

LESSONS FROM A CHANGED LIFE



Checking the Mail

Well, it's time to check the mail. When I was a kid I used to always look forward to checking the mailbox. Maybe I would get a letter from my grandmother in Kentucky. Or maybe a new Sears catalog would arrive.

It's funny how correspondence has changed today. Rather than personal letters we generally communicate via e-mail or face book or cell phones. Now, when I go to the mailbox is always junk mail and bills.... it's rare when I ever get a personal letter in the mail. Let's see what we've got...

"Junk mail, junk mail, bill, junk mail, junk mail, Bill... All Right... personal letter! Oh, too bad... they delivered it to the wrong mailbox!"

It's from The Apostle Paul to Philemon.

Today we're going to look at this letter which you can find in your Bible. This book in the Bible is actually a personal letter written from the apostle Paul. In fact, this book, Philemon is the only personal letter found in the Bible. What's interesting about this letter is that it doesn't address any specific doctrine, no specific theology, no heresy, no problem; it's simply a personal letter.

The book was written by the apostle Paul. He wrote the book from a Roman prison. It was written to a man named Philemon. He was a wealthy business owner who also hosted a small church in his home.

What was the content of this letter? It was written about a man named Onesimus. Onesimus was a runaway slave, a slave who worked for Philemon, who stole something from Philemon and then ran for his life.

Now, this is where the story begins. This runaway slave was fleeing for his life, and "somehow" he got to Rome, where evidently by God's divine plan, he met the apostle Paul.

Now when you consider the great distance Onesimus had to travel to Rome, and the Paul was locked in prison, I don't think there's much coincidence. I think Onesimus must have met Paul while Paul was in Colossae, at the home of Philemon.

He was attracted to Paul, even thought at that time he didn't respond to Paul's message and become a Christian.

But again he meets Paul and the apostle Paul did what he does best, and that was lead Onesimus to a full, saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

As these two people became friends, and Paul understood what had happened, it became evident to both of them that Onesimus had to go back to his master and to confess his sin and plea for mercy. So the apostle Paul, for his new son in the faith, wrote this letter for this runaway slave and said "take it back to my good friend and your master Philemon."

Let's see what this letter says. **Philemon 1-2; Philemon 7-10; Philemon 11-16**

The book of Philemon is a personal letter from the apostle Paul to Philemon about a runaway slave named Onesimus, who by the power of the risen Christ was changed.

Cover-up your notes (if you have any)

- Who wrote the book of Philemon? [Paul]
- Who was the book written to? [Philemon]
- The runaway slave's name was? [Onesimus]

As we studied his little bitty book, which has no major doctrines that it directly talks about, it is not correcting anyone, it is just a personal letter, we're going to find one of the greatest life-changing stories in Scripture. My prayer is that you will encounter the presence of the life changing God and that you will not be the same.

Because this book illustrates some really important to biblical principles. Today I want to focus on what it tells us about dealing with our problems. (Onesimus had a problem, didn't he?)

I. **DON'T DENY YOUR PROBLEMS; FACE THEM.**

Philemon 12 - *I am sending (Onesimus)-who is my very heart-back to you.*

I remember when my youngest daughter Katelyn had dance recitals. And all the Saylor's, of course we go for the recital. Here we were, Nina, myself, and Jesse and Tom, two young boys, seated

for a long dance recital. And I can remember times when Jesse or Tom would say, as the 20 something act hit the stage, "Oh, great. Not another one!" And I had to look at him and tell him "Face it, boys. There's 10 more acts, and were not leaving until the fat lady sings." You cannot deny it. You have to Face it.

So many of us, we go through life, naturally denying the problems that really exist. We learn from Onesimus that we must face those problems. Look at verse 12 where Paul writes to Philemon and says.

Philemon 12 *I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you.* (NIV)

You see, Onesimus could have denied what he did in continued to run from it. He could have said he was a victim, or it wasn't fair that he was in slavery anyway. And he could have continued to run, never going back to do what was right.

But under the discipleship of Paul, and the leadership of the Holy Spirit, Onesimus must have realized that the right thing to do was to go back and face the problem, confesses sin and ask for mercy.

So Paul, who loved him, who led him to believe in the Savior, wrote this letter for him to bring back.

Now in order to understand the gravity of this statement we need to understand the background of it.

No one was more aware of the risk that Onesimus faced than the apostle Paul. As a slave who ran away, there were heavy penalties for being caught. There were pressures on the slave owners to be harsh to their runaway slaves, as a deterrent to other slaves who might think about doing the same.

- The very *least* punishment that Onesimus faced was to be branded with a brand on his forehead, permanently marking him as a fugitive slave. For the rest of his life he would have carried the mark.
- But much more likely than that light punishment, a runaway slave would be executed on the spot. No trial. Nothing.

POINT: So here we see a runaway slave who met the risen Christ. He had a heart change, and then he did what so many people are unwilling to do, he went back, faced his problem, trusting God with the results.

The story teaches us the principle that we don't deny our problems, instead we face them.

But most people deny their problems. For so many people, it's like they're holding a lit firecracker and thinking, "It's not going to blow."

For many, the fuse has been lit, and they're living in denial. "It's not going to blow."

