

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

GOD'S JUSTICE

The Flourishing of Creation & the Destruction of Evil



 ZONDERVAN®

God's Justice: The Holy Bible

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INTRODUCING GOD'S JUSTICE: THE HOLY BIBLE

No doubt, you opened this Bible because something deep in your soul suggests that God and justice go together. In fact, you may be a follower of Jesus who could tell your own story of how instead of getting what you deserved, God's mercy and grace compelled you to find your own place in his story! Or maybe you are just curious?

The Bible is the gripping story of God's creation and his love for mankind. But as the story unfolds, we read about the unleashing of evil and humanity's alienation from the Creator. But the Good News of the Gospel is that through Jesus's sacrifice, the story ends with the destruction of evil and the flourishing of humanity! This Bible is designed to encourage you to find your place in God's restoration story.

Our reality is that every day we encounter this creation gone awry, a beautiful world that is clouded by the powers of evil seeking its destruction. In cities filled with art and music, children are abused and thrown away like trash—thousands of children.

Sex trafficking. Political prisoners locked up secretly, tortured, murdered. Overcrowded clinics filled with sickness and death. Workers laboring on one meal a day, while owners isolate themselves in comfort.

Rich and poor, separated by a fence and security guards. Rich and poor, separated by oceans. On both sides of the fence, and on both sides of the ocean, God ignored and defied.

War. Machetes, missiles, guns, killing pregnant women and their unborn babies. Suicide bombers targeting schoolchildren.

Abortion. Infanticide. Child slaves and abuse.

Police who take bribes. Courtrooms where the poor are mocked. Governments that ratify the oppression of the weak by the strong.

Families destroyed by unresolved bitterness. Loneliness. Loathing. Bullying. Prejudice. Lying. Such ugliness can make the heart sick. Can anything make a difference? Does anyone care enough to make it different?

The book you hold in your hands is the story of a God who sees disease and wants it healed, who hears the cry of the oppressed and is determined to make things right. Many people restrict the Bible by thinking it's just a book of rules and religion. But it is so much more. It is a book about the holy and sovereign God revealing who he is, and providing a way for all mankind to be restored to a relationship with God, through Jesus, and then join in his restoration project. The Bible tells the story of God's amazing kind of justice, with love and mercy inextricably intertwined.

Restoring justice is God's work and mission all through history; it is the heart of his loving, calling and redeeming his people. It is at the heart of salvation and cost God his Son in order to set things right with sinful mankind. This story will lead, surely, to "justice roll[ing] on like a river, and righteousness like a never-failing stream!" (the prophet Amos).

The Bible boldly answers the questions "Who cares?" and "Can anything be done?" God cares, and he is powerfully at work to make things right.

We aren't used to thinking of the Bible as a book about justice. Sometimes we reduce the Bible to simply a book about our personal welfare and how we can gain God's favor and live a holy life. We don't spend as much time pondering God's greater concern for all of mankind and

creation, much less how I could love my neighbor as God intends, for example. Personal salvation and justice appear to be different categories, only accidentally occupying the same book.

In reality, they belong together. The Bible tells how God sets things right in all of his creation, and that means bringing justice to every level—to the individual soul and to society at large.

Problems come when personal salvation gets isolated from justice. Consider perhaps the worst example in history: Hitler's Germany. Except for Christians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, many watched as Hitler led their country into war and murdered whole populations. Or take the killing fields of Cambodia, the genocide in Rwanda, or the carnage of Somalia. People do not appear to understand what the Bible clearly teaches: that God's passion for justice penetrates every area of life, from the dictates of the ruling powers to the welfare of the weakest creature.

Sometimes we are misled by definitions. In modern life justice may be a very limited and forbidding word—a word for the courtroom. When justice is done, we think of guilty verdicts pronounced and people getting what is coming to them.

However, the Bible sees justice as broader and deeper than “what's coming to you.” In the Old Testament, “justice” is often paired with “righteousness,” a word that means having right relationships. A just person acts generously toward poor neighbors and defends their rights in court.

In New Testament Greek, the words translated “justice” and “righteousness” actually come from the same root. The two are inseparable. Together they sum up all that God cares about and is working for. That includes forgiveness of personal sins, deepening holiness, growing communities of faith, care for God's creation, generosity to the poor, good government, a world without wars, protection for the vulnerable, an end to lies and bribes, family reconciliation, and much, much more.

Justice is “making things right”—making everything right. God sends Jesus not “to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (the Gospel of John). Our personal salvation is a central expression of God's justice and a crucial part of the bigger story.

The story is a struggle that begins within the Bible's first pages. In a beautiful garden, human choices lead to rebellion, alienation and broken relationships. Adam and Eve's child murders his own brother, then refuses to accept his guilt. How will God deal with this reality of evil? How will he restore his beautiful world gone wrong?

This question is profound. Setting the world right is not simply a matter of good intentions and excellent organization. Evil goes deep, right into the core of humanity. Its stain has penetrated and cannot be wiped off or scrubbed out.

God works with deeply flawed creatures, and through such creatures. He calls a man, Abraham, and his wife Sarah. He teaches them to live a life of obedient faith, doing justice. A family is created (see Genesis 18:19). The family becomes the nation of Israel. God delivers the Israelites from slavery and gives them a law code promoting justice—all in order for them to lead the way in redeeming the broken world.

The Bible relates how this nation sins and rejects God, how its people forget their calling and yet are repeatedly drawn back to what God intended. Sometimes they do horrible things. Often God's chosen people are as bad as anybody else.



The story tells of plagues and battles, rivalries and reconciliations. It features music, poetry and blood sacrifice. It describes good kings and bad, and then the Great King, Jesus. He is acclaimed until, stunningly, he is executed.

