

## What Does The Bible Say About Forgiveness?

**February 25, 2024**

Good morning CrossWinds family. Last week, we began 1 Thessalonians. Today, we take a small break from that series. I was in Palm Springs, California, meeting with EFCA pastors, so I didn't have much time to prepare for this morning.

Last week, I told you I would be recycling an old message for today. I allowed you to vote on which one you want. It was either, "What does the Bible say about happiness?" Or, "What does the Bible say about forgiveness?" "What does the Bible say about forgiveness?" won the vote. That is what we will talk about this morning. Let's dive in.

Today, forgiveness isn't seen as a virtue. It is seen as a vice. Forgiveness isn't seen as a sign of strength. It is considered a form of weakness.

Look at the heroes in our movies. Are they people who forgive or people who glorify getting even? If you are a little older, like me, you will remember the movie "Rambo." That was about Sylvester Stallone getting even with those who hurt him because they drew first blood. If you are younger, you will remember the movie "Taken" with Liam Neeson. That was not a movie about him getting back his daughter. It was a movie about him exacting vengeance on those who took her.

Revenge doesn't just dominate movies and the entertainment industry. Turn on the nightly news, and you will find it filled with revenge stories. I doubt you will hear one story about forgiveness. The Middle East remains in turmoil because the Arabs in the Gaza Strip indiscriminately shoot rockets across

borders to kill Israelis to get revenge. Some would say the Israeli military offensive into the Gaza Strip has crossed from defense to revenge. You never hear talk about forgiveness in the Middle East.

Revenge crimes are also on the rise. Did you see the man in the news from Colorado? He shot a neighbor's dog in a premeditated, unprovoked attack. This man's dog and the other dog had a dogfight a few weeks before. This man plotted pet revenge on his neighbor's dog to shoot and kill it. You know revenge is over-the-top in our culture when pet revenge is something they talk about on the news.

When was the last time you heard someone on the news say the words, "I was wrong." "I am sorry." or "Would you please forgive me?"

We live in a world that is about getting even. We live in a world where if someone hurts us, we will hurt them worse. As Christians, we are to be the exact opposite of our culture. After Jesus has forgiven us, we are to be known as forgiving people. That is to be written across the top of our Christian business card.

If you want to put the message in a nutshell, here is the soundbite you want to remember.

As we have crazy and insane levels of forgiveness from God by Jesus, we are to extend crazy and insane levels of forgiveness to people around us.

People should be able to catch the scent of God's insane levels of forgiveness on us by the way we extend insane levels of forgiveness to the people around us.

I talked with a couple this past week, and the man is afraid to tell his wife about a financial matter where he had to take out a small loan. He is afraid she won't forgive him. He is afraid she will yell and scream at him, then constantly bring it up again and again.

Folks, that isn't the way a Christian marriage works. Does there need to be a serious discussion between the couple? Yes, of course. There also needs to be a decision to forgive. If you forgive someone, you can't keep bringing something up from the past and beating them over the head with it. That is the way the world does it. It is not the way Christians handle it. When you get hysterical, you cannot get historical. The Bible says an unwillingness to forgive or a desire to get revenge is utterly unthinkable in the Christian life.

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. Matthew 6:14–15 (ESV)

Forgiveness is so central to the Christian life that persistently holding onto a hurt is evidence that someone may not know Jesus because those who know Jesus can't help but find themselves forgiving others like Jesus.

Forgiveness is part of the Lord's prayer. The Lord's prayer assumes we will forgive those who hurt us.

...and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. Matthew 6:12 (ESV)

Forgiveness for Christians means we don't withhold our affection from people when we forgive. When we forgive, we want what is best for people. Forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean we pick up a relationship with the same level of trust we once in a relationship. When trust is broken, it takes time to earn

it back. We can forgive someone, want what is best for them, cease our anger at them, and genuinely care about them, but not have a full restoration of trust with them.

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Ephesians 4:32 (ESV)

Paul says to the Ephesians, when you forgive someone, be kind to them. Have a tender heart toward them. Instead of daydreaming about their demise, genuinely want what is best for their well-being when you forgive them. That is what genuine forgiveness does.

