

This morning, I am continuing in our sermon series “The Power of One Life,” where we are looking at a different minor Biblical character every week. This week, we will look at a man named Onesimus. We first hear of him at the end of Colossians.

Colossians 4:7-9 - *Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. ⁸ I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. ⁹ He is coming with **Onesimus**, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here.*

This passage seems like a simple list of people traveling with Paul’s letter, but hidden in these greetings is an incredible story of the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. To our ears, Onesimus, who Paul describes as “our faithful and dear brother,” sounds like a fellow worker with Paul. But there is more to the story. Tychicus has brought this letter to the church in Colossae. In v. 16, we find that he has also brought a letter from the church in Laodicea. And he has also brought one more letter, a letter to a Christian man in Colossae named Philemon, that is going to shed more light on just who this Onesimus is. We don’t have the letter from Laodicea, but we do have the letter to Philemon. Turn there.

Philemon 1:1-25 - *Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, ² to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home: ³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your **love for all the saints**. ⁶ I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. ⁷ Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints. ⁸ Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹ yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul-- an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus-- ¹⁰ I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while **I was in chains**. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. ¹² I am sending him-- who is my very heart-- back to you. ¹³ I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴ But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. ¹⁵ Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him **back for good**-- ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord. ¹⁷ So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has done you any wrong or*

owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back-- not to mention that you owe me your very self. ²⁰ I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; **refresh my heart in Christ.** ²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask. ²² And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. ²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. ²⁴ And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers. ²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Let's answer three questions: Who is Onesimus? What does Paul ask of Philemon? And what are the implications of this letter for us today? What do we learn about Onesimus from this letter? Three things:

1) He was Philemon's runaway slave

¹⁵ Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good-- ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

Slavery was different in those days. The important thing to realize is that **slavery in the 1st century Middle East was nothing like the slavery in the New World that was declared illegal during the days of Lincoln.** The slavery of the 19th century, as you know, was race-based, life-long chattel slavery that happened against people's will. There was nothing redeemable about it; it was simply one race and culture deliberately persecuting another against their will for the sake of economic gain.

But in the 1st century, just about every free man owned slaves, and it was just as natural as owning a TV or car today. In those days, people who were in debt would often sell themselves into slavery in order to pay off those debts. Slaves were paid, could buy their freedom, and were not usually slaves for life. For Paul to command the abolishment of slavery would have made no sense in that culture, since it was not the enslavement of a whole culture against their will. However, slaves were at the bottom of the social ladder, and **a runaway slave could expect to be killed if found as a deterrent to other slaves.** So for Onesimus to be standing there as a runaway slave in front of his master, Philemon, would have been astounding.

2) He likely stole from Philemon as he was leaving

¹⁷ So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me.

So he ran away from Philemon, stealing from him in the process. Certainly according to the customs of that time, he was deserving of death.

3) He became a believer in Jesus and has been a useful encouragement to Paul

¹⁵ Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good-- ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

Somewhere along the way, Onesimus became a believer. Eventually, the truth must have come out about who Onesimus was and Paul told him that he needed to go back to his owner. Paul would have loved to have kept him, but he needed Onesimus to do what was right, to go back and submit to his master. And so, Paul sends Onesimus back with Tychicus to Colossae, along with this letter to his owner, Philemon.

So what does Paul ask of Philemon?

1) Do not kill him, but welcome him back as a brother in the Lord

***Philemon 1:15-17** - Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good --no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord. So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me.*

Onesimus has become a believer with Paul. He is now a brother in Christ, eager to serve the Lord.

2) Charge anything that is owed to Paul's account

***Philemon 1:17** - So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me.*

Paul does not want money to be a hindrance to grace, so he is willing to bear any costs associated with welcoming Onesimus back.

3) Consider giving him his freedom so that he can work alongside Paul for the gospel

Philemon 1:11-14 - *Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. I am sending him-- who is my very heart-- back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced.*

Onesimus has become a believer with Paul. As a result, he is now useful (a play on the name Onesimus, which means profitable or useful). Paul clearly is hoping that Philemon will give Onesimus his freedom so that he might continue to serve alongside Paul for the sake of the gospel of Jesus.

Look carefully at Paul's approach in this letter. Notice how Paul, while not crusading for the end of slavery, is nonetheless sowing seeds that will undermine the institution of slavery. He is communicating that Onesimus is more than a slave – he is a brother in Christ – and as a result is useful for more than simply manual labor. Think of this incredible passage:

Galatians 3:26-29 - *You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.*

In Christ, the categories that divide people in the culture come down. There is no elevation of Jew over Greek, free over slave, or male over female. All are one in Christ, children of God, belonging to Christ, heirs to God's promises. And it was concepts like this, along with the idea that all are created in the image of God, and that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves and seek justice, that were seeds that eventually led Christians like William Wilberforce to speak out against slavery and to seek its abolishment.

In the Bible what is known as cultural accommodation. Throughout the Bible, we see God leading His people to follow Him within the culture and cultural structures in which they find themselves, while also putting creative pressure against those structures so that when the culture changes, the structures can change to more accurately reflect God's will. Let me say that again – in the Bible, we see God leading His people to bring salvation to the nations within the culture and cultural structures in which they are ministering, while at the same time putting creative pressure against those structures so that when the culture changes, the structures can change to more accurately reflect God's will. The reason for this approach is that the

priority is always the gospel of Jesus Christ and advancing the kingdom of God. This gospel of sin and the necessity of forgiveness was scandalous enough, and adding to the scandal by seeking to immediately overturn cultural roles would have detracted from the main message. For this reason, Paul consistently taught his churches to avoid significant social disruption that might bring shame on the gospel or the church and as a result keep people from coming to Christ. He taught Christians to honor the Roman household codes, while also putting creative pressure against those structures. He told slaves to remain slaves in submission to their masters, while also telling slave masters to treat their slaves well, since God was their master, and encouraging Onesimus to let his slave Philemon go so that he could work with Paul. He told wives to submit to their husbands, but also told husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church, sacrificing themselves for their wives, and to be faithful to them. And it can be argued that he told women to leave the teaching and leadership of the church to men. But he also praised the many women who served alongside him, and declared in Galatians 3:28 that in Christ there is neither male nor female. Is God's ultimate will for slavery to exist, or for men to have authority over women? No – it was an accommodation to the Roman culture for the sake of the gospel, an accommodation that is no longer needed when the culture changes.

