

About That Broken Relationship

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I'm very glad that you are with us today. I think that what we have in front of us today is going to be a great encouragement to you. Knowing what's ahead, I would suggest that maybe you reach for a Kleenex or two, not because I'm going to try to manipulate you emotionally but the nature of what we're going to talk about today is going to come close to your heart and I want to be able to prepare you in advance for that, I guess you might say.

One of the things about being a pastor over a period of a number of years in the same place is that you start to get to know people over a period of time, and there is this introductory time where you're getting to know each other and things are good and a little bit, maybe a little bit superficial and that's okay, that's part of the process of building relationships, but as you go on and conversations start to expand and deepen a bit, you start to get a little bit of a feel for some of the deeper hurts and difficulties that people are going through, and I have many conversations like that with many of you fairly frequently. And I realize, you start to realize that people are dealing with some broken relationships that are very difficult to them and that bring them a lot of sorrow and a lot of grief, and difficulties, and you're not sure exactly what to do with the situation, and we as elders pray for you in the midst of that. It's quite common for people after they've heard a pastor, not necessarily me but they'll go up to a pastor and say, "That message you preached was just for me." And sometimes people have asked, "Well, did you know something? Did my wife talk to you before you preached that message?" And of course, the answer is no. It doesn't work that way at all. It's just a testimony to the penetrating power of the word of God to speak to our hearts exactly where we're at without the speaker intending anything by that, without the speaker targeting anyone, at least a decent pastor, never uses his pulpit to target people in what he says for good or for ill. You just open God's word and you teach it and you let the consequences fall where they may and let the ministry of God's word go where it may. Well, look, knowing that I have had a number of very personal conversations with many of you over the past few weeks about difficult relationships, it would be easy for you to think, "Oh, he targeted this for me. He set this up just to talk about my situation." That's not the case at all, and yet at the same time, I'm also aware of the fact that there is a broad applicability to the things that we're going to look at this morning, and so I just wanted to kind of lay that out before you that there are many people that will be helped by God's word here this morning and the fact

that I know who many of you are is simply an indication of the fact that we've gotten to know each other as a church, as a pastor, as elders. We've gotten to know each other in a way that we know how God's word might be helpful and how it might apply.

We're going back to the little letter of Philemon and I'd invite you to turn there, to the letter of Philemon, which is just before the book of Hebrews if you don't know how to find it, and we've been teaching through Philemon over the past month or so and we'll try to bring it to an end next week or maybe the following week. I don't know. But it's a very interesting letter. It's been a bigger challenge to preach than I expected, not because the content is difficult but simply because it's just long enough to not be able to preach it in a single message and there is so much going on in what Paul says to his friend Philemon that it's hard to separate it all out in a way that gives it some kind of coherence from one message to the next and what we've done now is we've come to verse 12 in our exposition, and I'm going to go through verse 16. Let me read that passage and set it in mind and then we'll see what the Lord has for us here today. Again, I'm just so very glad that you're with us here at Truth Community Church. Philemon, beginning in verse 12, Paul says,

12 I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart,
13 whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might
minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; 14 but without your
consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be,
in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will. 15 For perhaps he was
for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him
back forever, 16 no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved
brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and
in the Lord.

Let me make a very simple observation from this text that will kind of help us get started and then I'll expand out into a broader context that will give us a way to go here. Notice that in verse 15, Paul speaking to Philemon says, "For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while." He is writing to a man named Philemon. As we have seen, Philemon was a wealthy Christian who was a man of means and he was a godly man who was a very good instrument of God's blessing to the church there. You see that in the opening verses where Paul said in verse 5, he said, "I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints." In verse 7, "I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother." What he's saying is, "Philemon, you are a godly man that I respect and cherish. I am grateful for the fact that you serve Christ together with me." And that's a little bit of a window into who Philemon is. We've talked about that in weeks gone by.

