

# The Providence of God in the Pains of Life

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**Text:** Philemon

**Date:** January 15, 2006

**Series:** Goodness of God

**Introduction:** Open your Bibles to the book of Philemon. The title of tonight's message is "The Providence of God in the Pains of Life." Philemon is a book named for a man who had a run-away slave named Onesimus. Philemon was an elder at the church of Colosse who was married to Apphia. The Archippus mentioned in verse 2 is probably their son who was a co-laborer with the Apostle Paul.

Paul was writing from a Roman prison cell. John McRay has written about what it would have been like for the Apostle at this time:

"Roman imprisonment was preceded by being stripped naked and then flogged, a humiliating, painful, and bloody ordeal. The bleeding wounds went untreated; prisoners sat in painful leg or wrist chains. Mutilated, blood-stained clothing was not replaced, even in the cold of winter..."

Most cells were dark, especially the inner cells of a prison, like the one Paul and Silas inhabited in Philippi. Unbearable cold, lack of water, cramped quarters, and sickening stench from few toilets made sleeping difficult and waking hours miserable . . . Because of the miserable conditions, many prisoners begged for a speedy death. Others simply committed suicide."<sup>1</sup>

"The present situation is, therefore, very unpleasant, deeply frustrating. He is in a Roman cell: damp, with little light, and probably cold - very uncomfortable. The Scriptures tell us that the Romans had an obsession for chains. The apostle Paul himself refers to those chains in 2 Timothy 2:9, where he says that he is presently bound, or chained. And he says in Acts 26:29 also, that he could wish that all men were as he, a child of God, yet without these bonds, these chains.

Further, we learn from 2 Timothy 4:13 that it could well be at this time that the apostle Paul lacked adequate clothing and books, for he asks Timothy to bring his cloak and the books with him when he comes to visit him."<sup>2</sup>

Later on, we read in Acts 28:29, that Paul was put under house arrest. These would have provided Paul with milder conditions, but at the time he is writing to Philemon the minister, he is in a horrible dark and primitive prison cell.

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<sup>1</sup> Church History, Issue 47.

<sup>2</sup> Clark Haak. The Reformed Witness Hour. *Learning Contentment*.  
<http://www.prca.org/refwitness/1999/1999apr25.html>. Accessed 15 January, 2006.

What is also interesting is that here you have this servant, Onesimus who is writing this letter as Paul dictates it. You have the same thing with the letter to the church at Colosse. So Paul has instructed Onesimus to return to Philemon and bring both the letter to Philemon and the letter to the Colossians.

With that in mind, let us look to the book of Philemon to teach us some lessons about God's Providence in the Midst of our Pain. I've titled the message purposely tonight. There are some who teach that those two words, providence and pain, do not belong together. They are ignoring the truth and making a mockery of the Christian life. To say that the Christian life is anything less than providence and pain is make it a utopian myth. The Christian life is not a fairy tale. It is real living breathing godliness in the face of the pain of the real world. So, how can we know God's providence in our pain?

I. First, Recognize that God has chosen the **State** of our birth. In verse 16, Paul let's us know Onesimus' present state clearly. He calls him a "servant" or we would say today, a slave. This was sadly quite common in the Roman Empire. The Romans would have conquered other nations, and some of these people were made slaves. Now, here Onesimus is in a horrible position to begin with. He is either born into slavery, or he is made a slave when Rome conquers his land. Either way, he did not choose his present condition. No one would choose this. Who was it that chose this for him? God has not only chosen where *Onesimus* was to be born, he has chosen all of those things for us also.

A. So first notice that there are very many things about us that we do not **decide**. I love chocolate ice cream. I will choose it almost every time if I'm given that choice. I have my preferences, but there are many things I have not chosen for myself. God has chosen our parents, our strengths, our weaknesses. He has chosen whether we have a high metabolism or a low one. He has allowed all the inherited illnesses and all the inherited strengths to be vested in you. Some have been born with diabetes; some are predisposed to heart problems. Others are born with back problems. My brother was born being predisposed to scoliosis. He had to endure six major back surgeries beginning at age 13. None of us choose these things. We must own the fact that everything that we did not choose, our hair color, our eye color, our personality, and even our quirks! There are so many people unhappy today because they wish they were different. Where ever you are today, and who ever you are—realize God has chosen all these things for you for His own purposes. You did not choose the language of your childhood. God wired you the way he wanted to wire you. You may be introverted or extroverted, contemplative or totally laid back. So much of who we are was given to us before we were born. We need to accept the things that we cannot change.

