

Philemon

THINK & LOVE & LIVE

Part 1: Onesimus



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3 Men

Today we begin a three part study of Paul's letter to Philemon. At only 25 verses, Philemon is the shortest of Paul's existing letters, and yet it is, as we shall see, rich not only in what it reveals about the early church, but also about Christ's power to liberate us.

What enslaves you? What struggles tend to define your life? Is it your past? Present? Can anything be stronger than your past or present struggles? Philemon answers with a resounding yes!

Philemon is one of Paul's most personal letters, and it is both humbling and powerful in what it reveals about how Jesus Christ changes our lives—especially in how we treat each other and see ourselves. To unfold the story and the doctrines found in Paul's letter to Philemon, we're going to devote one message to each of its three principle players—Onesimus, a runaway slave; Philemon, that slave's former master; and the apostle Paul, who played a part in leading both of these men to Christ. We'll jump around some as we unpack this letter, but since it is so short, we will see Philemon develop as a whole as we go. We begin with Onesimus, the main subject of the letter, but before we dive into his story let's read the letter in its entirety.

Philemon 1-25

¹Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker ²and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house: ³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, ⁵because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, ⁶and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. ⁷For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

⁸Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, ⁹yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— ¹⁰I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. ¹¹(Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) ¹²I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. ¹³I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, ¹⁴but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. ¹⁵For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

¹⁷So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. ¹⁸If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. ²⁰Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

²¹Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. ²²At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

²³Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings, ²⁴and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, & Luke, my fellow workers. ²⁵The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

1st Century Slavery

All of us, at one time or another, want to run away. Some of us do. Some of us are born into awful situations. Some of us make them for ourselves. And the hard truth is that it can be much easier to define ourselves by our hardships than our blessings. Onesimus, a slave in the household of Philemon in the city of Colossae, had a tough life, and when he ran away to Rome, he made it even tougher. If anyone tells you slavery in 1st century Rome wasn't that bad, don't believe them. It was horrifying. Though some slaves may have had kind masters, the reality was they were still property with no rights or protection.

Slavery was essential to Rome's social order. The entire Empire was built on the backs of slaves owned by "men of nobility" who believed it was beneath them to work. We will address the Christian response to slavery later in more depth as we study Paul's interaction with Philemon. And while the core of this letter isn't focused on undoing slavery in Rome, it is deeply abolitionistic—challenging the evils of human trafficking, but also the sacred call to treat each other with dignity as people made in the image of God. As Paul said of Christians, "There is neither slave nor free, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3:28)

On the Run

Reconciliation is the theme of this letter—the reconciliation of Onesimus to God and then to Philemon, his brother in Christ. 1,200 miles separate Colossae from Rome—roughly the distance from Kansas City to New York City. This is how far Onesimus ran. And all he would have had available to cover those miles were boats, horses and his own two feet. Before he left, verse 18 suggests he stole from Philemon to fund his escape. After all, why else would Paul mention a possible outstanding debt? Perhaps Onesimus stole money and belongings to disguise the fact that he was a runaway slave.

Still, as soon as Onesimus ran away, he was in big trouble. Stealing and fleeing were both capital crimes for slaves in Rome. This wasn't uncommon, though. To escape was to risk the wrath of the slave-holder anyway, so many who fled also stole from their masters on their way out in the hopes of funding a clean getaway. But stepping out of their current bad situation usually meant stepping into another bad situation—specifically, into a society of fugitives evading arrest. A city like Rome was the perfect place to vanish, and many had come to do just that.

Since such a flight would've been near impossible without help, Onesimus probably joined that underworld of runaway slaves and criminals. In itself, this was a notoriously dangerous network to tangle with. Plus, historically, for every underground society of fugitives seeking to stay off the grid, there is another society of bounty hunters making their living off hunting them down and handing them back over for a reward. Onesimus was in trouble because runaway slaves were the bounty hunters' bread and butter. This is the world Onesimus stepped into when he ran.