But Philemon had a problem, in a sense, he had a broken relationship through no fault of his own. He had a slave named Onesimus and Onesimus had left him, quite likely had stolen from him and fled away and gone to Rome to hide and to leave his master. It was a criminal thing that Onesimus had done, it violated the relationship, and so they were

separated, that being the point from verse 15, they were separated from one another for a time. Now, what happened was Onesimus, being an unsaved man, fled and was just trying to hide and get away from life, as it were, but God brought him to the Apostle Paul, and the Apostle Paul ministered to Onesimus, talked with him, and eventually led him to Christ. Onesimus was converted by the direct personal ministry of the Apostle Paul, and in the course of working out the implications of his salvation, Paul said, "Onesimus, you've got to go back to Philemon. You've got to make things right. You wronged him. What I'll do is I'll write you a letter that will introduce and explain things to Philemon and you can hand him that and I believe that Philemon will receive you back and forgive you for the wrongs that you had done."

So all of that to kind of lead up to saying this: prior to receiving this letter from the Apostle Paul, Philemon had a broken relationship on his hands even though he was a fine and godly man. He was an honorable Christian with a broken relationship through no fault of his own and he was in a position where he could not do anything to fix that relationship. He did not know where Onesimus was. Onesimus had fled, as it were, under the cover of darkness, and so there was a relationship that was broken in Philemon's life, and before he received this letter, there was nothing he could do about it. That's kind of the context that I want to address this passage from. His slave, who was somehow a member of his household, had left and was estranged from him.

Now, Paul when he writes this letter, is bridging the way for a reconciliation to take place. The circumstances have changed. More particularly, Onesimus had changed. He had gone from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God's beloved Son. He had been converted. He was now a Christian and Paul is writing to help Philemon understand the new circumstances so that Philemon could respond properly. But here's what I want you to notice and here's the way that we're going to approach this passage here this morning is this, I want you to put yourself in Philemon's sandals, as it were: before Philemon received this letter, he was in a situation where he had this broken relationship and he was powerless to do anything about it. Paul is writing to Philemon to help him walk through things, to inform him, and to lead him to a proper decision to receive Onesimus and forgive him. And here's what we're going to do today, I'm going to just kind of walk through those five verses that I read, verses 12 through 16, I'm going to walk through those fairly quickly, and then we're going to try to draw some principles from Philemon's situation that I believe will help you in your own broken relationships and the situations that you care about but that you cannot change, and walking through this text is going to set us up so that we're able to do that.

So here's what we're going to do, look at verses 12 and 13 with me as we come back to the text as we begin now. Actually, let's go back to verse 10 just to remind you of the context for those of you that haven't been with us. Paul says, "Philemon, I appeal to you," verse 10, "I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me." He says, "Philemon, I'm sending Onesimus back to you. He has come to Christ during the course of my imprisonment. He is not like he used to be. He was useless. You

didn't even know where he was at but now he's a useful man and so I'm sending him back to you."

And he goes on and he says in verse 12, "I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel." What Paul is saying here there at the end of verse 13 is, he's saying, "Philemon, Onesimus has become a close personal friend. He is serving me in my imprisonment. It is a personal loss for me to send him back to you because he is doing so much to help me and to encourage me in such practical ways, but it wasn't right for me to keep him. I had to send him back to you even though it's like ripping my own heart out and sending it back to you, that's how much I care about him. That's how much I love this man that stands in front of you now." Paul says that Onesimus is, look at verse 12, he says, "He's my very heart." Verse 13, "I wanted to keep him with me." So there is this great personal attachment that Paul has but he doesn't let that cause him to do the wrong thing. He gives himself up, as it were, he denies himself, as it were, and he says, "Philemon, I'm sending Onesimus back even though I much would have rather kept him for myself. Onesimus belongs to you. You're his master and so I've got to send him back to you even though he could have served me personally in such a great way." The picture of it is this, look at verse 13 with me, there is this sense, you get a little sense of the progression of the mind of Paul as he was contemplating what to do with this. Verse 13 he says, "I wished to keep him with me." It has the sense, "I was wanting to keep him with me. This is what I wanted to do. I was feeling this way over a period of time. I wanted this man with me, Philemon, because I love him and I care about him but," then he makes his decision; the greater principles came to mind besides his own self interest and verse 14 represents his decision. He says, "Without your consent I did not want to do anything, so I was leaning this way, I was going this way with it but I stopped there. I said, no, that's not the way to handle this. I've got to send him back to you even though it's going to be a personal loss to me as I do." So he sends Onesimus back to Philemon because Philemon had the right and prior claim on the presence of Onesimus. Onesimus belonged to him in the institution of slavery that existed in the first century and so Paul sends a back.