The story is complex and emotional. For every promise there comes a disappointment. Everywhere God plays an active and passionate role: warning, coaxing, blessing, punishing. Everywhere human beings play active and passionate roles as well: inspired yet petulant, hopeful yet grasping—and often forgetful of what they are meant to become.

God's passion for justice is most visible when he sends his own Son, Jesus. Entirely human, entirely divine, Jesus leads the struggle to bring justice to the earth. He announces God's kingdom. The blind are given sight, and outcasts rejoin society. He brings God's justice with God's mercy and peace. For his troubles he is rejected and murdered.

Yet that is not the end. The story goes on. God raises Jesus from the dead, and Jesus breathes resurrection life into his followers. Paradoxically, through Jesus' death God absorbs the worst injustice humans can ever do. He bears it, suffers it—and defeats it on our behalf.

And then Jesus invites his followers to join him in the struggle—the struggle he leads to bring justice to the earth. He asks us to work for justice in the way he showed us, with his Spirit to direct and help.

Other terms can be used to sum up the Bible's story: God's mission, God's kingdom, reconciliation, peacemaking, covenant, and love, to name a few. All these are valid and true, but none has the bite, the contemporary relevance, of justice. God fights. God confronts the evil powers. His love is justice, and justice is his love. "And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night?" (the Gospel of Luke).

God's drive for justice will result in the wonderful city that the book of Revelation portrays—a place of healing, a place of worship, a place of beauty, and a place of peace. All creation will flourish. Evil will cease. A just world will be established at last, enduring forever.

We are meant to join this story. We are supposed to "get it"—to get God's healing justice in our lives—and to bring it to others all through the world.

The Bible is where we learn the story of God's justice. But the Bible is not a simple book. To understand it we need all the help we can get.

The commentary in *God's Justice* comes from scholars and activists all over the world. They bring the insights of their diverse, God-given cultures to this book, so that we can hear God's justice story told in dozens of different accents. From this crowd of voices, we can each learn better how to tell the story for ourselves—and how to live it.

Injustice and evil remain potent and subtle, and each new generation faces unprecedented challenges. We have no script for the next chapter. We must use our creative powers to build on the story so far until we reach a good ending. How can we do that? Only by soaking our minds and hearts in God's ways of justice, revealed to us in the pages of this book. Those who know the story best can best write the next chapter.

God's justice can become the story of our lives.

FINDING YOUR PLACE IN THE STORY OF GOD'S JUSTICE

1 Begin to learn the story

The Bible centers on God and what he does to set the world right. But the story is not just about God; it is God with us. He means us to carry the story. Here are four steps to finding your place in the drama of God bringing justice to his creation.

2 Commit to following Jesus

Unless you know the story as God has told it so far, your part may be just wild improvisation. The Bible is a complex book—sixty-six books, with many authors, writing in various centuries. You can learn its story only by reading deeply and widely, letting it soak into your imagination and heart. Those who know the story can best tell the next chapter.

3 Live a life of justice

Jesus put it in the simplest terms: Love God; love your neighbor (Matt. 22:37–40). These two loves go together to live out the story of God's justice. You follow these loves with Jesus in you, through his Spirit. You are never alone.

4 Find others who are acting out the story of God's justice

God wants you to discover this life alongside others, those who are part of the body of Christ, the church. Share the work with them as you join a local community of faith. In addition, national and international organizations have specialized in working for justice in particular areas of concern. You can learn about some of these by visiting www.GodsJusticeBible.com.

A BIBLE DESIGNED FOR UNDERSTANDING

The Bible isn't a single book. It's a collection of many books that were written, preserved and gathered together so that they could be shared with new generations. The Scriptures were inspired (written and collected) as whole books, and they are meant to be read as whole books. Reading, of course, is not an end in itself. Especially in the case of the Bible, reading is a means of entering into the story. Overall, the Bible is an invitation to the reader first to view the world in a new way, and then to become an agent of the world's renewal. God's Justice: The Holy Bible is designed to give you a great experience of these sacred books—for reading, study, teaching and preaching.

Just as the Bible is not a single book, the Bible is more than bare words. Those who wrote its books chose to put them in particular forms, using the literary conventions appropriate to those forms. Many different kinds of writing are found in the Bible: poetry, narrative, wisdom collections, letters, law codes, apocalyptic visions and more. These forms must be read as the literature they really are, or else misunderstanding and distortion of meaning are bound to follow. In order to engage the text on its own terms, good readers will honor the agreement between themselves and the biblical writers implied by the choices of particular forms. Good readers will respect the conventions of these forms. They'll read poetry as poetry, songs as songs, stories as stories, and so forth.

The presentation of the Bible text in God's Justice: The Holy Bible respects these different kinds of writing and seeks to present the natural literary divisions of each book. Of course, the common chapter and verse markers in the Bible weren't placed there by the original authors. They were added much later: in the 13th century for our chapter numbers, and the 16th century for our verse numbers. Also, these markers commonly don't reveal the natural sections of the Bible. So we've designed this Bible so readers can more easily see those sections.

First, it is set in a generous single-column setting, so poetry and prose can be easily distinguished, and other literary forms more readily seen. In addition, we've shown the natural breaks within each book by the use of line spacing. The books of the Bible include both major and minor divisions within them. In this Bible, you can easily discover those natural sections by noting the number of line spaces between sections. The more lines you see, the more major that break is in the overall structure of that book. Our goal is to encourage meaningful units to be read in their entirety and so with greater appreciation and understanding.

We invite you to read the Bible as more than a collection of verses. We encourage you to enter deeply into the messages of whole books, and to read in context, in order to more clearly see the emerging story of God's justice coming to earth.

