

A STUDY OF THE PRISON EPISTLES

THE BEST LESSON

All-time great tennis superstar, Serena Williams, said, "I've grown most not from victories, but setbacks. If winning is God's reward, then losing is how he teaches us."

What competitor likes losing? We can acknowledge its value, but still hate it. Similarly, throughout this study, we've seen over and over the penalty, power, and presence of sin. Yet, despite our hatred of sin, sanctification cannot begin until we acknowledge and understand it. Although sin feels good for a moment, its devastation is lasting. The only value sin offers is the constant reminder that I'm not God and I desperately need a Savior. It doesn't mean I submit to sin, but that freedom in Christ is the reward from the setbacks sin causes.

Last week, we considered the emotional jolt Philemon might have had seeing his runaway slave return. Paul's words in *Colossians* still echoed from the walls of Philemon's house church as he began reading the imprisoned apostle's personal letter to him. This Week, Paul kicks it up a notch. Though Philemon was a good man, some lessons still needed to be learned.

PHILEMON 15-25

¹⁵ For perhaps it was for this reason that he was separated from you for a little while, so that you would have him back eternally, ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, as a dear brother. He is especially so to me, and even more so to you now, both humanly speaking and in the Lord. ¹⁷ Therefore if you regard me as a partner, accept him as you would me. ¹⁸ Now if he has defrauded you of anything or owes you anything, charge what he owes to me. ¹⁹ I, Paul, have written this letter with my own hand: I will repay it. I could also mention that you owe me your very self. ²⁰ Yes, brother, let me have some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹ Since I was confident that you would obey, I wrote to you, because I knew that you would do even more than what I am asking you to do. ²² At the same time also, prepare a place for me to stay, for I hope that through your prayers I will be given back to you.

²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you. ²⁴ Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my collaborators, greet you too. ²⁵ May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Ancient slavery, although sharing some similarities, was quite different than American slavery. However, both were systems of evil and oppression. So, why didn't Jesus and the apostles come out and attack these systems?

There could be many answers to that question. Ultimately, the issue wasn't about slavery, it was about sin. They understood that changed lives change systems. For more info on ancient slavery, scan the QR code.



DISCUSSION

What are you most looking forward to this Summer? Any big plans?

ICEBREAKER

1. What possibility did Paul offer for Onesimus' absence? (15)

OBSERVATION

2. What *relational* changes did Paul suggest on the basis of Onesimus' *spiritual* change? (16-17)

3. How did Paul imply accountability to his requests toward Onesimus? (22)

4. How does the interaction between Paul, Philemon, & Onesimus illustrate the gospel?

INTERPRETATION

5. How have you changed as a part of this study? Where do you think you need to continue growing as a result of what you've learned?

APPLICATION

"Leave it all on the field." We hear this all the time. As we conclude our study, don't leave anything unsaid. If there is something you've held back, talk to your coach today.

STUDY NOTES

UNITY THROUGH MEDIATION PART II

Last Week, Paul praised Philemon for his *love for all the saints*. Paul shared that Onesimus is now one of the *saints*. Thus, Paul was saying, “Philemon, don’t be mad at Onesimus—he’s a saint!” Paul went even further to give possible motive to Onesimus’ absence saying, ***perhaps it was for this reason that he was separated from you for a little while, so that you would have him back eternally, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, as a dear brother.*** (Insert head explosion emoji here).

We might imagine that Philemon had led a Bible study at one point on Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. Maybe he even shared the foolishness of the older brother’s hard-heartedness as the father in the parable said, “*your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost and is found.*” Paul just equated Onesimus with the prodigal son and offered Philemon a choice—will you celebrate your brother’s return like the father or will you despise his absence like the brother?

Paul offered to cover any loss suffered to Philemon because of Onesimus. However, the apostle then did something incredible. Paul never outright condemned slavery. Yet, he makes two stern implications at the end of this short letter. First, he stated, ***“I was confident that you would obey, I wrote to you, because I knew that you would do even more than what I am asking you to do.”*** Read this as, “Remember how you used to have a slave named Onesimus, but now he’s a brother. Yeah, let’s keep it that way.”

Secondly, as if the veiled reprimand wasn’t enough to set Onesimus free, Paul then said, ***“At the same time also, prepare a place for me to stay.”*** Read this as, “You better do as I say big boy, because I’ll be back to check on you.”

WISE MEDIATORS ENGAGE EXISTING RELATIONSHIPS

Ancient slavery wasn’t exactly like what we think of as American slavery. It wasn’t necessarily based on race. Often, slavery existed as a bond between master and slave. The slave had debt or needed work, food, housing, etc. and the master provided an opportunity. However, it’s not like American slaves had it terrible and ancient slaves were basically contract labor. Both institutions were horrible. In both instances, slaves had no rights, no choices, and no humanity.

Paul stood in the gap for Onesimus by first sharing Christ, then showing Philemon his value. Onesimus, a law-breaking, runaway rebel, had a debt he could do nothing to solve and needed help. Philemon had been wronged and, like many of us, he needed to learn to grant forgiveness. In these three men, we see a picture of the Gospel.

Like Paul, Christ found all of us in the same condition as Onesimus, runaway slaves, law-breakers, and rebels. However, when we placed our trust in him, he identified us with himself before his Father. His work on the cross paid our debt of sin which we could never pay. As a result, the Father has forgiven us. Once in Christ, we have the choice like Philemon to receive sinners or to shun them. Likewise, we can learn to forgive as we have been forgiven, or we can stay in bondage to the pain caused by others—hurting only ourselves through unforgiveness.

WHAT YOU MUST DO

The late great Bible teacher, Howard Hendricks said, “There are a lot of things you *can* do, you have to find the things you *must* do.” You may be gifted all over the place. At some point you’ll have to choose—will I do what I *want* or what I *must*?

Doing what I want, I can stay like Onesimus, a slave to sin. Or I can be like Philemon, a victim of circumstance. However, as believers in Christ we have an opportunity. We get to decide if we’ll be intermediaries like Paul.

Doing what I must, like Paul, I can stand in the gap for others. While the world fights over solutions to problems they don’t understand, we can be true change-makers because we have the solution to the problem at the root of every issue. What you must do is discover where and how God wants to use you to change the world.

From prison, Paul penned letters that have reshaped eternity. He was an old man worn down from years of travel, calamity, and confinement. You are young, energetic, and standing on the shoulders of giants throughout our history. With the wisdom of Paul, you too, can live a life that echoes into eternity.

Paul traveled the magnificent Roman roads to take the gospel to the outer reaches of the empire. You have such a greater reach in your fingertips. You can contact anyone in the world through your smartphone. How shameful will it be if we stand before the Lord and he asks what we did to magnify him with the opportunity for world-wide travel and communication. Don’t waste your opportunity to change the world.