



Forward thinking from Philemon ...

## "Perhaps"

There are many events and circumstances in the lives of people and Christians. While these events often seem random or even destructive, one of the overall portrayals that the scripture gives is that God is aware of, and — while allowing the free will of mankind to be executed — orchestrating the history of man so that His will is accomplished. As God spoke through the prophet Isaiah, He declared, "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8,9). While this statement of the All Wise is true as a general statement, it is specifically directed at the idea that God orchestrates the affairs of men in such a way that His word which goes forth from His mouth will not return to Him empty, and without accomplishing the purpose for which He sent it. "Seek from the book of the Lord, and read," enjoins the Most High, referring to those whose names have been written in the Lamb's book of life from the foundation of the world, "Not one of these will be missing; none will lack its mate. For His mouth has commanded, and His Spirit has gathered them" (Isaiah 34:16). There is a God who governs the affairs of men, and is working in the details as well as managing the big picture.

- **The circumstances** — Onesimus ran away from his Christian slave master Philemon in Colossae. From Colossae he would have had to find his way to the sea and passage thence to Rome, or he would have had to go by land from what is now western Turkey across the Bosphorus to the Balkans, then across the Balkan peninsula to Italy and thence to Rome. At Rome he would have had to search to find the prison wherein Paul was incarcerated, then arrange to meet the apostle. In either case, it was a long and complicated journey for a runaway slave, with many opportunities for "bad things" to happen on the way. But Onesimus made it, and was "begotten" by Paul while the apostle was still imprisoned. Paul then sent Onesimus back to Colossae as part of the team with other Christian men, and the slave obviously survived that journey as well.
- **The parting** — A slave's running away is clearly not a parting of company by mutual agreement. Philemon's character as indicated in the underlying tones of this epistle is that he is a dedicated Christian, and governs himself accordingly. While there may have been some frustration at the incident, and maybe some damaged property, Philemon would also have been concerned for the welfare of his slave. So Onesimus' disappearance would have caused quite a bit of consternation on the part of this good Christian man.
- **The "perhaps"** — The apostle, then, in comforting, encouraging, and appealing to Philemon, comments, "For *perhaps* he was for this reason parted from you for a while, that you should have him back forever" (Philemon 1:15). His point clearly is that all these circumstances might have been the necessary ones for Onesimus' conversion. But it is also clear that the apostle could not say definitely that they were.

**If *perhaps* is the strongest word the apostle could use, no else could use a stronger one.**

Even the apostle Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, could not definitely say what the connection between the circumstances connected with an unruly slave's rebellious departure, and the eventual conversion of the slave; the strongest word he could use was *perhaps*. If that is the strongest word the apostle could use, no one in future circumstances could use one stronger. For modern day saints, the lesson is that God is orchestrating, using people of all kinds in their strengths and weaknesses, in their obedience or rebellion, to accomplish His plan. Every Christian, then, needs to give thanks to God for all things, knowing that all things work together for good to those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose.

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