

## High Knowledge

Psalm 139:1-6

Philemon 1-21

We departed from the chaos of the International Arrivals curb at Chicago O'Hare Airport. It was rush hour. We crept along from freeway to freeway. It took over an hour to travel the first seven miles. Finally we left the megalopolis behind and entered the flat cornfields of Illinois and Indiana. As we cruised along at forty, then sixty miles an hour my companion asked, "Is it like this in America? So much...open." And he pointed at the well-kept farmhouse we were passing, the only dwelling in sight. "In America we have cities where many people live close together, like Chicago," I answered. "But we also have a lot of spread out places, like here, and also a lot of empty places."

The sun approached the western horizon, bathing the land in a warm, flattering light. My passenger took out his phone and took pictures of the fields—and the massive wind turbine farm that stretches for perhaps twenty miles along Indiana 63. The sun went down and it grew dark. He put away his phone, sighed deeply and said, "It is very beautiful. So green. Not like at home. I had no knowledge of this." And the silent alarm system I keep activated at all times, the one searching for sermon illustrations, went off. I knew I would preach today about the knowledge of God. My companion, Saber Sohrab, had just entered the USA after two flights consuming 19

hours. When he boarded the aircraft in Kabul, Afghanistan, neither he nor any of us knew for sure that customs in Dubai or Chicago would admit him. We had several prayer groups working on that.

I told Saber that normally our part of the world looks drier by the end of summer. We have had a lot of rain. He nodded and then asked about each of the seasons in Terre Haute. As the hours passed and we passed through the darkness, we talked of many things. His English is adequate and he is clearly a very smart man. But as we neared our destination he fell silent and literally leaned forward in his seat. His wife, Negina, and their five children awaited his arrival in the small house we leased for them. Their reunion was beautiful. I felt awkward watching it happen. But they insisted, and were equally adamant that I sit down to the welcoming feast Negina had prepared. Lamb, okra in a spicy sauce, homemade Naan bread, rice with sweet balls of something or other, tarts filled with a heady mixture of spices and, believe it or not, a can of Diet Pepsi and finally I could at last roll my bloated body out to the car. My own wife lay sleeping with our dog. We kissed (Linda, not the dog), talked for a few minutes and went to sleep. It was just the best day I have had in a long while.

Philemon occupies an overlooked cul-de-sac of the New Testament. Likely the last letter written by the Apostle Paul included in the Bible, it accompanied an escaped slave en route to his master. From our conversations, conducted by video calls for three months now, I know that Saber feels like he got out of jail free. He had a diplomatic visa that, strictly speaking, should no longer be valid. For a year now we

have had no diplomatic ties with the nation of Afghanistan. Saber knew full well he might get detained at an airport. But he *needed* to resume his calling as a husband and father and he accepted the risk of seeking to do so. I must say I respect his decision almost as much as I respect Negina's ability to create and maintain a home for six without him. Freedom is one of the most powerful of all human motivators. Why, then, would Philemon's slave Onesimus willingly carry Paul's letter to the man who owned him?

Note first that Paul opens his letter by calling himself “a prisoner of Christ Jesus”. And he means it. He has spent many nights in prison. The best scholarship puts him incarcerated in Rome as he writes. He understands as none of us do the reality of losing one's autonomy. He has no liberty. He cannot leave. He cannot perform bodily functions in private. Yet he can rise to the defense of an escaped prisoner. A man he has somehow met and whom he has converted into a Christian. Paul learns Onesimus has escaped from enslavement to a man he, Paul, knows personally, probably in Colossae, the destination of the letter we know as Colossians. This amazing coincidence—Colossae was even then an obscure, small town and Rome, where Paul languished in chains, was a great world city—may have intensified Paul's feelings. Regardless, Paul has a theological point to make. And he must make it in writing, across the terribly uncertain gap of correspondence in a time when sending a letter was little more reliable than throwing a note into a bottle in the sea.