Revenge is the way of life in the world. Forgiveness is the way of the Christian. If you want to know a great way to share your faith and reach people with Jesus, it is by handling conflict differently. Focusing on forgiving and restoring relationships rather than bickering and insisting on our rights makes Christians stand out in this world like lights illuminate the side of a runway on a dark, foggy night.

### **Why is forgiveness an essential part of the Christian life?**

1. **Refusing to forgive imprisons us in the past.** Refusing to forgive keeps the pain and the hurt alive. Refusing to forgive keeps the wound of a hurt open. It won't allow it to heal. When we don't forgive, it feeds anger and resentment. Refusing to forgive keeps us living in the past. Only forgiveness can free us from the past.
2. **Refusing to forgive leads to bitterness.** The longer we dwell on a hurt done to us, the more bitter we become. Bitterness is not just a sin. It is an infection. Bitterness refuses to stay compartmentalized in our lives. Like an infection

that spreads and eventually destroys the body, bitterness spreads and affects our entire life. Bitterness changes the way we think. Instead of thinking about wholesome things, we think about hurtful things. Bitterness twists our hopes and aspirations for the future. Instead of longing for a future that honors Christ, bitterness leaves us hoping for a future that is dishonoring to Christ. Bitterness leaks into our language. When we are bitter, sarcastic words drip into our language. Instead of building people up, we gripe, complain, and tear them down. Bitterness infects our relationships, especially our marriage. Bitter people are not attractive people we want to spend time with. They are unlovely people we want to avoid. If we become an unforgiving bitter person, it will sow seeds of destruction in our marriage where bitterness will take life from our marriage instead of giving life to it. Your spouse will not be attracted to a bitter person. Bitterness spreads from us to other people.

See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; Hebrews 12:15 (ESV)

Nobody wants to be around bitter people because they make us bitter!

3. **Refusing to forgive gives Satan an open door.** When we hold on to bitterness, it gives Satan an open door into our lives.

Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. Ephesians 4:26–27 (ESV)

Most of the ground Satan gains in our lives happens when we won't forgive. Refusing to forgive people who hurt us hurts us more than we hurt the people we won't forgive. When we don't forgive, it is like drinking poison and

then expecting the person who hurt us to get sick. Refusing to forgive kills us, not the other person.

I often think of this. God was at his best when Jesus died on the cross to forgive us. We are at our best when we crucify our pride and completely forgive people who hurt us, like Jesus completely forgave us.

..., if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs. 2 Corinthians 2:10–11 (ESV)

Here is the same theme. Paul tells the Corinthians he forgave them because if he didn't, he could find himself outwitted by Satan and tricked into bitterness and sin.

#### **4. Refusing to forgive may mean we are unforgiven.**

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. Matthew 6:14–15 (ESV)

We looked at this earlier, but it is so important I want to look at it again. Forgiving other people is so central to the Christian life that not forgiving someone may be evidence you have not experienced the forgiveness of God in your life.

In saying that, we should recognize that forgiveness is usually not a once-and-done deal in our hearts. We can forgive someone for the hurt they did to us but find ourselves sucked back into a pit of bitterness and despair just hours or days later. What do we do when that happens? We need to forgive that person all over again. We need to fix our thoughts on Jesus' insane forgiveness of us and let that give us the strength to forgive again.

The Bible constantly reminds us that the way we find the ability to forgive others is by meditating on the crazy, insane forgiveness God gave to us through Jesus.

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Ephesians 4:32 (ESV)

bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Colossians 3:13 (ESV)

Forgiveness is such an important topic that the Holy Spirit decided to not just give us a handful of verses. The Holy Spirit devoted an entire book of the Bible to forgiveness. It is the Book of Philemon. In this book, forgiveness is not taught as a principle. It is shown to us through a real-life situation. It is the broken but finally restored relationship between two close friends of the apostle Paul, a wealthy businessman named Philemon, and a slave named Onesimus.

### **What is the background of the letter to Philemon?**

Paul was under house arrest in Rome when he wrote the books of Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. Earlier in his life, Paul stayed three years in Ephesus, where he shared the gospel. One of those who heard the gospel and trusted in Jesus was a wealthy businessman named Philemon. He lived in the city of Colossae. While passing through the nearby city of Ephesus, he met Paul and became a Christian. He returned to his hometown to plant a church. The church of Colossae met in his home.