GOD'S JUSTICE: THE HOLY BIBLE

VOLUMES

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POETRY & SONG



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A Word About the NIV 1777

The first five books of the Bible begin with God creating a "very good" universe. Immediately this beautiful beginning is shattered by human rebellion, which leads to astonishing violence and injustice. What can God do to restore his creation? He begins to set things right by calling Abraham, promising him blessing that will ultimately bless the whole world. Abraham and Sarah's offspring grow into the people of Israel. They are rescued from slavery and oppression by God, who, through Moses, leads them to the promised land. On the way God sets down a body of law, a foundation for a new nation meant to embody justice. These laws are such a prominent feature of the first five books that this volume is sometimes called Torah, or Law.

Genesis 5

Exodus 73

Leviticus 123

Numbers 159

Deuteronomy 213

The history books start with Israel's entrance into Palestine. There the nation is governed by judges, until God appoints Saul as Israel's first king. Kings dominate Israel's history thereafter, beginning with the great reigns of David and Solomon. Troubles follow and the kingdom splits in two. Despite occasional revivals, the two nations descend into sin and injustice. As punishment, they are conquered and exiled by the Assyrian and Babylonian empires. Has God's plan to set the world right failed? Only after generations living in exile do some of God's people return to Palestine and begin again.

Joshua 261

Judges 293

Ruth 324

1 Samuel 333

2 Samuel 373

1 Kings 411

2 Kings 449

1 & 2 Chronicles 489

Ezra 571

Nehemiah 589

Esther 611

The people of Israel are not just a government and an army, and their lives are more than the history books tell. The story of God's justice includes psalms of worship, love poetry, collections of wise proverbs, and philosophical reflections. Artistry, beauty and wisdom show the depths of God's work in his people as he molds them into a community of love and justice.

Job 627

Psalms 683

Proverbs 829

Ecclesiastes 883

Song of Songs 901

PROPHETS



God speaks to his people through prophets. On God's behalf they condemn injustice to God and neighbor, often through poetry. Prophets address all nations but particularly tell Israel to live up to God's call and thus experience his blessing—a blessing aimed at the whole world. Prophets also speak of the future, when God will set everything right, punishing evil and causing his creation to flourish. The prophets are the ethical and spiritual conscience of God's people; their words pulse with justice.

<i>Isaiah</i>	919
<i>Jeremiah</i>	1031
<i>Lamentations</i>	1127
<i>Ezekiel</i>	1145
<i>Daniel</i>	1209
<i>Hosea</i>	1231
<i>Joel</i>	1253
<i>Amos</i>	1265
<i>Obadiah</i>	1285
<i>Jonah</i>	1291
<i>Micah</i>	1299
<i>Nahum</i>	1313
<i>Habakkuk</i>	1321
<i>Zephaniah</i>	1331
<i>Haggai</i>	1341
<i>Zechariah</i>	1347
<i>Malachi</i>	1363

LIFE OF JESUS



The Gospels—four portraits of Jesus—show God himself coming to us as a human being, the climax of the story of God's justice. Both Jesus' teaching and his actions demonstrate God's rule on earth as he calls people everywhere to join him and be transformed. Jesus' way of justice is surprising and unexpected. When he triumphantly enters the capital, Jerusalem, he is put on trial and executed. He then comes back to life triumphant over the forces of evil and death. Departing, he turns his work over to his followers. The book of Acts follows the gospels with an account of Jesus' life continuing through his people, inspired by the Holy Spirit.

<i>Matthew</i>	1373
<i>Mark</i>	1415
<i>Luke</i>	1443
<i>John</i>	1487
<i>Acts</i>	1519

LETTERS



Followers of Jesus grow and spread as the good news of his life is passed on. Letters from their leaders—Paul, primarily, but also Peter, John, James and others—remind Jesus' followers of what God has done and continues to do in them. The new churches are God's dwelling place on earth, and the focal points where he is beginning to transform the world. The letters offer encouragement and direction to communities charged to be God's agents of justice.

<i>Romans</i>	1561
<i>1 Corinthians</i>	1583
<i>2 Corinthians</i>	1603
<i>Galatians</i>	1616
<i>Ephesians</i>	1625
<i>Philippians</i>	1635
<i>Colossians</i>	1643
<i>1 Thessalonians</i>	1651
<i>2 Thessalonians</i>	1659
<i>1 Timothy</i>	1665
<i>2 Timothy</i>	1674
<i>Titus</i>	1681
<i>Philemon</i>	1687
<i>Hebrews</i>	1693
<i>James</i>	1710
<i>1 Peter</i>	1719
<i>2 Peter</i>	1726
<i>1 John</i>	1733
<i>2 & 3 John</i>	1741
<i>Jude</i>	1746

APOCALYPSE



The book of Revelation reveals the hidden nature of God's battle to set the world right. Meant to encourage believers who are suffering, it reveals the deeper significance of their pain and encourages them with a vision of the final flourishing of God's creation. Using strange and sometimes difficult symbolism, Revelation shows the tumultuous struggle against evil, with a very fitting ending.

<i>Revelation</i>	1753
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God's Justice began in Hyderabad, India, where Joseph D'Souza and the Good Shepherd/OM India Ministries wanted a Bible that would highlight God's passionate concern for justice. This led to an international convocation in Hyderabad of approximately thirty-five people, all involved in justice issues in their home countries. Such organizations as International Justice Mission, Compassion and World Vision were represented.

After meeting for the better part of the week, the convocation agreed that a Bible emphasizing the theme of justice was needed. But it must be an international effort; Westerners, alone, could not speak for the global church. And it must be a Bible that offered deep and timeless commentary, rather than superficial or trendy slogans.