And look at verse 14 with me again here. Again, we're just kind of walking through the passage together. Verse 14, Paul says, "without your consent I didn't want to do anything." And he goes on and says in verse 14, "so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will." What he's saying is this, "Philemon, I know you well," and he says, "I believe that if you knew the whole circumstance of my imprisonment and what was going on with Onesimus, you would have gladly had Onesimus stay with me, but it was not my place to make that decision for you. You needed to be able to give your informed consent to what I think you would want me to do, what your preference would be. It's not my place to make a decision for you about something that belongs to you that is rightly yours, not mine." So he says, "I wasn't willing to do that."

Isn't it striking, isn't it amazing that a man with the authority of an apostle, directly appointed by Christ, a man who knew what Philemon would have wanted, nevertheless

deferred to him and says, "It's not right for me to make that decision on your behalf. You need to be able to do this on your own. You need to be able to make up your own mind and so I defer to you, I defer to your prior claim. I send this man back to you and now it's up to you to decide what you are to do." Paul refused to take advantage of his position or his relationship with Philemon. If he had kept Onesimus, it would have been presumption against Philemon and that's not the way Christians deal with each other. That's a whole other line of thought that we should talk about some time but we'll just lay it there. It is not the place of one Christian to make decisions about how another Christian should use their resources; not to take a gift from someone that is not gladly given and consciously given. So that is the situation and that's the spirit of what Paul is saying.

So having said that, he goes on here in verse 15, he goes on and he helps Philemon's perspective as to what to do with this situation that unexpectedly showed up on his doorstep. I don't mean to be trite here or flippant: you know, remember this is the first century, not the 21st century. Paul couldn't send a text on ahead to Philemon's cell phone and say, "Hey, someone's coming to see you." It didn't work that way. There wasn't a phone call to be made. Philemon is just going about life and suddenly this fugitive slave shows up on his doorstep with a letter to hand to him, maybe with another man or two with him to help represent him back to his former master. So there was no prior warning. All of a sudden Philemon is in the middle of a situation where he's got to make some decisions and respond to an unexpected development. So what Paul is doing in this letter is he is helping Philemon's perspective so that he would think rightly about what to do and how to think about the situation and this is what we see as we go into verses 15 and 16. Stay with me here. All of this is going to be personally helpful in just a little bit.

Verse 15, Paul says to Philemon, look at it there with me. Philemon, verse 15, he says, "For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord." Paul here doesn't expressly refer to the providence of God, the hand of God, but that's exactly what he's talking about here. Look at what he says, "For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while." What reason? Whose reason? Whose thinking? Who is ultimately behind the separation as you look at that verse? Well, what Paul is saying is he's saying, "Philemon, here's what you need to think about, maybe God took Onesimus away, brought him to me so that he could come to Christ and now sends him back to you so that you would not have an unsaved slave but that you would have a brother in Christ now to serve you." He says, "Philemon, you've got to remember the bigger purposes of God as you're contemplating how to respond to this situation." He says, "Look at the result. Look at what happened. Look at what the outcome is. This man is now in Christ. Whereas before he was a thieving fugitive slave, now he comes to you voluntarily and presents himself to you as someone who is in Christ." He says, Paul says to Philemon, "You've got think through the whole purpose of God. Maybe Onesimus took off in a bad way, maybe he did things wrong at the start but don't let your perspective be determined by that, look at the outcome and then calculate backwards to realize God's hand was in this, Philemon. God was working this out. God was doing something" – watch this, oh, this is so important. I know, I know, when I do that it wakes everybody up. That's okay.

This is so important. "Philemon, you didn't see the purpose of God at the time when this relationship was broken and this man went away from you, but now the veil is pulled back and you can see the outcome and you can understand that there was a purpose of God in this, that you did not see at the time." Very crucial.

