should do to you and what it no doubt did to Philemon as he first read this, picture it this way: suppose you knew a truly godly man who had been imprisoned for the sake of Christ and you knew he was innocent but there he is suffering for the Gospel that you hold dear to your own heart. What is your response going to be? What is your attitude toward this man going to be as you think about him in that condition? You're going to think about him with respect, right? He's suffering for the Gospel. You're going to think about him with a sense of sympathy that, "He is suffering for that which I love. I am on the outside free and he is inside in chains," and you're going to have a sense of concern and sympathy for him as you read and think about him. This sympathy and this concern and this respect and this reverence for the man who is suffering is going to dominate your thought. Well, Philemon was no different. A man who had earned your respect now suffering for the Gospel is someone think you're going to be favorably disposed to. That was the position from which Paul was writing.

Now, you wouldn't know this from just looking at the book of Philemon but Paul wrote this letter to Philemon at the same time that he wrote the letters to the Ephesians and to the Colossians. We know that by looking at a certain section of Colossians and I invite you to turn back there so that you can see it, Colossians 4. Paul wrote a number of letters that are contained in our New Testament called the prison epistles. He wrote different letters that are preserved for us today; Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon are among those letters. And notice in Colossians 4:7, this is the part that you hurry through because you think it doesn't matter in the 21st century, but sometimes these little personal notes give us a lot of background information about the circumstances under which our New Testament was written. Colossians 4:7, Paul says to the Colossians, he says, "As to all my affairs, Tychicus, our beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow bond-servant in the Lord, will bring you information." He had said the exact same thing at the end of the letter to the Ephesians, saying that, "Tychicus will deliver this letter and give you a personal update on my behalf." And look at what happens in verse 8, he says, "I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts." Then in verse 9, he says, "with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of your number." Apparently Onesimus was somehow familiar with, had relationships with the people in Colossae, maybe from that very city, maybe that's where Philemon was from also. But Tychicus is taking a number of letters with him as he leaves the presence of the Apostle Paul and going with him is Onesimus and as we read Philemon, we see that Tychicus and Philemon are going to be interacting over Onesimus in a very short amount of time. All I want you to see from this is the connection here, that when Paul wrote Ephesians and Colossians, he also wrote this

personal note to Philemon and he sends out those letters with this former slave going out as well. So we just see this background that there are a lot of things going on in Paul's mind and his ministry as he takes care of these things.

When Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians, he had been speaking about the greatness of salvation. You remember that, how God chose us before the foundation of the world and Christ redeemed us at the cross and we were sealed in the Spirit, and he wrote an exalted letter about the purpose of the church and the plans of God, and the themes of redemption in Christ, and the glory and the exaltation of Christ are predominant in Ephesians and in Colossians, and that's the mental framework, that's the background, that's what's in his mind as he's writing this letter to Philemon, it's the greatness of reconciliation in Christ, and that informs the things that he says and it informs the way that he approaches Philemon. That's the Apostle Paul.

Let me introduce Philemon to you based on this letter. We really don't know much about him apart from what is contained in this letter, that we can glean from this letter, and I realize and I say this many times, that I realize that if you're just reading through Philemon like on a Bible reading plan or something like that, you read it in five minutes and move on and you don't really think about what you're reading, but when you read it closely, you can find out a lot about Philemon. You can find out about this man that helps you understand the nature of the transaction that is going on as Paul writes to him here in this short letter.

What can we say about Philemon? How could I introduce him to you? Well, first of all, Philemon was a man of some means. He had some measure of wealth of some kind because his house was large enough for the church in that area to meet in his place. Look at verse 2 of Philemon. Paul opens up the letter in verse 1 and he says, "To Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker." He mentions a couple of other people that we'll talk about later today. And he says, "and to the church in your house." At the time, there were not separate church buildings for Christians like what we're meeting in here today. The church was the people and the location where they met was often simply someone's home, a place for them to gather and it was often a person of means that had a large enough home for people to gather together like that. Philemon was the meeting place of these Christians. His house was the meeting place of these Christians which tells us that in some measure he had some means that were at his disposal. He was a man of some kind of stature, in other words.

