

Freedom  
(*Philemon 1-21*)

What enslaves you?

It may hang like a weight across your shoulders and makes you stagger. It may stand like an immense wall right in front of you, too high to scale, too solid to break through. It may course through you sometimes, like a shot of guilt or fear or worry, suddenly jolting you, sapping your resolve or hope.

What enslaves you this morning - makes you feel like a prisoner? Because today is all about freedom

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If the letter of Paul to Philemon that Amy read this morning seemed unfamiliar, you're in good company.

It wasn't a typo in our order of service that listed the reading as Philemon 1-21. Today there is no chapter listed, only verses, because the whole book of Philemon is only 25 verses. Amy read it all, other than the last few verses where Paul signs off.

The Letter to Philemon is hard to figure out, because there are things we don't know. It's like reading one email out of a long email chain - we don't know exactly what the characters said to each other before or after this little letter. We've been dropped into the middle of their lives.

But I'm so intrigued by the Letter of Philemon, because it is all about freedom and slavery - real freedom, real slavery, the kind you and I know about, still today.

Because things still enslave us. We all struggle with scripts that have run so long in our heads about what we're supposed to do; each day we confront messages about what real success looks like and who is valued. There are pressures shaping us, telling us what is expected of us, or our children, or our homes, or our job performance.

The Letter to Philemon is about free will, and what happens when we've been freed from all of our compulsions. If we really are freed of all that, if we really do have free will - complete and total and utter freedom - then how do we choose to treat other people? Philemon asks, If you have real freedom of choice, how do you spend your days?

What would your life be like, if you were fully, completely, honestly free of every single fear?

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Here's the background to the Letter to Philemon. There are three main characters: the Apostle Paul; Philemon, a man who hosts a church in his house in Collosae, now a part of Turkey; and Onesimus, Philemon's slave.

### Paul

Paul is writing just at the beginning of this new Jesus Movement that was starting to pulse through the Greco-Roman Empire. No one, even Paul and Philemon, was sure where it would go. The letter was written in the late 50's or early 60's, perhaps twenty years after Jesus was killed by the Romans; it's one of the earliest texts we have, written before Matthew or Mark, Luke or John.

We're also quite sure that this letter from Paul to Philemon was actually written by Paul. About half of the other letters that bear Paul's name in the Bible weren't – they were really written by Paul's later followers, using Paul's name. For me, this is important, because I'll admit that for years I stayed away from Paul's writings. I was deeply disappointed in this supposed follower of Jesus, because he wrote that women must remain silent in church; that any sexual love, gay or straight, was always a bit distasteful, far less virtuous than celibacy; and that slaves should obey their masters. Yes, I knew that Paul was writing at a different time and culture, but those teachings – about women, sex and slavery - have done so much damage, have so burdened the lives of millions of Christians - that I couldn't dismiss them by simply saying Paul lived in a different historical "context." Jesus lived in a different culture, too, but he affirmed women all the time; never demeaned sex between loving partners; and reached out to society's pariahs, rather than condemning them. The words ascribed to Paul were antithetical to those I knew from Jesus, and I rejected them.

I still do reject them. But with study, I've concluded that the worst among them probably weren't authored by Paul, but instead were written later, by people who were Paul's followers. At their best, these later followers tried to apply Paul's teachings to new situations that arose. At their worst, they tried to soften the radical nature of Paul's teachings and Jesus's words, to render them more palatable to the society around them.

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The real Paul was far freer than that. Like Jesus, he spoke what he believed and experienced, which was a profound freedom. Paul and Jesus may have been among the free-est of all people the world has ever known, because both were convinced that they had nothing to fear. They were fearless *not* because they could overpower and dominate others. They never wanted to dominate others.

The secret of their fearlessness was that Paul and Jesus already had what they most yearned for in life, their deepest longing. They already trusted, down to their toes, at the very heart and core of their beings, that they would always be loved by God; that they would always be forgiven. Nothing could change that, nothing could ever separate them from God's love, not even death.

So instead of fearing where they stood in the pecking order of people, how they measured up or ranked, Paul and Jesus were willing to call themselves servants, even slaves. Because they knew that the love they'd experienced was available to every single person, they called all others their brothers and sisters. Earlier in his life, Paul had been obsessed with education, driven to perform with excellence, according to religious law. But once Paul was freed of those compulsions, no longer afraid of failing, then he proclaimed this: it doesn't matter whether you've been a perfectly observant Jew or a pagan Greek, male or female, slave or free: everyone could have the same deep freedom, from God.

The real Paul is heard in his letter to Philemon, a Paul so free -- so radically changed by God's forgiveness and love -- that he'd risked everything to talk about it. He hadn't cared if people imprisoned him because he riled up the social order. So he writes a letter to Philemon all about freedom, from his prison cell. Freedom might lead to death, but he'd still be free, said Paul, even then.

