

Grace for Runnin' Rebels

Philemon (Part 1)

- Introduction (start recording)
 - The beauty of God's grace is a profound mystery, is it not?
 - That God would come for rule breakers and worthless sinners like us?
 - That even the vilest among us can be washed, cleansed, and set free from their sin?
 - That is a profound mystery that flies in the face of all other religions and reminds us that there is no one like our God!
 - Gratitude to Tom for friendship and partnership in ministry
 - Open Bibles to letter of Philemon
 - Bibles available to all (ushers)
 - Express gratitude to VBS volunteers for this past week
 - One of the most significant ministries of our church each year
 - Read Philemon & Pray

- Introduction
 - Often true that the shortest messages carry the strongest punch
 - Consider the aftermath of the battle of Gettysburg in 1863
 - One of the most important and deadliest battles in Civil War
 - Edward Everett, one of the most famous orators at the time, spoke for nearly two hours at the memorial service held on the battleground nearly four months after its carnage
 - The marathon speech was followed by a simple address by the president at the time, Abe Lincoln
 - The speech, which became known as the “Gettysburg Address” would go down as one of the most famous speeches in world history, even though it consisted of a mere 275 words (60 less than the book of Philemon) and took only three minutes to read
 - Required memorization for many
 - Short messages often carry the strongest punch

- Such is the case w/Philemon
 - Not the theological juggernaut of Romans or the vast pastoral counsel of 1st Corinthians
 - Just a short letter that carries a significant punch
 - And yet for most of us, Philemon is quickly brushed aside or skipped over
 - In all honesty, how many of you had trouble locating it this morning?
 - Not difficult for the page (singular) of it to get stuck there between Titus and Hebrews
 - Yet despite its size, Philemon has become one of my favorite and most beloved books of the Bible
 - And I trust its message will be a blessing to you these next three weeks as our senior pastor and his family get some much-needed time of rest and recharge (please be in prayer for them)

- Background
 - Author: Paul who identifies himself as a prisoner for Christ Jesus
 - In prison (vv. 1, 9-10)
 - At least house arrest in Rome
 - Who is he writing to? Philemon (v.2)
 - V.19: probably became Christian under Paul's ministry in Ephesus
 - He & Epaphras (v.23, Col. 1:7), probably began the church in Colossae, which meets in the home of Philemon (vv.1-2)
 - Gives us reason to believe he wrote the book of Colossians at this same time as well
 - In so doing, also penned this short note to his buddy Philemon
 - So why is Paul writing to Philemon?
 - Why this short postcard? Why this personal note (unlike any in NT)
 - Probably one of the most difficult letters to understand in the NT
 - Must piece together backstory
 - From what we can tell, it centers around 3rd important character: Onesimus (slave of Philemon)

- Onesimus & slavery
 - Learn he is a slave (v.16) who was owned by Philemon
 - Radar senses go up when we hear the term “slavery” in our culture
 - What did it look like in this culture?
 - Contrary to America, not race specific or based in man-stealing
 - Up to 1/3 of population of the Roman Empire at this time
 - Came into slavery for all kinds of reasons: POW, Pay off debts, make restitution, etc.
 - For many slaves, their position was favorable to being on their own
 - Doesn't mean it was a desired position but it wasn't Paul's focus
 - Paul in his letters (and here) is not concerned that slaves be set free by their masters, so much as that their new identity as Christians rise above their earthly identities
 - He wants them to embrace their new role & relationship to one another in the family of God
 - What Philemon is primarily about!

- Why do those things rise to the surface of this letter?
- B/c of what happens to Onesimus
- We learn in v.10 that somehow Onesimus escaped to Rome, met Paul, became a Christian, and now must go back to his master,
- But both are now Christians; both are members of God's family
- This creates a whole flurry of ?'s
 - How should Philemon respond to Paul's appeal? What is Paul's role in all of this? Why is Onesimus so dear to Paul?
 - What the next 3 weeks are about
 - Rather than work through the text, I want us to look at each of the 3 characters individually
 - Want us to see their unique relationship in God's family
 - This week our focus will be on Onesimus, where we learn that...

MP: As those who need forgiveness, we are graciously adopted into God's family.

- In other words, our sin is never so great that it can ever escape the reach of our Heavenly Father
 - Our God delights to search, find, and rescue spiritual orphans who have run away
 - This postcard is a timely reminder of God's grace for runnin' rebels
 - If you are here this morning and have experienced this adoption in your own life, then I invite you to sit back and marvel at the love of your heavenly Father today
 - But if you are here this morning and you are a rebel on the run (like Onesimus), then I invite you to stop running long enough to hear about the grace that is freely offered to a sinner just like you
 - So what does that grace look like?

Prop: Three blessings of being adopted into God's family.

By welcoming us into his family...