Paul wishes to have Onesimus back as a brother serving the Lord. It is as if he is saying, is not God in this?

So what are the implications of this passage for us today?

1) The road to freedom goes through confession

Onesimus must own up to his sins and be willing to face the consequences. Paul would have loved to have him stay with him and minister, but he knew that as a runaway slave, Onesimus needed to go back to his master and face the music first, confessing his sin of stealing to his master.

The same truth applies to us. The road to freedom goes through confession. The road to life passes through the willingness to die first.

Psalm 32:3-6 - *When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. ⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"-- and you forgave the guilt of my sin. ⁶ Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found; surely when the mighty waters rise, they will not reach him.*

1 John 1:8-9 - If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Like Onesimus, we who have offended others go back to confess. **Who have you offended? To whom must you make amends, instead of moving on as if nothing happened?**

2) The Christian is to meet confession with grace

Paul exhorts Philemon to meet Onesimus' confession with grace, and to go even beyond what might be expected, to give him his freedom and welcome him as a brother, setting him free from slavery. This showcases the gospel of grace.

Certainly one of the main reasons we are reluctant to confess is because we do not expect to be received with grace. But this is the call on the Christian:

Luke 17:3-4 - "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. ⁴ If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."

This is too hard! Think of what it will cost me!

3) The gospel of grace has transformative power

If we truly had a community that honestly confessed sin and guilt, and also showed grace and compassion to those who confess, think of how transformative that would be.

You hear echoes of the gospel all over this story. Think of the **prodigal son** in Luke 15 In that parable the son tells his father he wishes he were dead, and then goes off and squanders his father's money in wild living. After finding himself without money and hungry, he comes to his senses and heads for home, hoping to be welcomed as a slave, but is welcomed with joy by the father as a son who was lost and now is found. The son, who has shamed the family and deserves to be punished and to even allow back as a slave would be gracious, is welcomed back with joy and grace as a redeemed son. **Philemon is asked to welcome Onesimus back much the same way, to show a slave who deserved death unexpected and undeserved grace, not only as a servant but as a son.**

You hear echoes of the **unforgiving servant** in Matthew 18, who had a great debt forgiven but refused to forgive his fellow servant. ¹⁹ *I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back-- not to mention that you owe me your very self.* But Onesimus stole from me! **You were forgiven a greater debt. How can you not forgive this man?**

And ultimately, you hear echoes of the cross. The cross shows us how God does not treat us as we deserve, but in Jesus, He bears our burden and takes the penalty we deserve. Instead of death, we receive freedom. **2 Corinthians 5:21** - *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* In the same way, Paul is willing to bear the burden of cost so that Onesimus can be forgiven and possibly even go free. And he is asking Philemon to bear the cost of losing his slave, so that Onesimus might go free and serve the Lord more fully.

Paul is asking Philemon to show grace, just as God shows us grace. Instead of death, we received forgiveness and eternal life. In the same way, Paul asks that Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave, receive freedom instead of death. **This is to be how it is in our community.** We are to be a community of grace, reconciliation, and redemption, where people confess and speak the truth, knowing that they will be met with grace.

Before I close, let me ask a question: why was this letter included in the Bible? It seems odd to have a personal letter to a man about how to treat his runaway slave, doesn't it?

The story as it has come down through church tradition is this: the corpus of Paul's writings was published in the first few years of the second century in Ephesus by the **Bishop of Ephesus**. During that time, a man named Ignatius was the bishop of Antioch in Syria, and he was being taken to Rome for execution about 110. As he was being taken to Rome, he was visited by the Bishop of Ephesus. In response, Ignatius writes a letter to the Ephesians that we still have in its entirety. In that letter he commends to the Ephesians their bishop, a man named Onesimus. Ignatius writes, "In God's name, therefore, I received your large congregation in the person of Onesimus, your bishop in this world, a man whose love is beyond words." His letter clearly echoes the language of the letter to Philemon, playing again on the name "Onesimus" and using other similar phrases as are found in Philemon.

Why was this letter included in the Bible? **Most likely because the corpus of Paul's letters was compiled by the Bishop of Ephesus, a former runaway slave who deserved death but found forgiveness, life and hope in the gospel and in the new community – a man named Onesimus.** And certainly he would have included the letter that sealed his emancipation, the letter sent to his former master Philemon. Onesimus is the

runaway slave who deserved death who became the bishop of Ephesus by the grace of God and the forgiveness of God's people. What a testimony to the hope found in the gospel of grace.

There is nothing in the world more powerful than grace when it comes to the human heart. There is nothing that can transform a heart like undeserved love and favor. When someone deserves death and receives life; deserves condemnation and receives forgiveness and love, it can change lives. I know because I am one of those. I have been saved by grace. Everyone in here who knows Jesus knows this to be true.

You have been loved. You deserved death and are offered life. You are guilty but offered not just pardon but an inheritance. You were a runaway slave who deserved death but was given freedom as a son. And now God calls us to go and do likewise to those who offend us, so that His grace might transform the world.