

GOD'S VIEWPOINT

STUDIES IN PHILEMON #4

There probably were not two of the founding fathers of our country who were closer friends than John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. These men served together in the Continental Congress risking their very lives for freedom. Thomas Jefferson wrote the original draft of the Declaration of Independence; John Adams was one of the select few who revised it and fought for its acceptance. While the Revolutionary War was being fought, John Adams was an ambassador for the cause of our country in France. Towards the end of the war, he was joined by Thomas Jefferson who succeeded him when Adams returned to our land. When John Adams became the 2nd president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson was his vice-president. Yes, it could be argued that there weren't two closer friends in government during those early years of our country's infancy than Adams and Jefferson.

But then something happened in their relationship towards one another. Adams became more rigid in his conservative views as a member of the Federalist Party. Jefferson became a staunch defender of the Republican Party which was much more democratic in those days. Instead of running together as a team for re-election, Jefferson ran against Adams in a bitter campaign. The vote was close, but Thomas Jefferson edged out John Adams and became the 3rd president of our country. Adams retired bitterly to his home in Quincy, Massachusetts. The 2 never spoke or communicated by letter during Jefferson's presidency. And after his term was finished, Thomas Jefferson

retired to his home in Monticello, Virginia. Friends of both parties were grieved at the rift that had developed between these two gifted men. They had fought great and weighty battles side by side, they had risked life and limb for the freedom that they both believed in, but now in their retirement years, they wouldn't even talk to each other. Their friends tried to achieve a reconciliation for many years to no avail. Adams and Jefferson were now the only two surviving Founding Fathers - and they still wouldn't talk to each other. What a sad state of affairs.

Finally, one friend convinced John Adams to just write a short note to his former friend. He did. And Thomas Jefferson responded with a cordial letter reminiscing about their days as *fellow laborers in the same cause, riding through the storm with heart in hand*. Their friendship rekindled, they now began to correspond regularly, speaking of everything from former battles to the present details of their daily lives. How happy we are today for their reconciliation. For their letters have given historians a window through which to see life in the early days of our democracy.

John Adams died at the age of 90. He was sitting in his armchair at the time. His last words were *Thomas Jefferson survives*. Happily, Adams died having reconciled relationships with his old friend. What John Adams didn't realize was the fact that Thomas Jefferson had already passed away 5 hours earlier down in Virginia. And one of the ironies of their passing was that both men, the final 2 founding fathers, died on the same day, July 4th, 1826, the day when the rest of our country was in the midst of a gigantic party, celebrating

the 50th anniversary of the signing of the declaration of independence, the document that one of these men wrote and the other edited. But the joy of the celebration in our nation was more complete that day because these 2 men who had fought side by side for freedom were not longer alienated from one another, but had been reconciled and were once again close friends.

Reconciliation - it is a beautiful word, isn't it? There is something deep inside each of us that longs to be at peace with everything else in our environment around us. Enmity brings stress and uneasiness to our hearts. Reconciliation brings a sense of satisfaction and peace to us.

We have been studying a beautiful story of reconciliation found in the brief, one chapter, 25 verse book of Philemon. Philemon was the shortest epistle that the Apostle Paul wrote - but it is also one of the more positive books that he wrote. We have already seen the story several times now - how Philemon was a church leader in the important Asia Minor city called Colossae. The church of Colossae actually met in Philemon's home. But one of Philemon's servants named Onesimus had become disloyal to him. He had looted Philemon's house and had run away to Rome in an attempt to find his freedom. But instead of the euphoria of liberty, Onesimus had only found despair and hopelessness. He had squandered all of his money. And in a desperate situation, Onesimus had sought out the Apostle Paul who was in Roman custody under house arrest. Onesimus not only found Paul, but he also found faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Apostle introduced him to the path of reconciliation with God. Now, as a member of God's family, Onesimus wanted

to make things right with Philemon as well. So Paul wrote this brief letter of introduction which Onesimus could carry with him when he returned to Philemon's household.

We have already seen this situation through the eyes of each of the major 3 participants. Looking from Philemon's viewpoint, we have seen the necessity of forgiving others when we have been wronged and allowing a relationship to be restored. Looking from Onesimus' viewpoint, we have seen what Biblical repentance is all about - not only being sorry for sins committed, but also being willing to turn from them to a new path in life and making restitution for wrongs committed. Looking from the Apostle Paul's viewpoint, we saw last week the importance of being a peacemaker. Paul was a catalyst, mediating between Onesimus and Philemon.

