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Mordecai tells Esther of Haman's decree. The book of Philemon and the New Testament teaching on slavery.

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Transcript

Esther chapter 4. When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city. And he cried out with a loud and bitter cry. He went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one was allowed to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth.

And in every province, wherever the king's command and his decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and many of them lay in sackcloth and ashes. When Esther's young women and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed. She sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth, but he would not accept them.

Then Esther called for Hathak, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to

attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what this was and why it was. Hathak went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her, and command her to go to the king to beg his favour and plead with him on behalf of her people.

And Hathak went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. Then Esther spoke to Hathak and commanded him to go to Mordecai and say, All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law, to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden sceptre, so that he may live. But as for me, I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days.

And they told Mordecai what Esther had said. Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish.

And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this? Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law.

And if I perish, I perish. Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him. Esther chapter 4 opens with Mordecai's anguished response to the news of Haman's decree.

He tears his clothes, puts on sackcloth and ashes, goes out into the midst of the city, and cries with a loud and bitter cry. Rabbi David Foreman notes that this reference to the loud and bitter cry recalls Esau's cry in Genesis chapter 27 verse 34. As soon as Esau heard the words of his father, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, Bless me, even me also, O my father.

We have already observed allusions to the rivalry between Esau and Jacob in the character of Haman the Agagite. Haman the Agagite is the descendant of Agag, the Amalekite. King Saul, Israel's first Benjamite king, had failed to wipe out the Amalekites as he was instructed to do and was rejected from the throne as a result.

The rivalry with the Amalekites went long back in Israel's history, all the way back to the story of Esau and Jacob. Esau's response to having lost both the birthright and the blessing was this great and bitter cry. We also see parallels between Esau's response

when he later lifts up his voice and weeps and King Saul's response in 1 Samuel chapter 24 verse 16 when he lifts up his voice and weeps as he acknowledges that David is the true heir of the kingdom and that the Lord will bless him and deliver the kingdom into his hand.

This great history, the history of the rivalry between Esau and Jacob and the tragic history of the tribe of Benjamin can be heard in the background of this episode and in much of the rest of the book. Indeed it can shed some light upon what has happened to this point. In Genesis chapter 27 verse 29 we can see the blessing that was given to Jacob over his brother Esau.

Let people serve you and nations bow down to you. Be Lord over your brothers and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you and blessed be everyone who blesses you.

Haman's fury against Mordecai was provoked by Mordecai's refusal to bow to him, the very blessing that Jacob had taken from Esau. Esau's response to the loss of the blessing to Jacob was a murderous anger. We read of this in verses 41 to 42 of that chapter.

Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him. And Esau said to himself, The days of mourning for my father are approaching. Then I will kill my brother Jacob.

But the words of Esau, her oldest son, were told to Rebekah. So she sent and called Jacob her youngest son and said to him, Behold your brother Esau comforts himself about you by planning to kill you. In Haman the Agagite, his descendant, Esau's murderous rage against Jacob his brother has blown up into a genocidal rage against an entire people, provoked by the failure of one man to bow.

As we hear this story in the background perhaps we can also recognise connections between different details. We might think about the relationship between Rebekah and Jacob and the relationship between Esther and Mordecai. The two competing brothers, Esau and Jacob, are here, Haman and Mordecai.

Perhaps we might also see ways in which King Ahasuerus is like Isaac. Mordecai is not alone in this mourning. There is a more general despair among the Jews in every province.

Separated from the commoners and the regular life of the city and the palace, Esther does not seem to be aware of Haman's decree. Her impression at this point might simply be that Mordecai is destitute. He has fallen into extreme poverty and so she will send out clothes to assist him.

Perhaps in this gift of clothes from Esther to Mordecai we might hear some element of an echo of the story of Genesis chapter 27 where Rebekah gave clothes to Jacob so that he

might go before his father in disguise as Esau. When Esther inquires further, Mordecai informs her about the decree and asks her to plead with the king on behalf of the people. We must remember that to this point Esther had not disclosed her identity or her people of origin to the king.

She was the radiant, beautiful queen chosen from the common people. As Rabbi Foreman notes, this would enable her to stand for the whole nation of Persia as a common person of the realm. If she were to out herself as belonging to this hated national group, her symbolic role as the queen of all Persia would be thrown into jeopardy.

Besides, she informs Mordecai, one cannot simply enter into the king's presence. He has to summon you and if you enter his presence when not summoned you do so in jeopardy of your life. Esther had not been summoned at any point in the last month.