It fell to me to lead this effort editorially. I spent the better part of a year traveling on five continents and testing ideas with Christian leaders. I also read widely. The key task was to gather the fifty-six writers who have produced *God's Justice*. I began with my contacts from a generation of reporting internationally on behalf of *Christianity Today* magazine and the Lausanne Committee, as well as service with the Langham Partnership. I extended the network outward using my contacts' recommendations.

These writers—biblical scholars and activists—come from every continent. They were given guidelines as to format but great freedom as to content. I want to especially thank Havilah Dharamraj and Christopher Wright for their great and generous help. When I was befuddled in the editing process, they came to my rescue, several times.

God's Justice represents a new kind of Bible, not only because of its emphasis on the story of God's justice, but also because of its truly international character. For two thousand years we have known that God's kingdom represents members of "every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev 5:9), but only now has it been possible to gather them to work on a common publication. This is a new and wonderful day.

It takes a great team to produce a Bible such as this, and I have been privileged to work with outstanding colleagues such as Nate Young who, along with Sharon Oleniczak, designed both the cover and the interior pages. John Sloan, editor par excellence, served as a great liaison with Zondervan, while Daniel Johnson copyedited and Verlyn Verbrugge and Nancy Erickson did theological and biblical review.

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Revelation





Joshua
Judges
Ruth
1 Samuel
2 Samuel
1 Kings
2 Kings
1 & 2 Chronicles
Ezra
Nehemiah
Esther



INTRODUCING RUTH

by Emily J. Choge Kerama

Not long ago we buried a thirty-year-old man who left behind a young widow and two tiny children. It was a very sad occasion because he had died of AIDS. Nowadays, people live very long with AIDS because of antiretrovirals (ARVs), but he did not seek treatment because of personal fears and stigma. Now his wife was left behind with two little children. The difficult question was how they would be provided for. She does not have much formal education, and her husband had been her only source of support.

In traditional Africa, as in ancient Israelite society, there were systems in place to provide for young widows. They would be inherited by a brother of the deceased, who would see that she and her children were provided for. This form of levirate marriage was seen as the best solution. However, because of rapid social change in Africa the custom of levirate marriage has been abandoned and is sometimes abused. It was the mainstay of justice for widows in Africa, but now we have to rethink.

Some communities continue levirate marriage, but it has become a form of injustice. Atrocious stories are told of what happens to widows, especially those whose husbands have died of AIDS. If she is suspected to have caused the death of her husband, for example, she may have to prove her innocence through such unhygienic rituals as drinking the water used to wash her husband's corpse.

Some communities have abandoned levirate marriage, but widows remain at the home of their husbands with no provision. In an effort to get income to support their families and to fulfill their sexual needs, they practice prostitution, becoming agents for the spread of HIV/AIDS. I believe the church needs to think seriously about what is justice for these widows in Africa. We need to interact with various cultural traditions in Africa and the world over to provide justice for widows and orphans, and for women in general.

The story of Ruth offers us an opportunity to see how justice works for vulnerable individuals through structures built into ancient Israelite society. Justice in the Old Testament is seen in caring for widows, orphans, the poor and foreigners (Exod 22:21–22; 23:9). The means for caring for widows are gleaning (Lev 19:9–10; 23:22; Deut 24:19–22), which is a short-term solution, and levirate marriage, which is a long-term intervention (Deut 25:5–10). These two practices are brought out clearly in the book of Ruth. When Naomi, Ruth and Orpah lose their husbands, it is a sad and tragic situation, but God has built structures into the Israelite social system to ensure that the family name will not be decimated. In my community, the Nandi in Kenya, when a man dies without an heir, it is termed as *Kome maat*, literally, “the fire has gone out.” In this Israelite family we will see how God's justice brings back the “fire” into the family of Elimelek, through the marriage of Ruth to Boaz, a relative of Elimelek. The story highlights the witness to justice coming from an unlikely source: a poor woman, a foreigner and a widow. It also helps us to think of situations in our own world where marriage to a rich relative might not be the solution for vulnerable women as it was for Ruth. It makes us ask ourselves what we can do so that they are treated with justice.

Emily J. Choge Kerama (Kenya) is senior lecturer at Moi University, Eldoret. She chairs Uasin Gishu Children's FORUM, which brings together all organizations that work with vulnerable children in Eldoret, Kenya. She is also chairperson of the Advisory Board of BethanyKids, an NGO that helps children with disabilities to access medical and surgical care, and a founding member of African Christian Initiation Program (ACIP), a community-based program that helps young people to transition from childhood to adulthood.

¹ In the days when the judges ruled,^a there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. ²The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

³Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, ⁵both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

⁶When Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. ⁷With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

⁸Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. ⁹May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."

Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud ¹⁰and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."

¹¹But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? ¹²Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me — even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons — ¹³would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has turned against me!"

¹⁴At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵"Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."

^a 1 Traditionally *judged*

1:1 Famine Famines are common in Africa. One way people respond is by moving to a neighboring country or village to obtain food. It happens so frequently we have a word for it in four different communities in western Kenya. The word is *kosuma* or *kesumet*. Elimelek's family is in danger of death due to famine so it goes to the next county, Moab, to escape. In modern society migrations for those in search of economic survival are also common. Economic refugees often move to western countries as they seek to escape from joblessness and poverty in their homelands. The plight of Elimelek's family speaks to all these situations.

1:5 Multiple Deaths in the Family The cruel hand of death, which they tried to escape, catches up with Elimelek and his family in Moab. The result is three widows with no male heir—a tragedy in Israelite society as in some African communities, since there is no one

to carry on the family name. The question arises: How is this situation to be handled? Many African communities try to remedy it by what is called widow inheritance or levirate marriage. But as mentioned in the introduction, some rituals associated with this practice in the modern day do grave injustice to the widow. There is a need to examine death rituals to see whether or not they empower the women and children who are left behind.