Philemon had a slave. His name was Onesimus. Instead of being a useful slave who enjoyed the benefits of a Christian master, he was a useless slave who constantly rebelled against his master. We don't know the events that led to

the breakdown in the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, but we do know that Onesimus ran away from home and headed for the city of Rome.

Rome was 1,800 miles away from Colossae. It was a city of 800,000 people. Onesimus hoped the distance a vast population would camouflage him so he would be impossible to find in the sea of humanity.

Some parts of the letter to Philemon imply Onesimus stole money from Philemon when he ran from his home. He probably stole a lot of money. In the ancient world, like today, travel was expensive. For Onesimus to travel almost 2,000 miles required a lot of cash. He no doubt stole enough money to journey to Rome and set himself up to live comfortably while in Rome.

Imagine you have a maid that cleans your house. She is paid a modest sum of money. One day, while looking at your checkbook, you notice a check was removed from the back. You call the bank to find that she wrote herself a check for \$100,000 dollars. She cashes it, then skips the country with your money. How would you feel about the maid? Would you be furious? That is how Philemon felt toward Onesimus.

At this time in history, Romans dealt harshly with slave revolts. The last slave revolt in Rome was 100 years before this time. It was led by Spartacus. At one point Spartacus' rebellion consisted of 70,000 slaves that challenged, and at times defeated, the Roman legions. Eventually, the Roman legions crushed Spartacus and his slave army. When the Romans won the final battle against Spartacus and his slave soldiers, they crucified all 6,000 slaves. The Roman approach to slave rebellion was zero tolerance and brutal defeat.



Slaves were crucified for far lighter offenses than what Onesimus had done when he stole from Philemon and fled the town. When runaway slaves were captured, if they were not crucified, they were branded on their foreheads with a big letter “F” for the fugitive. If they stole money when they escaped, as Onesimus had done, they were branded with an “FC” for fugitive criminals. That was the standard treatment for slaves who stole or ran away from their masters.

In this time of history, there were slave catchers who were bounty hunters. Like Dog the Bounty Hunter on television, they hunted down runaway slaves for a fee. Onesimus probably suspected Philemon put a bounty on his head after what he had done.

Let's return to our story.

Through unknown circumstances, Onesimus and the apostle Paul crossed paths in Rome. Onesimus spent time with Paul and became a Christian. Onesimus didn't just become a Christian but his life completely changed when he became a Christian. Onesimus was so transformed by Jesus that he gave his time to helping Paul in prison, caring for his spiritual father.

While Onesimus' life turned around, one outstanding problem remained. Onesimus was still a runaway slave in hiding who needed to make things right with his master. There was a broken relationship to restore. There was repentance to be expressed and forgiveness to be sought. This wouldn't be an ordinary attempt at restoration. Trying to make things right with Philemon would be risky business. Philemon held Onesimus' life in his hand, and after what Onesimus had done, most masters would deal with his behavior harshly.

After Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians, he planned to have a man named Tychicus carry that letter to the church that met in Philemon's home. Paul sent Onesimus with Tychicus back to Philemon in the city of Colossae. Paul didn't send Onesimus alone. With him, he sent a little postcard-sized letter, called the Book of Philemon. Tychicus was to read this note aloud to Philemon when he came with Onesimus to the church that met in his home.

Imagine with me the excitement on Philemon's face when he heard that a messenger arrived with a letter for the church written by the apostle Paul. That would be thrilling. In your mind, picture how Philemon's face changed when he saw his criminal slave in the room standing next to the letter carrier. Can you see the redness on his face? Can you picture his hands clenched into fists? In that tense moment, Tychicus gets Philemon's attention and clears his throat.

Philemon... Paul didn't just write a letter to the church. He wrote a personal letter to you. Let me read it to you.

Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you. Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. For this perhaps is why he was parted from

you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Philemon (ESV)

Let's work our way through the first 15 verses of this letter.

### Who are the people in the greeting?

Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Philemon 1–3 (ESV)

**Philemon** - He was a wealthy businessman who was Onesimus' owner.

Philemon hosted the church in his home.

**Apphia** - This was most likely Philemon's wife. She was also a Christian.

**Archippus** — This was most likely Philemon and Apphia's son. Paul called him a fellow soldier. This means Archippus was involved in the church and was reaching people with Jesus.