And so what Paul is doing as he talks with Philemon here is he is gently, pastorally helping Philemon to bring the purposes of God into his thinking rather than simply viewing this matter on a human horizontal realm that would say, "This slave wronged me. He's a fugitive. He's subject to punishment." Paul says, "Philemon, don't think that way. Perhaps what was going on was this, God actually removed him through his runaway actions in order to bring him to Christ and then send him back to you. Maybe this was the way that he could be converted and returned to you." And if he has returned, look at what happens here in verse 15, Paul says, "he was separated from you for a time, just for a little while, just for a moment that separation took place, so that you could have him back forever, no longer as a slave plotting rebellion against his master, but as a brother in Christ, as someone who shares Christ with you, who will love you and serve you faithfully now that there has been a transformation in his heart by the power of the Holy Spirit." Paul says, "Philemon, I think that's what's going on here. There is something bigger than what you saw when he ran away."

Look at verse 16, "no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord." You know, when a person comes to Christ, there is a whole different perspective, a whole different calculation on the relationship. Those of you who are parents and your children have come to Christ, if you're thinking rightly about your child whether they're a young person or an adult, if you're thinking rightly about them, you're thinking fully from a full perspective about them, you no longer think about them simply as, "Oh, that's my son or that's my daughter." If you're thinking rightly about it, you say, "Oh, daughter in the flesh but sister in Christ. A brother in Christ to me is my son. A sister in Christ is this daughter that has now come to Christ" This changes the whole perspective on the way that you think about each other. It changes the way that you relate. There is an added level of love and shared affection and union that is in place that is not true when that person is unconverted. So Paul says, "Philemon, here's how I want you to think about this, he's no longer a slave to you. He's so much more. Oh, he might stay as your slave but not just horizontal, now there is this whole greater dimension that he is a brother in Christ, that you share love for Christ and share love for one another with." Everything is changed by the presence of conversion. What Paul is saying and what he is suggesting to him here in these verses in verses 15 and 16 is this: he's saying, "Philemon, maybe that's just what God had planned all along. Your relationship was broken for a time only to be restored to something better down the road in a way that wouldn't have happened if he had stayed with you."

In Genesis 50:20, Joseph said to his brothers who had betrayed him into slavery and sold him and faked his murder and after the long process that led to Joseph becoming the Prime Minister of Egypt, he forgave his brothers and he said, "Men, you meant evil against me but God meant it for good," Genesis 50:20. He said, "You meant evil against

me. You meant to harm me in this but God had an overriding superintending purpose that you had no idea about at the time. You simply acted according to your own evil wishes against me but God had a greater purpose that he was working out and because it was God's purpose, it was always good because God's purposes can only be good because God is good with no mixture of evil in him, and God's purposes are at work in everything that happened and therefore there is some manner of good being tinged in this," Joseph says to his brothers, "that couldn't have happened any other way. A good God was in perfect control therefore I don't hold it against you because I see the outcoming of the working of God's providence in this." That's a little sense of what's going on in Philemon 12 through 16, Paul helping Philemon work through things to see a perspective so that he would receive this man rightly.

Now, it surprised me as I was working through this passage, it surprised me where this went in my mind in terms of how to take this and preach it to you here in Truth Community, you know, and my messages are for the people that are in this room as opposed to an audience outside. You know, this is for you. You're the primary audience of this pulpit no matter whatever else happens with the content later on. And here's the thing, just give you a sense of warmth and informality in everything that I'm going to say from here on out because this is personal to you, it's for you, it's to help you, and it's shocking to me, really, as I look at individual faces and situations pop into my mind and I know what's on your mind as we talk about the concept of a broken relationship. Here's what I want to help you with. Occasionally there are pastoral things that are buried in a passage that come out and you say, "Oh, this would be really helpful." This is one of those times and being mindful of the fact of the chronic seemingly unchanging and unchangeable nature of some of the problem relationships that you're facing, I want to lay out some things that I think will be a help to you and we're going to view it from this perspective just so you see how it is tied to the text, we are viewing this from the perspective of Philemon before he received the letter. We are putting ourselves in Philemon's sandals in order to view things as it was for him before he got the letter. His slave was gone. He didn't know where he was. He had been wronged in this relationship and there was no way for him to fix it. He didn't even know where this man was and so there is a fractured relationship that's present that he's dealing with.