1:6–10 A Glimmer of Hope There is some glimmer of hope when Naomi hears that "the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them" (v. 6). But before Naomi goes back to her original home, she offers the young women the opportunity to go back to their homes. Levirate marriage is impossible: she is too old to bear any more sons, and even if she were able, the young women could not wait for them. Orpah takes the most reasonable option. Ruth refuses to go.



¹⁶ But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. ¹⁷ Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.” ¹⁸ When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

¹⁹ So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, “Can this be Naomi?”

²⁰ “Don’t call me Naomi,^a” she told them. “Call me Mara,^b because the Almighty^c has made my life very bitter. ²¹ I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted^d me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.”

²² So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

2 Now Naomi had a relative on her husband’s side, a man of standing from the clan of Elimelek, whose name was Boaz.

² And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, “Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor.”

Naomi said to her, “Go ahead, my daughter.” ³ So she went out, entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelek.

⁴ Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, “The LORD be with you!”

“The LORD bless you!” they answered.

⁵ Boaz asked the overseer of his harvesters, “Who does that young woman belong to?”

⁶ The overseer replied, “She is the Moabite who came back from Moab with Naomi. ⁷ She said, ‘Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.’ She came into the field and has remained here from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter.”

⁸ So Boaz said to Ruth, “My daughter, listen to me. Don’t go and glean in another field and don’t go away from here. Stay here with the women who work for me. ⁹ Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the women. I have told the men not to

^a 20 Naomi means pleasant.

^b 20 Mara means bitter.

^c 20 Hebrew *Shaddai*; also in verse 21

^d 21 Or *has testified against*

1:16–17 Taking a Vow These words have been memorialized as the perfect vows for marriage between a man and a woman. Yet in the original context they are words of commitment from Ruth to her mother-in-law, Naomi. Against all stereotypes of mother-in-law relationships, Ruth throws in her lot with an old, tired, bitter widow. What is more, her commitment goes beyond Naomi. She boldly acclaims, “Your people will be my people and your God my God” (v. 16). By her commitment to Naomi, Ruth declares her commitment to the God of justice. Justice is not for the public sphere alone. It needs to show itself in just relations within the private sphere of the family.

2:2–3 Gleaning Once in Bethlehem Ruth takes the initiative to glean in the fields. Gleaning is another institution of justice for the poor in the Old Testament (Lev 19:9–10; 23:22; Deut 24:19–22). Whenever farmers harvest, they must leave some for the poor. A form of social justice for the poor is built into the system. What structures of justice in our communities ensure that those who are poor will not fall into cracks? Some compare this system to welfare structures within Western governments, which offer special forms of financial support to the destitute or the unemployed. In the developing world there are no such government structures, and the safety net provided

by clan members has been eroded.

Ruth gleans from the field of Boaz, who is from her late father-in-law’s clan. Within this social structure, clan members stand for each other as a form of social security. In Israel the clan member is known as the *goel* or guardian-redeemer. The rapid breakdown of the social system in Africa has meant that such communal support is fast dying out. One needs to ask how the strengths of these communal ties can be revived without breeding overdependency or putting an undue burden on some members of the family.

2:8–12 Ruth’s Kindness Returned Boaz the relative offers protection and provision for Ruth. He notes that this is in return for what Ruth has done for her mother-in-law, Naomi. What we do for others will come back to us. Doing kind acts emulates the justice of God, who protects those who are vulnerable.

It has been said that the health of a community is measured by how it treats those who are vulnerable. Ruth is most vulnerable as a poor woman, a widow, a jobless foreigner. God’s justice is seen in Boaz’s acts of providing care and protection. What is our attitude to those who are poor, foreign, disabled or at the margins of society? How do we treat them?



lay a hand on you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled.”

¹⁰At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She asked him, “Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me — a foreigner?”

¹¹Boaz replied, “I’ve been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband — how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. ¹²May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.”

¹³“May I continue to find favor in your eyes, my lord,” she said. “You have put me at ease by speaking kindly to your servant — though I do not have the standing of one of your servants.”

¹⁴At mealtime Boaz said to her, “Come over here. Have some bread and dip it in the wine vinegar.”

When she sat down with the harvesters, he offered her some roasted grain. She ate all she wanted and had some left over. ¹⁵As she got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men, “Let her gather among the sheaves and don’t reprimand her. ¹⁶Even pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don’t rebuke her.”

¹⁷So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. Then she threshed the barley she had gathered, and it amounted to about an ephah.^a ¹⁸She carried it back to town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gathered. Ruth also brought out and gave her what she had left over after she had eaten enough.

¹⁹Her mother-in-law asked her, “Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you!”

Then Ruth told her mother-in-law about the one at whose place she had been working. “The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz,” she said.

²⁰“The LORD bless him!” Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. “He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead.” She added, “That man is our close relative; he is one of our guardian-redeemers.^b”

²¹Then Ruth the Moabite said, “He even said to me, ‘Stay with my workers until they finish harvesting all my grain.’”

²²Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, “It will be good for you, my daughter, to go with the women who work for him, because in someone else’s field you might be harmed.”

²³So Ruth stayed close to the women of Boaz to glean until the barley and wheat harvests were finished. And she lived with her mother-in-law.

3 One day Ruth’s mother-in-law Naomi said to her, “My daughter, I must find a home^c for you, where you will be well provided for. ²Now Boaz, with whose women you have worked, is a relative of ours. Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. ³Wash, put on perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don’t let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴When

^a ¹⁷ That is, probably about 30 pounds or about 13 kilograms ^b ²⁰ The Hebrew word for *guardian-redeemer* is a legal term for one who has the obligation to redeem a relative in serious difficulty (see Lev. 25:25-55). ^c ¹ Hebrew *find rest* (see 1:9)

2:20 Naomi’s Reaction “[God] has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead. This man is ... one of our guardian-redeemers.” Naomi sees the favor Ruth receives as evidence of God’s continuing justice. What about our familial relations—are they working for justice or injustice? Do the families support one another so that someone in need can be rescued?