1. God graciously shows us his amazing power (v.10)

- Finding us in our darkness
 - Again, some of the details of this story are not clearly presented
 - But many believe Onesimus stole something (v.18), and ran away
 - Where would be a good place to go if you were a runaway slave?
 - Big city, get lost in Rome
 - Yet, it is exactly in his running and hiding that he is searched & found
 - Not by Paul or Philemon, but God
 - Reminds us that God is the one who finds us when we try to hide in our sin (darkness)
 - John 3: we love the darkness and try to avoid light of God's grace
 - Light switch in morning w/kids
 - When God saves an individual, leads them out of darkness and into light
 - There is no place you can go to outrun God
 - He not only finds us, but he also...

- Leading us to God's people
 - This is one of the craziest, most overlooked parts of this letter
 - Onesimus runs away to Rome to get lost and of all the people he comes across – it's Paul, the good friend of his master, Philemon
 - Anyone else have experiences like this? Big city encounter?
 - Thing is, Paul is in prison!
 - Number of possible reasons
 - Perhaps he realized he messed up, needed help, and heard Paul was there (we just don't know for sure)
 - There is another possibility that stands out to me above all the rest (again, don't know this for sure), but why might people cross paths in prison? (b/c you wind up in prison!)
 - How much more amazing does that make this rescue mission if true?
 - Sometimes God has to bring us to our lowest point to break us
 - Drugs, bad relationship, fired from work, a crushed dream or, yes, even prison

- Again, the particulars of how they met are not spelled out for us clearly
 - All we know is that God, in his sovereignty, allowed their two paths to cross at just the right time, which is exactly how God works, is it not?
 - So Paul, from confines of his own imprisonment, pours himself out for the eternal good of this lost soul
 - Pleads with him to stop running, not just running from Philemon, but to stop running from God!
 - Some of you need to heart that this morning
 - You have been running your entire life, trying to control your own outcomes and be the God of your own kingdom
 - Has left you broken & imprisoned to your sin
 - Even if he didn't know it, Onesimus needed to hear the good news of hope that had changed his master

- God is in the business of leading us to His people
 - Paul was in right place at right time
 - True for me first year of college
 - Small group Bible study & church
 - Believe that is the path that not only saved me, but also placed me on the road towards ministry
 - Would not have happened if God had not put his people at the right place, at the right time
 - You know there is good reason to believe you are someone's Paul right now
 - God has strategically placed you in a job, neighborhood, or team with people who are running
 - Rebels who are lost in darkness and don't even realize they need the hope of Jesus
 - How are you making the most of these opportunities?
 - God's power is amazing to align the stars like this: to find us in our darkness, to lead us to His people, and then finally to...

- Rescuing us from our bondage
 - This is the miracle of this postcard
 - V.10: Onesimus becomes his child
 - How? In what way? Adopted?
 - Later verses (v.16) indicate that this is spiritual; became a Christian!
 - Paul uses this language often to describe a spiritual relationship
 - Very much like a family
 - Truth is, God performed a miracle by taking Onesimus to Rome, leading him to Paul, and hearing the good news about Jesus!
 - To the point where Onesimus gave his life over to God forever!
 - Notice it leads to a release from the true bondage holding him back
 - Not freed from his bondage to Philemon; no, the true enslaver of Onesimus was His own sin
 - For the first time, Onesimus truly knows what it means to be free!
 - Entry into God's family should feel like freedom, not bondage
 - Why should it feel this way?

By welcoming us into his family...

2. God graciously pays our previous debts (v.18)

- Postcard is unique in that, the main body of it, doesn't really talk about the death or resurrection of Jesus
 - Always a focus of Paul
 - But what some think Paul is doing is picturing Christ here by what he offers to Philemon in v.18 (read)
 - Where we get the idea that Onesimus may have stolen from Philemon (cost him in some way)
 - But Paul says if he owes anything, whatever the cost, charge it to my account – I'll repay it for Onesimus
 - We'll talk about Paul's side of this in a few weeks, but for this week I want you to see what this pictures from the position of Onesimus
 - What Paul is doing is demonstrating the saving reality that has taken place in Onesimus' life
 - Why he can now feel truly free

- Sin is a debt
 - What is a debt?
 - Obligation to someone else
 - Owe them (financially, physically) for something you have done against them or they did for you
 - Matt.6:12
 - Credit Card transactions

- A debt must be paid
 - Debt doesn't just go away on its own – expected that you will pay
 - Why people loan you money or provide services; believe you will make good on your ability to pay up
 - Credit Card – every month you will get the bill summary on how much you are going to pay
 - But what is the problem for us as humans? Our debt to God?
 - We cannot pay it! Incapable
 - Rom. 6:23 – wages (payment) for sin is what? Death
 - Credit Card balance
 - Bad news! So where is the hope?

- Our debt is charged to Jesus' account
 - This is what Paul's offer to Philemon reminds us of?
 - What it reminds Onesimus of!
 - When we were incapable of paying the debt for sin – Christ stepped in!
 - He was willing to become sin for us so that our debt towards God could be paid (2 Cor. 5:21)
 - Your account vs. Jesus
 - Imagine a credit card company offering to forgive all your debt after maxing out hundreds of cards you could never pay back
 - Wake up & its gone!
 - Beautiful picture of what Christ has done for you already!
 - Do you realize the freedom that brings to your life?
 - Paul may not have just explicitly taught on the death or resurrection of Christ, but he has illustrated it in the most powerful of ways
 - And as those who have been bought by God we have now been adopted into his family where...

