



“Forgiveness That Forgives” (Philemon)

Danny Hodges – NT3524

I. THE TEXT

v.1 Paul writes this letter while a prisoner in Rome. It is one of four he wrote from prison, the others being Ephesians, Philippians & Colossians. They have come to be known as the “Prison Epistles.” Please note Paul’s perspective regarding his imprisonment. The authorities of Rome arrested him, bound him, and imprisoned him, but from his perspective, all this was arranged as part of the will of God for his life by Jesus Christ Himself! See Philippians 1:12-14; 4:22.

vv.1b-2 Most scholars agree that Apphia is the wife of Philemon, and Archippus is their son. They are all very involved in ministry, and they had opened up their home for church meetings. We know from the letter of Colossians that they lived in Colosse, and that theirs was not the only house church (Col.4:15). Not until the third century did churches begin to meet in separate buildings. Paul addresses Philemon very personally, but he also wants this personal letter shared with the church. And Paul’s has good reason for this.

v.6 There is an undeniable connection between sharing our faith with others, and spiritual growth and understanding. Every time I share my faith, I am reminded of how much God loves me, and how much He has forgiven me.

v.7 Philemon was a “refreshing Christian.” His name means “affectionate.”

vv.8-16 Wow! Can you imagine how Philemon’s emotion must have been stirred when he read these words. His slave, Onesimus, had run away. He was a logical man, so he went to the city of Rome. The big city would be the easiest place to hide. But somehow, in the providence of God, he ran into the apostle Paul. We do not have the details, but Paul led Onesimus to the Lord. Afterward Onesimus became a great blessing to Paul, so much so that Paul would have loved him to stay. But Paul knew what had to be done. He had to encourage Onesimus to return to his master. We know from Col.4:7-9 that he did indeed return.

Sometimes when a slave who had runaway was caught, they would burn an “F” into his head (“fugitive”). If he ever ran away again, he would easily be caught. Sometimes if a slave ran away and was caught, they would be tortured, at times even crucified. And under Roman law, all this was legal. Now, even though slavery was not at all like that in American history, nevertheless slaves were the property of their owners. So the owner could treat his slave however he deemed appropriate, and the law gave him every right to

do so. But wherever Christianity had an impact, relationships between slaves and owners were revolutionized. See Titus 2:9-10; Ephesians 6:5-9; Col.3:22; 4:1.

We have to believe, based on Paul's comments about Philemon, that he was a godly master to Onesimus. Despite this, Onesimus ran away.

vv.17-19 What a challenge Paul gives to Philemon. This implies that Onesimus had wronged Philemon, and part of the way he had wronged him was to rob him when he ran away. Who knows what other wrongs Onesimus had committed against Philemon. But Paul reminds Onesimus that he owes Paul his very self, telling us that it was Paul who led Philemon to Christ!

vv.20-21 Paul says he is confident that Philemon will do even more than he asks. Wow! That would mean not only forgiving Philemon for running away, cancelling any debt he owed his master, welcoming him back home, but showering him with grace and mercy.

v.22 And one more thing, I hope to see you soon. You talk about pressure for Philemon to do the right thing!

II. LESSONS

A. Why Did Onesimus Run Away?

1. He had a good master, wouldn't he want to stay?
2. Because he was wanted to be free
 - Onesimus wanted the same thing the Prodigal son wanted. He wanted to be his own master.
3. Because it was his nature
 - See Isaiah 53:6; Ex.34:6-7a
 - God is certainly the best Master anyone could have, yet despite His goodness, man chooses to run from Him.

B. What Did Onesimus Experience When He Returned To His Master?

- Freedom; freedom is not the absence of authority. Rom.14:8 says that no one lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. In other words, we are all accountable to a Master in heaven. Freedom is not found by running from/rebelling against authority. Freedom is found by submitting to authority. And of course the ultimate authority is our heavenly Father, and His Son, Jesus Christ.

C. Applying The Text Personally

- Anybody here running from God? You can run, but you can't hide (Heb.4:13; Adam & Eve). If you're tired of running, why don't you come home to a heavenly Master who wants to forgive you, cancel your debt of sin, and lavish on you grace and mercy you can't comprehend! Lead in salvation prayer.
- How did Philemon respond to this letter? What happened when Onesimus returned? I have to believe that he responded exactly the way Paul anticipated he would. He forgave Onesimus of running away, cancelled any debt he owed, welcomed him back as he would have welcomed Paul himself, and lavished him with grace and mercy.

- Anybody here been offended, wronged, rebelled against? No matter how much you've been wronged, it does not compare with how we have wronged God. See Matthew 18:15-35; James 2:12-13; Eph.4:32; Col.3:13.

D. Examples Of God's Love/Forgiveness

- Jesus, "Father forgive them..."
- Stephen
- Paul (II Tim.4:14-16)

E. What Happens When I Do Not Forgive As God Has Forgiven Me?

1. I am imprisoned (Matt.18:34)
 - I allow the sore to remain open, am never free of the past, robbed of joy & peace. Corrie Ten Boom said, "To forgive is to set a prisoner free, and realize the prisoner was you."
2. My fellowship with God is hindered (Matt.6:14-15; 5:23-24)
3. I allow bitterness to breed in my heart ("Bitterness has the shelf life of a Twinkie"). Heb.12:14-15
4. I Give Satan a foot-hold in my life (Eph.4:26-27; II Cor.2:11, context).

