

PREFACE

On November 24, 2008, I wrote the following in that week's *Reflections by the Pond*:

God's continuing grace is never more eloquent than when it is extended through the simple kindness of a friend.

We live in the age of round-the-clock cell phone connections. We need never be more than an obnoxious ring-tone away from speaking with anyone, anywhere. Even so, there are times when we must turn off the little plastic wonder, forcing the caller to leave a message. Then he is shunted off to our fully-digitalized, virtualized capacity, off-site voice mail. Thus we need never be more than a recorded message away from anyone trying to make contact with us.

But in a time of grief, nothing is better than a neighbor.

Years ago, when my aunt died, those of us who remained were suddenly burdened with the many details and arrangements to dying. There was the funeral to plan, flowers to order, luncheons to arrange. We had to meet with the lawyer, the pastor, the funeral director. Something had to be written for the notice in the local paper.

Though it was all proper and fitting, it all can become a bit much for those who simply want to sit and remember the good times shared with a loved one now gone.

So in a small Midwestern town, when the family needs to run errands, yet at the same time receive well-wishers—both in person and by phone—it is not a machine, but a neighbor who attends the phone and the doorbell. It is warm, and real, and wildly inefficient.

While we met our obligations for our aunt, instead of using voice mail or an answering machine, a neighbor gave of her time to sit at Mom's house to answer the phone and answer the knocks at the door.

The apostle Paul understood this. Of course it is true that the first century did not enjoy the many other options we have for communication, but I have a feeling that even if it had, Paul would have still opted for the personal touch. Even if there had been a reliable postal service, it is not hard to imagine that Paul would still have sent his correspondence by means of a brother in the faith. A mailman would have just delivered the letter to the door; Paul's "mailmen" delivered far more than that.

Read Colossians 4:7-9.

v7-8: TYCHICUS

We first meet Tychicus [[too-kee-kos'](#)] in Acts 20. He is listed with those who accompanied Paul on his last journey to Jerusalem. The purpose of that trip was to deliver to the Jerusalem church gifts from a number of Gentile churches, and he had probably been entrusted with the gift from his church located in Asia [[today's Turkey](#)]. So on *this* occasion, he had probably visited Paul in Rome, collected the correspondence, and was now returning to his home region. Many believe he carried the letters not just to Colossae, but to Ephesus and to Philemon as well. Paul mentions him as one of his regular messengers in his letters to Timothy and Titus, but he was more than just a “go-fer.”

Paul describes Tychicus as his

- beloved brother [[a dear adelphos](#)]
- faithful servant [[trusted diakonos \(deacon: attendant, worker\) to Paul](#)]
- fellow bond-servant in the Lord [[syndoulos: a co-slave \(with Paul\) to the Lord](#)]

The NASB “As to all my affairs, Tychicus...will bring you information” is too sterile. A more literal rendering of the Greek would be “all the things concerning me”—what Paul was doing, how he felt, what was on his mind, his sorrows and his joys.

Paul knew Tychicus could be trusted not just to deliver his letters, but to share faithfully and accurately with their brothers and sisters in Christ the details of his life. Verse 8 expresses that level of intimacy (and requires little exegesis).

Sidebar: The KJVs’ “that he may know *your* circumstances” is a variant reading of the Greek text. Douglas Moo says it “is unlikely to be original” (i.e., inaccurate), but F. F. Bruce suggests it carries equal weight with the other reading.

v9: ONESIMUS

Tychicus had as a traveling companion the slave, Onesimus.

Read v9.

From the phrase, “who is one of you” (or “your number”) we can safely deduce that Onesimus—and, it follows as well, his master Philemon—was from Colossae. For him this was a return home. He probably received a warm welcome as a brother in Christ from the church body, but the reception he would get at the home of his master was less certain.

[\[regarding Onesimus and Philemon, read the NT letter to Philemon, then read *Seeds of Encouragement*, appended to this PDF\]](#)

Paul refers to Onesimus as a “faithful and beloved brother”; in the letter to Philemon, he calls Onesimus his “very heart.” But while the slave was clearly dear to Paul, he does not describe him—as he did Tychicus and Epaphras—as a “fellow worker.”