The question of approach to King Ahasuerus has been one throughout the book to this point. Vashti had failed to approach the king when she had been summoned. Bigthen and Teresh, two guardians of the king's threshold, had sought to transgress the threshold and lay hands upon the king.

The king's presence and approach to the king, as James Jordan has observed, is similar to approach to the throne of God. Those who enter unsummoned can be destroyed. Bigthen and Teresh could be compared to Nadab and Abihu.

A similar thing is going on in Genesis chapter 27 with the blessing of Isaac. In verses 11 and 12 of that chapter, Jacob expresses a similar hesitancy to Esther. But Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, Jacob had ended up approaching his father with food and wine but in a disguise as his brother.

Esther's approach to the king will have to be one in which she removes the disguise, in which she unveils herself as a member of the Jewish people. Mordecai responds by warning Esther but his warning is a surprising one. The concern that he expresses is not for the Jewish people but for Esther and her father's house.

If she fails to act, it will be her that loses out. Deliverance will arise from another quarter. Esther's name, if we were to render it in Hebrew, suggests the sense of hiding.

The story of Esther is in many respects a story of hiding. We might initially think of Esther hiding her identity when she goes into the king's house. However, the greater act of hiding can be seen in the Lord's hand.

The Lord is never mentioned by name in the book of Esther, yet his presence and action is everywhere. The book of Esther is a book in which we see the work of the Lord in acts of seeming chance, God's providence rules throughout. The book is packed full of seeming coincidences that advance the Lord's purpose and deliver his people.

Mordecai here expresses his confidence that the Lord's providence will achieve his purposes for his people. The Lord's promises concerning the Jews are an assurance that they will not finally be wiped out. Whatever Haman's decree, deliverance will arise for them from some quarter and Esther at this point seems to be the best situated.

The big picture is certain, the Lord will deliver his people. How Esther and her family will stand relative to this is what is really in the balance at this point. If she fails to act, she will bring disaster upon herself and her kindred, but the Jews will be saved.

Mordecai invites her to look at her situation differently, knowing that the Lord is in control of history and that the Jews will be delivered. It is not unreasonable to wonder whether she has been put in the position that she has as a divinely appointed means to deliver them. By pursuing the Lord's purposes where she is placed, she might prove to be a decisive instrument of the Lord's providence.

Rabbi Thormann suggests that we ought to read these verses against the backdrop of Numbers chapter 30 which concerns the making of vows and also their annulment. In verses 10-16 it speaks of the situation of a young woman who marries a husband. And if she vowed in her husband's house or bound herself by a pledge with an oath, and her husband heard of it, and said nothing to her, and did not oppose her, then all her vows shall stand, and every pledge by which she bound herself shall stand.

But if her husband makes them null and void on the day that he hears them, then whatever proceeds out of her lips concerning her vows or concerning her pledge of herself shall not stand. Her husband has made them void, and the Lord will forgive her. Any vow and any binding oath to afflict herself her husband may establish, or her husband may make void.

But if her husband says nothing to her from day to day, then he establishes all her vows, or all her pledges that are upon her. He has established them, because he said nothing to her on the day that he heard of them. But if he makes them null and void after he has heard of them, then he shall bear her iniquity.

These are the statutes that the Lord commanded Moses about a man and his wife, and about a father and his daughter, while she is in her youth within her father's house. As Rabbi Foreman recognises, several of the details of this passage in Numbers chapter 30 are mentioned in Esther chapter 4. There's the young woman who marries, there are instructions concerning the relationship with the spouse and their word, there's the reference to the father's house, silence is presented as assent and affirmation, and there's the urgency of speech. If she does not speak, she will be seen to affirm.

Foreman notes that the vowelisation of her husband in verse 14 is not original. Vowels are not found in the original unpointed Hebrew text, and there is a different way of vowelising the text, which, while clearly not the original meaning, is a play and mirror

image of it. The word rendered her husband could be rendered a woman.

This would yield something like the meaning, but if a woman says nothing to her husband from day to day, then she establishes all his vows or all his pledges that are upon him. She has established them, because she said nothing to her husband on the day that she heard of them. Now this is clearly not the original meaning of the text, but Mordecai seems to be playing upon it.

He is inviting Esther to see herself as the person that stands in the place of being able to annul the word of her spouse. If she speaks up at this time, she will be able to negate his word, but if she does not, her silence will count as assent and she will be judged. Esther responds positively to Mordecai's charge.

She will undertake this great and dangerous act of disclosing herself. However, before she does so, she asks for Mordecai to gather all the Jews together in Susa and to carry out a fast for her, and she will do the same with her young women. This fast for three days and three nights from the time of the Passover should make us think of the story of Christ.

