

## ONESIMUS AND THE GOSPEL

Philemon 8-21

**Intro:** It would be difficult for us to find a better illustration of the Gospel than we have in Paul's letter to the Colossian, Philemon. Onesimus was Philemon's slave. He had run away from Philemon, and somehow had come into contact with the Apostle Paul in Rome. Paul had witness to Onesimus, and Onesimus was saved. He had been with Paul long enough for Paul to be assured that Onesimus' relationship with the Lord was real, and a great bond of love developed between Paul and Onesimus. Onesimus had served the Apostle for some time in Rome, but then Paul became convicted that he ought to send Onesimus back to Philemon in Colosse. That would pose some risks for Onesimus since it was possible that Philemon would have Onesimus put to death. Masters were often very cruel to their slaves. They would not only put them to death, but have them die in the worst of ways. Bishop Moule tells about an associate of Augustus Caesar who had a tank of conger eels. If a slave displeased him, he would order him thrown into the tank where the eels would eat him alive.

Paul knew that it would be different with Philemon because he was just as sure of Philemon's relationship with the Lord as he was sure of Onesimus. Nevertheless, Onesimus' offense was very serious, and we can sense that in Paul's letter. It probably took Paul some time to write the epistle, but we know, because the epistle is a part of the Word of God, that the Holy Spirit was guiding Paul, thus giving us the picture of the Gospel that we have when we consider these three men in their relationship with each other.

Onesimus was the offender. Philemon was the offended one. The Apostle Paul was the mediator.

Clearly Onesimus' fate was in Philemon's hands. It was entirely up to Philemon as to whether or not Onesimus would be forgiven and received back into his favor. It is quite amazing that Onesimus' fate rested in the relationship between Paul and Philemon. There was a very close bond between them. Paul had also led Philemon to Christ. And Paul reminded Philemon of this as he appealed for Onesimus to be accepted.

A little thought will show, when we think of the Gospel, that Philemon stands in the place of God. Paul, the mediator, the one who stood between the offender and the offended, is a type of the Lord Jesus Christ. And Onesimus represents the sinner. He represents us. I remind you of

the now famous statement made by Martin Luther that we are all the Lord's Onesimi. So he recognized the picture that we have in this short, one-chapter epistle.

Let me read for you verses 8 through 21. (Read.)

Let us notice, first of all,

## **I. PAUL'S DESCRIPTION OF ONESIMUS.**

### **A. He was a servant (v. 16a).**

This is the Greek word for a bondservant. He was a slave. He belonged to Philemon and was just as much Philemon's property as anything else that Philemon owned. He was as a slave to be completely subject to the will of Philemon. It was often said of slaves that they had no will of their own. They were the opposite of freemen. Masters and servants were at the opposite ends of the social scale. This is what Onesimus was.

### **B. He was an unprofitable servant (v. 11).**

The word "unprofitable" means that he was useless. He was a detriment to Philemon. He did Philemon more harm than he did good. He was completely undependable. Philemon was clearly better off without Onesimus, and it is very likely that Philemon had not even looked for Onesimus feeling that he was glad that Onesimus had gone.

And this leads to a third point.

### **C. Onesimus was a runaway (v. 15).**

When I think of Onesimus as a picture of what we were without Christ, my mind goes to Isa. 53:6, the first part of the verse: "All we like sheep have gone astray..." Onesimus was a rebel. He wanted to have nothing to do with his master. If he had been left to himself, Onesimus would never have gone back. There were many slaves in those days who had run away and who were content to live as fugitives.

A fourth point is this:

### **D. Onesimus had probably stolen from Philemon (v. 18).**

We don't know exactly what was behind this statement, but bad slaves

were almost always thieves. This made put Onesimus in greater jeopardy than if he had merely run away.

— So we can see that Onesimus had a lot of minuses in his life, but not a single plus! However, when Onesimus came into contact with the Apostle Paul (how, we do not know), then something happened in Onesimus' heart which completely changed him and the course of his life:

#### **E. Onesimus was saved (v. 10).**

The significance of this verse when applied to Christ is rich indeed. Paul meant that he had led Onesimus to Christ while he, Paul, was a prisoner of Rome, but applied to Christ we can see that the new birth has come to us because of the afflictions which Christ endured for us when He died on the Cross. Not only was Onesimus saved, but he was changed. He was a new creature. He could never have gone back to be like he had been before. Paul had had an opportunity to see that instead of being “unprofitable,” now he was “profitable.” He was not only useful, but he was eager to be used. He readily did, and did well, whatever the Apostle Paul had asked him to do.

— So Paul was not pleading with Philemon to take back the same Onesimus, but it was a new Onesimus, a transformed sinner, a different person entirely.