And what had Philemon done with his means, with his wealth? Well, as you read about this, you can see why the Apostle Paul's heart is tender toward him. Philemon was a man who had dealt generously with other believers and had extended care to them. He had shown love for the people of God, the kind of love that we read about in our Scripture reading earlier from 1 John 2. Look at verse 5 with me, actually in verse 4, Paul says to Philemon, he says, "I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints." He says, "Philemon, I thank God for you when I think of you in my prayers. Why? Because you have shown love to the saints. You have been an instrument

in the hands of Christ to provide for, to care for, to protect and watch out for the people of Christ, and I thank God for that, that you're a man like that, Philemon."

Then you go down in verse 7 and you see Paul repeating this theme about the inner joy that the life of Philemon has brought to him. Verse 7, "I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother." He says, "I know what happens in the sphere of your influence with the people of God. You help them. You care for them. The people of God leave your presence and leave the sphere of your ministry built up and encouraged and, Philemon, I am so joyful over that to see the reality of Christ being lived out in your life. It brings me such joy as I sit here in prison to think of what you have done for the people of God." And you see the warmth with which he speaks to Philemon. Look back at verse 1, "Philemon our beloved brother." Really, "To Philemon, the beloved," it could be read. He says there as we looked at in verse 7, he calls him, "brother." He appeals to him in verse 9, "for love's sake." And so there is this warmth toward this noble Christian man of some means that Paul addresses him. We get to know him and we say, "Boy, Philemon would be a pillar in any church based on the description that we see of him here."

There is one more aspect that kind of helps you kind of round out a little bit the nature of the relationship. Philemon had apparently become a Christian under the influence of the Apostle Paul. Paul's ministry had led to Philemon's own conversion. Look at verse 19 with me, taking these verses a little bit out of context and just pointing things out and then we'll come and pick up the context in future messages. Paul in verse 19 says, "I am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it," talking about whatever Onesimus might owe to Philemon. Then he makes this parenthetical comment, "(not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well)." What's he saying there? He says, "Philemon, you're a Christian because you came to Christ under the influence of my ministry. Your very self, the very core of what defines you as a noble Christian man, Philemon, I would just remind you that that came as a result of you responding to Christ under the influence of my ministry." He says, "You owe me your own self," which is simply a delicate polite way of saying, "Philemon, I know and I remember that you came to Christ under my ministry."

With that in mind, thinking about Paul and Philemon now in light of what we're saying, let's go back, let's circle back and think through the dynamic that is at play here. Philemon, a man of noble character, a man of means, gets this letter that opens up and he realizes this is from Paul and Paul is in prison. Immediately his affections are going out toward Paul as he writes, as Philemon reads, and he sees this affirmation, this kindness, this appreciation pouring out from a giant, from a man directly appointed by Christ saying, "I see you. I know you. I love you. I appreciate you. God bless you for all that you've done." Wow. Philemon's feeling 10 feet tall at this because that's what encouragement does. That's what edification is, it builds someone up and Paul is having this edifying influence.

Then toward the end of the letter, he reminds him, Paul remembers and reminds Philemon, "You know, you came to Christ under my ministry, didn't you?" "Oh yeah,

Paul, I did. That was such a sweet time. I left behind my sin, the idolatry, the wickedness of this world, and I found freedom and forgiveness and eternal life in the Lord Jesus Christ. Why? Because of your ministry, Paul." And there is just a four-lane highway of affection flowing back and forth between these two men. That's the way that it should be. That's the way that it was between these two men. So we see Philemon, a noble Christian man, faithful in his aspect, his contribution to ministry, who is loved by the Apostle Paul and who is even brought to Christ by the Apostle Paul. That's who Philemon is.

