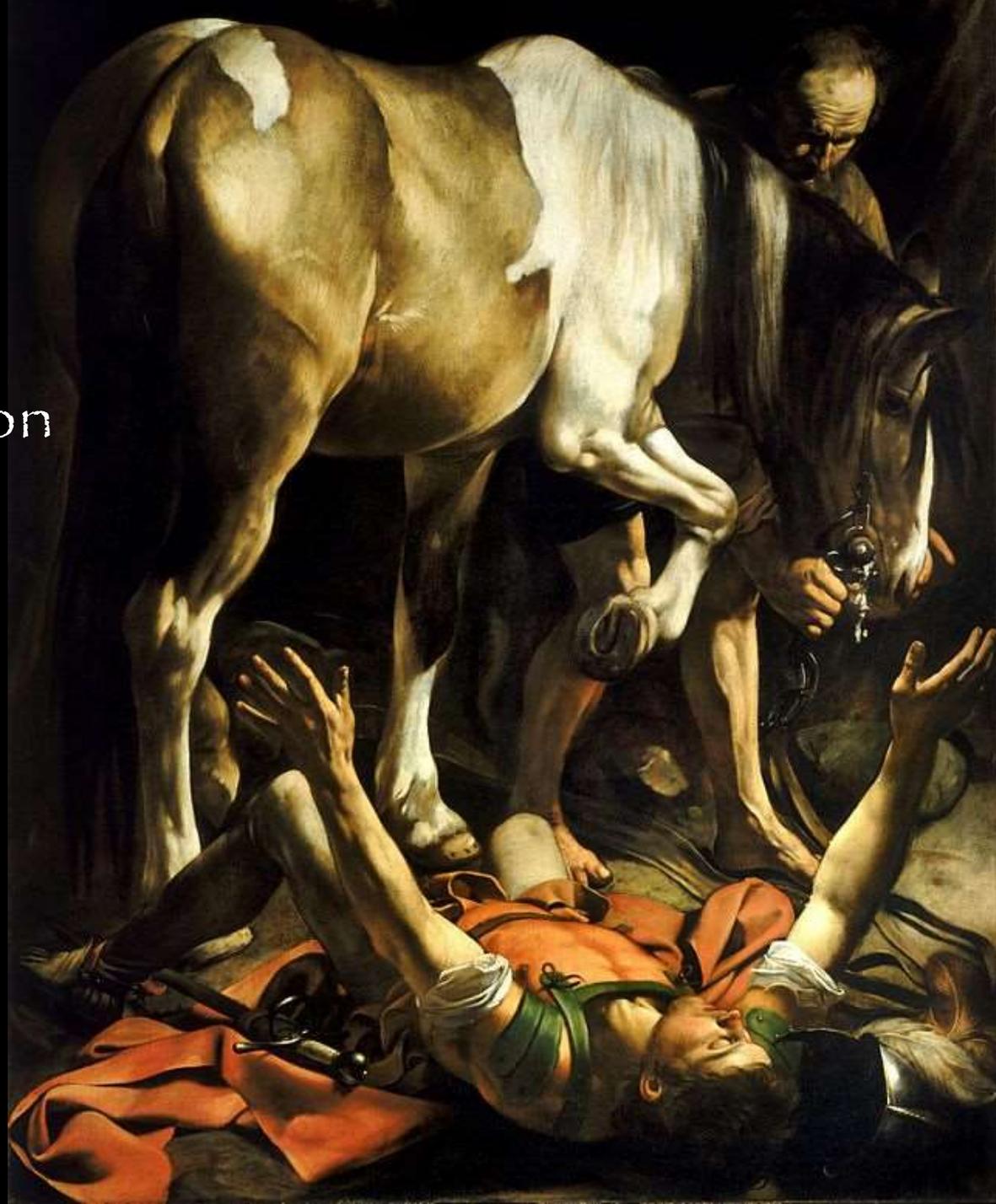


The
conversion
of Paul

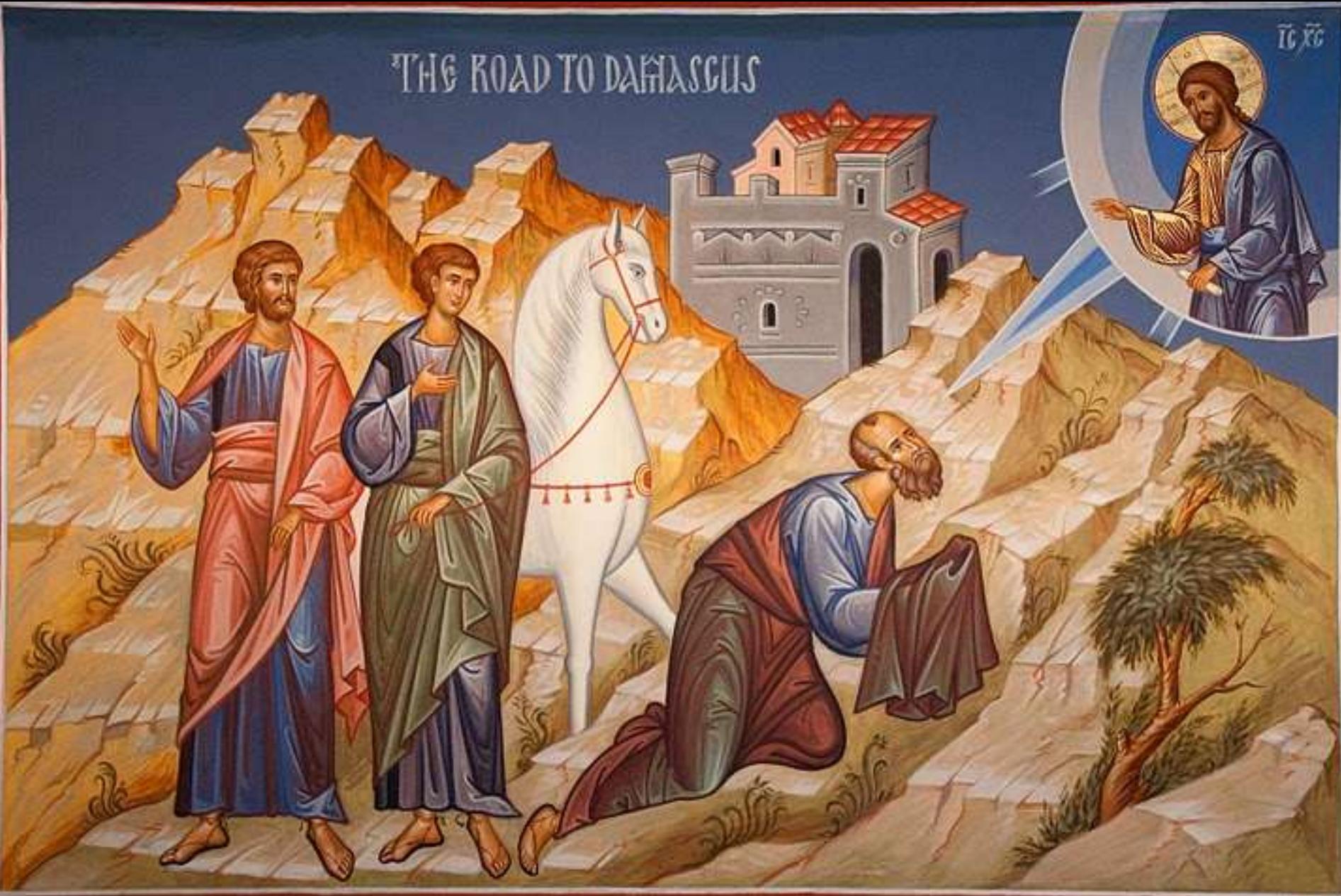






THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS

IC XC



CONVERSION

OF SAINT PAUL



Images of Paul's conversion—Acts 9:1-9

In Philemon v. 10 we have just a brief statement of Onesimus' conversion...

