

In the Gap for the Gospel: A Story

Introduction/context

- Today's message is from the book of Philemon
- Small letter written by Paul to a man named Philemon (Paul wrote it while in house arrest at Rome)
- Philemon lived in Colosse
 - **See map**
 - Tri-city area: Colosse, Laodicea, Hierapolis
- Philemon a wealthy man: Church met in his home
- Addressed also to Apphia and Archippus (wife and son?)
- Today, a different type of message
 - Instead of the standard 3 points and a poem, I want to tell a story
 - (Did this almost 2 years ago, and I heard no complaints)
 - A story how I picture these events of Philemon
 - The general information is accurate, but I have embellished the details.
- Since this is a story, I want to ask that you use your God-given imaginations to picture these events.
 - I plan to read most of the story, so eye-contact won't be as important.
 - Feel free to close your eyes if it helps.
- Join me in praying that the message of the Gospel would emerge from the text to encourage our hearts.

Prayer

It was just after lunch when Philemon went to the upstairs of his spacious Greek-style mansion (white walls adorned with art and pictures, marble floors, open windows to circulate the fall air).

Philemon enters his home-office and sits down at his desk to prepare for the worship service later that evening.

After being in the study for about an hour, he hears faint commotion from downstairs.

Short time later, Apphia, Philemon's wife, gently knocks on the door and then enters.

- **Apphia:** Philemon, sorry to interrupt, but a man named Tychicus has just arrived from Rome.
- **Philemon:** Tychicus? Do we know him?
- **Apphia:** He's a brother in Christ and a messenger sent by the Apostle Paul.
- **Philemon brightened:** Oh yes, I have met him. It's been a while, but we met in Ephesus when I went with Epaphras to the Lecture Hall of Tyrannus to hear Paul speak.
- **Apphia smiled and thought about when he husband had returned from Ephesus a changed man. It was, of course, when Philemon heard the Gospel and became a believer. The changes had been dynamic:**
 - *Before, their marriage was in serious trouble; their son, Archippus, was drifting away.*
 - *Now, Christ had become the center of their lives.*
 - *Life had meaning, and the Lord had blessed the family with great joy and peace.*
 - *Gospel message was spreading because of Philemon*
- **Philemon interrupted her thoughts:** So why's Tychicus here?
- **Apphia:** He's brought a letter from Paul – a new revelation from the Lord.
- **Philemon:** For us? Wow, Paul didn't even plant this church; he's never been here, and he has a message for us?
- **Apphia:** Actually, *said Apphia*, there's more than one. Tychicus had one for the Laodiceans, which he dropped off this morning, and he has one for us. Our instructions are to read the letters and then swap them.
- **Philemon:** Wow! This is wonderful news. I mean, we're no Ephesus or Corinth. We're a small little house church, and to get a direct word from the Lord is incredible. We'll read the letter tonight in place of the sermon.
- **Apphia:** You're not preaching?
- **Philemon:** Not now, not with this in our hands. Can you have Tychicus bring the letter to me? I want to start copying it.
- **Apphia:** He's resting now in one of the guest rooms, but as soon as he gets up, I'll have him bring it in.

Then her countenance changed.

- *Philemon stood up:* What is it, dear?
- *She walked over to his desk and hesitated.* **Apphia:** Tychicus didn't come alone; he has a traveling companion: Onesimus.
- *Philemon's face turned red, and he fought back a rising temper as he thought about Onesimus.*
 - *Onesimus had been a former house-hold servant of Philemon.*
 - *He was lazy, had a problem with authority, and to cap it off, he had stolen a large sum of money and fled.*
 - *It had been over a year since Philemon had even heard of him.*
- **Philemon:** What's he doing back here, and with Tychicus?
- **Apphia:** Apparently, when he ran away from us, Onesimus went straight to Paul in Rome.

Philemon sat down again.

- **Philemon:** That's just like him – thinking about himself and not others. He sure put Paul in a compromising situation, harboring a run-away slave in his rented house. Ugh! Now I'm in a foul mood, and Archippus is arriving any minute to talk with me about the order of worship for tonight.

