

Repairing Relationships



Repairing Relationship

by Brian Johnston



1. Getting Acquainted

Allow me to introduce you to a particular family. It's going to feature in this short series. In many ways they seem to be a normal family. Dad and Mum appear to be comfortably well off. They're well-liked, and they're committed Christians. They host the gatherings of the local church in their own home, and it would appear that they have a son who's also active in serving the Lord, following in his parents' footsteps.

All quite normal – at least in Christian terms. But something happened quite recently to disturb the tranquillity of this well-run home. Some time back there was real drama in the household when a domestic help ran off – and with how much of the household 'silverware' we're not sure ... But, these things happen – sadly – and the fuss soon died down. Gradually, over time, the incident came to be forgotten, until one Sunday there was a bit of a shock announcement in church ...

Let me just cut in there. Have you ever heard of anything like this happening? This isn't a made-up incident. It really took place. Quite a while ago admittedly, but it's a true story. In fact, you've probably heard it before. Maybe the facts of the case do now seem

to be ringing bells in your memory. You do know this family from somewhere, don't you?

Of course, you do. Dad is Philemon; and Apphia is his wife. The Church of God at Colossae (in first century Turkey) meets in their home. In all probability, their son is Archippus whom no less than the apostle Paul respects as a 'fellow soldier'. And it was from their household that Onesimus, one of the household slaves, ran off – and he didn't stop running for a 1,000 miles until he got to the capital city of the Roman Empire, yes Rome itself!

If that seems a bit of an epic journey for a slave, perhaps I should add that his crime was punishable by death under Roman law. Here was a young man – presumably he was, anyway – he was certainly fit and strong to make a journey like that, no doubt in harsh conditions – here was a young man fleeing for his life, running from the law, looking for a place to hide. To lose himself in a big city seemed like a good idea at the time.

At this point, let's rewind to what we were saying about how one Sunday morning there was probably a shock announcement in church – one which brought

painful past memories back. An announcement followed by the reading of a letter. Interestingly, the bearer of the letter was standing there, and he looked somewhat unsure of himself, but more than that he seemed strangely familiar somehow! As the letter was read – I guess by Philemon who hosted the church meeting in his home – as the letter was read, everything fell into place. The letter was addressed to Philemon but mentioned the church meeting in his home – it was a sort of half private, half public letter - and so they all got to hear its contents. Of course! This is the letter to Philemon contained in our Bibles. They all got to hear it because the contents of the letter – and the decision which hung upon it – would in some way affect them all, and it was designed to have an impact on them all.

Actually, I think there might have been 2 letters read to the church that morning – there was another more general letter which was formally addressed to the church, the Church of God in Colossae. We know it by the heading 'Colossians', and it, too, is found in our Bibles. It's full of some of the most exalted and glorious teaching about the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. They must surely have wanted it to be read to them more than once, so

they could absorb its wonderful content. I wonder when we last read it? Perhaps, we should make a mental note to do just that sometime soon.

It's easy to understand why the letter to the Colossians is in our Bibles; but what about the other letter? Ever wondered why Philemon is in the Bible? It's only 25 verses long - with no deep meaning or direct teaching. And it's generally ignored by the Christian public. When did you last hear a sermon on the letter to Philemon?

But I think I know why it's included in our Bibles. God wants to bring healing to our broken relationships. The ministry he's entrusted us with is a ministry of reconciliation. The wonderful news of the Christian message is that we can be reconciled to God by the death of his son, Jesus on the cross. And if that message is going to mean something in our lives, God wants us to work on our own human relationships too. So why the letter to Philemon? Because it illustrates how we can mend broken relationships.

We may be correct in thinking of Philemon as an influential early church leader at Colossae. How was he now going to react to the return of his runaway slave? It would be within his rights to have him put to death. There would

likely be a hush over the congregation as the letter was read to them, as I believe it was. Here are the words they would hear:

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker, and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

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; and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake.

For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.

Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you – since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus – I appeal to you for my child Onesimus (Philemon 1:1-10)

The letter comes from the Apostle Paul. How is it that he's involved in all this? Few, if any, there would have known Paul personally, because he had never visited Colossae. But surely Paul's reputation went before him. Philemon would have told them about Paul, for he'd had personal dealings with him somewhere in his past it seems. How extraordinary that the Apostle Paul should be writing to them about this useless, good-for-nothing scoundrel of a slave who had abused the privilege of having such a decent master as Philemon!