- I don't know how it would play out for you, but surely for some of you the marital fuse is lit. And you got some significant challenges in your marriage, but you're pretending not you don't. *"It's OK, it's not that big of a problem. We're in no worse shape than most others."* *"It's not going to blow. It's not going to blow....boom."*
- Maybe for someone it's a physical challenge. You found something wrong in your body, a lump somewhere or internally you know that something is just not right. You know you just not as healthy as you should be. You tell yourself "it'll be okay, it'll be okay." boom.
- For some it's financial challenges. You're spending and your spending and your spending and you're spending. And you keep telling yourself "it'll be okay, it'll be okay." Boom.
- For some it can be your sin. The last few weeks I've been talking about "God's plan" for relationships. Maybe you are out of God's will in that area. *"No one knows about my sin. No one knows. I'm getting away with it. This is how I'm coping with it. It's not that big of a deal. It's just a little sin."* Boom, it blows.

We cannot deny our problems and find the healing power of God. We must face them and take them to him. So my question to you today is this. What's your problem? Honestly?

If you will be still in the presence of a holy God and listen. The convicting voice of the Holy Spirit will always reveal anything in you that is impure and not what it is supposed to be. "What's your problem?" What I challenge you to do today is just be transparent and vulnerable before God.

And say, "Yeah there's something in me that's not what it should be. An attitude, a thought process. There's anger. There's unforgiveness. My family is messed up. I am living in sin."

Give it a name. Stop denying it. Stop pretending that everything is going to be okay. Let's take it to God and face it. That's what we're going to do today.

We have one of three options. With your problem, you can

1. Curse it. “I wish it wasn't this way. Why does this always happen to me? I don't like this I'm going to pretend it's not there. I curse this problem!”

2. Nurse it. “*Oh poor me. Why do all these things happen to me? I'm always the victim.*” Or, you can take it to God and

3. Let God REVERSE it. As you face it and take to God, you can let God reverse it. Instead of pretending that it doesn't exist, or you can take it to God and let the life-changing, transforming power of a caring, powerful God change what you are facing.

Let the Scriptures speak to you. Let the power of this Scripture speak directly to you. Personalize it.

2 Chronicles 20:15, 17 *This is what the LORD says (to you): 'Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's... Go out to face them tomorrow, and the LORD will be with you.*

We don't deny our problems, which is what Onesimus could have done. But he didn't. Instead he took a handwritten letter back to the one who had the authority to kill him and said "I trust God with the results."

How about you? Are you willing to take this letter (Bible) from God with you to face your problems?

Today I'm putting out these mailboxes for you to send a note back to God. Look for the “airmail.” That's “prayer-mail” Write down that problem that you are facing, asking for His forgiveness, His help. (write down what it is your laying down – don't put your name. I may read some of them next week to celebrate what God is doing.)

II. DON'T FOCUS ON WHAT WAS, BUT ON WHAT CAN BE.

I love that. Don't focus on what was, or what happened, or the past, but focus on what *can be* as God enters into the problem.

Philemon 11 *Formerly (Onesimus)was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.*

Play on words. The name Onesimus means useful. He is saying Onesimus, formerly he was useless. But now he is living up to his name and is useful.

- “He used to be just a slave, but now he is more than a slave but a brother in Christ.”
- Formerly he wasn't of much help, but now everything has changed.
- Formally he was thing, but what once was, is no more.

I love that, because that is exactly what God does in us when we meet him in Jesus Christ. And some of you, may walk out of here today, experiencing or reexperiencing that power.

Everybody say.... *Formerly*....., *but now*.

formerly: *pote* (pot-eh'); in the old time, in time past, formerly.

but now: *de nuni* (deh, noo-nee'); no longer the past, but now.

Onesimus, He was this way but now he is a new person in Christ.

Some of you today will have a *formerly, but now* moment. You walked in one way but you will leave not as you where the as God wants you to be.

Formerly, you made a bad decision, *but now* you are the righteousness of God in Christ.

Formerly you were lost in your sins, *but now*, you've been found.

- *Formerly*, there are those of you unmarrieds today, and you walked in today and living outside of the will of God and sinful behavior, *but now* you will come into the presence of God and you will walk out a new person. And God will prepare you for a godly spouse.
- There are those of you right now, men, who are not spiritually leading your homes, and God will grab your heart and you will come a spiritual leader. *Formerly* you weren't but now you will.
- There are those of you who have come in as thieves, robbing God according to Scripture. Not offering to God what rightly belongs to him in the form of a biblical tithe. To not do so is to steal from God. Formally you were under a curse but now you will give to God what belongs to him and you will be under his greatest blessings.

Formerly you were one way, but now the presence of God has touched you. Many of you today can and

will have by *formerly, but now* moment. You're on a divine appointment for a *formerly, but now* moment.

Once again, let the Scriptures speak to you:

Ephesians 5:8 *For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.*

Colossians 1:21-22 *Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. ²² But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death...*

Ephesians 2:12-13 *You lived in this world without God and without hope. But now you have been united with Christ Jesus... NLT*

Let's Pray. *God we ask that we would have a holy encounter with you and that we would never ever be the same.*

As we close, I want you to be very, very honest. Today we want to take our problems to God. Name your problem, and we're going to take it to God.

Formerly some of you have hatred in your hearts, lustful thoughts that are consuming you. You got unforgiveness and bitterness toward someone. *That was then, this is now.* The presence of God is here.

Those of you have marriages that are in need of desperate help. Relationships that are all messed up. Finances that are all messed up

Those of you that have been away from God for a long long time. You have been living with sin and and has been dominating you for a long long time.

You need a *formerly, but now* moment.

Write it down. Write it down.

Ask and he will help you, call on his name.

As Onesimus looked at death, and Paul told them their's someone who has already died for you. And the apostle Paul told the guy who have no hope, about the hope that he could find in Jesus Christ. And this man call upon the name of Jesus Christ and at that moment he was forever changed.

For some of you, you're here for that ultimate *pote, de nuni* moment.