Now we want to be so bold this morning as to look at this situation from one more viewpoint. And some might think it presumptuous to view this story from God's viewpoint. But that is exactly what God wants for us to do. For that is one of the main reasons why this brief letter, out of all of the hundreds of letters that the Apostle Paul wrote, has found its way into the Bible. Just like the short Old Testament book of Ruth is in the Bible not only because it is a dramatic love story of Ruth's marriage to Boaz but also because it is a picture of the important kinsman-redeemer concept in the Old Testament revealing the mission of the Lord Jesus Christ to come, so the Epistle to Philemon is more than just a nice story about the reconciliation of a servant named Onesimus back to his master Philemon. Each of the main characters also pictures a

deeper spiritual truth that is critically important for us to see. Let's look at Philemon and Onesimus and Paul again, this time emphasizing the spiritual picture that they each represent.

1. PHILEMON IS A PICTURE OF GOD HIMSELF. Philemon, as we have already seen, was a mature Christian leader in the church. In fact, he was one of the prominent Christian leaders in all of Asia Minor. The Colossian church met in his house. In verse 2, Paul greets *the church that meets in your home*. So as the church is God's house, it would be appropriate for Philemon, whose house was the church, to picture God himself.

Now this certainly doesn't mean that Philemon was perfect. He was an ordinary man with strengths and weaknesses just like all of us. But for the sake of the portrait that is being painted by the Holy Spirit here, Philemon pictures God and his house is the church that pictures fellowship with God.

It is interesting to note that Onesimus had been in Philemon's household, but not as a personal believer in the Lord Jesus Christ at the time. When Onesimus was in Philemon's household as an unbeliever, all he could see were the restrictions, the rules, the imprisonment that he felt. He longed for freedom.

If I could only get away from this restrictive environment, I will be able to find myself and be free. Is this not what the unbeliever thinks when he looks at God and the Bible? Does not the unbeliever view God as being One who is trying to control his or her life through commandments and regulations? Isn't there a natural tendency to rebel against divine authority and try to find happiness in our own personal freedom?

But what happened when Onesimus ran away from Philemon's household? Did he find that inner freedom that he so desperately craved? No. He was miserable. He lost all of his resources. And finally, reaching the end of himself, he sought help from the Apostle Paul. Once Onesimus left Philemon's house, he was like a fish out of water.

All of us have seen a fish outside of water at some time or another. When a fish finds itself outside of its created environment, it just flops around helplessly doesn't it? As you watch its gills gasping and drying scales, do you think the fish is happy and content? How can you make the fish happy and content? Suppose you cover the fish with hundred dollar bills, do you think that will satisfy the fish? How about dressing the fish in a nice double-finned suit, will that satisfy the fish? Maybe if we give the fish a Playfish magazine and a martini, do you think that would satisfy the fish? Of course not. None of these would make the fish any more content. There is only one way to satisfy that fish and that is to put it back into the environment that it was created for. When the fish gets back into the water again, it stops flopping and immediately starts swimming gracefully.

How many people are trying to find happiness and contentment through material prosperity or fame or self-indulgence or power? A man who lived in the 4th century named Augustin made a statement that is as true today as it was way back then. He said in his Confessions to God, *Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.* God created the human race to live in the environment of fellowship with Him. That

is the reason for His going down to walk in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve every day. When any of us are removed from that environment, we lose inner peace and contentment. It is impossible for us to be completely satisfied because we are like fish out of water. In order for us to have lasting inner peace and contentment, we have to be at peace with God in our lives. There is no other way.

2. But let's move to our second picture. **ONESIMUS REPRESENTS EACH OF US AS HUMAN BEINGS.** As Martin Luther, the great reformer once said, *We are all Onesimi.*

Onesimus means *useful*. All of us long to be useful. We all have an inner drive to make our lives count for something of great value. We all suspect that we are of great value and worth, but we so often don't feel very valuable. We desperately desire for our lives to make a difference, to make an impact that will outlive us.

The problem that we all face is our inability to achieve our intended purpose when we are out of fellowship with our creator. Just like the fish can never reach its fullest potential when it is flopping on the sands of the beach outside of its intended environment, so we can never achieve our fullest potential when we are out of fellowship with God our creator. For we were created to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. How can we achieve this purpose when we are alienated from Him?

The book of Philemon not only pictures our individual relationships with God, it also illustrates the history of the human race in general. God created

Adam and Eve in perfect fellowship with Himself. He gave them only one commandment to obey - do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But Satan filled the serpent to tempt Eve to eat of that forbidden fruit. He did this by attacking the goodness of God. He did this by making Eve feel imprisoned by God's single commandment to her. So like Onesimus, Eve and then Adam ate of the forbidden fruit and ran from fellowship with God seeking to find freedom in being their own masters. But that mirage of freedom that Satan had placed before their eyes ended up as hopeless and destitute enslavement to sin. After sin entered the world, every person born found himself or herself helplessly mired in the muck of iniquity, unable to make that journey back into fellowship with God once again. So like Onesimus, Eve and Adam and every single one of us do not feel very useful when we are out of fellowship with our creator. In fact, like Onesimus wandering around the streets of Rome, we feel quite useless.