In the New Testament world, slavery did not trouble any known thinkers, not

ethically, morally or theologically. It was simply a fact of life. We can admit this without accepting it; it just was. Even the most liberal of thinkers, like the ascetics living in the desert who produced the Dead Sea Scrolls, or the Bhuddists in India, accepted it as the norm. The Apostle Paul can, we hope, be forgiven for assuming an escaped slave like Onesimus ought, by every known metric, to return to his master Philemon. But Onesimus had gotten all the way to Rome, as far away from his master in time and space as a slave today might get by reaching Ireland from New Zealand. Philemon had zero chance of reclaiming his “property”, who had gotten well and truly away. What reason could Paul possibly have for urging the liberated slave to return to enslavement? Paul had two reasons: slavery then and there did not remotely resemble slavery in the American south in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and reconciliation.

In the first century Roman Empire slavery involved smaller numbers per household and more intimacy. So far as history has discovered, in Europe no plantations existed on which large numbers of human beings toiled in inhumane conditions for the enrichment of the owners. Instead, only the richest of households contained perhaps two or three slaves, people who worked in and around the house, often minding its finances or caring for its children. Slaves did not have real freedom. It will not do to pretend the system treated them fairly or freely. We cannot condone any form of slavery. Yet we need to understand that Onesimus, if he carried Paul's letter to his master Philemon, did not face the cruel excesses of slavery as we know them from our own history. He faced, rather, a loss of autonomy and possibly even that for only as many as ten years, the common term of slavery in the Roman world.

With great tact Paul appeals to Philemon's Christianity. He states that with his evangelical authority he could simply order the owner to “do what you ought to do”, which probably means freeing his slave. But Paul prefers to ask, not tell. He wants Philemon to make his own choice—and to gain God's approval when he makes the right decision. He wants all Christians to esteem one another as brothers and sisters. As stated before, he wants reconciliation. Reconciliation is the deep, profound restoration of relationship. It is the healing force of forgiveness. It is at the heart of Jesus' teaching. And as Paul writes, it “refresh(es) my heart in Christ.”

We occasionally refer to John Calvin's two-volume work, The Institutes of the Christian Religion. My copy of it runs to more than 1,700 pages—plus an exhaustive index. Calvin devoted more than half of the work to the knowledge of God. How do we know, what we know, about God? Calvin cites prayer, thought, reading the Word of God and several other methods of learning about God. Among these he lists reconciliation. In his commentary on the book of Hebrews Calvin wrote, “The beginning of acceptable Christian service is reconciliation. We cannot claim any allegiance with God unless we are reconciled with God and with our brothers (and sisters).” He went on to write that when we restore our relationships we experience the power and the reality of God's love. Reconciliation, he concluded, gives us a sure and certain knowledge that God lives, and God loves.

In Psalm 139 King David writes that we cannot escape God's presence. The Lord knows every word we say before we even form our thoughts in our heads. The

Lord has searched us and seen everything. David concludes this opening section of the Psalm with, “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too high for me to attain.” We cannot fully know God, we can only see and/or experience fractions of God. One powerful example of this is, again, experiencing reconciliation. But God knows us fully. God knows our sinful hearts and sees our destructive actions. Yet God still wills that we be reconciled—with God and with one another.

The Roman Catholic Church used to run a commercial that speaks to today's theme. It showed a middle-aged man doing his morning routine, shaving, brushing his teeth. He looked troubled. Next we saw walking up to the front door of a house. He heaved a big sigh, and pushed the doorbell. A man who could be his twin answered. We gather it was his brother, who did **not** look happy to see him. The first man said, “Can we talk?” The other man hesitated, then stepped aside, holding the door open. As the first one entered his brother's house an announcer said, “Do not let another day pass on any conflict that has the power to keep you awake at night. If you have anything against a brother, drop whatever you are doing and go, be reconciled.”

This is a quote from Jesus. If you have anything against anybody, why allow it to fester—especially when we have from time to time already experienced the joyful power of reconciliation? Guilt is a form of slavery every bit as restrictive as physical slavery. Go to those with whom you are estranged. Confess your own guilt in creating the situation. Ask for forgiveness. If they choose not to comply, so be it. More likely, they will forgive. And so will you. And you will be reconciled. Praise God!