Here we get a lesson in human nature. Though 20 centuries separate us from Onesimus' Roman Empire, human trafficking still exists—in some places as a system of selling others into slavery, and everywhere we sell ourselves into all manner of bondage. How common is the girl who runs away to the big city in search of a new life only to find herself enslaved beneath it? Or the man who pops a pill or takes a drink to relieve his stress, only to slip into addiction and all the junk that goes with it? Or the allure of the "soul mate" the married person meets at the office, beckoning them to abandon their spouse?

Actions have consequences that can shape us powerfully. How long before you are convinced your survival hinges on hiding, running and lying? Do you believe your past will forever define your future? Do you have a fugitive's heart? Are you running?

Stronger than Pasts

Somewhere between his escape and this letter, Onesimus and Paul came together. How did Onesimus meet Paul? This was probably more likely a prodigal son story than a coincidence. So long as Onesimus had money, he could stay underground. But when it was gone, he was left without any support structure, and like the prodigal son who blew through his father's inheritance, Onesimus probably began to shift from dreams of independence to cries for help. Onesimus probably came to know Paul when Paul led Philemon to Christ. ⁽¹⁹⁾ Somehow, Onesimus discovered Paul was in Rome and sought help from someone familiar and known for helping people in trouble.

Ultimately, it wasn't Paul who saved Onesimus. It was Christ. After finding Paul in Rome, Onesimus heard the Gospel and put his faith in Jesus, and from what Paul says, Onesimus was a changed man. Notice the affection Paul speaks over him. He says Onesimus is like his son ⁽¹⁰⁾ and that he is very dear to Paul. ⁽¹⁶⁾ Apparently Onesimus served Paul while he was under house arrest. Christ had become everything to Onesimus, and Paul would have been "glad to keep him with me" ⁽¹³⁾ forever. Onesimus' name literally means "useful." So in verse 11, Paul makes a pun, essentially saying "Mr. Useful used to be useless to you, but now Mr. Useful has become useful to both of us."

Our hope in Christ is that He really changes our lives. Onesimus didn't take hold of Christ. Christ took hold of him, and instead of fearing what might happen if he was found, Onesimus trusted Christ's work in his life, which eventually led to the desire to be reconciled to Philemon, his brother in Christ. Again, we lack detail. We don't know whose idea it was for Onesimus to return to Philemon; just that both believed it was the right thing to do. And even in sending Onesimus, Paul again states his affection for the man by saying, "I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart." ⁽¹²⁾ And then Paul appeals for him to take Onesimus in, not as a slave any longer, but as a brother. ⁽¹⁵⁻¹⁶⁾

And this is just what they were to each other now—brothers. It's a powerful reminder that in no way is the message of the Gospel that Jesus wants the runaway slave to go back to being a slave. The Gospel says no matter how bad the situation is that you came from, and no matter how much worse you've made it by your actions, Christ can not only redeem you, He can push back the effects of the fall in your life and give you a new identity in Him. Recognize how fully Onesimus is counting on this by returning to a man who has the legal right to kill him.

The Humility of Perhaps

If your life is anything like Onesimus'—literally or figuratively, you might be asking why? Having divided his years between the hard life of a slave and the hard life of a fugitive, Onesimus certainly had time to ask why his life was what it was? Paul offers a thought with a very humble first word: "**perhaps.**" He says, "Perhaps he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but as a brother." ⁽¹⁵⁻¹⁶⁾

There is always an element of speculation when trying to understand God's plans, so we're wise to begin such statements over each other with the humility of a "perhaps" concerning the question of "why?" But concerning the question of "who?" there is no "perhaps." God is the one who works all things together for the good of those who love Him. ^(Rom 8:28)

I don't know why your life is what it is, but I know God can so redeem you that you'll never be the same. Kent Hughes wrote, "The more we study the story, the more we see that it transcends 'chance.' Onesimus fled the length of the world to escape his master and lose himself in the bowels of Rome, only to meet the very man to whom his master owed his spiritual life—and thus found spiritual life himself! How he must have marveled at God's tapestry."

However God is weaving your tapestry, your story isn't finished until God says it is. Perhaps you are where you are so that you might be reconciled to someone you've fled, or so you might forgive someone who has wronged you. Maybe you're about to take in a spiritual fugitive. Here's what I know: the work of Christ is stronger than your past. Embrace the work of Jesus.