

# Grace to a Runaway Slave

**THEOLOGICAL THEME:** Christian reconciliation models the cross of Christ.

In his memoir *Twenty-Eight Years a Slave*, Thomas L. Johnson reflected on his unexpected journey from captivity to freedom. Growing up on a Virginian plantation in the 1840s, Johnson witnessed all the horrors of American slavery: the whipping post, the cruelty of sudden executions, and the selling of families at slave markets.

Johnson became a free man after the American Civil War when Abraham Lincoln declared emancipation for all the slaves in the nation. Later he read a pamphlet on prayer by the prominent preacher and burgeoning abolitionist Charles Spurgeon. Spurgeon's words ministered to him, so the former slave wrote him a letter.

Spurgeon personally financed Johnson's travel expenses to England, admitted him into the Pastors' College (the first African American student in his college), waved his education costs, and mentored him in the faith. The two became inseparable friends.

Spurgeon's friendship with Johnson paints in living color a three-dimensional portrait of the gospel—a gospel that regardless of background, skin color, class, or cultural difference unites God's family members and demonstrates the reconciling power of the cross.

Christian unity is not about *sameness*; it's about *oneness*.



## Voices from Church History

"Dear Mr. Spurgeon...While crossing the Atlantic, last September, and looking out upon its proud dashing billows and their varied forms, and thinking of the diversity in the human family, I remarked that 'we are many as the waves, but we are one as the sea.'"<sup>1</sup>

—Frederick Douglass  
(1817-1895)



How can the church experience oneness without sameness?

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Why is sameness not God's ideal for the church?

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As we explore the letter of Philemon, don't miss Paul's strategy for establishing Christian unity. A slave himself, Paul urged Philemon to consider *love*—not law, duty, or obligation. His instruction to receive Onesimus as a brother, not a slave, challenges us to evaluate our pride and align our perspectives of others with Christ's perspective. In doing so, Paul will help us reflect on the racial, radical, and redemptive reconciliation Christ offers.

## 1. Appealing to Love, Not Obligation (Philem. 8-14)

Paul addressed some of the problems between masters and slaves in his letters to Christians (Eph. 6:9; Col. 3:22; see also Titus 2:9). But why didn't Paul explicitly condemn slavery? That is a question often asked and we'll circle back around to it, but for the moment, let's return to Paul in his Roman house arrest. He's received Epaphras from the Colossian church. Then comes another knock on his door—Onesimus, a runaway slave from the same city. Read Paul's appeal to Philemon, Onesimus' master:



### Voices from the Church

"If the Holy Spirit is dwelling in our hearts, then no power on earth can separate us from the love of God in Christ. We can and do have fellowship with all who belong to that church, whatever branch of the visible institution they may belong to...Spiritual fellowship comes naturally to those who live in the Spirit, as people from all over the world can testify from their personal experience."<sup>2</sup>

—Gerald Bray

*<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, <sup>9</sup> yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—<sup>10</sup> I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. <sup>11</sup> (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) <sup>12</sup> I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. <sup>13</sup> I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, <sup>14</sup> but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.*

Organizing a slave revolt in Colossae wasn't on the apostle's agenda. After all, Rome was masterful at neutralizing uprisings. Jesus didn't spend His time devising a military coup with His disciples. Neither did Paul. There was a better way. Instead of changing the world from the outside in, the gospel would change the world from the inside out. Paul understood that reconciliation with Onesimus must begin in Philemon's *heart*.



How do we sometimes try to change the world or ourselves from the outside in instead of the inside out?

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Paul didn't appeal to Philemon on the basis of societal expectations, Roman convention, or religious obligation. Instead, he appealed to his friend "for *love's* sake" (v. 9). The apostle didn't even command Philemon's obedience (though he could have). Philemon must choose of his "own accord" to demonstrate love (v. 14).

Like Philemon, love is to be our motivation for obeying God in all things. We can easily fall into the trap of obeying God primarily out of obligation. We obey because we have to. We know we should. While this is certainly true—God has given us commands, not suggestions in Scripture—obligation cannot be what prompts our obedience. Love must be.

Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments (John 14:15). Love fuels obedience; obedience verifies love. A steady diet of love fattens obedience, but obligation will starve it at some point. This is why Jesus fused the two together. Our love for God produces obedience that pleases Him and also brings Him glory as the world around us sees us joyfully obey.



What are some internal sources of external sins we commit or observe around us, such as murder, stealing, lying, and adultery?

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How can we train ourselves to obey God from love instead of obligation?

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## 2. Accepting a Brother, Not a Slave (Philem. 15-17)

*<sup>15</sup> For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, <sup>16</sup> 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.*

*<sup>17</sup> So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.*

Paul had reminded the Romans (in whose city he lived as he penned the letter to Philemon): “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). Could this be true? Could *all* things really work together for our good? Even tragedy and turmoil, headache and heartache, broken relationships, sickness, suffering, and imprisonment? Even a runaway slave?

Reflect on what Joseph told his brothers in Genesis 50:20.	What similarities exist between Joseph's slavery in Egypt and Onesimus' escape to Rome?
“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”	

What difficult experiences in your life has God used for your good and His glory?

*All* is a little word, but sandwiched between its three little letters are vast galaxies of problems Christians have faced throughout the history of humanity. Look at Paul. In his elderly age, after years of trials and snares, Paul could write, “This perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while” (v. 15).

So what’s the good for Philemon? Paul writes that Onesimus, this slave, is now “my child” (v. 10). He’s “my very heart” (v. 12). He’s “more than a bondservant” (v. 16); he’s a “beloved brother” (v. 16). Why did Paul use so much ink establishing Onesimus’ new identity in Christ? Because Philemon’s problem was a pride problem. Onesimus was *not less* than Philemon. He was not defined by his slavery; he was now defined by his sonship and his citizenship in the family of God, just like Philemon. And so are we.

## 99 Essential Christian Doctrines

### 91. Family Relationships

God has ordained the family as the foundational institution of human society. It is composed of persons related to one another by marriage, blood, or adoption. Marriage is the uniting of one man and one woman in covenant commitment for a lifetime. It is God’s unique gift to reveal the union between Christ and His church and to provide for the man and the woman in marriage the framework for intimate companionship, the channel of sexual expression according to biblical standards (Heb. 13:4), and the means for procreation of the human race. The husband and wife are of equal worth before God, since both are created in God’s image. The marriage relationship models the way God relates to His people. A husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church. He has the God-given responsibility to provide for, to protect, and to lead his family. A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ. She, being in the image of God as is her husband and thus equal to him, has the God-given responsibility to respect her husband and to serve as his helper in managing the household and nurturing the next generation (Eph. 5:22-33; 1 Pet. 3:1-7). Children, from the moment of conception, are a blessing and heritage from the Lord. Parents are to demonstrate to their children God’s pattern for marriage. Parents are to teach their children spiritual and moral values and to lead them, through consistent lifestyle example and loving discipline, to make choices based on biblical truth (Deut. 6:4-9). Children are to honor and obey their parents (Eph. 6:1-3).



How should our identity as children of God and siblings of Christ shape how we live each day?

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### 3. Anticipating Grace, Not Duty (Philem. 18-22)

<sup>18</sup> *If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.*

<sup>19</sup> *I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.* <sup>20</sup> *Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.*

<sup>21</sup> *Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.* <sup>22</sup> *At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.*

Paul's language is subtle: "If he has wronged you" (Philem. 18). We don't know how Onesimus wronged Philemon. Maybe the slave lied about his whereabouts, hurt someone in his grand escape, or perhaps stole some of his master's money to cover his travel expenses. We don't know the crime, but Paul probably knew. Onesimus probably confessed his sins in explicit detail.

But Paul is wise to be hypothetical. That "if" protected Onesimus' confidentiality while simultaneously soliciting Philemon's grace. With that one word, Philemon was gently confronted to take inventory of the situation. What did he truly lose? And what might he truly gain by extending the love and grace Paul was demonstrating, but more importantly, the love and grace Christ has shown him?