Onesimus – that's the name of the slave in question, as we heard. We don't know why Onesimus ran away – it could even have been to escape the Gospel at home! There's a glorious irony in the story if that was the case, as we'll find out! The name Onesimus means 'profitable' or 'useful' – but, obviously as far as Philemon was concerned, he'd not lived up to his name. Perhaps there's even a clue in verse 18 that he'd stolen 'something for his journey' when he ran away from the household of Philemon. It's in that verse that Paul says to Philemon:

... if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account. (1:18)

If that was indeed the case, it'd only served to aggravate his offence. Facing a death sentence if caught, Onesimus just kept on running. A big city was just the place to 'lose himself', and so he arrived finally in Rome, the capital of the Empire. But it was there that he, in fact, 'found himself' - through meeting Paul in prison - and becoming a born-again Christian. I'd be more accurate to say 'the Lord found him'. How Onesimus happened to meet Paul in prison, we don't know for sure. As with many of the details we're sketching in this series, we can only make reasonable guesses, consistent with a reading of the Philemon letter.

It could be that Onesimus either fell into trouble or else found employment in the prison service. Whichever is the most likely route whereby he came to be in the prison at Rome, it was there he met the Apostle Paul, who was in chains for his faith.

But Onesimus could hardly have expected to meet Epaphras there - a man from his hometown of Colossae 1,000 miles away! Epaphras could even have been acquainted with all the facts concerning Philemon and the case of his disappearing slave! What an amazing coincidence - except it's hardly a coincidence at all!

It's this that shows evidence of

the hand of God. We can never escape his purposes no matter how far we run. I'm reminded of another runaway slave in the Bible, the slave-girl Hagar whom we read about in Genesis chapter 16:

But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her what is good in your sight." So Sarai treated her harshly, and she fled from her presence.

Now the angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur.

He said, "Hagar, Sarai's maid, where have you come from and where are you going?" And she said, "I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai."

Then the angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her authority."

Moreover, the angel of the LORD said to her, "I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they will be too many to count." (Genesis 16:6-10)

Notice we read that 'the LORD found her'. This runaway would also end up returning to her master, and eventually knowing the blessing of God upon her life. Neither Onesimus nor Hagar were blameless in the matters concerning them, far from it, but

God's counsel for each was to return and face up to the issues. Whatever issues we're running away from, God wants to meet us and he wants us to return and deal with things his way. This certainly includes facing up to relationships that have broken down. Join us again in this series to discover God's way for bringing about reconciliation.

2. Put on the spot!

Les Miserables by Victor Hugo is the heroic tale of one man's life in France and his struggle to live through injustice and revolution there in the 18th century.

At its most basic level, it's the life story of Jean Valjean, a victim of the class struggle. Jean Valjean is released on parole after 19 years on the chain gang, but finds that the yellow ticket-of-leave which he must display by law condemns him to be an outcast.

Only a bishop treats him kindly, but Valjean, embittered by years of hardship, repays the bishop by stealing some silver.

Valjean is caught and brought back by the police, only to be astonished when the Bishop lies to the police in order to save him – and gives him two precious candlesticks into the bargain! Valjean decides to start his life anew by assuming a new identity, and so the story unfolds through various twists and turns.

Victor Hugo's story has been critically acclaimed, a great story. But is it any more moving than the story behind one of the shortest of the Bible's books? The drama of the letter to Philemon revolves around the runaway slave Onesimus. It's very possible

that he, too, stole some of the family silver when he took off – a crime which then attracted the death penalty for a slave. His adventures finally took him to the bright lights of Rome. By then he'd been running for about a thousand miles!

Now, in prison there, he meets not one, but two, dedicated Christians – and, amazingly, one of them is from the very place from which he'd run away, a thousand miles distant. His sin has found him out. He learns you can't run from God. He's got away from an earthly master, but not from his heavenly one. And yet, Onesimus, too, finds forgiveness, and the opportunity of a fresh start.

One of the Christians whom Onesimus bumped into in prison was the Apostle Paul. Under the preaching of Paul, Onesimus was saved through believing on the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul refers to him as *my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment* while referring to himself as *Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus*.

So Paul, like Abraham, had the joy of having a son in his old age

– a spiritual one!

And like Joseph, Paul was another who had been made fruitful in trying conditions, including imprisonment! By the grace of God, Joseph had been able to see the hand of God. To his own brothers who had sold him into slavery, he'd once said: "God meant it for good"! (Genesis 50:20). And it was all going to work together for good for Onesimus, too.

Once Onesimus had been reconciled to God, the apostle Paul's concern shifted to effecting a reconciliation between Onesimus and his master, Philemon. Paul admits that he'd really rather like it for Onesimus to remain with him in Rome and attend to his needs. But he was sending him back to Colossae to be reconciled with Philemon. Before Onesimus could be a 'minister' to Paul, there was first an issue to be settled in terms of his relationship with Philemon.

It seems that the two letters – Colossians and Philemon – were written and delivered at the same time (Colossians 4:7-9). A man called Tychicus accompanied Onesimus when he was sent by Paul back to Philemon at Colossae, and brought both letters with him, it appears.