Philemon started rummaging through a drawer, pulling out papyrus papers and his pen and ink case.

- **Apphia:** That's not all, Philemon.
- *Philemon stopped and looked up.*
- **Apphia:** Tychicus has a third letter from Paul addressed specifically to you on behalf of Onesimus. Paul also wants it read to the assembly.

Philemon's mind raced.

- Now I'm really in a foul mood! I wonder what Onesimus has told Paul about me?! He's not only a thief; he's a liar! Now Paul's going to rebuke me publicly just like he did with that man in Corinth... and those two ladies in Philippi.
- And now when the church reads this, my laundry will be broadcast throughout the whole Roman Empire!
- **Apphia:** Calm down, Philemon. We all know Paul speaks by the authority of the Holy Spirit of Jesus. If Onesimus has slandered you in any way, wouldn't Paul discern it?

While these words were true, they did little to ease Philemon's thoughts. At this point, both Philemon and Apphia heard someone's steps in the hall. Both held their breath as they waited to see who was coming.

Philemon hoped it wasn't Onesimus as he was in no frame of mind to deal with that yet.

(pause)

Both exhaled in relief as their son, Archippus, bounded into the office clad in an olive colored toga and leather sandals. Archippus was about 26 years old and was the only child of Philemon and Apphia, and since Archippus was in charge of the worship, they were exceptionally proud of him. Philemon came around his desk to embrace his son as Apphia quietly excused herself. Archippus' enthusiasm communicated to Philemon that he knew nothing about Onesimus' return. Philemon thought it best, for the time being, not to tell him about the slave's return.

The two men sit down around a coffee table, and a servant girl comes in bringing a tray fruit, bread, and a carafe of wine.

- *Philemon thanks her and notices a nervousness in her. She obviously knows Onesimus is back and that there is now official tension in the house.*
- *The girl leaves, and Philemon and Archippus look up to heaven and give thanks for the provision.*

After the prayer, Archippus lays down a handful of unorganized papyrus papers, and jumps in.

- **Archippus:** Dad, I think tonight would be a great time to introduce that new song I've been telling you about. It's called "Fronete Christo."
- **Philemon:** The "mind of Christ," eh? Where'd you learn it?
- **Archippus:** Actually it's straight from Paul's letter to the Philippians, and the church, there, set it to music. It's from the middle of the letter, you know, the part that reads, "Your attitude should be..."

Philemon listened as Archippus read, but at the thought of Philipians, he thought about those two women rebuked by Paul: Euodia and Syntyche. Everyone in Christendom knew those names. Would he be next?

Philemon and Archippus talked about 30 more minutes, and then Archippus collected his papers to leave.

- **Archippus:** By the way, from what passage are you preaching tonight? It'd be great if you used Philipians – It'd go perfect with the new song.
- **Philemon:** Actually, my son, I won't be preaching tonight. I forgot to tell you, one of Paul's messengers arrived a few hours ago, and...
- **Archippus interrupted:** and he'll be preaching, then.
- **Philemon:** Sort of, but the truth is, he has two letters directly from Paul that he wants to read to the church.

Archippus beamed with excitement.

- Really? New revelation, for us! That's outstanding.
- Well, I'm off to buy communion supplies. I'll make sure the word gets out. With news like this, it'll be packed tonight!

Philemon didn't say anything. Archippus leaves and Philemon returns to his desk, sits down and buries his face in his hands. Now alone, his mind starts to race. Philemon starts to pray.

After about 20 minutes, Tychicus knocks on the office door and then enters. Philemon immediately remembers him, and the two embrace in a hug. It had been years since they had met, but the Spirit of God inside them both, united them as brothers.

The two men sit down where Archippus and Philemon had recently met. Before Philemon can speak, Tychicus says:

- **Tychicus:** Brother, I sense a huge anxiety, and I can guess why. You fear Paul's ears have been poisoned by the young man, Onesimus, and now Paul's going to make it public.
- *Philemon smiles an embarrassing smile and looks down as he strokes his gray beard.*
- **Philemon:** You hit it.

Tychicus puts his hand on Philemon's knee.