Very often, it's not *what* we say that gets us in trouble; it's *how* we say it. How does our digital culture make it even more challenging to be careful with our words?

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What are some ways we can be wronged that are difficult to respond to with grace? Why?

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Paul applied a soft touch in this letter, but in verse 19 he dug the quill deeper into the parchment. “To say nothing,” he reminded Philemon, “of *your owing me*.” Wouldn’t you love to know what memory that sentence triggered in Philemon’s mind? It looks like Onesimus isn’t the only indebted party.

Paul was calling in a personal favor because there was something significant at stake: *grace*. And the world was watching. What would Philemon reveal about the gospel in how he received Onesimus? What would they learn about grace, forgiveness, identity, and love?

If we as Christians only obey God out of a sense of obligation or duty, then we commit the sin of the Pharisee: righteousness without right-heartedness. As a former Pharisee himself, Paul knew this sin all too well. God desires that our obedience come from the heart.

Like Paul, you and I can afford to cover each other’s expenses because Jesus Christ has covered *our* expenses. After His Last Supper, Christ opened His wallet, “emptied himself” (Phil. 2:7), and proceeded to the checkout counter where the greatest transaction in human history occurred—our debts for His death. Jesus picked up the tab of our transgressions and purchased our freedom on Calvary.



How have you seen God use your brokenness or someone else’s to extend grace?

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## Conclusion

After Thomas L. Johnson graduated from the Pastors' College in London, Charles Spurgeon affirmed Johnson's desire and commissioned the former slave to serve as a missionary in West Africa: "May these truehearted brethren be burning and shining lights in the land of their fathers," he prayed.

The unexpected friendship between Spurgeon and Johnson echoes Paul's friendship with Onesimus and demonstrates the reconciling power of the gospel to bring God's family together.

Paul likely never saw the inside of Philemon's guest room. The Romans beheaded him before he could book his travel. But Jesus prepared a better room for Paul—and it wasn't for *guests*. Jesus once promised that He would "go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:3). Not even the most luxurious, five-star, all-inclusive bed and breakfast in Colossae could compete with the heavenly *home* Jesus prepares for His brothers and sisters.

This future home is what should motivate us today. Because we anticipate entering Christ's presence and basking in His love and grace as His brothers and sisters, we give to others today what we will receive then. It is the least we, all former slaves to sin who are now one family in Christ, can do for one another.



### Voices from Church History

"A house is not built by beginning at the top and working down. You must begin with the foundations in order to reach the top...The foundation is our neighbour, whom we must win, and that is the place to begin. For all the commandments of Christ depend on this one."<sup>3</sup>

—John Colobus (4<sup>th</sup> century)

**CHRIST CONNECTION:** When Paul appealed to Philemon on behalf of the runaway slave Onesimus, he placed himself in the middle of their broken relationship. In order to make peace, he volunteered to pay Onesimus' debt. Through this action, Paul modeled Jesus Christ, who is the peacemaker between God and sinful humanity. By volunteering to pay our debt, Jesus reconciled us to God and to each other.



# HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

**MISSIONAL APPLICATION:** God calls us to live as peacemakers who reflect the heart of our crucified Savior.

1. What will evangelism out of love, rather than obligation, look like, and how can we work toward that motivation?

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2. What are some barriers your group may need to repent of and overcome in order to see one another, and all Christians, as brothers and sisters in Christ?

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3. How can you demonstrate the grace of Christ in the coming days by taking the place of another?

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**The Gospel Project<sup>®</sup>**

Adult Personal Study Guide ESV  
Volume 6, Number 4 Summer 2018

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Printed in the United States of America

*The Gospel Project<sup>®</sup>: Adult Personal Study Guide* ESV  
(ISSN 2330-9393; Item 005573553) is published  
quarterly by LifeWay Christian Resources,  
One LifeWay Plaza, Nashville, TN 37234,  
Thom S. Rainer, President. © 2018 LifeWay  
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