

## **A Shepherd's Plea** (A Father' Plea)

Philemon 1:1-25

Key Verse: 10 "I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment."

Last week, we learned of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep. Have you decided to grow as a good shepherd like Him this year? If so, how can we grow? Ultimately we grow by learning from Jesus. But we can also learn from human shepherds. Paul is a super apostle and gifted evangelist who planted churches all over the Roman world. Today, in Paul's personal letter to Philemon, we see Paul's beautiful shepherding of Philemon and Onesimus while in prison. His shepherding has two essential elements: his shepherding is gospel-centered and carried out with the father's heart and humility. May we learn from Paul and grow as good shepherds in this year.

### I. Paul's life in prison: a good sheep to Jesus

The book of Philemon is Paul's personal letter to Philemon. Short as it is, it shows many things about Paul. Among them, I will focus on only two things.

First, Paul is a good sheep to Jesus. How does Paul introduce himself in his letter? In verse 1a, Paul calls himself "a prisoner for Christ Jesus," which implies he is in prison. Though he is imprisoned by the Roman Emperor, he identifies himself as a prisoner for/of Christ Jesus. He recognizes that it is in Jesus' sovereignty that he is in a Roman prison. Can you believe that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, led his faithful sheep, at the end of his life, into a dark, cold and lonely prison? It doesn't look like a green pasture. Sometimes, we feel frustrated and discouraged when unexpected and unpleasant things happen to us. Joseph in the Old Testament also ended up in prison. In such a situation, people become bitter, angry, frustrated or depressed, feeling helpless and hopeless. What about Apostle Paul? Is he bitter? Not at all! He is confident saying, "I am a prisoner for Christ." In Philippians, one of the letters he wrote in that prison, Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice... I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content... I can do all things through Him who strengthens me..." (Php 4:3, 11,13) Paul is a good sheep to Jesus who is his source of life, strength, and joy.

Second, Paul is raising future spiritual leaders in prison. Look at verse 1a. "Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and *Timothy our brother*." Verses 23-24 tell us there are others alongside him in prison. Let's read them together. "*Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers*." He has been working together with them. Epaphras is his fellow prison-mate, and the others willingly visited and worked with Paul. These people left their families and home to work alongside Paul, a prisoner. Why? Paul has the fragrance of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. They brought the news from the churches. And Paul wrote and sent letters to the churches of Ephesus, Philippi, and Colossae, building up these churches even from jail. Even more inspiring is that Mark and Luke, who will write 2 of the 4 gospels, are with him. Through Paul, while he is in prison, they are learning

the essence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Timothy is being trained to be a shepherd/pastor there. Wow! As for Paul, the Roman prison is a spiritual Westpoint where he is raising future spiritual leaders. Can any of you imagine a worse situation than Paul in prison? May God bless you to grow as good sheep to Jesus, and become good shepherds who raise spiritual leaders in whatever context and circumstance you are in.

## II. Paul's gospel-centered shepherding

Now it is time to learn how Paul shepherds two persons personally: Onesimus in prison and Philemon in Colossae.

First, Paul's shepherding Onesimus. Who is Onesimus? Verse 16 states that Onesimus was Philemon's bondservant. Verse 18 says that Onesimus had wronged his master Philemon, and owed him something, likely stole money from him. And Onesimus ran away. For some reason, he was arrested and placed in Paul's prison-cell. In verse 10, however, now this runaway slave and thief was saved through Paul's gospel message and Christ-like life. Paul dearly loved Onesimus. Paul calls him "my child" (10), "my very heart" (12) and "beloved brother." (16) Paul, while busy serving future leaders like Timothy, Luke and Mark, and serving all the churches around the world, has also cared for a lowly and useless runaway slave like Onesimus with such deep affection. Now Onesimus is serving Christ Jesus and is working together with other gospel workers, his fellow brothers in Christ. Surely Jesus, the Good Shepherd, has put Paul in prison to save and love this one lost sheep, Onesimus!