- ...a slave
- ...running from his slave master
- ...running from an old life in Colossae
- ...not knowing where he was ultimately headed
- ...who by the sovereign grace of God came across the apostle Paul in Rome, heard the gospel, responded in faith, and was adopted, redeemed, forgiven, justified, regenerated, made righteous, sanctified, and sealed by the Holy Spirit.

Martin Luther: "We are all God's Onesimus."

Here's the outline of Paul's letter we're using ~

- Paul's introduction to his letter to Philemon ~ 1-3
- Paul's thanksgiving and prayer for Philemon ~ 4-7
- Paul's appeal to Philemon ~ 8-16
- Paul's confidence in the obedience of Philemon ~ 17-22
- Paul's final greetings & prayer for Philemon ~ 23-25

So here's where we're going today as we look into Paul's appeal to Philemon ~

- The ground of Paul's appeal: love ~ v. 8-9
- The object of Paul's appeal: Onesimus ~ v. 10-13
- The goal of Paul's appeal: brotherhood ~ v. 14-16

Here's the deal: If the gospel really transforms hearts, then it must also transform relationships.

The ground of Paul's appeal: love – v. 8-9

What's this authority stuff Paul is tossing around in v. 8? How can he dare *command* Philemon?

Let's not forget that Paul was an apostle, and he knew it—

- He was directly and personally called by Christ as an apostle (lit., *messenger*).
- He was given revelation of the word of God by inspiration of the Holy Spirit.
- He performed miracles for the purpose of authenticating his apostleship.
- So, yes—he certainly had authority derived from Christ to command him “to do what is required.”

The ground of Paul's appeal: love – v. 8-9

Paul had what so many people seek after (and never find...but pretend they do)—genuine power.

But he didn't use it. Why not? Also: 1 Cor. 9:1-19.

- Paul's general attitude was Acts 20:24.
- There were times when he did need to use his authority as an apostle (i.e., Gal. 1:6-8, 2:11-14), and yet—in the case of the Galatians—he referred frequently to them as “brothers.”
- From a worldly perspective, Paul was far inferior to the wealthy Philemon—and he was also in prison—yet “I am bold enough in Christ”, because they were brothers, and he was an apostle.

The ground of Paul's appeal: love – v. 8-9

So Paul—an old man and a prisoner—appeals to Philemon “for love’s sake.”

What did Paul know about Philemon that made him able to appeal for love’s sake?

- He knew Philemon was his “beloved fellow worker” (v. 1), who was concerned about the souls of people.
- Paul had watched him refresh the hearts of the saints (v. 7).
- Paul knew that he had welcomed believers to gather in his large home for worship and instruction in the faith (v. 2).

The ground of Paul's appeal: love – v. 8-9

This was a godly, mature brother in Christ who had genuine and evident love for the saints, who was very dear to Paul—

- You don't pull rank with this guy
- You don't talk arrogantly and authoritatively, you speak graciously—you appeal from love.

Think about this: who was (probably) standing in front of Philemon as he read his letter from Paul (Col. 4:7-9)?

It was Onesimus who delivered it...most likely he was right there—maybe a bit of a tense atmosphere when Onesimus walked in the room? So Paul, the valiant old warrior for Christ, now in prison, appeals in love.

The ground of Paul's appeal: love – v. 8-9

John Calvin's puts it well: "By his example he shows that pastors should endeavor to draw disciples gently rather than to drag them by force...pastors are reminded that the hearts of their people must be soothed with all possible gentleness."

Time and trials will either humble a man, or harden him. In Paul's case, his nearly 30 years of following Christ as an apostle had been harsh and hard (see 2 Cor. 11:23-28). This was no longer the man of Acts 7:58 and 9:1-2 who was supporting and promoting the persecution of Christians—this was now a man with a transformed heart who had himself suffered much.

The object of Paul's appeal: Onesimus ~ v. 10-13

What happened to Onesimus after he got to Rome?

- He *somehow* managed to bump into Paul (more on this in a bit).
- He heard the gospel from Paul, and was converted (v. 10).

This is a good time to ask a really important question: What is a true conversion?