3:1 Naomi Scheming Naomi seeks to find a long-term solution for Ruth—a husband. In traditional societies marriages are arranged. A woman will move from her father’s home to the husband’s home, and if she is a widow like Ruth, the arrangement is a levirate marriage

through the guardian-redeemer. This is built into the Israelite social justice system so that widows are provided for. How are widows treated in your community, especially those who have not had formal education? In some African communities widows are deprived of all their support. They are physically abused, sexually exploited and materially deprived. Many have to resort to prostitution to earn a living. With the breakdown of traditional society their lives are in real danger—especially in situations where AIDS is rampant. Naomi’s scheme reminds Boaz of his duty to be a redeemer to Ruth and Naomi. Are there schemes or strategies we can put in place so that our daughters and sons are provided for?



he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do.”

⁵ “I will do whatever you say,” Ruth answered. ⁶ So she went down to the threshing floor and did everything her mother-in-law told her to do.

⁷ When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down. ⁸ In the middle of the night something startled the man; he turned — and there was a woman lying at his feet!

⁹ “Who are you?” he asked.

“I am your servant Ruth,” she said. “Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer^a of our family.”

¹⁰ “The LORD bless you, my daughter,” he replied. “This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. ¹¹ And now, my daughter, don’t be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character. ¹² Although it is true that I am a guardian-redeemer of our family, there is another who is more closely related than I. ¹³ Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to do his duty as your guardian-redeemer, good; let him redeem you. But if he is not willing, as surely as the LORD lives I will do it. Lie here until morning.”

¹⁴ So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before anyone could be recognized; and he said, “No one must know that a woman came to the threshing floor.”

¹⁵ He also said, “Bring me the shawl you are wearing and hold it out.” When she did so, he poured into it six measures of barley and placed the bundle on her. Then he^b went back to town.

¹⁶ When Ruth came to her mother-in-law, Naomi asked, “How did it go, my daughter?”

Then she told her everything Boaz had done for her ¹⁷ and added, “He gave me these six measures of barley, saying, ‘Don’t go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.’”

¹⁸ Then Naomi said, “Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today.”

4 Meanwhile Boaz went up to the town gate and sat down there just as the guardian-redeemer^c he had mentioned came along. Boaz said, “Come over here, my friend, and sit down.” So he went over and sat down.

² Boaz took ten of the elders of the town and said, “Sit here,” and they did so. ³ Then he said to the guardian-redeemer, “Naomi, who has come back from Moab, is selling the piece of land that belonged to our relative Elimelek. ⁴ I thought I should bring the matter to your attention and suggest that you buy it in the presence of these seated here and in the presence

^a 9 The Hebrew word for *guardian-redeemer* is a legal term for one who has the obligation to redeem a relative in serious difficulty (see Lev. 25:25-55); also in verses 12 and 13. ^b 15 Most Hebrew manuscripts; many Hebrew manuscripts, Vulgate and Syriac *she* ^c 1 The Hebrew word for *guardian-redeemer* is a legal term for one who has the obligation to redeem a relative in serious difficulty (see Lev. 25:25-55); also in verses 3, 6, 8 and 14.

3:10 Ruth Plays a Part Though Naomi hatches up the plot, it will not succeed without Ruth’s cooperation. She shows kindness to Boaz and Naomi by accepting this arrangement. It seems she has a choice to go after younger men, but she chooses Boaz, who is older.

The story reminds me of a prominent elderly widow in Kenya who married a much younger man. She recounted her loneliness and lack of companionship as an older widow and a woman. The only response from her family and Kenyan society was to censure her. Ageism is another common injustice in our society. In traditional Africa those who are older were cared for and respected for their wisdom, but today neglect and mistreatment are common. How do we treat those who are old? They are also vulnerable.

4:1 Legal Transactions The legal transaction at the gate seals the transaction. Justice for widows has to be put into public documents. It should not be a matter of charity. Proper procedures need to be followed. Much in Africa has been oral, but this needs to be documented. In Kenya, the 2010 constitution enshrines the rights of widows and orphans. However, the implementation has to trickle down to the grass roots. The church in every community needs to affirm and help the community to adopt legal procedures that will protect the widow and the children. It should not be left to personal interpretation. Men should also be encouraged to draft clear wills so that their wives are protected in the event of their deaths. The transactions for Ruth are done at the gate and in broad daylight. Marriage matters are not a private matter.



of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, do so. But if you^a will not, tell me, so I will know. For no one has the right to do it except you, and I am next in line.”

“I will redeem it,” he said.

⁵Then Boaz said, “On the day you buy the land from Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the^b dead man’s widow, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property.”

⁶At this, the guardian-redeemer said, “Then I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it.”

⁷(Now in earlier times in Israel, for the redemption and transfer of property to become final, one party took off his sandal and gave it to the other. This was the method of legalizing transactions in Israel.)

⁸So the guardian-redeemer said to Boaz, “Buy it yourself” And he removed his sandal.

⁹Then Boaz announced to the elders and all the people, “Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelek, Kilion and Mahlon. ¹⁰I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, Mahlon’s widow, as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from his hometown. Today you are witnesses!”

¹¹Then the elders and all the people at the gate said, “We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the family of Israel. May you have standing in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem.

¹²Through the offspring the LORD gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.”

¹³So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When he made love to her, the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. ¹⁴The women said to Naomi: “Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! ¹⁵He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth.”

