

*Gal 3:28*<sup>28</sup>There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Freedom from slavery, whether to a human master or to sin can only come from the hearts of men and women inspired by Christ.

## CONCLUSION

Two people look at each other, rather warily and perhaps even suspiciously. One says *What's really important in my life is football*. The other replies, *No way, baseball is my game*. One says he is a vegetarian, the other declares that a meal without meat is no meal. One says, *For a night out I go to a pop concert*. The other only ever listens to classical music. Then one says, *I listen to the Bible on my iPod*. The other tells him that he reads his Bible every morning. One says how he has had some wonderful answers to his prayers. The other tells how when he prays things happen. So they realize that though they are different they can accept each other because they both love Christ and want to serve him.

Sweetly may we all agree,  
Touched with softest sympathy,  
There is neither bond nor free,  
Great nor servile, Lord, in Thee.  
Love, like death, hath all destroyed,  
Rendered all distinctions void;  
Names and sects and parties fall;  
Thou, O Christ, art all in all! (*C Wesley*)

## ILLUSTRATED LETTERS

### 2. FREED TO SERVE

#### Philemon

Illustrated letters: Paul's letter illustrates how God lives in the lives of his people. God assures us:

*2 Cor 12:9*<sup>9</sup>...My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.

Each person in the story behind this letter needed to know that. They discovered that when God lives with his people, they forgive and accept each other

#### THE RECIPIENT OF THE LETTER – PHILEMON

Philemon was a wealthy Christian who lived in Colossae – about 100 miles from Ephesus. Paul ministered in Ephesus for three years and it was probably at this time that Philemon heard the Gospel and was saved. He is married to Apphia and their household – family, servants, slaves – formed the nucleus of the church that met in their house. The way Paul writes to him shows that Philemon needed careful handling. His slave, Onesimus, had run away and maybe had stolen from Philemon. Even if he had not actually stolen money, by running away he was depriving Philemon of his services and that was considered theft. Philemon would know his rights as a master and he seems to have been one to insist on them. He could also be loving and kind, especially towards the other members of the church. Included in the greeting, Paul mentions Archippus, **our fellow soldier**. The same word Paul used for Epaphroditus last week; one who fights alongside; Paul's equal in the work of the gospel. Archippus is the pastor of the church that meets in Philemon's house. Knowing that Philemon can be difficult Paul includes the pastor, perhaps to be a calming influence on Philemon if needs be. Philemon is a man who does his duty, sees in black and white, but can be appealed to in love. Philemon knows God and knows what to do. Good works are the *result* of knowing God, not the means. This is Christian maturity. We are to love God with the whole of our being and love our neighbor: our fellow men and women. Especially within the church.

Christianity is not just for lame dogs. Are you a tough guy? You can still be a Christian. The tough also need to experience the love of Christ and show love.

*John Newton went to sea when he was eleven. When he was eighteen he deserted, was re-caught, tied to a grating and flogged. Later, he was such*

*trouble to the crew of the ship he was on, they left in West Africa where he was abused by a slave owner and his wife. Newton described himself as "once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves." Yet this was the man who, one day would write:*

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,  
that saved a wretch like me.*

Hard-headed business men, politicians, soldiers, marines and other men and women in uniform, the tough guys of the world also know the love of Christ and are among his most devoted servants.

### **THE SUBJECT OF THE LETTER – ONESIMUS**

Whatever it was that had happened, Onesimus runs away and gets to Rome. There, in the most populous city in the Empire, living as a fugitive, he hoped to escape detection. Maybe he had heard Paul's name mentioned in Philemon's household and felt Paul would be the one to ask for help. The runaway came into contact with Paul and became a Christian. Onesimus grew in the faith and became useful to the apostle. As a prisoner, Paul's activities were restricted, but now he had Onesimus to help along with his other colleagues and friends such as Timothy and Tychicus. Eventually, these three: Timothy, Tychicus and Onesimus would deliver the letter to the church at Colossae and the letter to Philemon. The power of the gospel is that lives are changed and transformed. Onesimus was once useless even as a slave. Since becoming a Christian, the change in him is so marked that he is now useful. Paul can vouch for this. He has become a delight to have around. Paul calls him, **my own heart**, meaning Onesimus has become very dear to him. But he cannot stay in Rome. The fact that he is a slave and a runaway cannot be ignored. He must go back to Philemon.

*The pastor saw a former burglar kneeling at the Communion Rail beside a High Court judge who had sent him to prison where he had served seven years. After his release the burglar had been converted and become a Christian worker. After the service, the judge was walking home with the pastor and said to him, "Did you notice who was kneeling beside me at the Communion rail this morning?" The pastor replied, "Yes." Then the judge said, "What a miracle of grace." Thinking of the former burglar, the pastor agreed. But the judge said, "I was not referring to him. I was thinking of myself" It did not cost that burglar much to get converted when he came out of jail. He had nothing but a history of crime behind him, and when he saw Jesus as his Savior he knew there was salvation and hope and joy for him. And he knew how much he needed that help. But look at me. I was taught from earliest infancy to live as a gentleman; that my word was to be my bond; that I was to say my prayers, go to church, take Communion and so on. I went through Oxford, took my degrees, was called to the bar and*

*eventually became a judge. Pastor, nothing but the grace of God could have caused me to admit that I was a sinner on a level with that burglar. It took much more grace to forgive me for all my pride and self-deception, to get me to admit that I was no better in the eyes of God than that convict that I had sent to prison."*

What will it cost an Islamic terrorist who believes he is favored by Allah to admit he is a sinner and needs the grace of God that can be found only in Christ?

### **THE WRITER OF THE LETTER – PAUL**

Paul knew what it was to change. The Pharisee, expert in the Law of Moses, persecutor of the followers of Jesus, changed. He was sending a changed Onesimus back to Philemon. But there also needed to be a transformed relationship. Paul could have told Philemon to do his duty as a Christian and receive Onesimus back. Paul prefers to appeal to Philemon on the basis of love, rather than duty. Paul writes not with apostolic authority, but as one who considers himself a slave of Christ. Paul has a good relationship with Philemon. He knows he can be kind and generous, so he asks him to show his love towards one who has become very dear to him. Onesimus was unreliable and unfaithful. *But he has changed.* He will now live up to his name which means *useful*. Paul would have loved to keep Onesimus with him because he had become so useful. That cannot be. It would have been illegal and a breach of fellowship between Philemon and himself. More importantly, had Paul kept Onesimus with him he might have been going against God's purposes.

*Philem 1:15* <sup>15</sup>Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever,

Onesimus was Philemon's slave. He still is. Paul asks Philemon to take him back not as a slave, but as a brother. Paul is not asking Philemon to receive Onesimus as a freed man, nor give him his freedom. Let the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus be the same as that between Paul and Philemon. **Welcome him as you would welcome me.** This is the transformed relationship there needs to be. That is not the end. Whatever his running away has cost you, whether by theft or service, Paul says, *Put it on my bill!*

Not in this letter, nor anywhere else in NT is there a call for the abolition of slavery. To have done so would have been suicidal for the Early Church. What we do find is a call for transformed relationships motivated by love that defies the ingrained status distinctions of the surrounding culture.