Now, the connection between these two letters to the Church at

Colossae is an interesting one. 'Colossians' has the direct teaching - not only about Christ, but also about Christian relationships. While the letter to Philemon simply contained a strikingly timed appeal to put the teaching into immediate practice – especially the teaching about Christian relationships!

As a pairing, they give us a great example of what to do with the teaching of the Bible in real life situations. It's all very well to know the Bible, but we must put its teaching into practice. It must change how we live and behave!

Imagine the Church at Colossae listening to the main letter, the one simply addressed to them, the Colossians. In part, this is what they heard that Sunday morning:

there is no distinction between ... slave and freeman ... as those who have been chosen of God ... put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.

(Colossians 3:11-15)

So far so good; it makes a nice sermon. But then almost immediately perhaps, they realize that they – or Philemon particularly – are being put on the

spot. For beside the guy who brought the letter is the very figure of the slave Onesimus who's cheated on his master, having deserted him and run off. Will Philemon accept the fact that God sees no distinction between slave and freeman? Will he put on a heart of compassion towards this runaway slave of his? Will he find it in his heart to forgive him, just as he, Philemon, has been forgiven by the Lord? The atmosphere must have been electric.

I take it Onesimus is standing there listening as well. He's already understood that he's done wrong. Why else has he come back, but to make amends, to express his regret and his repentance to Philemon? But, in any case, there's a message in Paul's letter for slaves like Onesimus.

Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men ... For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality. Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven. (Colossians

3:18-4:1)

So, there it is again – an evenhanded treatment of both slaves and masters. And now taken together with what Paul writes in his letter to Philemon, we get a wonderful object lesson on applying the biblical teaching of reconciliation! The principles taught here apply to us as Christian employers and Christian employees today – and in fact to all our relationships with one another in terms of forgiveness and reconciliation.

So, what does Paul say to Philemon, in specifically applying the direct teaching of the Colossians' letter? Well, there seem to be three points. First of all, Paul stresses that reconciliation is required of us (v.8). He calls on Philemon to 'do what is proper'. The point is, reconciliation is our duty even when we can't seem to bring ourselves to do it – when we don't seem naturally inclined that way.

Then, secondly, Paul makes it clear that reconciliation takes love (v.9) when he says to Philemon: *for love's sake I rather appeal to you*. Yes, the motive for mending relationships has got to be love.

So reconciliation is something that's required of us, and our motive needs to be love. And now, thirdly, and finally, it's a family matter (v.15,16). Paul

entreats, *Have him back ... as ... a beloved brother.* There's also the incentive of all being members of one unit – as all who, through faith, have become children of God.

Can we do better than end with the words we quoted earlier?

"Forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you."

3. The art of diplomacy

The story is told of Napoleon inspecting his troops. A woman whose son was sentenced to be severely punished, cried out to the great general: "Please show mercy to my son!" Napoleon turned and replied: "He does not deserve it!" The defendant's mother, realizing full well she was in a desperate situation, shot straight back: "But I'm not asking for justice, I'm begging you for mercy." I believe Napoleon took the point. To show mercy means not doing as the person deserves.

There was all the passion of a mother behind that appeal. I'd like to share with you a very moving appeal that comes from the heart of a father – not a natural father, but the heart of a preacher who's appealing on behalf of one of his recent converts.

In considering it, we might like to ask ourselves the question: "Do we find it easy to forgive?" Or is it easier to nurse a grudge against someone who's offended us?

How often have we heard Bible teaching and been slow to put it into practice? In the case of Philemon and Onesimus – the master and the runaway slave – the teaching to be applied concerned reconciliation. Two letters had been read to the

Church of God at Colossae: the New Testament letters of Colossians and Philemon.

The letter to the Colossians had contained direct teaching about the conduct of masters and slaves: all about fair treatment, glad service and forgiveness of faults. The second letter, mainly directed to Philemon, was an appeal from the Apostle Paul for Philemon to put the teaching of the other letter into effect. It seems he was rather being put on the spot!

Onesimus the runaway slave had returned with the letter, a changed man – but how would Philemon react? Would he demand the law's penalty for the injury done to him? Or would he find it in his heart to forgive the offence committed by a slave?

In his short biblical letter to Philemon, the Apostle Paul has left on record one of the most courteous, diplomatic and tender appeals that we could ever wish to see or hear. Authoritative Bible teacher that he was, a man who had faced down 'wild beasts at Ephesus', who had held his own against the best orators of his day, and had been forthright in demanding his rights of citizenship – he appeals now, in a way that

would melt any heart, for a mere runaway slave who had been unknown to him until only recently!

Perhaps we'd do well to bring this appeal to mind whenever we've the opportunity of forgiving a brother or sister. Let's read now Paul's appeal to the very heart of Philemon to forgive and receive Onesimus, his runaway slave:

Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you – since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus – I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me.

I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, whom 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.

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, 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.

If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me. But if he 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 (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well).

Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say. (Philemon v.8-21)

Paul begins by diplomatically declining to flex his muscles. He says he won't order Philemon to do what's proper, but would rather appeal that Philemon will act of his own volition. Of course, he's subtly made the point in passing that reconciliation is the proper thing to do in God's sight. But the ground of his appeal – or the first of them, for there are many – is 'for love's sake' (v.9). For the sake of the bond of the love between them, Paul urges Philemon to act in forgiveness towards Onesimus.

That bond of affection between Paul and Philemon is something Paul continues to invoke, as he stirs up Philemon's sympathies by

further describing his appeal as the plea of an old man (he's 'such a person as Paul, the aged', he reminds Philemon in verse 9). And not only is he now an old man, but he's also in prison. This appeal is coming to Philemon from 'a prisoner of Christ Jesus' no less (v.9).

None of this is mere exaggeration for the sake of effect, of course. It's all true, but touched on lightly in the course of the appeal in a way surely guaranteed to melt the hardest heart. But Paul's not finished yet – indeed he's just getting going. The appeal, he writes, is on behalf of a child - 'my child Onesimus', Paul says in verse 10. Paul had 'fathered' him through his preaching of the Gospel. And so Onesimus had been born again in trying circumstances (v.10) - 'begotten in my imprisonment', as Paul writes. We're all aware of how emotive an appeal is when based on the plight of children. Who can resist those charity appeals which feature so graphically the forms of malnourished children lying with pathetic fly-covered bodies in some desperate drought crisis?

Paul then puts the case to Philemon that Onesimus, as he now is, is not the same person that he once was. Paul assures Philemon that Onesimus is drastically changed. He 'was useless ... [but] now is useful'

(v.11). In effect, Paul is promising that things will be different: Onesimus had never lived up to his name before, but he will now. Paul's making a telling word-play on the meaning of the very name Onesimus – which meant profitable.

Next Paul appeals again to the bond of affection existing between Philemon and himself when he asks Philemon to receive the slave Onesimus as though he was receiving the apostle himself – for in sending Onesimus back, he writes, I'm 'sending my very heart' (v.12).

That shows how close Onesimus had become to Paul. He'd been making himself helpful to Paul, and Paul tactfully says it was as though he'd already been representing his master in his absence. In this way Paul credits Philemon with rendering assistance to Paul in the person of Onesimus. Paul would clearly be more than delighted if that were to continue – so that, he says to Philemon, 'on your behalf he might minister to me' (v.13). But then the apostle graciously defers to Philemon – 'without your consent I did not want to do anything' (v.14), he says. Often more can be achieved by being gentle rather than pushy or forceful. Though he was such a one as the Apostle Paul, no less, he'd not simply presumed Philemon would be willing to have

one of his slaves seconded to Paul in Rome. So, graciously, he'd sent Onesimus back to make his peace with his master face to face, and then, hopefully, Philemon would return him to Paul.

In a way that could be seen as reminiscent of Joseph acknowledging God's hand behind the evil actions of his brothers toward him, Paul encourages Philemon to look at the bigger picture. He invokes divine providence when he says to Philemon - 'perhaps ... for this reason' (v.15) he was separated from you for a while.

And so he goes on to write about the benefits to Philemon if he were to receive Onesimus back – for now he would be 'more than a slave, a beloved brother' (v.16). How much better that double relationship would be than what had existed before.

Now, assuming Philemon was someone who really looked up to Paul, we can appreciate the appeal contained in Paul's words when he says, *If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me* (v.17). Paul was not speaking from some great height: he's taking the lowly place, and wondering if Philemon cares to honour Paul, as it were, by thinking of Paul as his partner in the Lord's service.

Paul touches on the possibility

that Onesimus has stolen something from his master when he invites Philemon to 'charge that to my account' (v.18,19). In this Paul shows a Christ-like spirit. Did Christ not take all the expense of Paul's and Philemon's wrongdoing and put it on his own account, in effect, as he hung on the cross dying for their sins? There again would be the echo of the words from Colossians: *just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you*. So Paul says that Philemon is to take the debt of Onesimus and add it to what Paul already owed Philemon – but then he quickly adds the reminder of Philemon's indebtedness to Paul which was still much greater! From that we might suspect that Paul had equally been instrumental in the matter of Philemon's salvation.

After all this, Paul rounds off by saying that it would bring joy to Paul (*refresh my heart*, v.20) if Philemon forgave Onesimus – not to mention the bottom line of it really being a matter of 'obedience' to the Lord (v.21)!

So, what practical lessons can we learn, beyond the need to be ready to forgive and be reconciled to one another? Well, we can take to heart the power of grace (v.8) as opposed to demanding our rights. Then there's the great respect for others' opinions (v.14) that comes across in this letter –

as well as the reminder to trace
the hand of God in the
unexpected events of life (v.15).

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