- **Tychicus:** Put your mind at ease, Philemon, it's a beautiful message... or, rather, I should say, it can be.
- **Philemon:** Can be?
- **Tychicus:** Here, why don't you read it for yourself.

Tychicus opened up a leather satchel and produced two scrolls.

- **Tychicus:** This larger one is for you all and for the church in Laodicea. This smaller one is for you.
- *Philemon takes the scroll from Tychicus and turns it around in his hands before breaking the seal to open it.*
- **Philemon looks at Tychicus:** And is it true that you'll be reading this one tonight too?
- **Tychicus:** Yes, those are my instructions.

Philemon finally breaks the red wax seal, leans back on the couch, and begins reading.

Verses 1-3

- *Philemon smiles as the tone of God's grace through Paul washes over him.*

Verses 4-7

- *Philemon pauses and looks up at Tychicus.*
- **Tychicus smiles:** It's true, brother. Reports about your love, your generosity, and your hospitality are circulating throughout the Empire.
- And indeed, Paul is praying for you as you share your faith with the church. He is so impressed, that you, a born and bred Roman, are preaching from the Jewish Pentateuch, psalms and prophets.
- After all, it's not like you were born into Judaism and know all the customs, not to mention the Hebrew language.
- **Philemon:** "That's why I use the Septuagint."

Both men laugh, and then Tychicus speaks again:

- **Tychicus:** Seriously, Philemon, I can't wait to tell you how God has used the funds you've sent to the churches to help advance the Gospel. But... that can wait, keep reading because you're getting to the meat of the letter.

Philemon continues.

Verses 8-21

Philemon stops, puts the letter down and rubs his temples and looks at Tychicus.

- **Philemon:** Tychicus, I thought you said I shouldn't worry. Now this letter will eventually be read in all the churches, and everyone will know about me.
 - I'll be like that man in Corinth who was involved in an incestuous relationship.
 - I'll be known like those quarreling women in Philippi.

Tychicus leans in.

- **Tychicus:** Philemon, #1, those are completely different contexts. There was real sin that needed to be dealt with.
- And #2, the church in Corinth is doing great. The young man, to whom you referred, has repented and was restored.
- And in Philippi, Luke, the beloved Physician, stepped in and helped Euodia and Synteche to work out their differences.
- And now you should see them. They're inseparable. They're like *Thelma and Luisa*.
- **Philemon inquired,** "Thelma and Luisa?"
- **Tychicus:** It's a new Greek play that came out last month in Rome. It's about 2 Roman wives who run away for a weekend of adventure.
- **Philemon:** So, what am I supposed to do?
 - That slave of mine stole a lot of money.
 - If I were to report this incident to the Roman authorities, he could face capital punishment.
- **Tychicus:** But didn't you read what Paul said? He's willing to pay it back.
- **Philemon:** And why would he do that? Onesimus is lazy; he has a problem with authority.... and, he's a clepto!

Philemon stands up and paces the room, venting all his frustrations.

- **Philemon:** Tychicus, I know his patterns, and I'm afraid he has manipulated Paul.
- And if Paul bails him out, it's only going to enable him more.
- Besides, why should Paul pay for Onesimus' crimes?
- Onesimus should pay me back by the sweat of his brow. Of course he could never be able to – not in 10 lifetimes.
- Do you know how much he stole from me?!

Tychicus looked back at Philemon with great compassion. He spoke slowly.

- **Tychicus:** No I don't know, Philemon, but I can assure you that Onesimus is a changed man.
- Do you think it was coincidence that he ran to Paul in Rome? Like the prostitutes and tax collectors that fled to Jesus, Onesimus, the clepto, fled to Paul.
- And yes, if you really want to know, Onesimus did slander you at first... but we didn't buy it.
- There were too many good reports about you.

Philemon just listened as Tychicus went on.

- Onesimus was speaking out of a self-centered and perverted mind, and we wouldn't let him keep going. He would go on and on, and we would always stop him.
- And slowly, as we served him, washed his feet, and listened to the real cries of his heart, he began to soften.

Philemon was listening, and his anxieties were lessening. Tychicus continued.