Pre-conversion:

- Useless
- Runaway
- Thief

Post-conversion:

- Useful
- Beloved brother
- Faithful (Col. 4:9)
- Very dear to Paul

The object of Paul's appeal: Onesimus ~ v. 10-13

What is a true conversion? The following is condensed & adapted from Paul Washer, *The Gospel of Jesus Christ* -

If there has been a true conversion, there will have been true *repentance* (whether or not the person knows either the word or the definition—it is an inward work of the Holy Spirit ~ John 16:8). Repentance: so how do you know?

- A change in thinking: a change of mind leading to a recognition that what God says is true, and we have been wrong—Ps. 51:3-4; Dan. 9:4-5.
- A change of emotions: a recognition of our sinfulness and guilt leading to genuine sorrow and shame for what we have become and done—Ps. 51:17; Jer. 31:19; Ezek. 20:43; 2 Cor. 7:9.

The object of Paul's appeal: Onesimus ~ v. 10-13

What is a true conversion?

- A change of actions: True repentance comes with a change of the will, producing right actions—
Matt. 3:8; Acts 26:20; 1 Thess. 1:9-10.

Do you think differently about God? About sin?
Do you see it as a terrible offense to God? Do
you long to be free from its condemnation and
slavery? Do you think differently about salvation?
Do you trust your eternal well-being to the power
and faithfulness of Jesus Christ alone?

The object of Paul's appeal: Onesimus ~ v. 10-13

What is a true conversion?

- Christians walk in the light, 1 John 1:5-7—
gradually conforming to the will of God.
- Christians are sensitive to sin, 1 John 1:8-10—
not immune to it, but disdaining it and repenting.
- Christians are obedient to God, 1 John 2:3-4—
not perfectly, but a new, increasing desire to obey.
- Christians love other Christians, 1 John 2:9-
11—desiring their fellowship and to serve them.
- Christians grow in disdain for the world, 1 John
2:15-17—their taste diminishes for this fallen world.

The object of Paul's appeal: Onesimus ~ v. 10-13

What is a true conversion?

- Christians continue in the teaching of the Word, 1 John 2:19, 24—they increasingly love truth.
- Christians purify themselves, 1 John 3:3—seeking to grow in holiness, and separation from evil.
- Christians believe and confess that Jesus is the Christ, 1 John 2:22-23, 4:2—He is their only hope of salvation, and they believe that He is fully God and fully man.
- Christians are subject to God's loving discipline, Heb. 12:5-11—God graciously disciplines that His children might share His holiness.

The object of Paul's appeal: Onesimus ~ v. 10-13

Paul has developed a deep affection for this young believer, Onesimus—he says that when he sends him back, he is “sending my very heart” (v. 12), like tearing his heart out. What is *heart* in Scripture?

Paul uses a less common word here—the most common NT word for heart is the Gk. *kardia*

Kardia is the range of things that go on in your inner self...thinking (Mark 2:6-8), grieving (John 16:6), rejoicing (John 16:22), desiring (Rom. 1:24), understanding (Eph. 1:18), etc. It can be deceived (James 1:26), sin resides there (Rom. 1:21), the Lord sees it (Luke 9:47), salvation cannot happen unless He opens the heart (Acts 16:14).

The object of Paul's appeal: Onesimus ~ v. 10-13

But Paul uses a different word here—this word is usually translated affection, tenderness, mercy, compassion (see Phil. 2:1; Col. 3:12). The word is *splagchna*, and it literally means *internal organs* (like stomach and intestines).

What in the world were the Greeks thinking??