The goal of this brief letter was to encourage Philemon to forgive Onesimus, to accept him as a brother in Christ, and to extend to him the same kind of crazy insane forgiveness Jesus had shown to him to Onesimus.

Since forgiveness is the goal of the letter, as we work through the first 15 verses, let's develop all of our points around the topic of forgiveness.

## Why do we forgive?

### Forgiveness is essential for Christian fellowship.

I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints... Philemon 4–5 (ESV)

In this first verse, Paul complimented Philemon because he had not separated loving Christ from loving people. Philemon knew that we can't claim to love God and not love God's people, even the hard-to-love people. Look what the Bible says about this.

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. John 13:34 (ESV)

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. 1 John 4:7 (ESV)

When we think of God's commands to love one another, we instinctively think God tells us to love the easy-to-love people. If that were what God was talking about, we wouldn't need to be told to love the easy-to-love people. We need to be told to love the hard-to-love people. We are commanded to love the people who hurt us, as Onesimus had done to Philemon.

This is one of the distinctions of the church. Christians love people who are hard to love. The church is to be different. It is a place where people from different backgrounds and with different outlooks on life love one another.

Today, we live in a politically charged world. It is easy for churches to become political echo chambers where the only Christians we love are Christians with identical political views to us. We need to be careful. That can be very unloving to our neighbors. It is failing to love people that are probably hard for us to love.

Should we have political convictions? Of course, we should. We should vote along those convictions, but we must not fail to love those with different convictions.

Friends, the problem in this world is not politics. It doesn't matter what party a political leader comes from. They will not be able to solve our problems. The problem in this world is sin. The only person who can solve the problem of sin is Jesus. As the church, that is our message. Politics is not our message. We freely offer forgiveness and love to people to people who are different from us. We offer crazy forgiveness to them, just as Jesus offered crazy forgiveness to us.

**Extending forgiveness is an essential part of Christian growth.**

...and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. Philemon 6 (ESV)

While Paul thanked God for Philemon's faith, which was a genuine faith that shows itself in genuine love for people, Paul also prayed that Philemon's faith would become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing we have in Jesus. The word *effective* can also be translated as *experienced*. Paul's prayer for Philemon was that he wouldn't simply talk about our forgiveness through Christ but that Philemon would experience what it means to offer complete forgiveness to others. Paul prayed that Philemon would move from talking about forgiveness intellectually to knowing what it was like to extend forgiveness experientially. He wanted this because he knew Philemon's comprehension of Jesus' forgiveness of us would be better understood only when Philemon had the experience of offering complete forgiveness to someone else.

It is one thing to talk about forgiveness on Sunday morning, but another thing to forgive somebody on Monday morning. It is one thing to talk about climbing Mt. Everest, but it is an entirely different experience actually to climb Mt. Everest. Paul prayed that Philemon would move from talking about God's forgiveness to experiencing what it means to extend complete forgiveness, just like God gave us.

In a moment, Paul will provide a perfect opportunity for Philemon to experience forgiveness firsthand with Onesimus.

It is crucial for us to understand that one way we grow in understanding God's forgiveness for us is to go through the experience of extending radical forgiveness to someone else.

The ability to extend complete forgiveness is something unique to Christians. It is only those who have experienced complete forgiveness that can extend complete forgiveness.

This should reframe how we think about the relational wounds many of us experience. We wonder why God allows into our lives people who hurt us, especially Christian people who hurt us.

The way we grow in understanding Christ's forgiveness for us is we need to go through the experience of extending complete forgiveness to other people, just as Jesus extended complete forgiveness with no strings attached to us.

God may have you in a situation right now where it is hard to forgive someone who hurt you deeply. It is hard to leave it in God's hands and not want to get even. God doesn't have you in that place so you can lose your faith but so

you can grow in your faith. How we choose to respond in that situation makes all the difference. If we choose not to forgive, that hurt will become a foothold for Satan in our lives. It becomes a source of bitterness and a temptation to sin. If we choose to extend forgiveness, that hurt will become a way we know the forgiveness of God more and grow to love him more deeply.

**Forgiving those who hurt us is a powerful encouragement to the church.**

For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you. Philemon 7 (ESV)

Paul told us he derived much joy and comfort from Philemon's love. Philemon's care for other people in the church was an encouragement to Paul and the entire church. Paul knew the church is not a bunch of individual relationships but like a body — in the church — we are connected. How we treat one person in the church affects other people in the church. Philemon's love and care for people in the church made the entire church a refreshing place to be.