3. God graciously gives us a new identity (vv. 10, 11, 16)

- Gets to the heart of the letter
 - We won't get to Paul's main exhortation until next week
 - But what I am about to say gets to the heart of Paul's main appeal in this letter
 - Are you ready for it?
 - Paul's whole point of this postcard is that all three men are partners in the same cause: cause of Christ
 - See that word in v.6 "sharing" (esv)
 - Same word in v.17 for "partner"
 - Greek: koinonia – fellowship, participation in the family of God
 - Paul's way of saying "we're all in this together" – you, me, and now even Onesimus
 - He is one of us; God has welcomed him into the family, & so should you
 - How is that possible? Because by becoming a Christian, Onesimus has become a new creation
 - 2 Cor. 5:17 – true for all in Christ

- Complete with new purpose
 - Look at Paul's words in v.11
 - Play on meaning of his name
 - Onesimus = "useful" (common)
 - Gone from useless to useful
 - Don't know all of Onesimus' story, but it is possible he was not a very useful slave for Philemon
 - But this new status as a Christian, as a member of God's family, has made him a new creation
 - Gone from useless to useful; God transformed his character, purpose
 - Seen that play out w/people who come to faith in Jesus
 - No sense of purpose, belonging but now having passion for life
 - For Onesimus, he was now serving God & His people, especially Paul
 - Your identity gives you purpose because of its object: Christ
 - Purpose & worth found there before anything else
 - Not job, appearances, relationships, or even past sins
 - Jesus defines your purpose in life

- Complete with new power
 - Your identity is not in who you were
 - For Onesimus – bondservant
 - Doesn't mean he would be set free, but it does mean his status is now primarily about who he is "in Christ"
 - Also think there is a beautiful picture here: bondage not the same
 - As Christians, we are no longer enslaved to sin, but Christ b/c Christ lives in us!
 - When not ruled by sin, you have power to fight & defeat sin
 - Your strength is in Jesus' power!

- Complete with new partners
 - Look at all the language throughout the postcard (v.10, 23-24, 2, 16-17)
 - When you become a Christian, you become part of a new family
 - It's called the church!
 - What I've learned most from Philemon is the importance of celebrating the blessings of God's spiritual family

App: Celebrate the blessings of your adoption into God's family

- Your spiritual freedom
 - For you as an individual, this letter should remind you that you are no longer a slave to sin but to God
 - Bondage is not a burden but delight
 - Such freedom is not a license to sin even more but is the very strength that allows us to overcome sin

- Your spiritual Father
 - There is no denying the fact that in a room of this size, the range of experiences with our earthly fathers is vast: from good to bad to absent
 - So often we live for the approval or acceptance of our earthly fathers but how comforting it should be to us all that the God of this world has approved us and made us acceptable on the basis of His Son
 - You have a good Father who is working for your eternal good

- Your spiritual family
 - The beauty of this relationship with your heavenly Father is that it does not stop with Him
 - He has adopted you into a family with brothers and sisters, just as messed up & dysfunctional as you
 - God has blessed us with koinonia (community) that is designed to encourage one another and build one another up in the faith
 - Has been said before that the church is not a museum for saints but a hospital for sinners
 - Such is certainly true, but I would say that the church is far more than a hospital; it is also a home
 - It is a place that when you are here, you feel the love and care of family
 - Sure we all come with our troubled past, but praise be to God that when we enter His home, we are no longer defined by who we once were, but who we are now in Christ
 - Pray

- Benediction

- Do you hear the hope in those words you just sang?
- Are they not the story of Onesimus?
- “I once was lost in darkest night, yet thought I knew the way. The sin that promised joy and life had led me to the grave. I had no hope that you would own a rebel to your will. And if you had not loved me first, I would refuse you still.”
- But now that Christ has reached into our darkness and pulled us into the kingdom of light, we can sing out “O Father use my ransomed life in any way you choose”
- Is that true of your heart? Is it your prayer that God would use your life with renewed purpose?
- I pray that it is
- It is a wonderful privilege to be a member in such a family
- But as we know, not all families are perfect, in fact, many carry baggage from past offenses; the case is no different in the book of Philemon

- Onesimus has gone from a runnin' rebel to a returning rebel; he's coming home to face his master
- How will Philemon respond? In other words, how do we in the household of God show such grace to runnin' rebels?
- For that, I will have to encourage to come back next week
- Reminder about exit offering for our gospel partner Carlos (Honduras)
- Appropriate considering the message we just heard about our koinonia (fellowship) with others due to our common salvation
- What a wonderful opportunity to encourage one of our brothers in Christ with a financial gift that serves our spiritual family in Honduras
- Ushers stand ready to receive those gifts from you as you make your way out this morning
- But before you do, let's recite our benediction for this series together
 - Ephesians 6:23-24