Thirdly, there's one more person that we need to introduce this morning as we get acquainted with this letter and that's the person of Onesimus. Onesimus. And Onesimus is the man who is the central concern of this letter, in one sense, and what you can do as you read this letter, is you can piece together his history simply as we follow the text of Philemon. I realize, once again, I realize that if you just read Philemon quickly through, you say, "Who is Onesimus? Why does this matter to me?" It's easy to just kind of put it aside. Well, we don't want to do that here today. If we just read the text with a little bit of care and time, we start to see this man emerge from the page. There is a sympathetic figure that rises from the page of Scripture to the mind of our understanding, and you should see in Onesimus a picture of yourself before God; a picture of your former life; a picture which reminds you that you yourself have committed sin and guilt and wronged people in profound ways and yet somehow God had mercy on you if you are in Christ. You should be able to identify with Onesimus and say, "Wow, I was like him. I had wronged people. I had lied. I had manipulated. I pretended to be somebody that I wasn't and I hurt people in the process. I was like that. I ran away from my responsibility. I ran away from what was right. I stole. I thieved." Every one of you should feel something of that identification with this man and no one should say, "Well, that's not true of me." No, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," Romans 3:23. "There is none righteous, no, not even one."

So we come to Onesimus with a sense and an expectation that we're going to understand where he is coming from in the midst of this and what can we say about him? Well, first of all, we're just going to go through the text as it applies and addresses Onesimus. First of all, as we come to this letter, Onesimus is now a Christian. He has been saved. He has been born again and the sweetness of this is that the Apostle Paul led him to Christ while Paul was in prison. Look at verse 10. Paul, who is the "I" in this verse, "I, Paul, appeal to you, Philemon." So there is first person, second person and third person in this one letter. He writes this letter and he says, "I appeal to you," Philemon, "for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment." Now, he has to be talking about spiritual birth here, right, because he wasn't Philemon's biological father and Philemon didn't become an adult in the two years of Paul's imprisonment in order to go back to Philemon. He's talking about Onesimus was converted under the influence of Paul while Paul was in prison. He, as it were, he gave birth to Onesimus. God gave birth to Onesimus through the ministry of the Apostle Paul while Paul was in prison and so this is a very special conversion that has taken place.

And we see something of what happened after that conversion. Somehow Onesimus found his way to Paul. Paul brought him to Christ through a faithful proclamation of the

Gospel. Onesimus was born again and his life changed and he started to serve the man who had brought him to Christ. What a sweet thing that is when that happens. In Philemon verse 12, the Apostle Paul speaks of this and he says, "I have sent him back to you." I, Paul, have sent him, Onesimus, back to you, Philemon. "I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart." And the text reads, "him who is my heart." He says, "I'm sending you a man that all of my affections reside upon. This is a man that I care greatly about," he says, "but I'm sending him back to you. I'm sending him away from me."

Verse 13, he says, "I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will." What's he saying here? He says, "I'm sending this man back to you. I preferred to keep him with me. I would rather have had him for myself because he is such an encouragement and he serves me and he is such a help and a blessing to me, but I send him back to you anyway. Contrary to my own self interests, I return him to you."

Why is he doing that? Well, we'll get to that in just a second but for now what I want you to see is that Paul led this Onesimus to Christ. They developed a relationship following his conversion that became one of very close friendship. When men are in ministry and young men come and serve them and love them and learn from them and there is an affection that develops very quickly between them that is remarkable; that is beyond horizontal human affairs because there is a commonality in Christ, there is a common affection and there is a love that flows from the man to his so-called son in the Gospel that just generates this profound affection that's unlike anything found in the merely human realm. That's what Paul and Onesimus had together and Paul, as it were, wounds himself in order to send Onesimus back after their fruitful relationship and their close relationship together.

Why would he do that? Why not just keep him here? Philemon had no doubt moved on with life. And why does Onesimus need to go back to Philemon? Well, just keep reading. Onesimus had a sinful past, just like you do, just like I do, and as we read this epistle, we see a little window into his past. He had been Philemon's slave. He had duties and responsibilities and legal responsibilities to his master and yet somehow he had run away.