¹⁶Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. ¹⁷The women living there said, “Naomi has a son!” And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

¹⁸This, then, is the family line of Perez:

Perez was the father of Hezron,

¹⁹Hezron the father of Ram,

Ram the father of Amminadab,

²⁰Amminadab the father of Nahshon,

Nahshon the father of Salmon,^c

^a 4 Many Hebrew manuscripts, Septuagint, Vulgate and Syriac; most Hebrew manuscripts *he* ^b 5 Vulgate and Syriac; Hebrew (see also Septuagint) *Naomi and from Ruth the Moabite, you acquire the* ^c 20 A few Hebrew manuscripts, some Septuagint manuscripts and Vulgate (see also verse 21 and Septuagint of 1 Chron. 2:11); most Hebrew manuscripts *Salma*

4:13 Joy Comes in the Morning There is rejoicing at the birth of a son, not just for Ruth but for Naomi. This recognizes the interconnectedness of community. Amazingly, in a community that values sons they say, “[Ruth] is better to you than seven sons” (4:15). Ruth’s radical choice to stick with Naomi reverses the fortunes not only of Naomi but also of the whole lineage of Elimelek. They have traveled from death to life, from destruction to restoration.

Imagine if Ruth had not agreed to follow Naomi and to risk her life in a foreign land. What would have happened to this family? When restorative justice is done in family relationships through the spontaneous response of

members, sometimes following procedures established by God, this can be the result. From Ruth’s brave choice the lineage and ancestry of the “prince of life and the bringer of justice” is ensured.

As one writer says, “To be sure, from time to time there may be some change in life that we may attribute only to the intervention of God, but more often God is at work through the everyday actions of faithful people seeking to manifest divine loyalty in their interactions with those around them.” The story of Ruth demonstrates how we can do justice and emulate the God of justice in our daily interactions, especially our closest interactions within the family.



²¹Salmon the father of Boaz,
Boaz the father of Obed,
²²Obed the father of Jesse,
and Jesse the father of David.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON RUTH

1. What is the picture of God's justice that you get as you read the story of Ruth and Naomi? Why do you think we don't get this picture all the time?
2. What should the church do in your society to see that structures are in place to protect the vulnerable members of the society, the weak, the old, the widows, the children, the sick, the disabled, and the foreigner? What can you individually commit yourself to do towards reducing poverty among women?
3. Are there restorative customs in your community that should be upheld so they can bring justice to the vulnerable? Are there any negative or corrupted traditions that are unjust to the vulnerable members of the community?
4. Have there been times in your life when you felt that God intervened directly in your circumstances? How have you experienced God working for you through the lives of other people? In what ways do you sense that God might be using you to make a difference in the world?

PRAYER

Come, O Holy Spirit!

Come, open us to the wonder, beauty, and dignity of the diversity found in each culture, in each face, and in each experience we have of the other among us.

Come, fill us with generosity

as we are challenged to let go and allow others to share with us
the goods and beauty of earth.

Come, heal the divisions

that keep us from seeing the face of Christ in all men, women, and children.

Come, free us to stand with and for those

who must leave their own lands in order to find work, security, and welcome in a new land,
one that has enough to share.

Come, bring us understanding, inspiration, wisdom, and

the courage needed to embrace change and stay on the journey.

Come, O Holy Spirit,

show us the way.

—*The Justice Prayer, Justice for Immigrants Campaign*







Romans
1 Corinthians
2 Corinthians
Galatians
Ephesians
Philippians
Colossians
1 Thessalonians
2 Thessalonians
1 Timothy
2 Timothy
Titus
Philemon
Hebrews
James
1 Peter
2 Peter
1 John
2 & 3 John
Jude



INTRODUCING PHILEMON

by Andy Crouch

Subjects of the Roman Empire could no more imagine their society without slavery than Americans can imagine their society without electricity, according to biblical scholar N. T. Wright. Slavery was simply the way all sorts of things got done, so common and essential that it faded into the background for nearly every Roman, whatever their status—citizen, freeman, or slave.

Roman slavery differed in important ways from the slavery that was sustained in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries AD by the three-cornered, transatlantic slave trade. It was not justified primarily on race. The Greco-Roman world had a less clear “color consciousness” than most societies today. Slaves came from every corner of the empire.

And Roman slavery was far more intimate than most nineteenth-century plantation slavery, or indeed than modern-day forms such as bonded labor in Southeast Asia, where children and adults are made to work to pay off debts. Most Romans were part of a *familias*, a Latin word that means much more than just a biological or even extended family. The *familias*, or household, would include not just a married couple, their children, and other relatives, but also business and political “clients” of the male head of the household (the *paterfamilias*) and some number of slaves. The *paterfamilias* exercised an unquestioned legal right over the life and liberty of his slaves (as well as wife and children) that has no parallel in any country’s laws today. The closest parallels today are informal (and often illegal) systems of domestic servitude—whether Arab households that confiscate their Filipino or Indian maids’ passports and force them to work without just compensation or freedom to leave, or urban households in Haiti that take in rural children as household servants through the system known as *restavek*.

Where English distinguishes clearly between “slaves” on the one hand and “employees” or “servants” on the other, in Paul’s world the Greek word *doulos* meant all of the above, usually in the form of a profoundly unequal relationship where a powerful owner could control nearly every aspect of his slaves’ lives. And yet slaves could also be entrusted with the family’s most precious business, educating their children and conveying the countless messages, greetings, payments and requests that sustained every *familias*’s network of relationships and web of obligations.

While slaves were part of the household, they were not at all, in our modern sense, part of the family. The bonds of love and natural affection that constrained a *paterfamilias*’s power over his wife and children, or the bonds of mutual obligation and protection that came with his relationships with his clients, did not apply to slaves. Ultimately slavery was based on violence and coercion. Every *paterfamilias* understood that a slave who could gain his freedom would do so—and there were few greater gifts a *paterfamilias* could bestow than manumission, the release from slavery (usually followed by the slave becoming one of his master’s clients, so that even freed slaves would remain part of the household). Some slaves would seize their freedom if they had a chance. Slaves could and did run away, often taking some of their masters’ treasure with them.