The issue at hand was the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon. How Philemon treated Onesimus, his new Christian brother, was an opportunity to encourage or discourage the rest of the church. If Philemon treated Onesimus according to Roman law and branded Philemon's forehead with an "FC," it would discourage the entire church. If Philemon lavishly forgave Onesimus, like Jesus lavishly forgave him, that would encourage the entire church to extend grace and forgiveness to others in their lives.

This morning, if you are struggling to forgive someone who hurt you. That may be a spouse or a former spouse. It could be a parent. It could be a child.

Know that giving in to bitterness and holding onto the wound will discourage the rest of the church family. Forgiving someone completely then leaving the results of that at the feet of Jesus, then trusting him in the outcome, will encourage the rest of the church to follow your example and forgive others.

### How can I encourage forgiveness?

**Don't command someone to forgive. Encourage it to come voluntarily from their heart.**

Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus... Philemon 8–9 (ESV)

Paul encouraged Philemon to forgive Onesimus and accept him as a brother rather than crucify him, whip him, or brand him with an “FC.” Rather than telling Philemon what to do, he appealed to him. True forgiveness must be a choice we make, not a command we obey.

Maybe you grew up in a home where you fought with your brother and sister. Mom would break up the fight and then tell you to apologize to your sibling. Did that work? Absolutely not! You said you were sorry with your words but not in your heart. You were waiting for the next opportunity to knock your brother in the head. In the same way, true forgiveness cannot be demanded from people. We can only encourage it to come from people. We cannot force a heart. Paul understood this.

Commanding Philemon to forgive would have humiliated him. It would have demeaned him. Paul just commended Philemon for his great faith and fantastic family. Here, Paul encouraged Philemon to live out that great faith by extending forgiveness.



This is something we can apply to all our conflicts. Let's use a silly example. How many of you take out the garbage at home because your wife asks you to take it to the curb? Your wife can ask you to take out the garbage in two ways. The first way is she can command you to take out the garbage. "Take out the garbage now!" Most men will take the garbage out when their wives command them, but they will do it, grumbling because they were bullied into the chore.

Another way a wife can tell her husband to take out the garbage is by appealing to him. She can ask her husband to take out the garbage, and when she does, she can tell him how much she appreciates it when he helps her with those little chores around the house. She can tell him how grateful she is for him that she doesn't have to go out in the cold with the garbage. Which approach is more effective? The appeal or the command? The appeal draws someone's heart toward a behavior. That is more effective than a command that forces someone into a behavior.

When it comes to forgiveness and someone who struggles to extend it, we can't command them to forgive, but we can appeal and encourage them toward forgiveness.

### **Repentance encourages forgiveness.**

**I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) Philemon 10–11 (ESV)**

Part of becoming a Christian was Onesimus admitting his sins and repenting of our sins. Onesimus owned his sins to become a Christian. Confessing and repenting of our sins is essential to the healing of any broken

relationship. The moment someone says, “I handled that wrong,” or “I was over the top.” or “ want to apologize. because I was wrong.” Most people find their anger toward the other person subsiding. Forgiveness and healing can begin.

While it doesn't say it directly in the text, it is implied that Onesimus was repentant of his thievery and running from his master. He knew what he did was wrong and wanted to make it right. If he weren't repentant, he wouldn't have agreed to travel back to Colossi to show up on Philemon's doorstep and attempt to set the broken relationship straight.

One of the fastest ways to encourage forgiveness from someone else's life is to take the initiative to own, confess, and repent of what we did wrong. Don't ignore a broken relationship. Admitting our sins, confessing our sins, and repenting our sins encourage other people toward forgiveness.

#### **An advocate can encourage forgiveness.**

I am sending him back to you, [sending my very heart](#). [I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.](#) Philemon 12–14 (ESV)

Paul loved Onesimus, but when Philemon heard the name Onesimus, his stomach soured. He rolled his eyes. Paul needed Philemon to know the same Onesimus that he couldn't stand was now deeply loved by Paul. Onesimus was a different person. Sometimes, in a difficult relationship breakdown, an advocate is needed, an intermediary is needed to bring people with a broken relationship together.