What can we draw from this and what can we draw from the way that Paul handles it and what he said to us in this passage? First of all, I would have you write this down and, believe it or not, all of these things are helpful. First of all, sometimes close relationships are broken. Sometimes close relationships are broken even for godly growing Christians. It's definitely contrary to what we want, isn't it? We all want all of our relationships to be good and warm and loving and nurturing, whatever adjective you want to use there. We want that but the truth of the matter is that it's not like that. That's not reality. Sometimes close relationships are broken. Onesimus wronged his master and fled and left Philemon behind to pick up the pieces of the broken relationship.

Do you know what that does, beloved? Do you know what this whole topic does for us? It reminds us of the nature of the world in which we live, in which you live. It reminds us of the nature of the environment in which you are trying so hard to live for Christ and to

be the person that he would have you to be. The nature of our world is a nature of a world in conflict. From the moment that Adam fell, man was separated from God and human conflict went right on the heels with that. Adam looked to God and said, "Hey, it's this woman that you gave to me that did this," so he kind of jointly accuses God, "You gave her to me," and accuses the woman in the process. The woman says, "Well, the serpent deceived me," and all of a sudden where there had been this great harmony in Eden, all of a sudden there are accusations and conflict flying and you only turn to the next chapter and what happens except that one of their sons kills another, Cain killed Abel because he hated him. So, beloved, what I want to encourage you to do is to have a realistic view of the world in which you live. It is a world that is broken by sin; it is fractured and conflict comes with that just in the general sense of living in an environment like we have, like we inherited from Adam. Conflict entered the human race and we still bear the effects of it.

Now, beloved, we are just trying to be realistic here, okay? I think reality is a whole lot better than a stage show, is what I think, and I think God's word is better than simply our unrealistic and unfulfilled desires about things and so we need to say this next part as well. Let me back up and just say this: there is nothing coming in what you're about to hear in these – I've got four points for you, by the way. I just gave you the first one: sometimes close relationships are broken. There is nothing coming in this where I am going to blame you for what's happening in those family relationships. That's not coming so you can relax in that, you know, and I just want to help you with some biblical perspective to say, "This helps me see what's coming." We all stumble in many ways, Scripture says, but that's not the point this morning that I'm bringing out to you. Here's the thing: in general, the world is a sin-broken world and conflict comes with that, on a macro level when cities blow up in riots, when wars come, and it comes in personal relationships as well. Now, beloved, here's the next thing that you need to say as we bring this within the walls of the church, the next thing that you need to see: becoming a Christian does not remove you from that realm. It does not somehow magically take you out and place you in a realm where everything is peaceful and you never experience any conflict in your relationships at all. That is not reality and it's not good to have that as your expectation. Let's deal with reality. Let's deal with what Scripture says.

Do you know what Jesus said? "Well, he said a lot, pastor." Yeah, I know. I'll be more specific here. Jesus said that he himself sometimes is the cause of greater conflict in personal relationships. Look over at Luke 12. I want you to see this, Luke 12:51. Jesus said, "Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division; for from now on five members in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law." Christ says, "When you are born again, when I save you, when you start living for me, it is going to create conflict with those who don't. That's why," he says in Matthew 5:10-12, he says, "Blessed are you when people persecute you, when they insult you, when they say all kinds of things against you falsely on account of Me." He says, "Be glad in that day and rejoice for your reward is great in heaven." My point is this: Jesus tells us, he told us during his ministry, the

writers of Scripture record it for us, that one aspect of our existence as Christians is the reality that there will be conflict with those closest to us and sometimes it is directly a result of our commitment to Christ. Sometimes close relationships are broken.

The nature of a sin-fallen world points us in that direction and the nature of what Christ said to us as disciples prepares us for that, and here's the thing, my friends, my brothers and sisters in Christ: God would have you calculate that into your worldview about your relationships; that sometimes there will be conflict, sometimes there will be things that come up and difficulties come to you that you weren't looking for, that you don't welcome but it's just the way that it is. It was that way for Philemon. Christ told us to expect that. We expect it from the nature of the world in which we live. The truth of the matter is that you and I are not only on the receiving end, sometimes we are on the contributing end of that. We get that. We understand that. All we are saying now is to realize this is the nature of life, that it's like that, and what that means is that because that's true, here's how this really helps you, I think, is that when conflict comes, you don't have to be completely knocked over and knocked back by the fact that this is happening. You have in God's word a view of the world that can account for that and say, "Oh, this is to be expected. This comes with the territory of life even as a Christian," so that you don't have to fall into an overly introspective sense of despair of, "Oh, this must be my fault," as some are prone to do. On the other hand, you don't just have to immediately rush out and say, "I'm going to vindicate myself and justify myself in this conflict." You don't have to be in a hurry to do those things. First you walk through the fact that conflict comes with the territory of life, you don't have to be surprised if it comes.

