

We have lots of questions in difficult times. We have “how” questions; how am I going to fix this? How am I going to get through this? Who questions; “Who can help me with this?” “Who do I turn to?” Where questions; “Where do I need to be?” “Where do I need to go?” But the most important question is the why question. “Why is this happening?” Sociologists have done studies to prove what we all know to be true. We are a meaning seeking species. This makes us different from all other species on the planet.

Paul, in his letter to Philemon, touches on this very question. Addressing the situation with Onesimus, Paul writes, “For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever” (Philemon 15).

Notice how Paul uses the word “perhaps.” He doesn’t claim to know exactly why things have unfolded the way they have. Instead, he offers a possibility, hinting at a purpose that is bigger than what is immediately visible. A number of studies done in the field of psychology have revealed that those who believe in a conscious “higher power” experience less stress than those who don’t. Why is this? Because they recognize that they are not in control of things they can’t change. But here is the interesting part, studies showed that to feel the effect, we don’t have to know “why” ourselves. We only need to trust that someone does.

Why God’s “Why” Is Different

Our human desire for understanding is nothing new. Throughout Scripture, people have sought explanations for the tragedies and trials they faced. Paul’s cautious language in Philemon suggests that while we may not always grasp the reasons behind life’s twists and turns, we can trust that God knows. Onesimus likely didn’t plan to run away, meet Paul, and become a follower of Christ. His reasons for fleeing were probably tied to his immediate circumstances—fear, anger, or the desire for freedom. Yet, in God’s sovereign plan, something greater was at work. God used his flight to bring him to faith and ultimately to transform his relationship with Philemon from one of master and servant to brothers in Christ.

Think about Joseph’s story in Genesis. His brothers sold him into slavery out of jealousy and hatred. For years, Joseph suffered in Egypt, enduring false accusations, imprisonment, and isolation. It would have been easy for him to question why these things were happening to him. Yet, when he finally confronted his brothers, he said, “What you meant for evil, God meant for good” (Genesis 50:20). God had a purpose in Joseph’s suffering that was far greater than Joseph’s immediate pain. He was working to save an entire nation through Joseph’s position in Egypt.

We Seek the Now, But God Works for Eternity

As humans, we are often consumed by the present moment. Our focus tends to be on

how things affect us in the here and now. But God’s view is eternal. Paul suggests that Onesimus was “parted for a while,” but the ultimate purpose was “forever.” This contrast between temporary separation and eternal reunion reveals a key difference in how we view circumstances compared to how God does. We tend to focus on our immediate discomfort or confusion, while God sees the bigger picture—a picture that spans eternity.

Like Onesimus and Joseph, our present sufferings might be part of a much larger plan—one that we can’t fully comprehend right now but that holds eternal significance.

We Seek Our Wants, But God Meets Our Needs

We are driven by our desires. When we face challenges, we often ask, “How can I get what I want out of this situation?” But God, in His wisdom, looks beyond our wants to provide for our deeper needs.

Paul tells Philemon that Onesimus is returning to him not just as a servant but “as a beloved brother” (Philemon 1:16). The restoration of their relationship goes beyond a mere resolution of a practical matter—it speaks to a transformation of heart and identity. Philemon didn’t just need a servant back; he needed to understand the deeper truth of brotherhood in Christ. God wasn’t just interested in fixing their situation; He was interested in healing their hearts and drawing them closer to His eternal purposes.

In our lives, we often come to God with a list of wants—relief from pain, resolution to a problem, or restoration of something lost. But God, in His infinite love, knows what we truly need. He uses even our disappointments and unmet desires to shape us into the people He has called us to be.

We Focus on the Physical, But God Works in the Spiritual

It’s easy to focus on the tangible aspects of our struggles—the things we can see, touch, and measure. We want physical solutions to physical problems. But God works on a deeper level, addressing not only our physical needs but also our spiritual condition.

In Philemon, Paul highlights that the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus has changed in both the flesh and the Lord. Onesimus is no longer just a physical servant, but a spiritual brother.

This same principle applies to us. When we face hardships, we may ask for immediate physical relief, but God is often doing a deeper work in our spirits. He uses trials to refine our faith, to draw us closer to Him, and to teach us dependence on His grace. James 1:2-4 reminds us, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.”

God’s purposes are always deeper than what we can see on the surface. He is working not

only to meet our immediate needs but to transform us into His image, to draw us closer to Himself, and to prepare us for eternity.

Trusting God's "Why"

So, when we ask "Why?" the answer may not always be clear. We may never fully understand the reasons behind every hardship or challenge. But as Paul reminds us, it is not necessary that we know the "why." What is important is that we trust the One who does.

We may not know why someone has hurt us but we can trust that God is in control, that His purposes are good, and that He is working all things for our ultimate good (Romans 8:28).

They had their reasons but God also had his. They had their plans but God had his purpose. In the end, we must ask ourselves: Whose "why" is better? Ours, with its limited understanding, focused on the immediate and the tangible? Or God's, which sees the eternal, meets our deepest needs, and works both in the physical and spiritual realms?

God's purposes are far better than anything we could devise. His reasons are rooted in His love for us, His desire to transform us, and His plan to bring us into eternity with Him. We only need to trust the One who does.

When life throws us into confusion, and the answers seem elusive, remember that God is in control. Like Paul, we may only be able to say, "perhaps." But even in uncertainty, we can be confident in God's eternal purposes. He works beyond our wants, sees beyond our now, and transforms beyond the physical. His "why" is always better.

Part 4: "His Purpose" over "Our Plans"

a study of Philemon

RUNAWAY grace

God's Plan for Broken Relationships