We can understand why, under the circumstances, he might diplomatically refrain from referring to Onesimus as a “fellow bond-slave,” but from this we might also deduce that Onesimus was not yet numbered with Paul’s “ministry team.”

V10: ARISTARCHUS, JESUS-JUSTUS, AND JOHN-MARK

Read Colossians 4:10-11.

Aristarchus

Tychicus and Philemon were standing there in front of the church in Colossae as this letter was being read to them. Paul now mentions three individuals—Jews—who were still with him in (probably) Rome, but would have been known to many in Colossae: Aristarchus [ar-is'-tar-khos], Mark (John-Mark), and Justus. These three send their “greetings.”

We learn from the accounts in Acts that Aristarchus was from the city of Thessalonica in Macedonia. [Today that city is in Greece, rather than Macedonia.] and a later traveling companion of Paul's. His life was threatened, along with Gaius, during the riot in Ephesus [Acts 19:29].

Now he is with Paul, who refers to him as “my fellow prisoner.” It is possible Paul means this metaphorically—i.e., Aristarchus has been “taken captive” by the Lord to serve him—or he means this literally. Interpreters are divided. Best guess is that Aristarchus is voluntarily confined with Paul so that he might be of service to him.

Jesus-Justus

We know nothing about this man except for his name. [Jesus his Jewish name; Justus his Roman name—e.g., Saul/Paul]

John-Mark

More interesting is the reference to Mark, “Barnabas’ cousin.” Here we have evidence of restoration and grace. We first meet Barnabas in Acts 4.

Read Acts 4:36-37.

We meet Mark in Acts 12—one of my favorite, most hilarious episodes in the Bible. Peter has been imprisoned by Herod, and v5 tells us that “prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God.” This prayer meeting (or at least one of them) was being held in the home of Mary, the mother of a young man named John Mark [John his Jewish name; Mark his Roman name]. An “angel of the Lord” frees Peter and, wanting to get off the streets, he heads to one of the homes where Christians worshiped together—Mary’s house.

Read Acts 12:12

Because of the way this is worded, John Mark was probably better known than his mother Mary. So, mind you, these people have been on their knees, “fervently” praying for Peter. He knocks at the gate and the servant-girl who answers is overjoyed that it is Peter. She runs inside to tell the others and...

Read Acts 12:15.

The Lesson: If you believe enough to pray, believe enough that God will *answer* your prayer.

We next meet Mark at the end of the same chapter, when Barnabas and Saul take him along with them on their missionary trip (v25). In Chapter Thirteen we learn that Mark (John) bailed out during the trip (v13), so, later, when they were organizing their second missionary journey, Paul refused to permit John-Mark to accompany them since he had “deserted them in Pamphylia.” This dispute caused such a rift between Paul and Barnabas, that they parted company. Barnabas took his cousin with him to Cyprus, while Paul chose Silas to accompany him through Syria and Cilicia (Acts 15:37-41). [Now back to Colossians.](#)

Only from Colossians 4:10 do we get the family connection between Barnabas and Mark—Mark’s mother Mary was probably sister to Barnabas. But it is what is *not* stated that makes this verse so interesting. John-Mark is back with Paul! We don’t know the circumstances; we don’t know who made the first move. But the bad feelings had been repaired, and the relationship restored. This improved relationship is reflected in Paul’s final correspondence in 2 Timothy.

Read 2 Timothy 4:11.

So even as his end drew near, Mark was on Paul’s mind. In v10 of our text, Paul adds a parenthetical phrase regarding Mark:

(about whom you received instructions; if he comes to you, welcome him)

Some have tried to guess what this is in reference to, but the fact is we simply do not know, beyond what is here. Paul had apparently issued previous instructions to the Colossian church regarding Mark, [\[the word *could* be translated “command” or “order,” but most agree that the context here calls for a softer tone\]](#) and he wanted him to be received properly by them.

