Paul’s Shepherd Heart

Philemon 1:1-25

Key Verse: 1:17, “So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.”

Philemon is the Apostle Paul’s personal letter to Philemon, who was a leader in the Colossian church. In this letter Paul asked Philemon to forgive Onesimus, who was Philemon’s runaway slave, but was converted to Christianity. In his letter Paul shows his humility in dealing with co-workers, his shepherd heart for one lost soul, and Christ’s saving love.

Let us read 8-11. “***Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul-an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus- that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful to you and to me***.” Paul’s special request was his appeal for the clemency of Onesimus, who was Philemon’s runaway slave. We don’t know how and why Onesimus ran away from Philemon’s house. His name ‘Onesimus’ means ‘useful.’ He might have run away to live a useful life as a free man, or he might have been tempted to live in Rome. So, he stole money from Philemon and ran away to Rome, where it was easier to hide himself. But he met Paul in prison at Rome and was converted to Christianity through Paul’s witness. He became a new creation in Christ and the personal aide of Paul, who was in chains.

Now Paul wanted to send Onesimus back to Philemon. Paul’s appeal for Onesimus was that Philemon might forgive Onesimus and accept him as a brother in Christ. Here we learn Paul’s humility in appealing to Philemon. At that time Paul was a great Apostle. He had authority as an Apostle and as a personal shepherd of Philemon. He could have been bold and ordered Philemon to do what he ought to do. But Paul did not use his authority to satisfy his request. He humbly appealed to Philemon on the basis of love. Humility is the character of Christ Jesus. Jesus said, “…learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart…” (Mt 11:29) Jesus helped the Samaritan woman with humility. Even though he is the holy Son of God and she was a sinful woman, Jesus served her with great patience and humility. Genuine love and humility opened her hardened heart. In the past, Paul was a proud and self-righteous man. He was a persecutor and murderer. But Jesus visited him first, forgave him, and called him to be an apostle. Paul practiced Jesus’ humility in his appeal for Onesimus. There is no one whose heart is not opened by those who practice Christ’s humility.

How did Paul regard Onesimus? He called Onesimus ‘my son’ (10), ‘my very heart’ (12), ‘very dear to me.’ (16) Paul was old enough to become his father. Onesimus might have grown without a father. Here, Paul meant that he became a spiritual father to Onesimus. Paul loved Onesimus as his own son. Paul was a Jewish rabbi and Onesimus a gentile criminal. How did Paul accept Onesimus as his son? Here we learn that being a shepherd is being a father who loves, cares, provides, protects, and guides.

Paul had compassion on Onesimus at his first glance. As a young man Onesimus was frustrated, and filled with anger, resentment, and fear. He did not open his mouth and kept quiet for several days since he moved into the prison cell. Paul gave him his own food, but Onesimus didn’t pay any attention. Paul remembered the days of his own youth, which were filled with anger and hatred against Christians. He hated Christians who followed Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, the crucified. Paul hated their smiles on their faces in the midst of persecution. He thought that Christians are parasites who should be exterminated from the earth. So he arrested many Christians and put them into prison. He was there when St. Stephen was martyred and gave the mob his approval over his death. Paul was zealous, but ignorant. He thought that he was doing God’s work, but he was not happy. He had no peace in his mind. The more he persecuted Christians, the more he was frustrated with hatred.

Paul saw his old self in Onesimus. ‘Onesimus’ means useful. Since he came to realize the meaning of his name, Onesimus wanted to live a useful and meaningful life. But, he was frustrated because he was a slave. He needed freedom and equal opportunity to live his life more useful than a slave. He was well aware of the price of his escape. He could be stoned to death or even crucified according to the Roman law. Nevertheless, his desire for freedom and new life couldn’t stop him. He stole some money from Philemon and ran away to Rome, where it was easier to hide himself. The fugitive life in Rome was not as easy as he expected. Every day he hid himself behind crowds and had no peace in his heart. Every night he suffered from nightmares of being chased by slave police. Fear, anger, and frustration occupied his heart. When he was sent into the prison where Paul was, he almost gave up his life.