CONCLUSION

- December 7, 1941, 7:55 A.M. on a cloudless Sunday, the Japanese hit Pearl Harbor. In two hours 2,403 Americans were dead, 1,178 were wounded, 169 U.S. aircraft were totally destroyed, three massive ships sunk and 18 others damaged. This incredible attack was led by a 39-year-old Japanese top gun pilot, Commander Mitsuo Fochida whose life hero was Adolf Hitler. Fochida initially led 183 Japanese airplanes into the harbor at Honolulu (all total was 359) and devastated thousands of men and a whole nation and triggered, as you know, the massive, massive death that came about through American atomic retaliation as well as conventional weaponry. After the war was over he was besieged with memories of death. He decided to become somewhat of a recluse and so he took up farming near Osaka. It gave him time to think. He focused increasingly on the problem of peace and he decided in the midst of his guilt and worry over all that had been done in the war to write a book. He determined that the title of the book would be No More Pearl Harbors. He would urge the world to devote itself to pursuing peace. Mitsuo Fochida struggled in vain, however, to find a principle by which peace could work. For years he tried to find the principle that would let him write the book, but he couldn't find it, not in any of the religions of Japan, nor in the philosophies of the world. Then the story took a dramatic change. As Japanese war prisoners were returning from America, Fochida went to visit an old friend, a lieutenant who had been captured by the Americans and incarcerated in a prisoner of war camp in America. When they met they spoke of many things. Then Fochida asked the question upper most in his mind: how did the Americans treat you in the POW camp? His friend said, "They were

treated well." Then he told Fochida a story which he said made an immense impression upon him and on every prisoner in the American camp. There was a young American girl named Margaret "Peggy" Covell who came to the camp on a regular basis doing all she could for the prisoners. She looked after their sick and helped them in many ways. They received an immense shock, however, when they asked her why she was so concerned to help Japanese prisoners. She answered, 'Because my parents were killed by the Japanese army.' "Such a statement might shock a person from any culture but it was incomprehensible to the Japanese, in their society no offense could be greater than the murder of one's parents. Peggy tried to explain her motives. She said her parents had been missionaries, and when the Japanese invaded the islands, her parents escaped to the mountains in north Luzon for safety. In due time, however, they were discovered. The Japanese charged them with being spies and put them to death. At first Peggy was furious with grief and indignation. Then Peggy began to consider her parents' selfless love for the Japanese people. Gradually she became convinced that they had forgiven the people God had called them to love and serve. Then it occurred to her that if her parents had died without bitterness or hatred toward their executioners, why should her attitude be any different? Therefore Peggy chose the path of love and forgiveness. She decided to minister to the Japanese prisoners in the nearby POW camp as a proof of her sincerity. "Fochida was touched by the story. But he was especially impressed with the possibility that it was exactly what he had been searching for, a principle sufficient to be a basis for peace, the principle was a forgiving love. Could that be the principle upon which the message of his projected book, No More Pearl Harbors could be based? "Shortly after this Fochida was summoned by General Douglas MacArthur to Tokyo. As he got off the train he was handed a pamphlet entitled, "I was a prisoner of Japan." It told about an American sergeant, Jacob DeShazer who had spent 40 months in a Japanese prison cell and who after the war had come back to Japan to love and serve the Japanese people by helping them to come to know Jesus Christ." To make the story short, DeShazer told about how he was a bombardier on one of the 16 army B-25 airplanes under General Jimmy Doolittle, launched 18, April 1942 from the deck of the USS Hornet to bomb Tokyo. None of the planes were shot down but they did run out of fuel. DeShazer was captured and incarcerated for 40 months, the duration of the war. DeShazer noted that all the prisoners were treated badly. He said that at one point he almost went insane from the violent hatred by the Japanese guards. Then one day a guard brought them a Bible. They were in solitary confinement so they took turns reading it. When it was DeShazer's turn he had it for three weeks. He read it eagerly and intensely. On June 8, 1944." DeShazer received Christ as his Lord & Savior. He determined that if he lived until the war was over and if he were released, he would return to the U.S., study the Bible for a period of time, then return to Japan to share the message of Christ with the Japanese people. And that's exactly what he did. Great crowds came to hear him. Many responded and were saved. Here was a second person who forgave the Japanese and came in forgiveness to show them the love of Christ. Fochida was deeply impressed. He got a New Testament & began to read. In September of 1949, eight years after Pearl Harbor, he was reading Luke 23 and he heard Jesus say this, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." He bowed his knee and received Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Mitsuo Fochida, devotee of Adolf Hitler became a Christian, & later a well known evangelist.

- We live in a culture filled with anger, bitterness, hostility, & hate. Retaliatory crimes are commonplace in our society. We have lawsuits for everything conceivable, and some that are inconceivable. I am told there are more people in law schools than all other professional graduate schools combined. Jesus said that as we get closer to his return, because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most would grow cold. What about you? Is there someone you need to forgive? Do it, by faith. Don't let your love grow cold...