Look at verses 15 and 16. The Apostle Paul says, "For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, no longer as a slave." There you go. In times past, Philemon had Onesimus as a slave which was perfectly proper under the conditions of society in the first century. This was an accepted human relationship at the time and Onesimus had violated that. He had apparently run away and Paul says, "I'm sending him back and now not as a former slave, I'm sending him back to you with another relationship having developed." Look at verse 16 with me, "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." And based on what Paul says a little bit later, it seems like Philemon had perhaps been wronged by Onesimus, maybe



Onesimus had even stolen from him as he left the household. Look at verse 18. Paul says, "if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account."

So here's the situation. In years gone by, most likely, two, three, four, we don't know, maybe longer, Onesimus had been a slave to Philemon and he had run away, probably taking some of his master's goods with him and absconding with them and most scholars believe that he went to Rome in order to blend in with the crowd where he wouldn't be caught and returned to his master as was the legal situation for men like him, where he would have blended into the crowd. So he left under a black cloud of guilt. He wronged, he stole from his master, it's safe to assume, and he goes to Rome and he's a fugitive on the run; a fugitive not only from Roman law, not only a fugitive from his master, he is a fugitive from a holy God in his sin. And what did God do for him? What happened in his life? Somehow he met the Apostle Paul in Rome and Paul led him to Christ and Onesimus was showing the fruit of repentance with his change in life. He had begun to serve Christ and they had developed this close affection with one another. That was all great but there was a problem, there was a lack of reconciliation in a relationship. There was a broken relationship left over from the past of Onesimus. He had stolen, he had wronged, he had not made restitution to his master. He had not made that right and here he is as a Christian and probably over time, you know, I mean, Paul, they talked and Paul said, "Where did you come from?" "I don't want to tell you right now." "Tell me where you came from. Tell me what happened." And Onesimus in the overflowing of confessing sin, in the overflow of an affectionate relationship with a man who was probably old enough to be his father, Onesimus starts to say, "Well, here's the thing," and he laid out in truth what he had done. He did not try to hide it under lies. He did not try to obscure the truth or misdirect or blame somebody else for his conduct. He said, "Paul, here's what I did. I stole from my master and I ran away, and this friend led me to you and you told me about Christ and I realized my guilt," and with tears running down his face he said, "Now I belong to Christ and that's my whole story, Paul. That's the truth about me. I'm a thief and I'm a fugitive." And Paul in gracious compassion, as it were, puts his arms around him, takes him into his care, protects him and with his affection fully engaged, tells him, "Onesimus, you have to go back. You have to make this right."

And here we'll pause, here we'll step way back and look at what the meaning of the Gospel is for every sinner who would come to Christ. You see, we come up to that point where, "I've done wrong. I'm guilty before God and, Christ, I come to you." What is it that makes Christ so beautiful? So magnificent? What is it that so captivates our affection toward him? Christ doesn't look at us in that condition and send us off to a holy God and say, "You're going to have to account for yourself. You're on your own, buddy." Christ says, "I'll receive you. My Father loves me. I'll bring you in my own merit to the Father so that you can be reconciled and forgiven." Christ doesn't send men to work out their salvation in their own works, he brings them and carries them to God on the wind-filled sails of his own righteousness and shed blood and says, "I love you. I'll receive you. I'll take you to God." And that is the only way that any of you became a Christian is that Christ had mercy on you like that. We saw it from Matthew 11 a while back. "No one knows the Father unless the Son wills to reveal it to him." If you're in Christ today, it's because out of unprompted love, he showed grace to you like that and said, "I'll take you

in your guilt and wash you with my own blood and put my own clothes of righteousness on you and in that condition, I'll now present you to my Father." We're speaking a bit metaphorically, you get that, but that's the overall picture of salvation. Christ brings a sinner to a holy God.