And, of course, we know that Mark went on to write the earliest of the four gospel accounts. The timing of that, compared to the dating in Acts and the epistles of the NT, suggests that Mark, even while serving the apostle Paul, was probably compiling the necessary information for his gospel.

these are the only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are from the circumcision, and they have proved to be an encouragement to me.

Paul closes v11 with some additional information about these three individuals: perhaps with a note of sadness he adds that they were the only ones “from the circumcision” (Jewish Christians) helping him, and by them he was encouraged.

encouragement, comfort = *paregoria* (par-ay-gor-ee'-ah) = from a compound of <G3844> (para) and a derivative of <G58> (agora) (meaning to harangue an assembly); an address alongside, i.e. (special) consolation :- comfort. [\[Used only here in the NT; the word from which we get “paregoric” and denotes relief of pain \(Curtis Vaughan\).\]](#)

What a testimony! Paul searches for just the right word with which to express how precious these three men were to him, and he settles on one he’s never used before: *They relieve my pain*. No higher praise. What better use could we be to a brother or sister in Christ, than to relieve their pain.

Seeds of Encouragement

Philemon, a follower of our Lord Jesus, to my brother and friend, Paul; to Timothy, his son in the Spirit and fellow worker:

The members of this household—as well as those who worship in it—greet you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. The blessings of God upon you both, as you, Paul, suffer imprisonment for His name and glory. It is with a heart filled with an uncomfortable blend of gratitude and righteous anger that I answer your recent letter. Let this reply, in your hands, indicate sufficiently that yours arrived safely, with dispatch, by way of the assigned courier.

I will confess to you that it was not a pleasurable emotion that coursed through me when I first laid eyes on my returning slave. When, from a distance, I spied the absent Onesimus traipsing down the road—as if pursuing nothing more than a pleasurable romp in the afternoon sun—the rage so long nurtured in me rose like last evening's beans. How dare he come back to me with such a carefree air about him!

I will also confess to you, however, that it was with a certain measure of shame that I suddenly remembered the story told by the Lord when He had occasion to teach to a number of tax-gatherers. Quite unexpectedly, I saw myself in the role of the father whose son had abandoned his responsibilities, only to finally regret his life of dissipation and debauchery, and to return with his tail between his legs. Because my 'son' was returning—not in shame, but with great glee and bounding spirit—I was filled with unquenchable anger, rather than the compassion expressed by the father in Jesus' story.

As you know well, Paul, I am a businessman, and one who subscribes to the twin philosophies of promises kept and debts repaid. I believe in fairness, but also corresponding responsibility, and my initial reaction to my slave's return was one of fierce retribution over his promises broken and his debts left unpaid.

My good friend Paul: Though I love you as both brother in Christ, and as my Spiritual 'father,' I must, with regret, address you with what might be perceived as brutal candor.

When the slave Onesimus handed me your letter, and I began to read your words, my

anger was kindled anew when I realized that you had been the one harboring this fugitive. When one loses a valuable resource, there is a small comfort in supposing that the loss has not been compounded by someone else taking possession of that same resource. In that event, simple loss suddenly becomes theft. The knowledge that you, my brother, were the one in possession of my lost resource filled me with a powerful resentment that has not yet subsided. But, I admit, he is well, and certainly fit for new service. . .



"I just heard he was back!"

His attention still on his thoughts and the letter being penned to his friend, Philemon did not even look up when his wife, Apphia, flew into the room. "What's that, dear?"

"Is it true? Onesimus has returned? Who brought him?"

"No one," Philemon answered, finally pulling himself away from his private thoughts. "He returned on his own."

Apphia was stunned into silence. How remarkable, that a runaway slave would actually return by his own choice! Onesimus was not ignorant; he knew that the punishment for running away could be harsh. This was all very inconvenient; as the woman of the house, and the one in charge of the household slaves, it would fall to her to address the situation.

"What did he have to say for himself?" She asked.

"Not much. He went through all the motions, said all the right words. He was suitably repentant, threw himself at my feet and all. But it seemed almost a charade; even as he clutched at my ankles, he could barely keep himself from grinning up at me!"

"Now we're going to have to do something about it," Apphia said with a sigh. "It was almost easier when he was still a runaway."

