

**4 I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, 5 because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. 6 I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ.**

Jon stands on the banks of the North Platte River. It's not long after heavy rainfall, and the river is swollen from the recent deluge. Crossing his covered wagon with his family en route to Oregon will require crossing this dangerous stream to continue on their way. But with the swiftness of the stream to guarantee the wagon from tipping, cargo has to be dumped beforehand. Heaviest and least necessary first. Jonathan stares at his grandfather's clock and wonders how he can possibly save it. But holding that piece is going to mean something else has to go, something like flour for the family, spare parts, or even medicine. He stands and thinks of how he can possibly hold onto something that is so valuable to him personally. Because something has to go, something has to be left behind. In our text for today, from Philemon, Paul describes a similar situation to this idea of leaving something behind.

And as we look at our text, it's a tiny one. It's one of the smallest books in the entire Bible of one, one chapter with just 25 verses. And it only shows up in the selected readings for the church year, once every three years. So I think it's essential for us to look into the background of this incredible piece of God's Word to understand its impact on our lives as Christians.

Now Philemon is a letter written by Paul. At a time in which he was imprisoned somewhere. And it's written to, you guessed it, a man named Philemon.

Now Philemon was a Christian whom God had brought to faith through the ministry of Paul while he was in the city of Colossae. And we see that God had worked powerfully on his heart: Because in this letter, we discover that the church meets in his own home. And Philemon must have been wealthy enough that he owned a slave, a man named Onesimus.

Now here's the situation, Onesimus didn't like being a slave, while Roman slavery was of a completely different character than the slavery that we as Americans are familiar with in the American South; it was still less than an

ideal situation for someone to be living in. So Onesimus decided to take things into his own hands, and he ran away.

How did God turn and shape how history turned out? Onesimus landed with Paul. And through God's word in the work of the ministry of Paul, Onesimus also became a Christian.

And here is where we see the difficulty of the situation. Is that at this moment, all three people have something that is there something that they are somewhat entitled to buy in their present condition. Onesimus made it out. He was free from the servitude of a master where he could go and do things as he pleased. Paul has found somebody in Onesimus who is extremely useful to him. A helper whom he certainly could gain some assistance from while he was in prison. Philemon, if his slave is returned, holds all the power over this man's destiny. The typical punishment for eight slaves who run away and are captured is a brand on the forehead marking them as a troublesome slave who is prone to disobey and run away. But it would be perfectly within Philemon's rights to have Onesimus killed if he was ever to return.

And if you would look at all of this that is going on, humanly speaking, you find that there really isn't a great solution because somebody is going to lose. Onesimus isn't going to want to go back because he is going to have to give up his newfound freedom to go back to being a slave. Paul wouldn't want him to leave because then he's going to lose a helper that he desperately wants. If Onesimus doesn't go back, then Philemon is out of workers, and if he does, he's the one with the troublemaker slave.

But in Paul's letter to Philemon, there is one thing that shines through. It is the unity and the selflessness that comes from living under the Savior Jesus Christ. It's the solution that comes from understanding what it is that unites believers; it's the grace and salvation that is given to us by our Savior that leads Christians to act in very different manners than the rest of the world.

And the way that Paul demonstrates, this love can be summarized in leaving things behind. Onesimus, even though free, is going to leave his freedom behind. He is going to willingly go back to his master.

Paul is going to leave his convenience behind: **“I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. 13 I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel.”** he is going let someone who is very useful to him go back to his rightful master, and not only that, he will cover the costs of any monetary damages that Onesimus might have caused.

Philemon is going to leave his reputation and his right to punish behind: **“Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever—16 no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother.”** He is going to receive this man back into his house as a brother. He is going to treat him not as a criminal, not as a slave, but as a brother.

And in this short letter, three different people, from 3 different walks of life, in 3 varying situations, all give an example of Christian living. Of showing their unity in one Baptism, showing their brotherhood in the blood of Christ, demonstrating to the world and all who could see an appreciation for what they knew Christ had done for each of them. And what Christ did for them was far more potent than anything they were holding on to.

This lesson pairs so well with the Gospel lesson for this week, as Jesus speaks of bearing our crosses and encourages us all to examine ourselves and our own lives and see where it is that we can show our Christian love. Not sacrificing for the sake of itself, but for the love of our Savior and for the love and benefit of others. It's not something that is easy. It's not something

And so, for us as Christians, from this incredible story of God's love reflected out to others, what is it that God calls for you to leave behind? Each of the three men in this account left something behind in order to demonstrate the love of Christ to their brothers in Christ whether it was comfortability, their legal rights, even their freedom.

It will be different for each and every one of us here today, just as it was different for each of these men. Is it perhaps your right to be angry about a situation, for a grudge against someone who wronged you, to money owed, or retribution. Is it your comfortability? Letting something or someone go even though it would be better off for you. Is it your own freedom? Your ability to do what you want when you want?

I think if we think about it, we all can think of something that we have, a situation that exists, a right that we possess, that we can lay aside. Something that can reflect the love that Jesus had for us to our sisters or brothers whom God did the same for.

The river continues to move swiftly, Jonathan, with his family standing behind, reaches for the old clock, and places it gently on the bank. He will be ok without it. His family will be better off if it gets left behind. He loves his family enough to let this piece down that is so important to him, for the good of children. This fictional example, can illustrate what it is that Paul encourages us to do. In love for our Savior, in love for those around us, we can leave those things behind. We can leave our grudges, our rights, yes even our freedom behind, in reflection of the love God has shown to us.