Now, secondly, this is the one that's a little more difficult because it's going to be contrary to what you want me to say. Number 2, beloved: you may not be able to fix it. You may not be able to fix it. That's the condition that Philemon was in. Onesimus had fled. He had run away. Philemon did not even know where he was so how is he going to restore harmony to this relationship even though he's this godly productive Christian? He did not have control over reconciliation with this member of his household before the letter arrived.

In Romans 12, I believe it's verse 18, Paul says – let's look to that, Romans 12, I believe it's verse 18. Yes, it is! I like it when that happens. Romans 12:17 and 18, you see kind of an indirect acknowledgment of what I'm saying here. Paul says, "Never pay back evil for evil to anyone." Romans 12:17, "Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men." You see, if it's possible, if it depends on you, be at peace with all men, but the very nature of relationships are that there are two sides to them and you don't control both sides of the equation. You're not able to control what that other person says or does and I realize that this is hard to see sometimes, especially when it's close up and you're right in the middle of it, it's even harder to accept on a human level but, beloved, sometimes it's just out of your hands. And what does that do? It frees you up from a sense of misplaced responsibility to go out and fix it. If someone hates you, if someone absolutely refuses to talk to you, I've been there, you can't make them, and if that's their heart attitude, it's not

going to do any good to draw them in like a reluctant donkey and just pulling against it to get them to talk. That's not going to help when you're in that situation.

So, beloved, you might seek resolution, you might let it be known, "I'm open. I'm available. I want this to work out. You know, I'll do whatever I can within the scope of righteousness for this to work out and to be good between us again." But understand that you can't make that other person want that and respond to it rightly. That's not in your power and the sooner that we accept that, the closer we are to peace and, frankly, the closer we are to where the Lord would take you in your spiritual life with it, as I'm going to show you in these next couple of points here. But, beloved, you cannot make someone see it your way. You cannot make someone agree with you from their heart if they are opposed to that, if they are not willing to do that. You can't make them. You can't force them. You're not sovereign over them and you see that and you say, "Okay, I can dial it back a bit."

And then what do you do? This is the good stuff. Now we get into the good stuff. What I've tried to do here this morning is to be realistic and to free you from a false sense of responsibility that, "I can make this happen. I can make this reconciliation take place, or I must." That's just not...you may be in a position where you can't make that happen. Well, then what do you do? Then you look up and point 3: you trust the purpose of God. You trust the purpose of God through your heartache, through the disappointment, through the hurt feelings, even through the anger that you feel. "Why is this like this? And this person won't even communicate with me. How am I supposed to fix this if they won't talk to me?" Well, that's when you stop looking at the human dimension of this and you start remembering what it is that you believe about God, about his character, and about his sovereignty. Remember, go back to Philemon here, go back to Philemon 15 and Paul says to Philemon in verse 15, "perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever." Paul was reminding Philemon that there was a greater purpose at work in the separation.

Now, my brothers and sisters in Christ, I ask you to receive well what I am about to say because this changes your whole perspective on all of it and gives you a place where you can rest even if the circumstances never change. Paul said, "Philemon, in this situation, here's what God may have been doing." He could say that because God is sovereign and because God's hand is in – oh, watch this, beloved. Watch this. Grab hold of it. Rest on it. Grab hold of this and bring it close to your chest and cling to it in your broken relationship: God's hand is in everything that happens. God is directing everything in the universe to accomplish his will, Ephesians 1:10 says.

