



September 4th

THE NEW SHOFAR

**May I pray that our faith together will help
you know all the good things you have**

Called to forgive as Christ gave his life that we might be forgiven

The key word for our lesson today is **forgiveness**. The question to ask about our first reading is: *How do I really forgive someone I believe has wronged me?* Some of Paul's friends needed to know the answer to that question. This must have been an ongoing challenge among Church members, so much so they had brought this difficult question to him for an answer. However, it is as significant a question today as it was back then.

Think about a time when someone wronged you. How long did you stay wounded? What did it take (or would it take) to bring about reconciliation? How hard was it to forgive that person?

Here is the scene. Paul is in chains in a Roman prison and across the cell from where he is sitting is a young man with the name Onesimus. He was a slave and as he had stolen money from his master he took to the road as an escapee, ending up in Rome. Fortuitously (by divine Grace) he ended up there in the same cell, in chains alongside the Apostle Paul.

What actions did Paul advise Onesimus to follow? ***Be reconciled*** with Philemon his master. Some modern commentators lament the fact that Paul did not encourage Philemon to give his wayward slave freedom, but Paul was encouraging a far greater and more liberating pathway for both men: Philemon reconciled with Onesimus and Onesimus with Philemon.

Any runaway slave could be executed, a reality making Onesimus vulnerable. And so, in the background to our story is the important encouragement: repent and turn to God seeking divine forgiveness. Thus, living in Christ, nothing can separate him from the love of God, certainly not the execution cloud over him.

Sometimes pride comes in the way of reconciliation

There is more. Onesimus's master was also a Christian. He and Onesimus were brothers in Christ Jesus, fellow sons of the One True God. This has now added a significant challenge to both. ***Could Onesimus*** muster the courage to risk death by returning to his master seeking mercy? ***Could Philemon*** be humble enough to forgo passing judgment on this sinner, accept his repentance and embrace him? This would have been a tremendous challenge to both.

What Paul speaks to them about is the way Christ *renews* all hearts. Paul himself knows just how this feels, for it was Christ who had renewed his heart and brought him into the Church, gifting him with the grace of an Apostle. Grace too was the gift poured out into the heart of Onesimus when he was baptised.

Now that grace is being renewed through the gracious love God alone can give. Herein we have one of the great challenges of the Kingdom. Onesimus who has been transformed by grace now becomes a *grace giver* to others.

- Paul tells us just how Philemon had been graced by God and had then *refreshed the hearts of the saints* (vs. 7).
- In verses 8-11 he speaks to Philemon acknowledging him as a man who works for the Gospel. He has a house church where fellow Christians would meet for worship. He is known to be faithful disciple of Jesus and made it his responsibility to reach out to all those in need in his home town of Colossae.
- He was also known as a hope-giver, one who goes out of his way to encourage his brothers and sisters in those difficult times.
- All of this is important because Paul does not suggest to Philemon that he set Onesimus free. What he does suggest is that in making his decision he keep in mind the Gospel command to love as Jesus loved. Even in their master slave relationship, love must be what determines how they love and act.

Paul asks Philemon (verses 17-22) to receive Onesimus back as a brother in Christ. He even offers to pay back the money the slave had stolen. He was going to take on the debt burden so that Onesimus may be freed from the burden of his sin. It is brilliant! Paul is repeating the example of Jesus, an innocent man who died on the cross that we may be free. Now Paul is seeking to heal the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus. Is that not what Christ did for us, and at the same time offering us an example we are to follow?

Christ calls us to be renewers of the hearts of others

Paul presents Christ as the *renewer of hearts*, and in verse 20 he asks Philemon to put a new heart in him (Paul), in Christ. In Christ we all have the grace, working alongside of Christ, to renew the hearts of others. We need to hear that again: *we all have the grace, working alongside of Christ, to renew the hearts of others*. In other words, to do to others the most wonderful things God has done to us in his Son. We are invited to share in the ministry of hearts and souls, particularly the heart of another who has harmed us. What a power! What a gift! What an awesome responsibility! But we also have the freedom to increase the burden already crushing the heart of another, to “execute” them as Philemon had the legal right to have Onesimus put to death.

Only God can turn
a MESS into a
message, a TEST into a
testimony, a TRIAL into
a triumph, a VICTIM
into a victory.

This text box is a wonderful interpretation of verse six of the letter. There was no way the Roman system could have reached a solution to this problem apart from executing Onesimus on the spot. If, however, we bring our “messes” to the throne of God, the Almighty leads us in the way we need to walk. He is the transformer of lives, of situations in which we find ourselves, the true Father of reconciliation, the Lord of life and freedom.