I see this many times in marital breakdown. One spouse loses the judgment of charity toward the other spouse. The person assumes everything his or her spouse says or does is meant to hurt him or her. Many times that isn't true. They get stuck, always assuming the worst, not the best. In those times, there needs to be an intermediary to bring people together. There needs to be an intermediary that says, "You are hearing your spouse wrong." Or "You are misreading their intent."

This was Paul for Onesimus. Paul vouched for Onesimus being a changed man, a different person. Paul vouched for Onesimus being born again.

From time to time, relationships break down. They are too hot to touch, and we can't get to the point of forgiveness and restoration. Find a Christ-centered intermediary to help in those times. That could be myself, an elder, a deacon, or a trusted godly friend.

### **Understanding God's providence encourages forgiveness.**

**For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever... Philemon 15 (ESV)**

In this little verse, Paul reached into the mystery of God's providence and the wonder of his ways. Providence is how God orders the world in ways we don't understand. It is how God can take sinful choices done to us or by us, turn them on their head, and use them to achieve His good purposes.

One of the best examples of God's providence in action is the story of Joseph. We looked at that story when we studied the book of Genesis. Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery. They sinned against God, their father, and their brother in a terrible way. Later, Mrs. Potiphar sinned against Joseph again by

falsely accusing him of a rape he didn't commit. Those sinful choices moved Joseph from being the favorite son in his father's sheep-herding business to languishing in an Egyptian dungeon. Joseph did nothing to deserve this.

In the mystery of God's providence, God used that sin to put Joseph in the right place at the right time so he could move him from serving in prison to serving as second in command over Egypt. That was God's mysterious providence in action. The sin done to Joseph didn't thwart God's plans for Joseph. God used the sin done to Joseph to carry out God's good plans for Joseph.

Paul proposed that this may be what happened with Philemon. In God's providence, maybe Onesimus' stealing from Philemon and then running away to Rome was all part of God's good plans to bring Onesimus to Rome, where he could hear the gospel from Paul's lips and be born again. Paul wonders if this was all part of God's good plan to bring Philemon and Onesimus back together, no longer as a slave and master but as brothers in Jesus.

Rather than hold a grudge over Onesimus or seek revenge for what he did, instead, Philemon should thank God that Onesimus' sinful choices were overruled by God's grace and used to save his soul. Philemon should be grateful for God's plan to unite them to encourage the rest of the church and the watching world and show what forgiveness and reconciliation through Jesus look like.

## **Conclusion**

How did this story end? Did Philemon forgive Onesimus? If Philemon forgave him, how did he treat him? Did Philemon's forgiveness of Onesimus

become an encouragement to the church, or was Onesimus branded on his forehead as a fugitive and criminal?

The letter doesn't tell us how the story ends....

As I was praying and thinking about this, I think we know how the story ends. Why is this letter in our Bible? It is in our Bible because Philemon forgave Onesimus. It is in our Bible because the forgiveness Philemon offered to his runaway slave was such an encouragement to the church that nobody wanted to forget this story. The Holy Spirit then preserved this letter in our Bible. Hence, the forgiveness Philemon extended to Onesimus and the reconciliation experienced between these two men was such an incredible story that it wasn't just told in their day. As part of our Bible, it is told today.

Folks, there is no shortage of stories about bitterness and revenge; just turn on the news or watch a movie. There is a shortage of stories of crazy, insane forgiveness. As Christians, we are the only ones who can write those stories because we are the only ones who have experienced the crazy insane forgiveness toward us.

When you came in this morning, I don't know who hurt you. I don't know what betrayal kept you up at night. I do know that one of the reasons God has allowed you to be in that position is so you can offer the crazy, insane forgiveness you have experienced from Jesus to others. In so doing, you will grow in your love for Jesus. You will be an encouragement to the church. You will be a witness to the world around you who can not comprehend why you extend the olive branch of forgiveness instead of the sword of revenge.



Dr. Kurt Trucksess is ordained in the Evangelical Free Church of America. He enjoys reading, writing, time with his family and wrestling with his sons. His favorite topics are preaching and ancient rhetoric. Feel free to contact him at [www.Christ2RCulture.com](http://www.Christ2RCulture.com) ([www.c2rc.com](http://www.c2rc.com))

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