

**THREE TROPHIES OF GRACE**

Philemon 1-25

**Intro:** Have you ever stopped to think how many people you know, who are very dear to you, that you would never have met if you both had not been saved? Even if we confine our thoughts just to those of us who are a part of Trinity Bible Church, it is due to the providence of God that most of us know each other. And that is true even of us as husbands and wives. When Lucille and I were first married, and we had some occasion to tell where we were from, people would ask in some amazement, “How did you two ever meet?” She was from Harrisburg, Arkansas and I was from Tacoma, Washington. Well, we met at college, but the significant thing about that is that we would not have been at that particular college if we had not known the Lord. It was a Christian school, and it was the Lord Who led each of us to go there.

When I go around Portland where we have lived since 1951, with the exception of one year, I am amazed at the many times I have gone out, perhaps to a crowded store, and have not seen one person whom I know. But there are many people in Portland that I do know, and most of them, like you who are here today, I have met because of our mutual relationship to the Lord. That is one great fact that I am thankful for as we approach another Thanksgiving Day, that it is the Lord Who has brought us together. When you have some time to think, think about this, and I am sure it will warm your heart and fill you with thanksgiving to the Lord. Of course there are always those you might wish that you did not know, but for the most part the people we know are our friends, and we are thankful for them.

Now, as we come to Paul’s epistle to Philemon, which he wrote about Onesimus, I want you to think about this. It was highly unlikely that Paul would ever have known Philemon or that Paul would have known Onesimus, if the Lord had not brought them together. We don’t know how Philemon, the master, came into contact with Onesimus, the slave, but that, too, had to have been the providence of God. Paul was a Jew; Philemon and Onesimus were probably both Gentiles. Paul had been born in Tarsus which was located in the Roman province of Cilicia. Shortly before he was arrested, he spoke to an angry crowd in Jerusalem, and he said this:

3 I am verily a man which am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, and

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taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God, as ye all are this day (Acts 22:3). So he was born in Tarsus, raised in Jerusalem, and, as far as we know, would never have had any occasion to go to Colosse. In fact, when he wrote to Philemon, he still had never been to Colosse. And so he must have met Philemon somewhere else, maybe while he had spent time in Ephesus.

How and when he had purchased Onesimus, we don't know, but think of how unlikely it was that a rich master would ever meet a lowly slave.

We do know that Paul and Onesimus met in Rome, and it may have been under the auspices of the Roman government. There are many of the details we do not know. But this little epistle has a wonderful message to tell us about a rich master, his slave, and a converted Jew. The Jew, Paul, had been saved by the miraculous intervention of the Lord Jesus Christ in his life when he was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians, and to bring them back to Jerusalem in chains. Paul had led Philemon to Christ probably at Ephesus. Then when Paul and Onesimus came into contact with each other, the Lord used Paul to give the Gospel to Onesimus, and Onesimus was saved. You can be sure that when Paul first met Onesimus he had no idea that Onesimus was a slave who had run away from his friend Philemon. The whole situation was orchestrated by a sovereign God Who was, and is, in control of every person on earth.

Even though we can't put all of the pieces together, it is a blessing, isn't it, to think of how these three men met each other because of the leading of the Lord in all of their lives. And let me say that every one of them was *a trophy of God's grace*. And you are too, if you know the Lord. Think of how the Lord has maneuvered each of our lives to bring us to Himself. A trophy is a memorial of a victory, but the victory is not to our glory, but a victory of God's grace in each of our lives for His glory.

Now let us consider the message, or messages, of the epistle. It is the shortest of all of Paul's epistles which were written under the direction of the Holy Spirit. It is a true story about real people. It was written by the Apostle Paul to a prominent Christian master, Philemon, about Philemon's runaway slave by the name of Onesimus.

First, let me say that this epistle to Philemon is connected with Paul's letter to the church in Colosse by the mention of Onesimus in Col. 4:9,

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and of Archippus in Col. 4:17. See Archippus' name in Philemon 2, and Onesimus' name in Ph. 10. Also Epaphras, Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, and Lucas are mentioned in both epistles. So we can assume, and I think rightly so, that Philemon lived in Colosse, and that the church met in his home, and that his son Archippus was the present pastor.

The divisions of the epistle are easy to see:

I. Paul's greeting to Philemon and his family in verses 1-7.

II. Paul's appeal to Philemon for Onesimus in verses 8-21.

III. Paul's conclusion with greetings for Philemon from those who were with Paul in Rome in verses 22-25.

Paul's greeting to Philemon was very commendatory. Obviously Philemon was a true man of God whose life was a real testimony in the church at Colosse, but also to the people of God elsewhere, *i.e.*, everywhere that Philemon was known.