Now let us look at:

### **II. PAUL'S APPEAL ON BEHALF OF ONESIMUS.**

The first part of his appeal had nothing to do with Onesimus, but it had to do with the relationship between Paul and Onesimus. Paul called it:

#### **A. “For love's sake” (v. 9).**

— Paul was appealing to Philemon on the basis of Philemon's love for Paul, and Paul's love for Philemon. And there could not have been a stronger appeal than this. Often in the Gospels, especially in the Gospel of John we are reminded of the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. There was the most perfect bond of love between these Members of the Godhead. And, therefore, whatever the Lord asked the Father to do, the Father was certain to do--just because of the love that They had for each other. When we have the Lord Jesus Christ on our side, our acceptance with the Father is assured. And we can see that we have here a

picture of the new birth. Paul had begotten Onesimus in his bonds, just like the Lord has made us new creatures through His death on the Cross.

But now notice:

### **B. Paul's appeal for Philemon to "receive" Onesimus.**

There are three statements in the epistle where Paul used this word "receive."

#### **1. The simple, "receive him" (v. 12).**

The second, skipping down to verse 17:

#### **2. "Receive him as myself" (v. 17).**

Think of how gladly Philemon would have received Paul into his home. Paul was asking Philemon to do the unthinkable, to give a worthless runaway slave a welcome equal to that which he would have given Paul. But it is not even more amazing that we are "accepted in the Beloved"? Is not our standing before God equal to that of the Lord Jesus Christ? Are we not "in Him"?

The third appeal is equally amazing:

#### **3. "Receive him for ever" (v. 15).**

Paul was not asking for some temporary acceptance, nor was he asking Philemon to put Onesimus on probation with the possibility that he would be accepted, but that he might be rejected. Paul at the outset asked Philemon to grant permanent acceptance, an acceptance that Philemon would not go back on.

Oh, what security we have in Christ. He will never cast us away. No one can possibly take us out of His hand. We may displease the Lord, and we do, but our relationship is just as secure as the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. And verse 16 gives us Paul's request that he be received, not as a servant, but as "a brother beloved." This did not mean that Onesimus would be granted his freedom, but it did mean that Philemon would henceforth look upon Onesimus, not just as a slave, but as a fellow-member in the family of God.

The Apostle John seemed to revel not only in the fact that he was saved,

but that he was a full-fledged member of the family of God. Cf. 1 John 3:1-3.

Now let us notice:

### **III. THREE ADDITIONAL REQUESTS THAT PAUL MADE OF PHILEMON.**

#### **A. Paul wanted this all to be in accordance with Philemon's will (vv. 13, 14).**

Paul, of course, was speaking of the possibility that Onesimus might have stayed with him, but for him to return to Philemon was not to be something that Philemon felt force to do, but that which was in accordance with his own will.

How thankful we can be that we have not been saved over the objections of a reluctant God, but that our salvation has actually been the result of the outworking of the Father's will.

But notice another thing:

#### **B. Paul agreed to take on whatever debt Onesimus had with Philemon (v. 18, 19).**

When the Lord Jesus Christ saved us, it was necessary that He pay our debt to God in full. He paid it all. We are forgiven all of our trespasses. Not a single sin has been left for us to settle. If it were, we would be cast forever away from God because we would not be able to pay our debt.

And then Paul added this word of assurance:

#### **C. Paul believed that after all that he had asked Philemon to do for Onesimus, Philemon would do even more (v. 21).**

Have we not been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ. After we were saved, were we not like the Queen of Sheba who, after seeing all the glory of Solomon, said that the half had not been told her. We are still learning more and more about the blessings of salvation, but we will not understand it all until we get to heaven. Our Lord Jesus Christ has no doubt in His heart but that God will go beyond His promises in doing all that is necessary for our salvation.

**Conc:** Isn't this a wonderful picture of our salvation? Our case was even

more hopeless than was Onesimus' case. We, too, were absolute useless to God. There was no reason why He would want to have anything to do with us. He was certainly better off without us. But because of the mediatorial work of the Lord Jesus Christ, we can be "profitable" to Him. The grace of God in Christ not only makes us useful to God, but, as amazing as it may sound, God desires us, wills to have us, and has sought us, and found us, and brought us to Himself--AND HE WILL NEVER LET US GO!

What should our response be? Endless praise! We know that Onesimus did not deserve in any way what Paul was asking Philemon to do for him, but we need to realize that we are infinitely more unworthy of what God has done for us, and continues to do for us, in the Lord Jesus Christ.

What if you are not saved? You must come to Christ, as we all have, as one whose name is Onesimus. Only by the miracle of the new birth can anyone be acceptable to God, but Christ has done all that God requires. We need to turn to Christ and believe on Him.