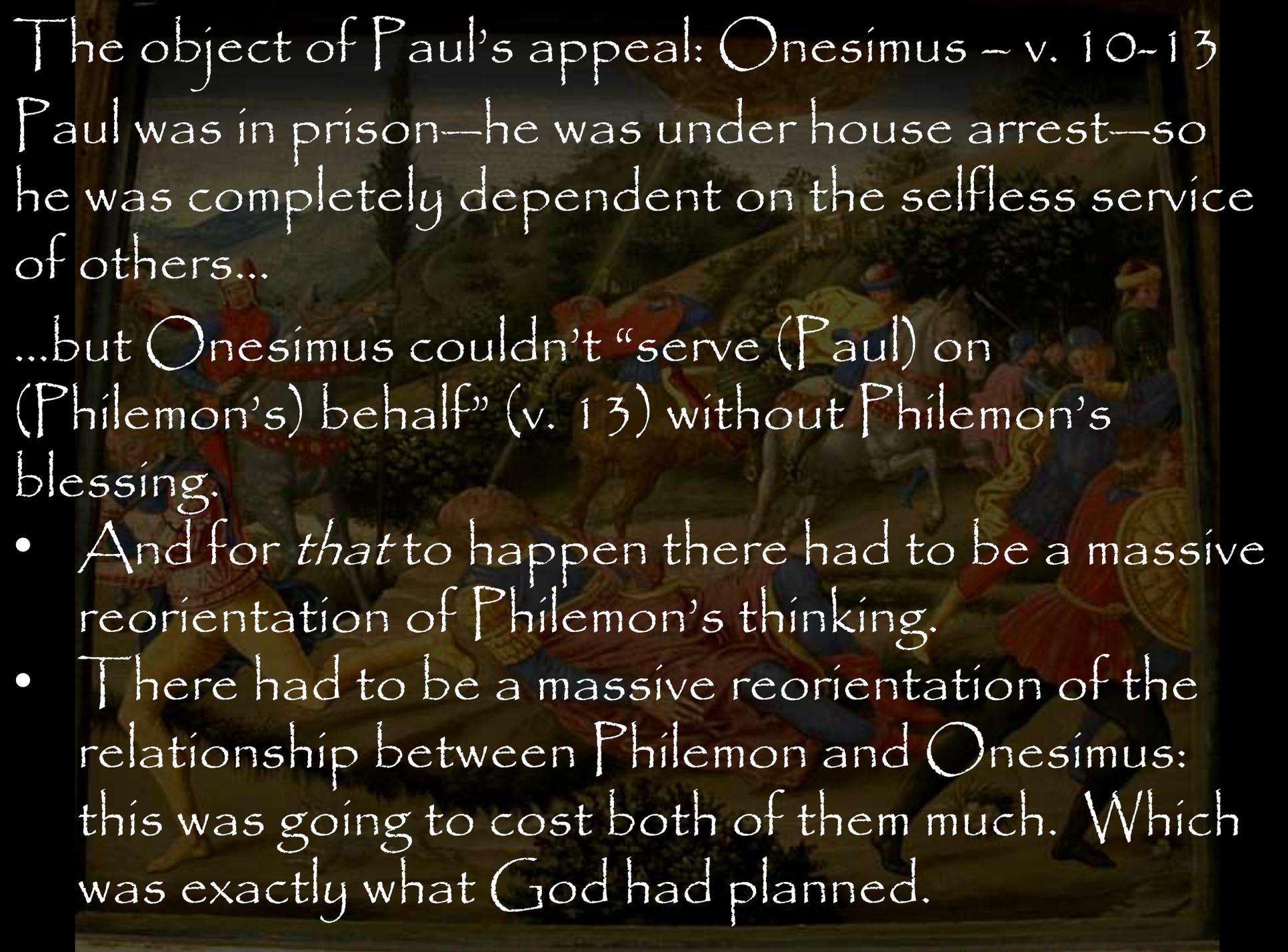
- Greeks thought emotions of compassion, tenderness, and love originated down deep, like in the intestines.
- John uses it in 1 John 3:17; Paul also uses it in 2 Cor. 6:12, 7:17; Phil. 1:8. Even God is described as giving salvation because of His “tender mercy” ~ Luke 1:78.

The object of Paul's appeal: Onesimus ~ v. 10-13

Paul has a deep, tender, fond affection for Onesimus, who has genuinely responded to the gospel—and Paul is “sending him back to you.”