Let's see how Paul shepherds Onesimus further. For several days, Onesimus must have looked dark and worried. Paul asks him, "What's up, son?" Onesimus answers, "My prison term is almost over. What shall I do?" Surely it is good news, isn't it? On the other hand, it is a scary and challenging moment for Onesimus!

Paul could advise him saying, "Onesimus, you must take ownership over your life! If I were you, I would look for a job and a woman to marry." Or Paul could say, "Onesimus, you are free in Christ. Move on from your past life. Do what may glorify God and make you happy!" Or, "Onesimus, you can stay with me, an old man, and work with me. I need you."

But how does Paul shepherd Onesimus further in that critical situation? Let's read verse 12. "I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart." Paul must have said to Onesimus, "Will you go back to Philemon, your former master?" What is Paul doing as a shepherd? Does Paul condone the evil, unjust system of slavery? When we read what he asks Philemon to do for Onesimus, we can see that it is not the case. We need to understand why and how Paul and Onesimus must have come to that decision.

Paul understood the core of the gospel. Jesus laid down his life on a cross. Why? In 2 Co 5:18-20 Paul says, *"All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation."*

*Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*” Paul recognizes that the very reason God made Jesus to be sin for our sake is that we can be reconciled to God. Paul also knows that once we are reconciled to God and have peace with God, we are to be reconciled with other people, especially with other Christians. We are called to forgive them and ask for their forgiveness. Our reconciliation with God and man is the essence of the gospel and the very goal of shepherding. For this reason, Paul is going to send Onesimus to Philemon so that they can truly experience the power of the gospel of reconciliation.

After several days’ Bible studies, surely Onesimus agreed with Paul and decided to go back to Philemon. However, Onesimus is still fearful because he has seen runaway slaves crucified. Onesimus continues to say, “What if Philemon refuses to receive me back and wants to execute me! I am scared!” Paul says to him, “Have faith in the power of the gospel. Philemon is also a mature Christian. I will write a letter to him. Simply deliver my letter to him.”

In a brief summary, Paul’s shepherding of Onesimus is personal beginning from where Onesimus is, from his context, and is gospel-centered. How can we shepherd each person personally from their own contexts? One of my shepherding mentors says that she reads her sheep’s life-testimonies again and again until she can know them better than they know themselves. Another mentor says he has written down what his sheep says and doesn’t say during each Bible study and in their testimonies. In summary, a good shepherd prayerfully listens to his sheep until they see where they are, what they are struggling with. However, shepherding shouldn’t stop there. A good shepherd guides them to the gospel. I have been guiding one young man to Jesus with one question: “Are your thoughts, your words, your plan right now in line with the gospel and in line with your new identity as a new creation?”

May God enable us to know by name our children, our Bible students, our coworkers so that we can learn to shepherd them contextually and help them to apply the gospel deeply into their lives.

Second, Paul’s shepherding Philemon. While listening to Onesimus’ personal story, Paul learned that Philemon at Colossae is his legal owner. Shockingly, Paul recognizes that Philemon is the very person who owed his life to him. Philemon was saved through Paul’s gospel message. What is more, Paul has prayed for him day and night as Philemon shepherded the Colossian Church. Philemon has had a deep personal love relationship with Paul.

Now let’s focus on Paul’s shepherding Philemon further through his letter. After calling him “*our beloved fellow worker* (1b),” Paul writes his thanksgiving and prayer topics for him (4-7). Paul recognizes God’s work in Philemon’s life; because of Philemon’s love and faith toward the Lord Jesus and others, Paul and all the saints have been greatly encouraged and refreshed through Philemon. In other words, Philemon is a mature Christian. However, Paul’s shepherding of him doesn’t stop there. Let’s read verse 6. “*And I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.*” Here the

full knowledge of every good thing that is in us or in you is the gospel. Paul is shepherding Philemon by asking him to deal with Onesimus by practicing the gospel by faith.