Go back to this letter of Philemon and realize what Paul is doing here. This is so precious and you can see when you're mindful of the fact that in Paul's mind where the great themes of Ephesians and Colossians and the glory of Christ and reconciliation, you can see how it fleshed out in his own mind, he took this spirit of Christ and exemplified it to the benefit of Onesimus. When it came out that Onesimus needed to go back and be reconciled to his former master, Philemon – watch this, this is everything – Paul didn't send him off and say, "You've got to go make that right." No. No, Paul said, "Let me take up your case. I'll take up your case for you so that you don't have to say a word." He says, "I know Philemon," which had to shock Onesimus if you think about it. He comes to Paul, he doesn't know Christ and he doesn't know that Paul knows Philemon. He says, "You know my master?" "Are you kidding? I love your master. I've known him for years. He's a man of character. Let me take a pen and write to him and I'll write you a letter of introduction that explains everything so that Philemon will receive you favorably." "Oh, would you do that for me, you the apostle of Christ? You'd do that for me, a fugitive?" "Of course, that's what a Christian does." So Paul out of sympathy for this beloved disciple that Onesimus had become, wanting to do everything that he could to guarantee his safe return, wanting to bring about reconciliation in a fractured relationship between two men that he had loved, says, "I'll intercede here. I'll put my own credibility on the line. I'll put my money, I'll put my wallet, as it were, where my mouth is. Onesimus, I'm going to cover you." And you can almost picture Paul with the mixed emotions as he sends Onesimus out with Tychicus. He says, "Take this letter and go back to your master." A master who had a right to punish him under Roman law. A master who had the right to deal with him in severity because he was guilty just like God had the right to deal with you in severity for your sins and Christ brings you to a holy Father. And now Paul, he couldn't go personally but he sends this letter and this letter, as it were, drapes the credibility and the love of the Apostle Paul all over this fugitive and he stands before Philemon and they read this letter together with Tychicus. So Paul sent him back to make things right, and as this letter is read for the first time by Philemon, in all likelihood Onesimus is standing right there watching him read it, realizing that his future is in this man's hands and all that stands between him and judgment is a letter written by his friend the Apostle Paul.

Wow. Think about it, beloved. I realize we're kind of going on two parallel tracks here. That's okay. What does a train do? It runs on two parallel rails, right? We're talking about Paul, Philemon and Onesimus; we're talking about you, God and Christ at the same time. You, as it were, were approaching a holy God with nothing to plead on your own. What stood between you and eternal judgment? What stands between us now, between that and eternal judgment except the love, the righteousness, the shed blood of Jesus Christ which drapes us, which covers us, which envelops us in a way that makes us perfectly acceptable to his Father.

Now, let's get something straight here and just remember something that I said but it would be easy to pass over it: Jesus isn't trying to convince a reluctant Father to receive you against his wishes, God the Father loves you. God the Father has his own love invested fully in the eternal purpose of salvation. When Christ brings you to God the Father, as it were, he's not trying to overcome the Father's reluctance to accept you, he is appealing to divine love which preexisted at the beginning of time. And he says, "Father, yes, this sinner is before you. Father, I cover him in my righteousness, in my shed blood. Father, I appeal to your love to receive this one. Everything that would have otherwise kept him from you, I paid for." And God the Father, if you remember the picture from the parable of the prodigal son, throws a party. Throws his arms, welcomes him, "Oh, my Son!" How glad he is. How heaven rejoices when a sinner repent and comes through Christ to God.

We're seeing a picture of this. All that protected Onesimus was a simple letter that the Apostle Paul had written. And what did Paul do? He invested Onesimus with his full credibility. He says and now we're just kind of summarizing here, Paul tells Philemon, "I know this man and I love him." He says, "He's my child. I have begotten him and I love him and I love you and I want the two of you to be brought back together." Appealing in love to both sides, as it were, one who had the right of judgment, the other who was defenseless and helpless before a law he had broken.