"But there's something else," Philemon said. "The situation's been muddied by this." He handed the rolled letter from

Paul to his wife.

"What's this?"

"Our runaway has been in the company of Paul."

Apphia lifted her gaze off the fresh papyrus scroll to stare at her husband. "Paul? But he's in prison."

"Yes, I know. Apparently, Onesimus found his way to him. He must have heard our discussions regarding Paul's welfare. Remember, the church has been lifting up prayers on his behalf; Onesimus must have overheard, and gone to him."

"Whatever for?"

"I wouldn't know why he went to him in the first place, but, according to Paul's letter, Onesimus has been of some value to him. As a matter of fact, they've become quite close."

"So instead of returning him to us," Apphia said incredulously, "Paul kept Onesimus as his own servant."

"Not quite." Philemon frowned as he returned to writing his reply.

Seeds Planted

My dear friend, I am not unsympathetic to your plight. You already know that Apphia and I, along with everyone who meets in our home, continually beseech the Lord on your behalf. We consider your current imprisonment to be a gross unfairness. Yes, we have heard of your witnessing for Christ there, and we praise God for the many opportunities for this. But we also know how much further this witness could be spread, were you free of Rome's chains.

Would that my faith were as constant as yours. From you, my friend, I learned of Christ; from you I have learned to place my trust in Him as Lord. But what you have not yet taught me well is to remember that He—and He alone—is the one who orders the stars, and the events in our lives. How much I hate the thought of you in prison! How I would rather have you here with me. Pray for me, that I will learn obedience and trust.

Your words of gratitude are a soothing oil upon my head. Modesty demands that I protest your glowing words of affirmation, yet I would not lie to you (you, who would, of course,

see the lie coming from afar off) and say that they are of no consequence to my life.

It pleases me that even from this distance you are aware of my love for you. If I hate the thought of you in chains, that thought, nonetheless, only deepens the love I have for you. And when I hear how you have been encouraged by our lives, I am reminded how much you have encouraged ours.

Let me be of further encouragement by telling you of last evening's events. If you remember, when you were last here you baptized a husband and wife: Lucian and Claudia. If their faces have been lost in the veritable sea of faces to which you have ministered, be reminded that it was the radiant and expectant face of Claudia, coming up out of the water, that brought such joy to your heart. After their many trials—especially those with their rebellious son—it was with a singular relief that they fell into the supportive arms of our Lord, giving every one of their cares over to Him.

The young boy's name was Alexander—that young rascal who brought so much sorrow into their life. If you recall, you spent no insignificant amount of time with him, helping him to understand the forgiving grace of Jesus. But to no avail; when you eventually left our home to travel to Ephesus, young Alexander was as rebellious as when you had first arrived, and your spirits were low because of his stubbornness toward Christ.

He remained so for some time, bringing heartache, even despair, to his parents. They stayed faithful, however, spending much time on their knees, patiently pointing the boy in the right direction—whether he liked it or not!

But the day came when those many prayers were answered. So permit me to bring you the glad tidings that the seeds you sowed into that small life have finally taken root.

Your planting, combined with the watering and careful cultivation by many in this church, has resulted in a new soul being added to the Book of Life. Yesterday he declared his allegiance to Christ, and last evening, with his proud parents beaming from the shore, Alexander was baptized. Praise God!

My brother Paul, that having been said in all sincerity, I now feel my thoughts returning to the matter at hand. My mind and heart seem split, as if being controlled by two separate spirits.

There is that strong part of me that wants

desperately to help you in every way possible—to minister to your needs in the way you have so often ministered to mine. For the sake of this discussion, we might refer to this part as being controlled by the Jesus Spirit.

But there is also that equally strong part of me that desires nothing less than justice where wrong has been done. Fairness insists that people—be they free or slave—be held accountable for their transgressions. We could say that this part of me is controlled by the business spirit.

For the moment, the spirits on either end of the rope in this tug-of-war are of equal weight and strength. And I am in the middle! What to do?

Onesimus—heretofore, an able and dependable servant—did not leave this house empty-handed. While it is true that he did not abscond with as much as he could, he did help himself to some of our stores and a small purse. Regardless his status from here on out, these must be repaid.