Paul waited until Onesimus appreciated his favor. This reminds of Jesus who waited on a Samaritan woman until she opened her heart and responded to Jesus’ questions. Shepherd life requires great patience. Each meal time Paul gave a half portion of his food to Onesimus. Onesimus began to say thank you to Paul and asked why he gave favor to him. Onesimus was curious why this Jewish rabbi paid attention to a gentile criminal like him and showed favor to him. While they were eating, Paul shared his life-testimony. Paul told him how terrible a sinner he used to be before God and how Jesus Christ forgave him and changed his life. Paul said, “I am the worst sinner in the whole world. Even though you (Onesimus) stole money and ran away from Philemon, I sinned against God and ran away from God’s presence. I was zealous, but ignorant. I was self-righteous, but actually sinned against God. But, Jesus loved me and died for my sins. He rose again on the third day and appeared to me as a light. He didn’t condemn me, but forgave me and called me to be his disciple. I was destined to die due to my sin, but Christ died in my place and gave me a new life. Only by his grace, I am what I am and I enjoy true freedom in Christ.”

Onesimus must have been encouraged by Paul’s testimony that Paul had been a worse sinner than himself. Onesimus had hope and desire to be forgiven and to live a new life in Jesus like Paul. But he could not believe in Jesus because he did not know who Jesus is. He didn’t understand why the Son of God must die on the cross like a criminal. He could not accept that following Christ is the way of cross. So he decided to delay believing in Jesus. Every day Paul prayed for him and taught him the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul must have studied Romans with Onesimus. Paul taught him that we are all sinners but become righteous through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul taught Onesimus that he was not a slave to sin anymore and could become a child of God through Jesus Christ. Paul said that true freedom is freedom from sin and curse, which comes through Jesus Christ. Paul encouraged him saying that we all become one in Christ as children of God, whether he is Jew or gentile, free or slave. (Gal 3:28)

Through daily one to one Bible study the Holy Spirit began to work in Onesimus’ heart. The word of God began to work in his heart. As Jesus’ patient Bible study with the Samaritan woman opened her spiritual eyes little by little, so Paul’s Bible study with Onesimus opened his heart little by little. One day Onesimus repented all his sins with tears and confessed that Jesus is Christ and Lord. Then, he was baptized by Paul in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. While he was being baptized, the Holy Sprit came down upon him. Onesimus was converted. He became a new creation in Christ that day. It was the day of salvation and the day of liberation. Paul had waited for this day. His prayers, tears, and all labors for Onesimus were not in vain. All his efforts for this one lost soul finally bore fruit, the fruit of life, the fruit of salvation.

Since Onesimus was converted, he lived a new life in Christ. He became a good co-worker of Paul. He became Paul’s personal aide, who was in chains. We don’t know how and when Onesimus was freed from jail, but their relationship continued. Onesimus was Paul’s son and Paul was his father. Onesimus was Paul’s very heart. Generally children are the very heart of their parents, especially to their mother. This is because the mother went through excruciating pains of childbirth. Paul experienced birth pains until Christ was formed in Onesimus. (Gal 4:19) Here we learn that a shepherd goes through birth pains until Christ is formed in a sheep’s heart. New life does not come instantly, but gradually with a process of conceiving, forming, growing, and delivering. Paul’s shepherding Onesimus needed a long process of conversation and comprehension.

Paul’s shepherd life did not end with Onesimus’ conversion. Paul thought about Onesimus’ future. Paul was concerned about Onesimus’ social position, especially about his relationship with Philemon, his former master. Onesimus was a free man in Christ, but not in Philemon’s house. Socially, he was still a runaway slave. Paul sensed the necessity of reconciliation between Onesimus and Philemon. But it was not easy for Paul to send Onesimus back to Philemon because he had become like a son to Paul. He really needed Onesimus’ help for his ministry. But he decided to send Onesimus back to Philemon. Paul denied himself and opened the way for Onesimus. Here we learn that a good shepherd is not self-centered, but Christ-centered and sheep-centered. Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” (Jn 10:11)

Paul knew that it was not easy for Philemon to accept his appeal for Onesimus. This was because it was against the Roman law and custom. According to the Roman law, a captured runaway slave should be punished. Paul understood this well. So he earnestly and humbly appealed to Philemon for Onesimus. Look at verses 14-16. “***But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever- no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord***.” Paul helped Philemon spiritually to see Onesimus’ case from God’s point of view. From a human point of view Onesimus was a runaway slave who damaged his property, hurt his owner and ran away. But Paul asked Philemon to see Onesimus not as his runaway slave, but as a dear brother in Christ. Joseph in the Old Testament saw his brothers’ betrayal as God’s divine providence for redemption, to save many lives. Similarly, Paul asked Philemon to see Onesimus’ behavior as God’s divine purpose for Onesimus’ conversion.