- Why doesn't Paul just keep him there?
- Why doesn't Paul just hide him?
- Why doesn't Paul give him a few bucks and tell him to head somewhere else and start a new life?

The point of Christianity is not to escape the past and run from it—Onesimus had wronged Philemon, and he has to face him and face the consequences of his sin...but Onesimus comes back as a very different person: a beloved brother in Christ.



The object of Paul's appeal: Onesimus ~ v. 10-13

Paul was in prison—he was under house arrest—so he was completely dependent on the selfless service of others...

...but Onesimus couldn't "serve (Paul) on (Philemon's) behalf" (v. 13) without Philemon's blessing.

- And for *that* to happen there had to be a massive reorientation of Philemon's thinking.
- There had to be a massive reorientation of the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus: this was going to cost both of them much. Which was exactly what God had planned.

The goal of Paul's appeal: brothers – v. 14-16

What was Paul's goal in v. 14?

An authentic love—“not...by compulsion but of your own accord.”

Why didn't Paul want to force Philemon's hand?

- He wanted Philemon to see for himself the transformation in Onesimus.
- Paul uses the same principle in 2 Cor. 9:7—giving should not be “reluctantly or under compulsion.”

Only joy-based giving will result in thanksgiving (v. 11), glory given to God (v. 13), and a mutual recognition of the “surpassing grace of God” (v. 14).

The goal of Paul's appeal: brothers ~ v. 14-16

How did Onesimus end up in Rome?

One way to say it: he was a useless slave (v. 11) who ran away from his master (and apparently stole from him on his way out the door ~ v. 18), and went to Rome where he thought he could escape detection.

Another way to say it: God, in His sovereign providence, determined to save Onesimus from his sins, and so caused him to feel an unease in Colossae and run to Rome. While there, He caused Onesimus to meet with the imprisoned Paul, from whom he heard the gospel, at which point his heart, prepared by the Holy Spirit in conviction and fear of judgment, responded in faith...which was given him by the gracious gift of God.

The goal of Paul's appeal: brothers – v. 14-16

How did Onesimus end up in Rome?

Paul is thinking that God may be behind all of this—notice his wording in v. 15.

- This is kind of like Joseph in Gen. 45:8, when he responds to the evil done to him by his brothers, and everything that resulted from it: “So it was not you who sent me here, but God.” And in 50:20 he says this: “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good...”
- God overrules human sin for His glory and the ultimate good of mankind—the cross is the great example of that: Acts 3:13-26; Rom. 8:28.

The goal of Paul's appeal: brothers ~ v. 14-16

Onesimus left a slave, but returned a brother.

- It is significant that Paul uses the same word (brother) to refer to both Philemon (v. 20) and Onesimus (v. 16). At the cross they are equal.

So—how does the gospel transform relationships?

That is a key question here—because both Philemon and Onesimus are believers in Christ, and therefore have new life within them, and have hearts that are alive to God (Ezek. 36:26), Paul expects that their relationship will be transformed as well.

- That *should* be the case...but it is not a given. That's why he writes this letter.

The goal of Paul's appeal: brothers ~ v. 14-16

How does the gospel transform relationships?

- Because of the gospel, Christians are new creations: the past doesn't define us, or determine our future ~ 2 Cor. 5:17
- Because of the gospel, we are forgiven; we trust a merciful God ~ Eph. 1:7
- Because of the gospel, we can forgive ~ Eph. 4:32. No one can ever offend me as much as I have offended God by my own sin.
- Because of the gospel, we are adopted as God's children, so no longer dependent on the approval of another ~ Eph. 1:5

The goal of Paul's appeal: brothers ~ v. 14-16

How does the gospel transform relationships?

- Because of the gospel, Christ intercedes for me before the Father, so I know there is hope that I will continue to change ~ Rom. 8:34
- Because of the gospel, we know that God overrules our sin & works through our difficulties & hardships for His glory & our good ~ Rom. 8:28
- Because of the gospel, hope is never lost (Rom. 5:1-4), and we know that even though there is still indwelling sin in both of us, sin does not need to rule in this relationship ~ Rom. 6:12-14.