

### **Transformed Relationships**

Before we do anything else, before we read from the Word, there are two things we first need to do:

1. Think about an occasion when you were seriously offended by someone – something really bad done to you. It may have been recently or some time way back in the past. You may think of more than one occasion when this has happened. Think about the person/s who offended you. What are your thoughts concerning that person or those persons. What would go through your head if that person or persons walked into the room right now, and came up to greet you?
2. Think about an occasion, and again it may have been on more than just one occasion, when you were the offender, when you offended someone else very seriously. Think about how you feel for that person or those persons now. What would go through your head if that person or those persons walked into the room right now, and come up to greet you?

**Remember those thoughts; you may even like to jot down a brief note about them in your note pad. We will come back to them later.**

#### **Philemon 1-25** (read)

##### **Background:**

We first need to gain an understanding of the events that have taken place and the various people concerned.

To fully understand this letter one also needs to read and understand parts of the letter to the Colossians. Philemon lived in Colossae and was part of the church there. He was one of the mature believers there. He had come to salvation through Paul's ministry, probably when Paul was in Ephesus.

Paul had never been to Colossae, but previously, while he was in Ephesus (about 150 km west of Colossae) establishing and teaching the church there, he had won Epaphras, a visitor from Colossae, to the Lord. Then Epaphras had returned to Colossae, shared the gospel there, and was the person who God used to establish and lead the church in Colossae. Now he was away in Rome consulting with Paul on matters of concern regarding false teachers who were trying to bring confusion to the Colossians.

Philemon is a wealthy Greek landowner and businessman living in Colossae. He, in line with the tradition of the day, had slaves serving in his house and business. One of these slaves was Onesimus. Onesimus had been lazy, unreliable, useless, and on top of it all, a thief. He had stolen from Philemon and then absconded. He ran away to Rome to try and hide in the crowds of the big city where he would not be found very easily, where he would live off the proceeds from the things he had stolen from Philemon.

In Rome somehow Onesimus had come in contact with Paul, who was there in prison. Possibly Epaphras, who was in Rome visiting Paul, had bumped into him in the streets of Rome and suggested he come along to meet Paul. We are not certain how he met up with Paul, but divine intervention must have somehow directed Onesimus to Paul. Then Paul must have shared the gospel with him and Onesimus had come to salvation. After becoming a Christian, Onesimus then served Paul and became good friends

with him. Quite possibly Paul spent time discipling him. Paul then must have realized that he could not keep Onesimus with him, despite how much he enjoyed his company and service and must have convinced Onesimus that he needed to return to Philemon and seek forgiveness.

It's at this time Paul wrote both letters; one to the Colossian church and one to Philemon, sending both letters back at the same time by Tychicus accompanied by Onesimus (Col 4:7-9). He did not address the matter of Onesimus and Philemon via the letter to the Colossians, rather, because of the personal nature of the offence he wrote a separate personal letter directly to Philemon and those immediately around him.

The letter is addressed to Philemon but in his greeting Paul includes Apphia and Archippus and the church in their house. Apphia most probably was Philemon's wife and Archippus his son, who was also an elder (fellow soldier) in the church that gathered in their house, and the church consisted of the believers that fellowshiped with them in their home.

### **The Offended and Offender**

So in this passage we have someone who has been **offended** – Philemon – and someone who is the **offender** – Onesimus.

Earlier I asked you to think of two occasions:

1. an occasion when you were **offended** – when you were a Philemon
2. an occasion when you were the **offender** – when you were an Onesimus

Now as we go through this passage, as we see how God desires to bring restoration between offender and the offended, put yourself in the place of Philemon and Onesimus. Allow the Holy Spirit to minister to you in such a manner that He may **transform the relationship** between you and the person/s that have offended you, or the person/s whom you have offended.

### **Family and Elder (v 1-3)**

**Family:** This is a message from God, our heavenly **FATHER**, to us personally as His child, and collectively to us as His and our **FAMILY**, whom he desires to see live in Peace together.

In Verse 3, 22 and 25 the “you” and “your” are in the **plural** – to the church as a family (From verse 4-21 all the “you” and “your” statements are in the **singular** and directed to Philemon personally).

But the greeting and final salutation are to the family and church as well as the individual. We are the church, we are the family, and it's partly our collective responsibility to see broken relationships healed, transformed and restored. We are to be part of the healing process. It's our prayer, love, acceptance and forgiveness for the offender and offended that will go a long way to encouraging them to reconcile and be at peace with one another. So let us be encouragers, and promoters of peace and joy. Let us make every effort to uplift these dear ones in prayer, that they may be restored.

One reason for participating in life groups (home fellowship groups) is that we may be able to get to know one another and be prayer supporters and encouragers of one another.

**Mature Counselor:** (v 1, 9)

The letter, this Holy Spirit inspired advice, is written by Paul. Sometimes we need a mature counselor or elder to lean on for advice, assistance and even to mediate between estranged parties. Wise counsel will be counsel given from the divine perspective and that alone is what it will take to help transform relationships.

Note in v1 and v9 Paul refers to himself, not as “Apostle” but as ... *“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus”* – Paul, the ever humble and gracious leader, leads and counsels by example. He was in prison due to the gross injustices of others. However, he doesn’t look at his position through eyes of hatred for those who have incarcerated him; he looks through the eyes of Christ and sees his position as divinely directed. He is Christ’s prisoner placed there for divine purpose – the spread of the gospel to the prison guards and palace folks. So when he looks at Philemon and Onesimus he does so through the eyes of Christ and offers humble, gracious and loving advice. He sees divine purpose at work and speaks accordingly.

If you are facing an awkward relationship, as one offended or as an offender, you may do well to seek wise counsel. Sometimes wise counsel will assist in the practical aspects of bringing two estranged parties together, or to act as a mediator.