Family

The sun was melting into the distant horizon, painting the garden in deep shades of burnt orange, when Apphia joined her husband for their usual evening chat—a custom they had kept since their second day of marriage. In this quiet moment, while the day reached toward its end, Philemon and his wife would let the events of the day just past simmer into their conversation, while they looked forward to the new day approaching. Here they talked—quietly, simply—and patiently listened to no one else but the other.

The olive wood bench was nestled between two myrtle bushes, and the whole area was scented by their evergreen fragrance. The bench was hard, but its seat, nevertheless, had two distinct impressions from where the couple had ended many years of days.

“What are you going to do?” Apphia asked her husband.

“I don't know yet.”

“Paul will be expecting your answer.”

“I know that.”

“He wants you to send Onesimus back to him, doesn't he?” She asked.

“Paul makes that quite clear in his letter. He stops short of saying it, but it's clear.”

“So why don't you do it?”

“Send him to Paul?” Philemon stiffened, turned to his wife. “What will that say to the other servants? That will give tacit permission for all the servants to leave whenever they like and make another life for themselves. What will that do to my authority? And where in that does Onesimus meet his responsibilities to *me*?” He sagged down into himself. “No. It wouldn't be right.”

Apphia nodded her head in agreement. “I hate to think of Paul going through this—but after all, he's not alone. His letter says that Timothy and Mark, Demas, Aristarchus and Luke are there with him. Why would he need Onesimus?”

Philemon withdrew the small scroll from inside his robe. “We only have what he says: ‘I would have liked to keep him.’ And he says that Onesimus has ‘become useful’ to him.”

“Maybe you should send a letter back to Paul, asking for more details,” Apphia suggested. “Then we can better make the decision.”

“I suppose.”

“Have you spoken with him yet?”

“Who?”

“Onesimus. He's been in his quarters since he returned.”

“I sent him there. I wanted time to let the anger wash out of me before dealing with him.”

“And has it?”

“Has what?”

“Are you still angry with Onesimus?”

“Oh, I rather think I'm more angry with *Paul*, than the slave. In Onesimus' position, I suppose I'd have done the same thing. What I can't abide is that Paul didn't send him back to me immediately. *That* would have been the right thing for him to do.”

Apphia gazed off toward the west, toward the orange ball now almost lost below the horizon. She sighed, and said, “It would be different if Onesimus were part of the family, instead of a slave. Then it would just be a *family* decision.”

Her words stabbed into Philemon like a hot knife. But of course, it *was* a family decision. How had Paul put it? ‘I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to

you.’ And later he had written that Philemon should think of Onesimus ‘no longer as a slave, but...as a dear brother.’

Philemon turned toward his wife and said, “But Onesimus *is* a part of the family.”

The Interview

It was the one room of the house in which none of the slaves were permitted. It was here that Philemon conducted his business affairs in relative solitude and quiet. Here was the one room in which he could call upon all of his well-practiced abilities to make the deals that kept him and his family wealthy.

This too, since Philemon had become a believer, was where he came to commune with God and worship his Savior. In this quiet place where no others were allowed, he could focus all of his thoughts and adoration upon the one who gave His life that he might live.

It was upon the heavy, wooden door to this room that the slave knocked.

“Come in, Onesimus,” Philemon answered. The cedar door swung out slowly, and Onesimus stepped inside. “Sit down here, next to me.”

The slave, with head lowered respectfully, crossed the room and perched nervously on the low stool that was positioned next to where Philemon sat waiting.

Onesimus was a rather ordinary-looking man, somewhere around twenty-five or thirty years of age—although no one really knew how old he was. He had been purchased by Philemon five years earlier from a passing caravan that included a group of prisoners from Crete. Philemon had selected him for his strong back, but soon Onesimus’ unique brand of earthy intelligence won him a position of trust within the household.

He kept his gaze lowered, as if studying the floor, while Philemon chose his words.

“I’ve read Paul’s letter carefully,” he began. “He speaks most highly of you.”

“Yes, master.”