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#### Onesimus

Onesimus is the slave in the letter to Philemon -- he's Philemon's actual slave, bought and owned. You or I could have been Onesimus; 35-40% of people were slaves, and almost anyone could become a one; it all depended on the vagaries of war -- who conquered whom -- or the vagaries of farming, the debts you or your family incurred. Slaves had no rights. Even after serving a family all your life, when you grew too ill or old to be of use, you could be flung from the home, discarded like broken furniture. And if you ran away and were found, you could be killed.

Onesimus had run away, it seems; he may have stolen from Philemon. Onesimus had found freedom, tasted that delicious feeling we treasure, too when we wake in the morning and can choose where to go, how to think, what to believe. And having tasted this, now Onesimus, of his free will, was returning to his master Philemon, delivering Paul's letter. What Onesimus had learned from Paul, while with Paul, had made Onesimus feel so free on the inside that he was risking this return, to be the letter carrier for Paul.

#### Philemon

And Philemon? He must have been wealthy to have a home large enough to host a church and to own slaves. Paul calls Philemon a good friend and companion in Paul's

work, so Philemon must have had stature within this community, been their church leader. Philemon must have been gratified and proud, when Paul complimented their church, having heard that their love and faith has brimmed over to other believers, that their community is growing.

But how does Philemon feel when the request comes from Paul – a request, not a command. Paul asks, Will Philemon free Onesimus, drop all charges, treat him no longer as a slave but as a brother?

How free, really, is Philemon? Does he feel as free as Paul and Osemius do, willing to risk so much? Philemon is given free will by Paul – he can choose what to do.

Ah freedom....When we have free will, do we use it in a way that shows we're really free, not afraid, like Paul and Jesus and Osemius?

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Put yourselves in the shoes of Philemon. A leader needs to consider the consequences of his actions. These thoughts must have run through his head.

What happens if actions like theft and broken laws go unpunished? Will all of Philemon's other slaves demand equal treatment? If all his slaves are freed, who will do the needed work in his fields, to feed Philemon's family and the other church members he's now supporting? Will a slave revolt grow and spread through the neighborhood, as word spreads about Onesimus? Will the turmoil that ensues require closing the church? Might Onesimus himself be imprisoned? Then who would provide for his mother and sister and daughter, who will care for the needy of the little church?

Philemon also must have mused about Onesimus and Paul, assessing what lay behind their odd actions. Had the slave's purported prison conversion been one of convenience, as we know prison conversions can be? Did Paul, in a weakened state, fall for the ruse too easily, not really understanding its broader implications for the Colossian church? Wasn't there a middle road possible – perhaps the master could treat his slave in a more brotherly way, recognizing him as brother in Christ, without freeing him? Couldn't Onesimus be legally retained as a slave, as least as far as the outer world was concerned?

Ah, the hard choices we have, because God has given us freedom.

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Count the cost, says Luke. Do you really know what you're getting into with this project of being a Christian? Do we realize, with Paul, that acting as a true Christian can get you into real trouble, even imprisoned? To we realize, with Philemon, that

from the world's eyes, you might have to give up everything: your reputation, your appearance of wisdom, even all your possessions. Even all your slaves.

Count the cost of what it means to open doors to people not like ourselves, and call them sister or brother in church: you might have to treat them like real blood relatives in the world, caring deeply about whether they get health care, or are sent into military conflict, caring as much as if they were your own parent or child.

Count the cost, of what someone might first steal from you, and then ask forgiveness for. Count the cost of what real love does – it gives others choices, too, as Paul gave Onesimus and Philemon – and then we need to live with their choices.

So Paul, loving both Philemon, the master, and Onesimus, the slave, gives both of them free will. To choose how to act, based on how each has been changed by the teachings of Jesus, by the love of God, by the freedom they've been granted, as wide as the oceans, and as deep as the universe.

Oh Freedom! What will you do with it? It's yours – now. A freedom that can break down walls that block your path forward, that can unlock the doors of your prison, that can lift the heavy weight from your shoulders, that can wipe from your soul the worry that twists and turns you.

Freed from what has enslaved us, all of us can do the unexpected. Like Paul, we can willingly giving up something we want and even need, trusting another may need it even more. As Paul gave up Osemius and sent him back to Philemon. As Osemius, willingly returned to the one he most feared, and asked forgiveness. Maybe like Philemon, willingly giving away our possessions, and risking widespread ridicule.

*"Maybe"* like Philemon, because we don't know what Philemon chose to do. We can't tell from the letter.

Our full story remains unwritten, too.

What will you do with the freedom we all have been given, in love?