Esther's life will hang in the balance for this period of time, and when the king raises her scepter, she will be, as it were, raised up. Her words at the end of her response, If I perish, I perish, should also remind us of the words of Jacob, as Judah pledged that he would bring Benjamin back safely from Egypt, as Joseph in disguise had instructed Jacob's sons to bring back their youngest brother with them. In Genesis chapter 43 verses 13-14, Take also your brother, and arise, go again to the man.

May God Almighty grant you mercy before the man, and may he send back your other brother and Benjamin. And as for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved. When we hear such linguistic parallels in scripture, our concern should be to discover whether they belong to a greater cluster of parallels that connect stories and their themes, not merely turns of phrase.

In the story of Joseph, it is Judah who intercedes for Benjamin. In the story of Esther, however, it is Benjaminites, Mordecai and Esther, who intercede on behalf of the Jews, the Judahites. The troubled story of Benjamin is woven throughout the background of the story of Esther.

Mordecai and Esther remind us of Joseph, the older brother of Benjamin. Mordecai and Esther seemingly arise from the line of King Saul. Like Saul, they are facing the threat of an Agagite.

Formerly Judah had interceded for Benjamin, and now the Benjaminites will intercede for the Judahites. In the story of Esther, troubled legacies are being laid to rest, good deeds once received are being repaid, and tragically unfinished tasks are being completed. A

question to consider, how many unlikely or coincidental events in the book of Esther can you think of in which we can see the hand of God's providence in action? The book of Philemon The book of Philemon I, Paul, an old man, and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus, I appeal to you for my child Anesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.

Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me. I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel.

But I prefer to do nothing without your consent, in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion, but of your own accord. For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bond-servant, but more than a bond-servant, as a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.

If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand. I will repay it, to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.

Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Philemon is the shortest of Paul's epistles, and after 3rd and 2nd John, the shortest book in the New Testament. Although other theories exist, it was most likely sent to Philemon in Colossae, at the same time as the epistle to the Colossians was sent there by the hand of Tychicus. It is written concerning a runaway slave named Anesimus.

Some in the later tradition have identified Anesimus with the Bishop of Ephesus, who was martyred in the reign of Domitian, possibly in the first half of the 90s AD. Slaves were a feature of the ancient world. When we think of slavery we tend to think of the race-based chattel slavery of the American antebellum South, which was fundamentally founded upon man-stealing.

Slavery in the Roman Empire was a vast and brutal institution. Much of Rome's economy depended heavily upon slavery, and hundreds of thousands of slaves were captured in wars in Europe and elsewhere. Others had been kidnapped by pirates.

Some slaves had been rescued from exposure as infants. A few sold themselves into slavery to improve their conditions. Some have estimated that over 30% of Roman society were slaves.

It is important that we recognise the greater complexities of the institution. In many less developed societies slavery could not easily be wished away. If a person was indebted or displaced, the choice might be between being a slave or suffering an extreme hunger and want.

Manumission, while an improvement in legal status, would probably not have been a step up in material conditions for many, but would have reduced them to destitution and the terrible indignities and cruelties of poverty in Roman society. The conditions enjoyed by slaves could vary widely. Harsh and inhumane treatment of slaves was very common.

However, in some cases slaves of wealthy and high status masters could enjoy influence and even wealth of their own. Masters provided the food, clothing and shelter that their slaves required. Other slaves could be valued and honoured members of the households that they served.

Slaves could be found doing all sorts of jobs in society, with many levels of expertise. Epictetus, who lived around the same time as Nesimus, became a great Stoic philosopher for instance. In Galatians chapter 4 Paul compares the condition of the child in his minority to the state of a slave.

The comparison could also work in the other direction. The slave was under the direct and practically absolute authority of another party over their actions, bodies and lives. They could be corporally punished by their masters.

Their position was one of great vulnerability, and very great many were used for sexual purposes and abused in this and other ways. However, slaves could often enjoy much greater material security and provision than freedmen, who, without a master to provide for their essential needs, were at greater risk of extreme poverty. In neither the Old nor the New Testament is slavery rejected as illegitimate in principle.

This is not, however, to suggest that either testament is ambivalent to the cultural practice. The Old Testament tells us stories of slaves, stories of Hagar and Eleazar of Damascus, slaves of Abraham. The story of Joseph, sold into slavery by his brothers.

Joseph illustrates both the ways that a slave could rise in their household, but also how vulnerable slaves were to oppression and mistreatment. The story of the children of Israel brutally oppressed by the Egyptians is another story of slavery. However, while oppression is a theme in some of these stories, it is not a universal feature.

Some slaves enjoyed great privileges. Eleazar of Damascus, prior to the births of Ishmael and Isaac, was going to inherit the entirety of Abraham's household. We also see in

Abraham sending his servant to find a bride for Isaac that that servant clearly enjoys great authority to act in Abraham's name and to manage his affairs.

The Egyptians were saved from starvation in the famine through giving themselves over to slavery to Pharaoh. Some slaves loved their masters, desired to remain in their masters' households for life, and performed a right to bind themselves to their masters. There were forms of slavery designed to allow poor women to marry into richer families.

The law reminds Israel of their own experience of slavery in Egypt, and while permitting them to own slaves, is concerned that the slaves are treated with justice and equity. Deuteronomy 15, verses 12-18 is an example of Old Testament teaching concerning slavery. If your brother, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you.

When you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress. As the Lord your God has blessed you, you shall give to him.

You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you, therefore I command you this today. But if he says to you, I will not go out from you, because he loves you and your household, since he is well off with you, then you shall take an oar, and put it through his ear into the door, and he shall be your slave for ever. And to your female slave you shall do the same.

It shall not seem hard to you when you let him go free from you, for at half the cost of a hired worker he has served you six years. So the Lord your God will bless you in all that you do. Treating slaves well was not really a matter of expediency in the law, expecting to get more work out of them.

It was a matter of basic morality secured by the Lord as the patron of slaves, and backed up by the rationale of Israel's own recollection of the experience of oppressive servitude. The New Testament continues in this same vein. Slavery is not directly condemned as an institution, but its cultural logic is radically undermined and replaced with a Christian logic that does not dispense with the form, but utterly changes its principles of operation.

Colossians 3.22-4.1 Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye service, as people please, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord, and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a master

in heaven. Ephesians 6.5-9 Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by way of eye service, as people please, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord, and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free.

Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with him. In Paul's teaching then, servants were encouraged either to act toward their earthly masters as those living out of a more fundamental state of servanthood, to a gracious, loving and good master, or to think of themselves as sons in relationship to Christ, acting obediently toward their earthly masters for his sake. Masters were to see themselves as slaves of a higher master, having this in common with their servants and being accountable for their treatment of them.

God is impartial, and unlike Roman courts, will not favour the unjust. God is the patron and the protector of the weak. Even more importantly, Christ himself came in the form of a servant, and the pattern of Christian ethics is set by a master who willingly assumed the path of service.

The New Testament is not an egalitarian document. It assumes and sometimes justifies a hierarchical order in society, with rulers, parents, husbands and masters occupying places over others, places which are not delegitimised. Perhaps more challenging to us, nowhere does the Scripture suggest that a person's soul is in jeopardy by virtue of possessing a slave.

This is not because the Scriptures are hesitant in calling out sin. However, nor is the Scripture simply a book legitimating and supporting the status quo. Slavery, while not delegitimised, is neither idealised nor meekly tolerated.

The Scripture frequently speaks into the institution to transform its operations on the basis of God's concern for the slave and the human kinship of the master and the slave, a kinship to which the Scripture constantly alerts us. This transformation is not undertaken for the purpose of rehabilitating the institution, though, as if slavery just needed a bit more spit and polish. Rather, throughout the Scripture the movement is towards release from slavery and into the independence, maturity and providence that slavery stifles and for whose lack it could often substitute.

While our society may commit itself to equality in principle, it often struggles in practice, as people clearly are not equal in their talents, abilities, capacities, their economic standing, their social and family backgrounds, the authority that they enjoy and any number of other criteria. While we talk about equality of opportunity or equality of outcome, for instance, we can try to realise equality in ways that set us up for constant

frustration, as, while there are areas where fairness must clearly be displayed, the natural differences between people will constantly produce diverging outcomes, and any attempt to level these outcomes will tend unfairly to stifle people in the expression of their gifts. Indeed, many of these attempts at equality can produce harsher situations, such as where the supposed justice of meritocracy leads to the justification of the much greater wealth or status of some being perceived as a natural right that they enjoy, when formerly it might have been attributed to the grace of God or unmerited fortune.

Such equality of opportunity may serve only to underline our great natural differences. Part of the power of the teaching that we find in Paul and in the rest of the New Testament, then, is the way that it speaks the levelling reality of the gospel into situations where social hierarchies are taken for granted, are not expected to disappear, and in some cases are even affirmed. The gospel does not abolish slavery, but it makes it impossible ever to think about it or practice it in the same way again, and, as many have observed, thereby sows the seed for the progressive social delegitimisation and the later abolition of the institution.

The gospel focuses its vision of equality beneath the surface of the social order. In the process it denies the social order finality, and insists that it be approached and regarded in terms of a more fundamental and determinative reality, given by virtue of the facts of human creation and redemption. Every human being is beyond exchange value, and is of incalculable worth in the sight of God.

Whoever someone is, wherever they stand in the social order, this is true of them. In the life of the church, in particular in the light of redemption, this fact is brought into fuller expression. For an institution like slavery, characterised by the negation of the personhood of others, and their reduction to mere possession, a true recognition of this fact would over time prove fatal.

And now we are in a better position to appreciate the power of Paul's argument in Philemon, which is shot through with the logic of the gospel. Onesimus fleeing from Philemon came to Paul, and apparently was converted through Paul's message. Paul sends him back to Philemon, but sends him back with an appeal.

Paul could have commanded Philemon. Philemon arguably owed Paul his spiritual life, and Paul was in a position where he could have laid requirements upon him. However, by appealing to him, he affords him the opportunity to act in the maturity and the freedom of love.

As Paul says, he desires Philemon's goodness not be by compulsion, but of his own accord. The gospel more generally is characterised by a rhetoric of appeal, exhortation and persuasion, rather than direct command. As persons acting in the freedom of the spirit, rather than under the command of the law, we are those who obey from the heart, and so we are appealed to as those who are mature, who are to obey from the heart,

and with reasons that have been given to us and internalised.

Prior to his escape, Anesimus was not a good servant to Philemon, but since his conversion he has become of great assistance to Paul, and will likewise be of great usefulness to Philemon. Receiving Anesimus back now, Philemon won't just be receiving a bond-servant, but someone beloved, as a now reformed man of his household, but also as a brother in Christ. Paul encourages Philemon to see God's hand in all of this.

Through Anesimus' departure, God has brought it about that Philemon is receiving him back as something much more dear than he ever was when he left. Verses 15-16 are not, I believe, referring to manumission. Receiving Anesimus back as a brother did not mean that he ceased to be Philemon's slave.

However, it would necessarily transform the way that Anesimus and Philemon treated each other from that point onwards, as brothers in Christ, and in the new humanity in Christ, also recognising their common dignity as human beings more generally, the master-slave relationship would take on a very different form, when occurring in the light of, and under the rule of, a much more fundamental reality. And at the heart of Paul's appeal is Paul's use of the work of Christ as a paradigm for his own appeal on Anesimus' behalf. So, if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.

If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand. I will repay it, to say nothing of your owing me, even your own self.

Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. In the Gospel, Christ, who was in the very form of God, took on the form of a servant, identifying with us, so that we, as we are found in him, might enjoy his riches.

Paul stands between Anesimus and Philemon, assuming all of the burden of Anesimus' debts and wrongs, and offers himself as a guarantor for them. He identifies fully with Anesimus, so that a glorious exchange can occur. Paul assumes Anesimus' debts, and Anesimus receives the welcome and the love that Paul himself would receive.

All of this rests upon the fellowship that we have in Christ, in which Christ has identified with us, so that we can enjoy his riches. However, this fellowship between head and body also calls forth a fellowship within the body, whereby we identify with each other, in whatever condition we may find ourselves. Rich must identify with poor, masters with slaves, men with women, rulers with subjects.

All must take concern for the other. Was Paul expecting Anesimus to be released? Perhaps the key consideration here is the cryptic statement in verse 21. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

What is the even more than I say? I am not persuaded that manumission is primarily

what Paul has in mind here. There was nothing wrong in principle in Paul's mind with a Christian owning a slave, or a Christian slave serving a master. However, the Gospel necessarily transforms such situations, and provokes godly acts of gracious creativity and imagination.

Philemon's relationship with Onesimus could not be the same after this, and Paul is certain that Philemon receiving Onesimus back will provoke Philemon to consider ways that his relationship with Onesimus can become richer and more characterized by grace. One possibility is that he might send Onesimus to Paul, who clearly has found Onesimus to be of great assistance to him in his work, and has a deep affection for him as his son in the Gospel. Onesimus might then have accompanied Paul as he travelled, assisting him in the work of the Gospel.

The possibility that Onesimus is the Bishop of Ephesus mentioned by Ignatius of Antioch invites further speculation. But whatever happened, the Gospel clearly transforms the relationship between slave and master, placing it on a completely different footing, denying it the ultimacy that it enjoyed in pagan society, and placing it firmly under the rule of Christ's grace. A question to consider, how might Paul's pattern of appeal here be adopted by Christians in our mission to those on the margins of our societies?