That is always the case, beloved. An eternal God is always, always working out his eternal purpose in everything that happens. That is just an implication, a corollary of the fact that God is God. God reigns. God is over his creation. God is at work and he knows what he's doing. The challenge for you is that you don't. You don't see it. Sometimes you're operating behind the veil and you don't get to see what that is. But, beloved, in the midst of your disappointment, in the midst of the hardship and – look, I'm mindful of how unfairly and how badly you have been treated in some of your relationships. I get

that but that's not what we're talking about here. What we're talking about here is the realm of God and what can we say about God in the midst of your broken relationship. God has his eye on the sparrow. Jesus said, "Not a sparrow falls to the ground apart from the knowledge of your Father." In that same context in Matthew 10, he said, "He knows the numbers of the hairs on your head." Jesus says, "Your Father, your heavenly Father is over all. He knows all and he carefully tends to even the smallest most insignificant aspects of his creation, the sparrow, the single solitary strand of hair on your head." Jesus says, "You look at that level of detail and understand that your heavenly Father loves you and cares for you like that," and therefore what you're supposed to do is to look at the small thing, "Oh, he takes care of birds," go up to the bigger thing and say, "Oh, I have this broken relationship in my life. Do you know what? In a way that I can't see, understand or even fully appreciate right now, God has that in his hands just like he does the sparrow and even though this is grievously sore and difficult to me, I trust him to be working out a loving purpose even though I don't see it."

You might say at this point, "But you don't understand. You don't understand how wickedly they have treated me. You don't know how they have wronged me." To which we simply go back and gently come back to Scripture and say, "Remember what Joseph said, 'You meant evil for me but God meant it for good.'" Do you know what would be good in the midst of your broken relationship? Do you know one element of greater eternal good that would come out of it if you were to respond to that way? It's to say, "I'm going to set aside this human relationship and rest more fully in the goodness and the sovereignty and the love of my heavenly Father." You say to yourself, "I know I can trust him. I know that he loves me because Jesus Christ gave his life on a cross to save my soul from sin. He took the punishment of my sin in order that I would be forgiven and have eternal life. That's the nature of God that is at work in this circumstance in my life and I see his loving purpose, his eternal loving purpose at the cross. I believe that. I trust in that and I believe," you say to yourself, this is where your life changes, "I believe the same eternal loving purpose that took Christ to the cross is at work in this circumstance even though I don't see it and therefore I have hope and confidence about what's going on. I can have a measure of peace and comfort in this even though on a human level this hurts." The hurt humanly is transcended by the love eternally.

So you trust the purpose of God and, beloved, you don't need to know the outcome of the human relationship in order to be able to rest in that. God is at work and God is love and God is good and he causes all things to work together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose. Christian, it is your birthright to be able to trust him even in the midst of that broken relationship. This starts to give you something of the wonder and the measure of how good it is to be a Christian. All of a sudden all of the difficult things in life are redefined and have a purpose that you cannot see but that you know the intent of. The intent of these things is to shape you for eternal glory in heaven. That's something to anticipate. That's a place to rest hope in, isn't it? You bet it is.

Finally, what do you do in the midst of it? Fourthly: give yourself to the people who do receive you. Give yourself to the people who do receive you. Give yourself to the people who do love you. You see, I know how it is, beloved. One relationship goes south and all

of a sudden it's like dropping food coloring into a glass of water, it colors everything else and it's all that you think about and it just shapes everything that you do. The broken relationship becomes the hub of your thoughts and everything eventually comes back to that center of gravity. Something about our human nature makes us like that but, beloved, ask God and act upon a decision that says, "I'm going to give myself to the people who do receive you."

Here's how we get this out of the text of Philemon. At some point, you've got to get these things out of the text. Remember who Philemon was before this letter showed up. He was a fruitful Christian. Go back to Philemon in verses 1 and 2. Paul, speaking to Philemon and, by the way, remember that Paul is writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and so this is God's assessment of Philemon even in the midst of that broken relationship with his runaway slave. He says, "Philemon, our beloved brother and fellow worker." He says in verse 4, "I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers. I hear of your love, of your faith in Christ, your love toward all the saints." Verse 7, "the joy and comfort of your love. The hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother." Philemon was in the midst of ministering to people and loving fellow Christians who were more than receptive to his life, his ministry and his relationship. He gave himself over to them. He served them and was a blessing to them even though Onesimus had rejected him.