Practically, what does Paul want Philemon to do? Does he ask Philemon to receive his runaway slave without punishment, and accept him back as his bondservant? Let's read verse 17, *"So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me."* Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul! Paul asks Philemon to go far beyond the cultural expectation. He says in 15-16: *"For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother – especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord."* Paul asks him to receive him no longer as a bondservant, but as a beloved brother, forever. He asks him to receive him as Paul's own very heart!

How is the gospel applied in this bold request? Paul's Biblical logic: Premise A: Onesimus is a beloved brother to Paul in the Lord. Premise B: Paul is a beloved brother to Philemon in the Lord. Conclusion: Onesimus is Philemon's brother in the Lord. Paul's request of Philemon doesn't stop there. Look at verse 21. *"Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say."* Paul implicitly asks him to free Onesimus.

As for us, Paul's request of Philemon sounds Biblical and right. However, in Philemon's context, it is an unprecedented and revolutionary request that goes against the times, human traditions and culture! However, Paul is confident that Philemon will obey him. Where does his confidence come from?

In Gal 3:26-28 Paul says, *"for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."* We who are united with Jesus by faith are brothers and sisters first to Jesus and then to one another. Paul is shepherding Philemon, asking him to practice 'the gospel of brotherhood' in Jesus by liberating his slave Onesimus and embracing him as his beloved brother.

Paul's shepherding of Philemon is gospel-centered. The gospel of brotherhood is radical. It goes against ungodly systems, traditions, cultures and trends. The gospel challenges us to go beyond forgiving those who have sinned against us. The gospel challenges us to embrace them as our beloved brothers and sisters in Christ! Do you have the courage to bring the kingdom of God on earth by gospel-centered shepherding? Or are you scared?

While examining my life as a shepherd, I see two obvious weaknesses among many: self-condemnation and fear of people. When I see myself not practicing the gospel especially when I am alone, I feel ashamed and unqualified to ask others to live by the gospel. I also feel afraid of people, thinking, "They might leave the church if they are told to live by faith and practice the counter-cultural gospel against their sinful nature and worldly values." So I have become timid. I have tried to hide behind P. Mark and Kevin. I can just remain as a Bible teacher and theologian, without intervening in others' lives. Like the lion in the Christmas drama, Lord, I need courage that

comes from the faith in the gospel! In repentance and hope to live a gospel-centered and courageous shepherd's life, I choose Gal 2:20 as my new year key verse, which states, *"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."* I pray that I may crucify my old timid and fearful man daily, live as a gospel-centered and courageous new creation, and live out the shepherd's life in my union with Christ. May God bless each of you to live a gospel-centered and courageous shepherd's life as well.

### III. Paul's shepherding in father's heart and humility

In Paul's shepherding of Onesimus and Philemon, we may assume he is a strong charismatic leader who forces them to obey him saying, "Onesimus, go back to your slave master. Philemon! Free Onesimus from slavery." No! As he carries out his personal and gospel-centered shepherding, he does so with father's love and deep humility.

Paul calls himself "a prisoner of Christ Jesus," which implies that he does not depend on his authority as an apostle of Christ Jesus. He deeply respects Timothy enough to call him "our brother," not my intern. He calls Philemon "our beloved fellow worker and brother," not his life-long sheep. He acknowledges his faith and love as well. Verses 8-10 highlights his father's heart and humility. Let's read them together. *"Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus -- I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment."* Verses 17-19 also reveals another aspect of his shepherding, which states, *"So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self."* I am not sure whether Paul has enough money to pay back Onesimus' debt. But he is willing to do anything for Onesimus.

Paul's humble and willing shepherding reflects Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who laid down his life for the sins of his sheep as a ransom saying *"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."* (Lk 23:34a). May our life also reflect Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

Today, we learned about shepherding through Paul. He is a shepherd in prison His shepherding has two essential elements: he shepherds them with the gospel, and with a father's heart and deep humility. May God bless us to grow as good sheep to Jesus and as good shepherds, who practice gospel-centered shepherding with love and humility.