- I remember one night when the believers were assembled. Timothy was preaching, and man was he on fire.
- We all looked at Onesimus, who was drenched in his own tears.
- He stood up and confessed aloud his thievery, his slander about your good name, and so much more about his past that he had never told anyone before.
- Onesimus welcomed Christ that evening, and he became alive.
- The next morning, Onesimus was the first one up. He was in the kitchen cooking for Paul, Epaphras, Luke, Demas, Luke and me.
- That was about 5 months ago, and he hasn't stopped serving others since – and in the sincerest of joy.
- Indeed, I have to agree with Paul, Onesimus has become so very dear to all of us. In fact, there were some brothers who didn't want Paul to send him back to you at all.

Philemon, walks back to the couch and sits down, bent over his knees.

- **Philemon:** So, what should I do?
- **Tychicus:** Exactly what Paul so strongly requests. Forgive him in Christ; absorb your losses, and trust that God will repay you.

Philemon looks over his shoulder at Tychicus:

- **Philemon:** Do I really have a choice here?
- **Tychicus grins,** "You're asking me about free will? You need to pull out Paul's letter to the Romans and read it again."

Both men chuckle. It was good levity. Tychicus speaks again.

- Seriously, brother, God's providence is all over this. Did you catch when Paul said, "Perhaps the reason Onesimus was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good – no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother."?
- **Philemon:** Yeh, I caught it. It reminds me of Joseph's words to his brothers in Genesis: what you all meant for evil, God meant for good.
- Now you're preachin!, said **Tychicus.**

Philemon resumed his reading of the letter.

Verses 22-25

Philemon puts the scroll down on the table and leans back.

- **Philemon:** So, he's really coming soon?
- **Tychicus:** Looks like it, he's been in house arrest too long, and no one from Jerusalem has shown up for his trials. The Romans are getting bored of this, and it's only a matter of time before his charges are dropped.

Tychicus stands up and stretches. He gathers up the scrolls and places them back into his satchel.

- **Tychicus:** Well, Philemon, I think I'll take some time to pray before the service tonight.

Tychicus walks to the door.

- **Tychicus:** You know, Philemon, when Paul comes, he's going to want to see you and Onesimus reconciled.
- "I know," responds **Philemon,** "I know."

Tychicus exits and Philemon drops to his knees to pray. He knows what the Spirit is asking him to do, but it seems impossible. Alone with his thoughts again, the spiritual warfare heightens. He prays through the dinner hour, and finally Apphia comes to check on him and to walk with him downstairs where people are already starting to gather.

As Philemon and his wife walked into the main living room, Philemon looked around to see familiar faces: Greeks, Romans, slaves, Jews, men, women, old and young. Word had indeed spread, and people were coming in by the droves.

- **Philemon:** We need to get more chairs!
- **Apphia** stopped him, "It's already taken care of. Onesimus has been working all afternoon, and without taking a break."

Philemon looked at his wife in total shock.

- Really, not a single break?! Maybe he is a changed man after all.

Philemon and Apphia made their way to the front, and Archippus got everyone's attention to start the worship. The house was packed, and people still kept flowing in. Philemon looked around at all the guests as they were uniting their voices in song.

He glanced over and saw Onesimus. Onesimus was about 6 feet tall, had jet black hair, and his eyes were closed in worship. Philemon could hear him singing above the crowd. He never knew it before, but the man could sing!

As Philemon watched Onesimus, the slave opened his eyes and met Philemon's glance. Onesimus' eyes glistened with tears which seemed to say, "I'm so sorry, master. Please forgive me."

Philemon quickly looked away, and the inner turmoil resumed again. Philemon shut his eyes and prayed in his heart.

- God, how can I be reconciled with this man?
- *The gentle whisper of the Holy Spirit impressed on his heart: forgive.*
- Jesus, what if he's playing all of us?!
- *HS again: forgive him.*
- But what if it's all an act? What if he does it again?
- *HS: love him, Philemon. Love him.*
- He hurt me, Lord, he hurt my estate. He stole from me – which is just as if he stole from you. He needs to be punished! He needs to pay it back!