Paul helped Philemon to see Onesimus’ case from God’s point of view. But he was not confident of his advice. So Paul helped Philemon to remember God’s grace so that he might forgive Onesimus by God’s grace and accept him as a brother in Jesus. Look at verses 17-20. “***So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back- not to mention that you owe me your very self. I do wish, brother, that I may have 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 ask***.” Paul asked Philemon to welcome Onesimus as he welcomed Paul himself. Paul also promised to repay all the debts of Onesimus in his place. Paul helped Philemon to remember that he owed Paul, which meant that Philemon had been converted through Paul’s witness.

Paul knew that he was saved only by God’s grace. He knew that he did not even deserve to be called an apostle because he had persecuted the church of God. He realized that he was saved only by God’s grace. (1 Co 15:9,10) He became a shepherd only by God’s grace. Paul helped Philemon to remember this grace. Philemon did not deserve to become a child of God because he was an ignorant gentile. But God loved him, saved him, and made him a child of God. This is only God’s grace and Christ’s forgiving love. Paul helped Philemon to remember that he owed Jesus more than Onesimus owed him. Martin Luther said that we are all like Onesimus in one way or another, as those who sinned against God and ran away from his presence. The penalty of sin is death and we had to pay the penalty of sin. But God so loved us and sent his Son Jesus and let him die for us on the cross, and let Jesus pay the price for our sins. So, Paul owed Jesus, Philemon owed Jesus, and we all owe Jesus. We are justified and become righteous only by God’s grace and through faith in Jesus.

I remember that I was saved and became a missionary and shepherd only by God’s grace. So, I have nothing to boast about in myself, but am only full of weakness and sin. At birth I was not qualified to become a shepherd. I was born in a Buddhist city, the son of atheist parents. From childhood, I was exposed to sexual immorality by touching a relative’s body. I was talented in drawing, but was wandering without any life direction. When I was in middle school, I experienced a certain meaninglessness of life after I read a book titled “A stranger” written by Albert Camus. Meaninglessness and emptiness of life began to affect my teenage days. After graduating from high school I was seeking direction for my life. I worked at LG company, but I knew that life was not just making money, eating, and dating, but doing something meaningful and valuable. So, I resigned and studied hard and entered the most prestigious art college in Korea. I thought that being an artist was the most meaningful life because I was deeply moved by the story of Paul Gaugin, the Impressionist painter, who quit his job and moved to an island and gave his life to artwork. At the college I worked hard day and night until I became a top student. Still, I was not satisfied and my heart was empty. I drank almost every night and smoked two packs of cigarettes a day. I soothed my sorrow by singing sentimental songs of the Beatles and filled my emptiness with dating several girls. Finally I lost my health because of too much drinking and smoking. I had to quit school and went down to my hometown for medical treatment. I thought my life is over. I was gripped with fear of death and eternal punishment in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. I was not sure of my salvation even though I went to church with my friends and worked as a young deacon.

It was spring 1985. It was the season of flowers and new life. Butterflies and bees were searching for honey under the bright spring light. But my heart was in deep darkness of a dungeon with fear of death and meaninglessness of life. In the darkest period of my life, heavenly sunlight came down on me with the good news of Jesus Christ. I was invited to UBF summer Bible conference by my ex-girl friend, and over there I met Jesus Christ. Jesus came to me as a bright light, the light of hope and the light of salvation. Based on Mark 8:29 I confessed that Jesus is Christ and Lord. Jesus gave me life direction as a campus shepherd through John 21:15. Jesus clearly taught me that my life came from God and is going back to him. Jesus told me that feeding Jesus’ sheep is the most meaningful, beautiful, valuable life in the world. Right after my conversion I went back to school and began to preach the good news. My classmates didn’t trust me because I was a ringleader for all drinking parties. They remembered who I was and what I had done a year ago. Nevertheless, Jesus gave me such unutterable joy when I preached the gospel, even though I was just a new convert. I knew that I was saved only by God’s grace. I have nothing to boast about but my sinfulness and weakness. But God loved me and saved me and used me as his servant. I know that only by God’s grace I am what I am.

God gave me a privilege to pioneer my art college with P. Abraham Kim for five years and sent me to Los Angeles as a missionary. In fact this was also only by God’s grace because at that time I was accused by my ex-girlfriend. I was a runaway shepherd. For another five years God helped me to live a missionary life in Los Angeles and sent my family to Chicago in 1994 right after the Northridge earthquake. I cannot skip my missionary life under my spiritual mentor the late Dr. Samuel Lee. I never expected to work with him face to face for the last 10 years before he went to heaven. I saw him the first time in 1985 when he delivered the message for world mission report in Seoul Korea. I was very impressed by his size and his spirit when he delivered the message and suggested the prayer topic for pioneering Russia. When my family moved from LA to Chicago and visited his office, he welcomed me with a big hug and said, “A great servant of God came.” I didn’t know what this meant. I asked him to give some necessary training because I came to America without finishing missionary training program. Dr. Lee said, “No one gives training to anyone. Each person receives necessary training from God.” God’s training started from the next day with basic boot camp training. Before coming to Chicago, I did not know how to nail properly with a hammer. My tool was a paint brush and my skill was drawing and painting. God loved me and gave me all necessary trainings through his servant Dr. Lee. I remember how much he was concerned about my childlessness. I thought that my childlessness was caused by my previous sinful life. But, God’s servant Dr. Lee didn’t think so. He thought my problem was laziness. In fact, I was lazy. My laziness made me useless. I started many art works, but only a few were completed. God’s servant knew my weakness and helped me to work hard. God gave me several projects at a time. I didn’t know what I had to do first. God disciplined me to organize from the most important to the least important tasks so that I could learn how to administrate God’s work effectively. I was impatient as a typical hot-tempered Korean. But God taught me to be patient in all circumstances through his servant Dr. Lee. For the last 10 years of shepherd life in St. Louis God helped me to be patient with all kinds of people and all different missionaries. Without learning from Dr. Lee, I would have gone through many unnecessary trials and errors in co-working. What I want to say here is that only by God’s grace I am what I am. I was a useless nowhere man without any meaning and purpose of life. But only by God’s grace he saved me and is using me for his purpose. When I remember this grace of God, I love anybody and welcome all kinds of sinners. When I remember this grace of God, I forgive anybody and bear any kind of weakness or shortcoming of others. Only by God’s grace I became a shepherd and only by God’s grace I feed Jesus’ sheep.

Ben West has many good points of becoming a good shepherd. He was smart, generous, patient, and diligent. He also has good devoted Christian parents. Since he had moved into common life three years ago, he never missed daily bread meetings. But, he had a hobby which I didn’t like. It was his mustache. One Sunday morning he appeared with his mustache, looked like Salvador Dali. All co-workers were shocked because he should be a presider. I defended Ben saying, “People look at outward appearance, but God looks at heart.” But, I was not happy with his unique hobby. After the service, I called him and said, “Some coworkers complained that they were distracted by your mustache during the worship service. Could you shave it for the glory of God? You need to have an image of a shepherd, not of an entertainer.” This must have hurt his pride. But, the next morning he appeared with a clean face. This is one of episodes of my shepherd life for Ben. God loved him and molded him inwardly and outwardly to become a useful bible teacher and shepherd. We thank God that recently his parents Kit and Melissa have committed to our St. Louis UBF ministry and started to teach the bible one to one. Praise God!

Today we learned Paul’s shepherd heart for one needy soul, Onesimus. Paul’s shepherd heart for Onesimus is God’s shepherd heart for all lost souls. His shepherd heart is Jesus’ shepherd heart for me and for you. Jesus saved us and called us to be shepherds. May God fill us with Jesus’ shepherd heart for many Onesimuses on campus through this conference. Amen.