The prophet Isaiah said it very simply in Isaiah 53:6a, *We all, like sheep, have gone astray; each of us has turned to his own way;* That is the story of the human race in general; that is the story of each of us individually. We have all strayed from God's perfect standards and character. We have each rebelled against God's commandments that He gave to us in love for our own good. We have all tried to find freedom in being our own master and Lord. And each of us in turn has found spiritual bankruptcy in our search. For we have strayed from our intended environment. There is no hope for contentment and usefulness out of fellowship with God.

Like Onesimus, we need to repent. We need to confess the error of our ways. We need to seek refuge in that wonderful environment of being at peace with God and having perfect fellowship with him. But how can we find our way back home? We might feel lost in Rome like Onesimus without any resources to make the journey back to Asia Minor.

3. Well, we must not forget our last picture, for it is most important. THE APOSTLE PAUL IS A PICTURE OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST, THE ONLY MEDIATOR BETWEEN GOD AND MAN.

Just as the Apostle Paul reached out to Onesimus in his helpless state, so God the Father sent his one and only son into this world to help the human race be restored back to its creator once again. Paul took Onesimus right where he was. He accepted him and loved him and led him to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. So, in Christ Jesus, God takes each of us right where we are. He accepts us and loves us and invites us to return into the security of his household once again.

But Paul did not stop with his personal acceptance of Onesimus did he? Paul knew that his ultimate goal was to get Onesimus back into the security of Philemon's household once again where he could return to useful status. But there were several obstacles. Onesimus was a long way from home. And Onesimus had hurt and wronged Philemon deeply. But worst for Onesimus was the fact that he had stolen from Philemon and had no means to repay what he had taken. Onesimus had incurred a debt with Philemon that he had no ability now to repay.

So what did the Apostle Paul do? He found a way to get Onesimus back home. He encouraged Philemon to forgive the hurts and wrongs that had been suffered with the absolute confidence that Philemon would do more than Paul would even ask of him. And then Paul, himself, guaranteed the debt owed. Paul sent Philemon an I.O.U. I personally will repay all that Onesimus owes to you, Paul said. Charge all of his debts to my account. And in all of these actions, the Apostle Paul was picturing the Lord Jesus Christ and what he has done for us.

When we were lost and unable to find our way back to God, The Lord Jesus Christ came to provide a means for us to return to God. Jesus told his disciples, *I am the way, the truth and the life. No one is able to come to the Father except through me. John 14:6.* Christ has shown us the way back to God the Father with the absolute confidence that God's heart of love is great enough to forgive all the sins that we have committed against him. There is no sin that we can commit that is beyond the reach of God's arms of forgiveness. Christ knew the heart of His father. He knew that God would be more ready to receive us back than we would be to return. He knew that God would be more ready to forgive our sins than we would be to confess them to him. He knew that God would be more ready to cleanse us than we would be to be washed clean. So the Lord Jesus Christ, as the one and only mediator between God and man came to show us the way back into fellowship with the Father with the absolute confidence that we would be fully accepted and forgiven.

But there was still the matter of the debt that we owed to God. That debt

had to be paid, and we didn't have the ability to pay it. So the Lord Jesus Christ paid it for us. He took upon himself our sins as he gave his life upon the cross of Calvary. The verse that I quoted earlier from Isaiah 53:6 has a sorrowful first half, but a glorious second half. *We all, like sheep have gone astray; each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

God the Father laid on the Lord Jesus Christ the wickedness and sinfulness and iniquity of the human race. You see, like the Apostle Paul did for Onesimus, the Lord Jesus Christ not only showed us the way and sent us back to fellowship with the Father, but he guaranteed any debt that we owed as well. I'll pay it all. Any debt that is owed, charge it to my account. And just as the Apostle Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon's household as more than a servant, but as a brother in the Lord, so the Lord Jesus Christ has shown us the way back into his Father's household as more than a servant - we are members of God's own family, we have been adopted as full children, we are heirs of God and joint-heirs with the Lord Jesus Christ. And Christ sends us back with a new purpose and meaning in life. We are no longer useless, but now we are useful. We are kingdom builders together with God. We are now gifted and equipped to help in the construction of the eternal kingdom of God.

Are you walking in fellowship with God this morning? Do you have meaning and purpose in your life? Do you know in your heart that your sins are forgiven, that all is right between you and your creator?

PRAYER - INVITATION:

1. FOR THOSE WHO AREN'T SURE THEY ARE MEMBERS OF

GOD'S FAMILY: CONFESSION OF SIN, BELIEVE THAT JESUS DIED FOR THEIR SINS, ACCEPTANCE OF HIS PAYMENT FOR THEM, EXPRESS DESIRE TO RETURN TO GOD'S HOUSEHOLD.

2. FOR THOSE WHO ARE CHRISTIANS: RETURN TO USEFULNESS FOR GOD, CONFESS SIN, REPENT AND COMMIT TO RESTITUTION.