Philemon's anger was growing. Apphia sensed his inner struggle and put her hand on his arm to comfort him.

Philemon opened his eyes and heard Tychicus' voice reading Paul's letter to the Colossian church. How long had he been praying? As he tuned into the message, Philemon was struck with these words.

Colossians 3:5-17

Philemon repeated the words to himself: "Forgive as the Lord forgave you."

The message sank in, and Philemon, giving up the struggle, leaned over his knees and wept.

After Tychicus read the Scroll to the Colossian church, he unrolled the letter to Philemon and read it aloud.

- *Everyone began to look at Philemon and then at Onesimus.*
- *As they listened to the letter, mouths dropped open.*
- *Visitors who were there had no clue what was going on, but they respected the solemnity of the scene.*

After the letter was read, Tychicus sat down.

Philemon stood up and walked to the front. You could have heard a pin drop.

Philemon looked around at everyone, took a deep breath, and then spoke:

- **Philemon:** Onesimus, my son, come here.

Onesimus stood up and walked up to his master, he was about to kneel in submission, but Philemon caught him on the descent and wrapped his arms around the penitent young man. Both men held an embrace and wept together.

Onesimus kept saying, "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

Philemon kept saying, "You're forgiven, my son, you're forgiven."

This went on for several minutes, and everyone was weeping at this point.

Finally, Philemon released Onesimus from his embrace and addressed the congregation.

- **Philemon:** Before we observe the Lord's Supper, I have a message.
- In all honesty I wasn't going to preach when I heard the news of Paul's letters.
- But my heart is bursting, and I must speak what is now flowing from me.
- Earlier today as I read Paul's personal letter to me, I must confess that it angered me.
- I asked a lot of questions that, up until now, I had no answers.
 - Why would the Apostle Paul give refuge to a thief and runaway slave?
 - Why would he offer to pay for Onesimus' crimes out of his own treasury?
 - Why would Paul stand in the gap for such a sinner?
 - Why?
 - Because he can't do otherwise.
 - I've come to see: Paul doesn't handle the message of the gospel, rather, the message of the gospel handles him.
 - Paul, obeying his own message to our brothers in Corinth, has become a minister of reconciliation.
 - Paul lives like his Savior.
 - It's so obvious to me now:
 - Paul, loving a thief, is willing to pay the price out of his own riches in order to restore him to his rightful master.
 - Does not Christ do that for us on a cosmic level?!

A few "amens" echo through the crowd. Philemon looks at Tychicus, who is beaming.

- Jesus loved us so much, though we are all thieves – robbers of his glory. He loved us so much that he paid for our heinous crimes out of his treasury of righteousness. Of his own blood, he paid our debts in order that we might be reconciled with our true master and Father.
- **Jesus stood in the gap for us.**
- We are all former slaves of the evil one, but now, through Christ, we are slaves of righteousness, serving the Lord and each other.
- My sermon? I have three simple points.
 1. Maybe you're here tonight and you can relate to Onesimus: You owe someone a big apology. Maybe you have robbed someone:
 - Stolen someone's good reputation through gossip or slander.
 - Or perhaps you've stolen someone's dignity and honor through manipulation or anger.
 - Go, and say you're sorry. You can't repay it back.
 - The Gospel message says, go, and be reconciled with your brother or sister.
 2. Maybe you're here tonight and you can relate to me, Philemon: Someone else has hurt you deeply, and you don't want to let it go.
 - Instead of forgiving, you want this person to pay.
 - You want to hold onto bitterness and hate.
 - Let it go and be reconciled to your neighbor. Receive their apology and grant them forgiveness.
 - The Gospel message says, forgive, just as in Christ God forgave you.
 3. Finally, maybe you're here tonight, and you can relate to Paul. Perhaps God has placed you in a position to stand in the gap for someone else.
 - He's called you to be a peace-maker.
 - He's calling you to absorb the pain of conflict and see that two children of God be reconciled.
 - Go in the strength of the Savior; stand in the gap for your fellow brothers.

Philemon bows in prayer and the church fellowships together around the Communion Table.

After Communion, Archippus stands up and leads the church in Philippians 2.