On the other hand, if you are an “elder”, a mature counselor, one mature in the faith, then let it be your part to pray for those in need of God’s help to transform their relationships. Paul shows us the way in his opening statement to Philemon in v 4 ... *“I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers”* ... Prayer changes things. Will you pray – earnestly and regularly – for humility, forgiveness, and peace to reign in the hearts of those who are facing difficult relationships?

**The Message:** (v 4-21)

Paul commences, not with the problem, but with the solution. He starts by being uplifting, not demanding or pulling down. He immediately gives us the keys to restoring bad relationships.

**Key 1: v 5-7:** Paul appeals to Philemon’s **faith and love for Christ**. A faith and love that is so real that it overflows in love, encouragement, uplifting and refreshing of those around him. The word used here in v7 translated ... *“refreshed”* is from the same root word used by our Lord in Matt 11:28 ... *“come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest”*.

Philemon’s love for Christ is worn on his sleeve. His love is active and effective in building up the body of Christ. It’s a love and faith that refreshed relationships. So the **first key** to transformed relationships is **a faith and love for Christ that spills out to others in love**, forgiveness, acceptance and refreshing encouragement.

**Key 2: v 8-9:** Paul identified with Philemon as one who had been offended, but does not point in blame to his offenders but rather focuses attention Christ. He did not put on an air of superiority and as an

apostle command Philemon what to do, but rather he appealed from his position as ... *“a prisoner of Christ Jesus”*. Paul was in prison through acts of unfairness and injustice by others, yes – but for a divine purpose! Remember it was Paul who said in Phil 1:12, 13 ... *Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else”*...

In this approach Paul helps Philemon view his position as one offended through the divine perspective. So the **second Key** to transformed relationships is to understand that in all circumstances and situations that face us **Christ, and not self, is our point of reference**. We live by the life of Christ for His purpose.

**Key 3: v 10-14:** Paul vouches for Onesimus’ changed life and character. He has been born again and is now living up to his name. Paul uses a play on words here. Onesimus means “useful”. As a runaway thieving slave he had done everything but live up to his name. Previously he had proven to be truly “useless” to Philemon. But now he was the real Onesimus – “useful”. Paul viewed Onesimus through the loving eyes of Christ, not as he formerly was, but as a precious and valuable brother in Christ. This is the new man he presents to Philemon.

Now we must also consider things from Onesimus’ side of the fence. Under Roman law Philemon had every right to capture him and put him to death for what he had done. Paul was sending him back with this possibility of death looming over him! But Paul was sending him to a believer whose faith and love for Christ and for the brethren has just been commended (v 4-7). Paul has no doubt assured Onesimus of Philemon’s loving and forgiving nature and persuaded him to humble himself and seek forgiveness and in this put his trust in Christ to restore him to Philemon.

The **third key** to transformed relationships is, when dealing with conflict **trust must be built up between the conflicting parties**. This is where the more mature believers are to step in and with prayer offer encouragement and build trust.

**Key 4:** Look at the wording of v 15 -16. ... *“For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.”* Paul is trying to help Philemon see the providence of God here – all this has happened, as bad as it appears outwardly, for the greater purpose of Onesimus coming to salvation and being restored to serve Philemon in an honourable way and to become part of the “family” of God.

It was providence that led Onesimus to Paul in Rome so that he could hear and respond to the gospel. Yes, Philemon had been horribly offended but the outcome was a man gloriously saved and then restored so that he could be what he was meant to be, a faithful servant and a brother in Christ.

It’s Paul who is the one who speaks from experience and says in 2 Cor 4:7-11 ... *“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered*

*over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh." And he follows this in verse 17-18 with ... "For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal"*

The **fourth key** to transformed relationships is understanding that **every aspect of our life is ordered by God**. Outwardly things may appear bad, but in God's realm of the Spirit He is in control and if we trust totally on Him we will see His greater purpose revealed. Rom 8:28 ... *"And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose"*. What wonderful assurance for both Philemon and Onesimus!

#### **Conclusion:**

The keys to transformed relationships are:

**Key 1:** Develop a faith and love for Christ that spills out to others in love, forgiveness, acceptance and refreshing encouragement.

**Key 2:** Understand that in all circumstances and situations that face us **Christ, and not self, is our point of reference**. We live by the life of Christ for His purpose.

**Key 3:** When dealing with conflict **trust must be built up between the conflicting parties**. This is where the more mature believers are to step in and with prayer offer encouragement and build trust.

**Key 4:** Know that **every aspect of our life is ordered by God**. Outwardly things may appear bad, but in God's realm of the Spirit He is in control and if we trust totally on Him and view through His eyes we will eventually see His greater purpose revealed.

As a fellow believer, as a member of the body, be one who is devoted to prayer for those you know are struggling in a bad relationship. Be a refresher and encourager of the saints. Encourage them to walk in humility, love, acceptance and forgiveness. If an unsaved person is involved, pray for their salvation.

As a Philemon or an Onesimus, understand that there is no difference that cannot be bridged by the love of Christ. There is no offence so great that it cannot be forgiven through the love of Christ. So let your faith in Christ, the Faithful One, activate His love in you towards the one who has offended you, or towards the one who you have offended. In humility and love offer forgiveness; in humility and love seek forgiveness. Allow the Holy Spirit to transform your relationships, and bring you and your offender, or the one you have offended, to a place of reconciliation, peace and joy. For in that God's purpose and plan for both parties will be fulfilled, more particularly if the offender has come to salvation through your prayers and love, acceptance and forgiveness shown to them.

True forgiveness means treating the person in the way we would want to be treated if we were in their shoes.