“Tell me why you ran away. Did we treat you unfairly?”

“Oh, *no*, master.”

“Then why?”

Slowly and methodically, after a moment’s thought, Onesimus began, “You never invited me into your meetings,

but I could hear what was being said. At first your discussions were confusing, and your prayers were foreign to any experience of mine. But little by little, I came to be curious about these things. Then my curiosity became something more—I wanted to *understand*.” He took a breath, as if gathering courage to go on.

“You and the others spoke often of the man Paul. I do remember the time he was here, but nothing else. You spoke of him as you would a leader—yet he wasn’t actually here. You gave his words great weight. They were important to you.”

“You never said anything to me,” Philemon interrupted.

“It would not have been proper to share my feelings with you, my master.”

“I’ve always treated you well.”

“Yes, you have,” Onesimus quickly agreed. “But there is a fixed distance between master and slave. I could not share it with you.”

“But you could with Paul?” Philemon said, only partially hiding his disappointment.

“Paul is not my master.”

An awkward silence fell over them for a few moments. Then Philemon said, “But why did you leave?”

Onesimus thought carefully before answering, and when he did, it was with his face once again to the floor.

“I know it was *wrong* to leave, and I ask your forgiveness. But I don’t know if I can put into words why I did.”

“Try. Speak freely.”

“I was not leaving *here*—but going *there*.”

“Where?”

“Not a place, but an *idea*. I was filled with a desire to know more about this Jesus you spoke of and prayed to.”

Philemon blurted out petulantly, “I would have told you.”

“Forgive me, master, but I did not feel comfortable bringing it to you.”

“Go on,” Philemon said, sadness creeping into his voice.

“From what I had overheard, I knew the city where Paul could be found—and I still had his face in my memory. It took me many days, but I finally found the jail he was in. For awhile, after that, I did nothing but sit at his feet, listening to his words about Jesus.

“Slowly, after many more days, I began to ask my questions. He always answered them—sometimes with words that needed explaining, but he always answered them. What surprised me was that he never concerned himself with who I was, or why I was there. Oh, in time he learned that I was of your house, but he never pried into the reasons for my being there with him. He just accepted me.”

A small smile spread over his face as Onesimus continued. “After awhile, I began doing things for him. Small things—sometimes just sitting with him after everyone else had left. He seemed to take comfort in having me there with him. I don’t know why. He spoke often of you and mistress Apphia. He remembered you fondly, telling me about the many things the two of you had done for the other believers—in your church and elsewhere.

“One day—it was late, long after everyone else had left—he turned and looked into me, and said, ‘Onesimus, I’ve told you much about Jesus. Now I want you to tell me what He means to *you*.’ It took me a long time to find the words, but I told him that I believed that Jesus was really God—God in flesh; that *this* God was the only true one, that all other gods were false; and that when Jesus died on the cross, my sins died there with Him. I told him that because of Jesus, my many sins were forgiven.

“What I said pleased him, but he said, ‘You still haven’t told me *what Jesus means to you*.’ What I told him was that I now felt part of something new and different, that I now had a *new* master—one who would always care for me and love me. But more than that, I knew that I would never again feel alone, that I would always have brothers and sisters who would support me—just like those who were there supporting Paul. I knew that my past life no longer mattered. What really mattered was my *new* life, and those who would share it with me. The next day, Paul had John Mark take me to a nearby stream, where he baptized me.”

Though Philemon stared at Onesimus, his eyes were unfocused, his gaze distant. As images of Paul and his servant together played over and over in his mind, he struggled to suppress the feelings of jeal-

ousy—even betrayal—that surged in him, trying to accept the events and changes that had transpired. He fought against the anger he felt from being helpless—from not having any control over what had taken place between his friend Paul and his servant Onesimus. At last, he spoke.

“Why did you come back?”

“I guess there were several reasons. First, because Paul wanted me to. I owe him a great debt, and I felt that by serving him, I am serving my Lord. I also felt the need to ask your forgiveness. I was wrong to leave, I know that. You are my master, and I am to obey you.