Beloved, every one of you needs to hear this because all of us need this kind of encouragement in our hearts. Your life is not defined by one bad relationship. Your existence is not determined, the measure of your life is not found in the one or two people or three people who reject you and accuse you and say all kinds of horrible things about you. That's not the measure of your life. Life doesn't stop in response to that, even though I realize that for some of you we're talking about the closest human relationship that you have. I get that but, beloved, let this help you look up and trust the purpose of God and look out at the other dimension of relationships that God has given you. Beloved, for all of you in this room, every one of you in this room, just within our church, there are many many people who receive you, who love you and accept you for exactly who you are. That's part of the beauty of being in the body of Christ is that we love each other. Well, thank God for those people. Love them back. Pray for them and receive their love and let that be the food coloring, as it were, that colors the water of the way that you think about life.

I'll state it a different way, my friends, as we're talking about that broken relationship and what you want in that relationship just isn't coming to pass. I have relationships like this. I don't speak this lightly. I speak it on level ground with you. Beloved, write this down: live in the realm that God has given to you rather than living in regret over the realm that he has not given to you. If God has given you a realm of loving relationships, even if they're outside your family and people love you and receive you, enjoy that. Capitalize on it. Maybe, beloved, maybe in time – watch this – maybe in time, God will give the other to you as well just like he gave Onesimus back to Philemon. Maybe in the future that's still ahead but don't stop living and loving while you're waiting for that to happen. Philemon didn't.

Let me say this: if that person has wronged you and hurt you but you can't communicate your way out of it for whatever reason, just have it in your heart, "I'm willing to forgive. My arms are open. I'm willing but I realize that if they're not, I can't make that happen, but in my heart the first thing I would do is rejoice if they came like that." Do you remember the father of the prodigal son? The prodigal son said, "Give me my inheritance. I wish you were dead." He goes off and he squanders it all on women and loose living. He comes to his senses, "I'll go back to my father." And what has the father done? He has continued living, continued going. He is with them. Then he sees that prodigal a long way off and he just runs for him for joy over having this person back, willing to forgive but in the meantime he had gone on with life with the relationships that he had. Beloved, maybe God will give you that person, give you that relationship back in the future. Don't let go of that hope. Don't write anyone off but don't wait. Don't pause your living until that comes. In the meantime, trust Christ, trust the purpose of God and keep living with joy and give yourself to the people who love you, and if that's only within the walls of this church, there is plenty of love to go around here.

And as you're doing that, one last thing to inform it. I'm done here. As you're walking through these things, remember this: remember the promise of Scripture to every true Christian that there is that coming day when you are with Christ, when you are with him in eternity, and what will you find? You will find that he has wiped away every tear from your eyes and there will no longer be any death, any mourning, any crying or any pain. The things of this broken world for you, Christian, are going to pass away, and what will be left in their stead is a love of Christ that prevails over all.

Let's pray together, shall we?

Father, we pray that you might bring comfort to our broken hearts in the midst of working relationships. We pray that though we don't see it, that you might bring restoration to those relationships and yet, Father, we accept that at times it's simply beyond our power and ability to make what we would have come to pass. So Father, we instead rather than looking for hope in a human dimension, we step in, as it were, to the dimension of God. We trust your eternal purpose which is loving, which is good, which is wise. You're too good to be unkind, you're too wise to be mistaken and your hand is in everything that happens. We humble ourselves before what we see in our lives and just clearly and unambiguously tell you, "We trust you for whatever is happening." Father, we thank you that you have given us relationships where love does abound, that there are people that love us, maybe different than what we had thought, what we had wanted, whom we would have chosen but, Father, you have given us loving friendships, relationships. We thank you for that and we thank you for that ultimate reality from Revelation 21, you will wipe away every tear. You will prove your faithfulness to us in a way that will be clear, unmistakable and far greater than anything we could have asked or thought or imagined or prayed for.

So Lord, in you we trust. In you we bring the heartaches of many sad relationships that are represented in this room. We ask you to have your restoring gracious hand upon

each one. We pray that there might be a full reconciliation of everyone dealing with a broken marriage or broken family relationships. We ask you to heal each one and bring a full reconciliation and joy, and those who are not in Christ, that you would save them to the uttermost just as you have us. We ask you for that, Lord, but we ask and we pray for it because it's outside of our power to make it happen. In the meantime, Father, while we wait for you to unfold your gracious purpose, we ask you to strengthen us in the grace and love of Christ and help us to find our satisfaction and our sufficiency in Christ alone. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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