And what does Paul do? Look at verse 18. It would be easy to just make this the whole message on Philemon but I'm not going to do that. We'll rehearse these things two or three times because these themes are too great to hurry through. Look at what Paul does in verse 18. He speaks to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus and he says, "If Onesimus has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account; I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it." He says, Paul takes upon himself the debt that Onesimus had and said, "Philemon, don't let that debt interfere with reconciliation. I'll pay every last drop of it. If he has wronged you, I'll pay it." Beloved, in the presence of God, do you understand and see that that is exactly what Jesus Christ did for you? He brings you, as it were, to the Father fully conscious of your debt and your violations against God's law and he says, "Father, I'll pay that debt. If he has wronged you in any way, my Father, you who call me your beloved Son, Father, in love I tell you, I promise you I'll cover that debt so that there is nothing to hinder this full reconciliation between you and this sinner before you." Wow. That's what Christ did. Paul knew to interact with Philemon and Onesimus this way because he understood the Gospel. This was a Gospel act that Paul was doing in the letter of Philemon.

So I think we're going to leave it there for today and we'll save the introduction to the letter for next time. Beloved, a couple of things should be clear in your mind. One is just a basic structure outline of what's going on in Philemon. Paul, a prisoner advocating on behalf of someone that he had led to Christ to someone that he had earlier led to Christ, and working out the difficulties that would have otherwise hindered their reconciliation. Even more as you walk out today, you should have such a profoundly elevated view of Christ, such a profoundly grateful view of Christ and such a completely humble view of yourself. There should be no one walking out of this room today with a sense of pride and

self-righteousness in light of what you've heard today. You were the guilty one before a holy God. You had nothing to commend yourself and yet Christ, the Intercessor, steps into the gap on your behalf and says, "I'll cover it for you. Father, if he has wronged you in any way, charge it to my account." The Father says, "I did that at the cross. There is nothing to hinder the reconciliation. Enter into the joy of your Master." That's what Christ did for you if you're a Christian. That's what Christ offers to you if you're not. "I will fully reconcile you to God. Simply confess your fugitive lawbreaking status, give yourself to me, and I will reconcile you to God." He's the great Intercessor.

Let's close with where we started. Go back to Hebrews 7, and as you're turning there, what should be beating in your heart, what should be pounding in your spiritual veins is, "Oh, I love this Christ! I love him profoundly because of the mercy that he had on my soul when I had nothing to commend myself. He interceded for me." And how did he intercede for you? Look at verse 27 again, "He did it once for all," Hebrews 7:27, "He did it once for all when He offered up Himself." He went to that cross to be your Intercessor with a holy God and if you're in Christ, you love him. If you're not in Christ, he calls you. The way is clear, and to spurn the one true Intercessor in a hardness of heart that says, "I would continue in my sin," beloved, understand that is a great morally culpable act on your part and if you walk out of this room not belonging to Christ, refusing the call of the Gospel, your guilt is immeasurable to reject such a gracious offer as what has been presented to you here today through God's word. Christ is all and in all. Christ, we love you. We adore you. We bow before you. Christ, our Intercessor, our perfect avenue to a holy God. Do you know him?

Let's bow in prayer.

*O Lord, if our heart and our eyes were not so dried up and sinful, there would be rivers of tears of gratitude and joy and repentance flowing down our cheeks right now at the sweet love of Christ poured out at Calvary for sinners just like us. Lord, we thank you that you are the perfect Intercessor, and we pray that as we study Philemon in the days ahead, Father, that we would see Christ rising out of the pages as he has today to make himself known to our souls that we would love him and adore him and thank him more deeply than we ever have before. And Father, we thank you that 2,000 years ago in real time this played out in real human relationships between a master and a slave who had been a fugitive, who had been a thief. We thank you for the reconciling power of the Gospel; that the Gospel cannot only reconcile men to God but it can reconcile men to each other when they approach on a common ground of the cross. Father, what's missing in our world today is not economics or human accommodations, what's missing in our world today is the reconciliation to God that is found only in Jesus Christ, for if men were reconciled to you, they would be reconciled to each other. Father, we lay our lives before you. We lay our sinful souls before you. We lay our young church before you. We lay our passing lives before you and approach you solely through our great Intercessor, the Lord Jesus Christ, and ask you to have like mercy on us. Just as you have had mercy in the past, have mercy on us going forward. And for those that are here without Christ, O God, save them. Incline their hearts through the power of your Holy Spirit to be reconciled to God through our Lord Jesus Christ. It's in his name that we pray. Amen.*

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