This background helps us understand the “household codes” that appear in other New Testament letters, especially in Paul’s letters to the Ephesians (Eph 5:21–6:9) and the Colossians (Col 3:18–4:1), but also in 1 Peter 2–3. The apostles seek to reorient the way members of the *familias* relate to one another in light of the gospel. They address husbands and wives, parents and children—and masters and slaves.

To many modern readers, the household codes take slavery distressingly for granted. Peter even calls on slaves to accept their masters’ authority when they are abused by them. But to ancient readers, the most striking thing about the household codes would have been the repeated stress on the responsibilities of masters to love their slaves—a completely novel and unexpected theme in the ancient world.

In Philemon we have a letter that addresses not just slavery in general, but a specific *paterfamilias* and his runaway slave, Onesimus. And while this is the shortest of Paul’s New Testament letters, in a few short lines it sets in motion an earthquake through the bedrock of Philemon’s world—a rearrangement of relationships among Christians that would ultimately lead to the end of slavery as the Romans knew it.

Paul’s letter is full of warmth and joy at having an occasion to write his dear friend Philemon. But it is also full of the language of the *familias*, deployed in surprising ways. As the *paterfamilias* of a large household (one that could host the city’s Christian church), Philemon would have played the role of patron for any number of clients. But Paul writes as Philemon’s own patron, reminding him that Philemon owes him his “very self” (Phlm 19) and that Paul awaits some “benefit” for his patronage in return (v. 20). Paul can even expect Philemon’s “obedience”—language that would normally be used of slaves toward their masters (v. 21)!

Amazingly enough, Paul’s request is not just that Philemon grant Onesimus manumission—though that would be extraordinary enough for a slave who has betrayed his master’s trust. Because Onesimus has become a Christian, apparently through Paul’s ministry, he is no longer to be considered just a slave. He will not even just be a client, like an ordinary freeman would become. He is Paul’s “son” (v. 10), and Paul asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus back as “a dear brother” (v. 16). The language of slavery has been replaced by the language of kinship and family.

Imagine being in the church, gathered in Philemon’s home on a Sunday morning, and hearing this letter read aloud for the first time. Suddenly everything in your world turns upside down. A prisoner is now a patron, with the *paterfamilias* as his client; a slave is now a son; and all three are now “brothers,” on equal footing before the “brother” named Timothy and Apphia their “sister.” And Paul himself is on the way, he hopes, to visit, to stay in this very home to see whether this fledgling community is indeed living out the new “partnership... in the faith” (v. 6) that the gospel calls for.

The letter to Philemon did not end slavery everywhere in the Christian community even in Paul’s time. (Though in places where Christianity became the dominant faith, slavery did eventually end.) Slavery’s horrible resurgence among Europeans and Americans in the seventeenth century, and in too many places in the world today, reminds us that it is far too easy for God’s image bearers to forget that they are meant to love one another like sisters and brothers. But this little letter also stands as a reminder that even when injustice is deeply woven into a human society, as slavery was in Rome’s empire, the good news of Christ Jesus can loosen chains, bring centuries-long institutions of injustice to an end, and reunite brothers and sisters in God’s great and generous household.

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¹ Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker — ² also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier — and to the church that meets in your home:

³ Grace and peace to you^a from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

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. ⁷ Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

⁸ Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹ 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 — ¹⁰ that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus,^b who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

¹² 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. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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 very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

¹⁷ So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back — not to mention that you owe me your very self. ²⁰ I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

²² And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.

^a 3 The Greek is plural; also in verses 22 and 25; elsewhere in this letter “you” is singular. ^b 10 *Onesimus* means *useful*.

14 Giving Dignity It is clear that Paul expects Philemon to free Onesimus on his return. But Paul also respects Philemon's own freedom. As Philemon's patron, Paul could be bold enough to “order” him (v. 8), but Paul's gospel demands that every person, even a slave owner, be given the dignity of free action—the same dignity Paul is asking Philemon to give to Onesimus.

17 The Language of Partnership Paul's letter is full

of “family” language, but it is also full of “partnership” language. The family language stresses the deep affection and mutual obligation that are meant to characterize Christian relationships, no matter what our status or privilege in the wider world; the language of “partnership” stresses our need for one another in advancing the gospel. Both emphasize the worth and dignity of every member of God's household.





²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. ²⁴ And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.

²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON PHILEMON

1. Why do you think Paul never directly commands, or even directly asks, Philemon to do what Paul obviously wants him to do?
2. Are there institutionalized forms of injustice in our own world that we take for granted just as much as Philemon and his household would have taken slavery for granted? What are the “fault lines” in those institutions—the ways they lead people to measures as desperate as Onesimus’s flight from his master?
3. Paul describes himself as a “prisoner of Christ Jesus” when the more natural phrase would surely have been “a prisoner of the Roman Empire.” How does this way of describing his condition change the way Philemon and his church think of Paul’s imprisonment? Does it strengthen Paul’s request that he writes as Jesus’ “prisoner”?
4. Paul describes Onesimus as Philemon’s “fellow man” as well as “dear brother.” How would these ways of describing Onesimus likely have challenged Philemon’s assumptions about his own identity? What would it take for Philemon to see a former slave this way?

PRAYER

God, we are so used to seeing ourselves as individuals with personal destinies. Remind us that we are made in your image, the image of community. Help us to love each other and be made one as you are one. Whisper your love to us and let us whisper your love to the world today. Amen.

—*Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals*