

Forward thinking from Philemon ...



“Begotten” in my Imprisonment

The great challenge in Christianity is where the “theory” meets the “reality” of daily living. In the case of Philemon, the custom of the culture was pitted against the principles passed on by Christ. Onesimus, the run away slave, should have been executed or severely punished, but Philemon is now facing an appeal by the apostle Paul for clemency for the slave based on foundations of the faith of Christ. The appeal is both personal and principled. Paul pleads on the basis of his personal friendship with Philemon, and the fact that Paul is now an aged prisoner. But he also petitions on the basis of scripture; he describes Onesimus as his child “whom I have begotten,” bringing all the precepts of the concept of what is embodied in *the new creation* to the fore.

- ◆ **Begotten** — The word *begotten* is the past participle of the older English verb *beget*, of which the past tense is *beget*, as in “Abraham *beget* Isaac.” *Beget* directly deals with a man fathering a child; the somewhat broader meaning has to do with a physical birth. Because of this physical meaning, many have assumed that the appellation of Jesus as “the only begotten Son” is a reference to his physical birth from Mary. But the apostle Paul, preaching to a predominately Jewish audience in Antioch of Pisidia, defined the word *begotten* as a description of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, a spiritual birth rather than a physical birth (Acts 13:32-35). Hence the Christ is described as “the first-born from the dead” (Colossians 1:18). The apostle Paul takes that meaning and then applies it to the spiritual birth of someone coming forth from the waters of immersion in the likeness of Jesus’ resurrection. Thus Onesimus was *begotten* at his immersion at the hands of Paul in Rome.

- ◆ **“Greater works”** — One of Jesus’ amazing statements comes from His talks with the apostles during the night in which He was betrayed. “Truly, truly, I say to you,” the Christ had commented, “he who believes in Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go to the Father” (John 14:12). The explanation that the future disciples of Christ would be able to do greater works than Jesus is this: Jesus walked on the water, healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, and raised the dead; the disciple of Christ walks sinners to the water, “heals the sick,” “gives sight to the blind,” and “raises the dead,” all of which occur in immersion into Christ. There was not one single individual *born again* during the years of Jesus’ earthly sojourn; hence those who would believe in Christ would be able to do greater works than Christ because He went to the Father before any of that could happen. The apostle Paul was able in this sense to *beget* Onesimus; he was directly involved in the process of Onesimus’ new birth as the one who taught and presumably immersed him.

- ◆ **Child of faith** — Onesimus, Timothy, and many others were Paul’s children of faith. This was not a distant, philosophical relationship. As Paul wrote to his spiritual children in Thessalonica, he reminded them, “We were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children” (1 Thessalonians 2:11). Properly understood, the spiritual bond between a person and his spiritual children is stronger and more permanent than the bond between a parent and his physical children.

So when Paul states, “I appeal to you for my child, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment,” it is to be hoped that Philemon would recognize the power and personal interest in that appeal. And may saints today recognize the power connected with *begotten*, be actively involved in helping others experience the true new birth, and be mindful and appreciative of the spiritual connection between those who are taught the gospel and those who teach it.

*Paul was involved
in the process of
Onesimus’ new
birth!*

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