

DO ME A FAVOR

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“It was the best of times; it was the worst of times” (from the opening page of Charles Dickens’ “A Tale of Two Cities”). Paradoxically, life can seem just so. Good times can mask the work of evil forces, while difficult times may release great blessing.

Today, I’d like to take you to such a season in the nascent Church of our Lord Jesus Christ, by reading together Paul’s letter to Philemon. It involves the story of three men: Paul, a prisoner in Rome (A.D. 61) because of his appeal to Caesar for the Gospel that he preached; Philemon, a wealthy Christian (and slaveowner) of Colosse, in whose home the Colossian Church met, and who was led to faith in the Lord by Paul; and Onesimus, one of Philemon’s slaves, who may have stolen some of his property and escaped, only to wind up in a Roman prison, with Paul, where he, too, surrendered his life to Christ. Here’s the 25-verse text:

Letter to Philemon

¹ This letter is from Paul, a prisoner for preaching the Good News about Christ Jesus, and from our brother Timothy.

I am writing to Philemon, our beloved co-worker, ² and to our sister Apphia, and to our fellow soldier Archippus, and to the church that meets in your house.

³ May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.

⁴ I always thank my God when I pray for you, Philemon, ⁵ because I keep hearing about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all of God’s people. ⁶ And I am praying that you will put into action the generosity that comes from your faith as you understand and experience all the good things we have in Christ. ⁷ Your love has given me much joy and comfort, my brother, for your kindness has often refreshed the hearts of God’s people.

*⁸ That is why I am boldly **asking a favor** of you. I could demand it in the name of Christ because it is the right thing for you to do. ⁹ But because of our love, I prefer simply to ask you. Consider this as a request from me—Paul, an old man and now also a prisoner for the sake of Christ Jesus.*

¹⁰ I appeal to you to show kindness to my child, Onesimus. I became his father in the faith while here in prison. ¹¹ Onesimus hasn’t been of much use to you in the past, but now he is very useful to both of us. ¹² I am sending him back to you, and with him comes my own heart.

¹³ I wanted to keep him here with me while I am in these chains for preaching the Good News, and he would have helped me on your behalf. ¹⁴ But I didn’t want to do anything without your consent. I wanted you to help because you were willing, not because you were forced. ¹⁵ It seems you lost Onesimus for a little while so that you could have him back forever. ¹⁶ He is no longer like a slave to you. He is more than a slave, for he is a beloved brother, especially to me. Now he will mean much more to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

¹⁷ So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹ I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it. And I won't mention that you owe me your very soul!

²⁰ Yes, my brother, please do me this favor for the Lord's sake. Give me this encouragement in Christ.

²¹ I am confident as I write this letter that you will do what I ask and even more! ²² One more thing—please prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that God will answer your prayers and let me return to you soon.

²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you his greetings. ²⁴ So do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my co-workers.

²⁵ May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

More Than a Slave

(v16) *He is more than a slave, for he is a beloved brother.*

What did Jews know about slavery?

- It was a customary (though occasional and temporary) life status (as when working off one's debt), from which, according to the Law, they were released every seventh year.
- The Hebrews were slaves in Egypt for 430 years.
- They were also slaves in Babylon for 70 years.

Slavery By Force

Slavery-by-force (forced submission) is a cause for extreme misery.

Contemporary stories of such unhappiness still abound: human trafficking (sex trade) and genocidal oppression, including religious persecution. Studies indicate that more Christians were persecuted for their faith in the 20th century than in the preceding nineteen centuries!

Freedom from forced slavery is a cause for extreme joy.

However, the Jews also practiced another kind of slavery: slavery-by-choice.

Slavery By Choice

Slavery-by-choice (chosen submission or bond service) is caused by extreme love (and it is for life).

Deuteronomy 15:16-17

¹⁶ *"But suppose your servant says, 'I will not leave you,' because he loves you and your family,*

and he has done well with you. ¹⁷ In that case, take an awl and push it through his earlobe into the door. After that, he will be your servant for life. And do the same for your female servants.

The only freedom from this chosen slavery is the death of one of the parties.

A common contemporary version of this is marriage. (Some may laugh. Some may snicker cynically. Some will tremble with pain.) But really, as God presented it, marriage is a lifelong relationship of a man and a woman, by choice, for love's sake. And this relationship is founded upon mutual submission and mutual trust.

Slavery and Christians

What do Christians know about slavery?

- It is a perpetual, inescapable spiritual condition (dependent on a redeemer).
- We are slaves by virtue of creation.
- We are slaves by virtue of the fall of humankind (we are slaves to whomever we obey).
- Or, we are slaves by virtue of redemption.
- Non-redemptive propositions (karma, evolution, humanistic progress, etc) offer a godless self-deliverance.

Why didn't Jesus and the early Christians oppose the institution of slavery?

As long as human government is martial or monarchical, slavery (as an institution) is not (cannot be) opposed.

When human government develops into democracies, then slavery will be overthrown. Democratic governments are, in fact, a by-product of the Gospel (promoting redemptive freedom).

When does slavery-by-choice feels like slavery-by-force...?

- When we forget that we chose it, and why.
- When we refuse to submit, and instead resist.

Humans make poor slaves, because defiance is strong (*"Every kind of animal can be tamed, but no one can tame the tongue."* James 3:7-8).

Humans also make poor masters, because pride is strong (the best are those who behave like slaves-to-a-still-higher-power).

Paul regarded Onesimus as "more than a slave" (a beloved son and brother)—who now loved God and neighbor. We should do so well!

Review those potent 25 verses again. Especially, notice the *last* line: “*May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.*” Paul was seeking a change of attitude from the heart of a slave-owner. That requires grace deep on the inside—“in the spirit.”

Do you have grace in that location? If so, you will treat others differently (as Paul prayed Philemon would). And, if so, you will serve others differently (as Onesimus did).