“The *real* reason I returned, well—it’s harder to explain. I don’t know if I have the words for it. Being there, with Paul, I came to understand that living a life with Christ is more than just *believing*. At first, when he spoke of having a personal faith, I thought that meant that our faith was to be kept separate from each other—that the only thing that mattered was what was between us and Jesus.

“But then I learned that the truth is quite the opposite. *Before* Christ, we were separate; living under him, we are all connected—members of each other.

“While I was there, I could see with my own eyes how important it was for others to encourage Paul in his work—and especially in his imprisonment. He would have days when the reality of his situation would press down on him like a heavy weight. He would think that all his work for the Lord had been in vain, despair would creep up on him, and he would begin to lose hope.

“But then would come word of victories in Perga, or a great spiritual revival in Miletus, or he would receive a personal letter from a dear friend that just said how much they loved him. What a difference these would make! After being there, I know that these words of encouragement literally kept him *alive*. Without them—and the brothers and sisters who were there in person—Paul would have lost all hope.

“So—and I’m not sure I can explain this well—I realized that I *had* to return, to bring his letter to you, to keep that connection alive. I can’t read—you know that—so I don’t know what his letter says.

But I know that you are dear to him, and that if he needs you, or he needs me, we should do everything we can for him.”

Philemon looked upon this man who had changed before his very eyes. Or was it *he* who had changed? Onesimus had entered the room a slave; he would be leaving a man—a brother. What miracle had transpired in that Roman cell?

After a long silence Philemon, his voice heavy with emotion, quietly said, “Thank you for being honest with me. You may go now.”

Onesimus rose from his stool and left the room, shutting the heavy cedar door behind him.

Epilogue

My dear brother and friend in the Lord Jesus Christ:

Abject humility can be an ugly thing in one so proud as I, but at the risk of possibly fatal ugliness, I will attempt to put words to the utter humiliation I am now feeling in my heart.

You may be wondering why I have chosen to append this to an already hopelessly ugly letter. Rather than my starting over, let the existence and reading of what has gone before stand as part of my humiliation. Stand on the street corner and shout out its words! to make public the evidence for the shame I now feel.

Dear Paul, I am a well-educated and wealthy man; I am a respected member of my community; and I hold a position of some tangible weight in the local Christian community.

I am a person of substance who has just been taught a most profound lesson of life by a common slave.

No—let me amend that. I am mistaken on both counts. Onesimus is no longer anyone’s slave—and he is anything but common. I have this day released Onesimus from all obligations to me and, as he is now in your presence, let the delivery of this letter demonstrate that he is now, indeed, a free man.

While I am embarrassed by my gross stubbornness, I am rejoicing that Christ saw fit to take pity on my stupidity, and perform surgery on this cancer before The Day.

I confess to you that when Onesimus first arrived here bearing your letter, I did not welcome him as I would you. My treatment of him was both stern and petulant. I boxed him away for a period of punishment, all the while serving only to punish myself. I tried to be angry

with him, but soon realized that instead, I was angry with you for keeping him from me.

But God has worked a miracle in my life by graciously changing my vision: He has changed my sight, so that now I see Onesimus not as a possession, but as a man and brother. He no longer belongs to me; neither does he belong to you.

He belongs to Christ.

I see now why Onesimus has become precious to you. This brave and deeply Spiritual man has afforded me the opportunity to witness the finest example of what it is to be a servant—not of man, but of Christ.

Though he did steal from me, Onesimus does not have anything to repay. For I have been repaid in full by the lessons he has taught me with his life of gentle humility.

With a glad and grateful heart I return Onesimus to you—not as his master (for he is no longer a slave to anyone but his Lord, Jesus Christ) but as our friend and brother.

May you profit from his life as much as I have.

Grace to you, brother Paul. I need not prepare a room for you; you may have mine!

The members of this household—Apphia, Archippus, and I—send you and your fellow workers our greetings, as well as our constant prayers for your release.

The Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ be a comfort to you in our absence.



The preceding, based on Paul’s letter to Philemon, began life in the form you see here, as a narrative, for the monthly devotional journal, *Aspects*. It was later re-imagined in 2005 as a one-act play entitled, *Brothers*.