When I was in Spain, there were many people that wanted to go to America to live. Well, they thought I would just be happier. The issue that we all need to see is that whether we are here or there does not matter. Whether we are naturally laid back or up tight does not matter. We are all diverse by God's plan. We need

to accept who we are as people and work on being the person God has called us to be.

And yet, even though there are many things we do not decide, we must understand that

- B. There are also very many things that we do **desire**. God gives each of us free moral agency. We have the freedom to choose within the confines of our own will. Of course, sinful man always chooses sin because that's what he likes. God never does violence to our wills. He never forces us to do anything. We are all responsible for every one of our actions. So though God decides many things about us, he is not responsible for any of our actions. We will all give an account before Him on the Day of Judgment.

God chose where and how and under what circumstance Onesimus would be born. God chose his personality traits and hair color, and even wired him to be the unique person that he was, but Onesimus chose what he would do with those things. We can never blame God for our own bad decisions.

So we need to recognize that God chooses the State of our birth. Secondly,

- II. We need to recognize that God has allowed the **Sins** of our past. Now God is not the author of sin. "God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all" (I John 1:5). James further tells us that "God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: 14 But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed" (James 1:13-14). As I said, we are responsible for our choices, but God is not in heaven wringing His hands. Onesimus had done wrong, but God allowed him to do wrong, so that he would be exactly where He wanted him.

Here was Onesimus, and he had stolen some money from Philemon, a minister of Christ. This cause Onesimus to flee Colosse. And where does Onesimus go? He goes to Rome! He ends up meeting someone who takes him to the Apostle Paul of all people. Here he is thousands of miles away, and God leads him to the greatest apostle the world has ever seen.

Illustration: We can see this in the life of Joseph. Here Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers. He is wrongly accused and sent to prison by the wife of Potipher. God works all these things together for His glory, so that when he confronts his brothers, he does not blame them. He says this:

**Genesis 50:20**

But as for you, ye thought evil against me; *but* God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as *it is* this day, to save much people alive.

Another example is the crucifixion. This was the most heinous act of sin in the history of man, but yet God allows it. And he does not do violence to the moral agency of man.

He says:

**Acts 2:22-23**

Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: 23 Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain:

We call this *compatibilism*. That is God always does His perfect will. His will is never violated. Neither is man's will violated. God fulfills His purposes without forcing man into a corner. Yet, God in His mercy opens man's eyes to the Gospel, and then man by the regeneration of the Holy Spirit freely chooses to love and serve God.

But let us get back to the matter of our sin. God allows our sins within the divine order of His plan. Yet we are always responsible. So what are we responsible to do?

- A. We must first, **Own** your sin. Onesimus was befriended by the Apostle Paul. Paul says in verse 10: "I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds." It is God's providence that we are where we are. There are some sins that we commit that will have consequences till the day we die. And yet, if we own these sins—that is we take full responsibility for them, then can make that which Satan planned for evil be to our good! What does Paul say,

**Romans 5:20**

where sin abounded, grace did much more abound:

So grace will abound, but we must first take full responsibility for our sin.

- B. Secondly, we must make specific plans to **Turn** from your sin. If we have stolen, we need to make restitution. Paul let's Philemon know that specific steps are being taken to make things right in verses 18-19

**Philemon 18-19**

If he hath wronged thee, or oweth *thee* ought, put that on mine account; 19 I Paul have written *it* with mine own hand, I will repay *it*: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.

If you find yourself in sin, you need to ask yourself what it is that you have offended the Lord

III. Recognize that God has called you to **Service** in the present. Isn't it amazing that Onesimus thought he would have it all if he just stole a bit of money and got his freedom! Little did he know that the Lord was after him. We read in the prophet Isaiah

**Isaiah 65:1**

I am sought of *them that* asked not *for me*; I am found of *them that* sought me not

That is the providence of God! Onesimus was going to Rome to enjoy his freedom, but what he found was true freedom in Christ. He went from slavery to sonship. He left rich with the money he had robbed, and he went back to Philemon rich in Christ.

A. Those who were once unprofitable are now not only **profitable**, but indispensable.

1. **Onesimus**

2. **John Mark** (Marcus)

**2 Timothy 4:11** Only Luke is with me. Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry.

B. We who were once strangers are now **united**—on the same team! Only God can do that!

**Conclusion:** God's plans and providence often require great pain. If we are to be used of God and profitable, we must follow His will—turning from our sin whatever it takes, and let God take care of the rest!

Closing Hymn: 442 I Know Whom I Have Believed