Beginning with verse 8 we see that Paul's main purpose in writing this shorter epistle and sending it with the letter to the whole church at Colosse, was to appeal to Philemon to accept, forgive, and restore Onesimus to his former place as a bondservant in Philemon's household.

*How and when* Paul had met Onesimus, we do not know, but we know *where* they met. It was in Rome. Onesimus may have been arrested and placed where Paul was, but we can't be sure about that. The important thing is to know not only that they had met, and that Paul had led Onesimus to Christ. See verse 10. He called Onesimus his "son," whom he had led to Christ after he, Paul, had gotten to Rome and was in chains. This was the way believers in those days spoke of others they had led to Christ.

You may remember what the Apostle Paul said to the Corinthian believers to show his great love and concern for them in spite of all of the troubles that the Corinthian church was having. We read this in 1 Cor. 4:14-16:

14 I write not these things to shame you, but as my beloved sons I warn you.

15 For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel.

16 Wherefore I beseech you, be ye followers of me.

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And it turns out as we go on in the epistle that Philemon also was a spiritual son of the Apostle Paul. This is evidently what Paul meant by what he said in the last part of verse 19.

Probably the Apostle John was speaking of his spiritual children, people he had led to Christ when he wrote in 3 John 4, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.” We would say that about the children in our families, but John was probably talking about his spiritual children, people he had led to the Lord. If a person has genuinely been saved, he will manifest it by a change in his life. If there is no change, there has not been a birth.

Now we can't always say when a person professes faith in Christ, that he or she has been saved. We hope that he has, but we don't know until we see that that person's life has been changed. Evidently enough time had gone by so that the Apostle Paul was thoroughly convinced that Onesimus had really been saved. In fact, Paul was so certain that Onesimus had been saved, that he wanted to keep Onesimus with himself. But he did not feel that it would have been right to do that unless he had Philemon's permission. Onesimus' first responsibility was to Philemon. He needed to go back to his Master, and so Paul was sending Onesimus with this letter commending Onesimus to Philemon as a changed man. In verse 11 Paul said that he knew that Onesimus had been “unprofitable” to Philemon, but now, because he had been saved and changed, Onesimus was “profitable” to both Paul and Philemon. This means that when a person is saved, he is not only going to manifest that change in one place, but he will manifest it in every place. We need to question the salvation of a person who acts one way, like a Christian in public, but is just the opposite with his wife and family.

In using the word “unprofitable” about Onesimus old life, he meant that he was inefficient, undependable, one who had to be watched all of the time, and that Philemon was probably relieved when Onesimus left him. “Profitable” means just the opposite. It meant that Onesimus was not only useful, but very useful, easy to use. This is what we mean when we say of a person that you can give a person a job, and he not only does it, but does it willingly, happily, and even comes back when his job is finished to find out if there is anything else that he can do. Or he may be the kind of a person who sees things that need to be done, and does them without being asked to do them. This is the kind of a servant that masters were looking for, and this is the kind of an employee that employers are

always looking for.

Paul was so sure that Philemon would find a great change in Onesimus that he asked Philemon to receive Onesimus the way he would receive Paul himself if he came. And we can be sure that Philemon was living for the day when Paul was to be a guest in his home. Paul said that perhaps it was necessary for Onesimus to leave in order that when he came back, a new man in Christ, Philemon would receive him forever, meaning, as long as they both would live.

From Paul's words in verse 16 we must not assume that Paul was asking Philemon to give Onesimus his freedom. And he would not have counseled Onesimus to expect that Philemon would set him free. Paul's advice to bondservants as he wrote to the Corinthian church is expressed in 1 Cor. 7:21-22:

21 Art thou called being a servant? care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather.

22 For he that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord's freeman: likewise also he that is called, being free, is Christ's servant.

What Paul meant in Ph. 16 was that Philemon should not receive Onesimus *just as a servant, but more than a servant, a beloved brother in Christ*. This epistle has to be one of the sweetest, most delightful accounts that we have any place in the Word of God, OT or NT, which have to do with believers.

Although we are not told what Philemon did, I believe that we are on safe ground to conclude that Philemon did accept the new Onesimus back, not only into his home, but also into his heart.

But before I leave this precious epistle, I want to point out to you what an excellent illustration of the Gospel in this story about Onesimus. Think of the way the Lord Jesus may have pled with the Father for our acceptance! Martin Luther said, "We are all the Lord's Onesimi!"

And so Philemon is a type of God. Paul is a type of the Lord Jesus. And Onesimus is a type of you and of me.

Note that Paul asked Philemon to do three things for Onesimus as far as taking Onesimus back was concerned:

1) In verse 12, "receive him."

2) In verse 15, “receive him forever.”

3) In verse 17, “receive him as myself.”

We rightfully talk to people about receiving Christ, but the bigger question is, will He receive us? And the answer is a resounding, “YES!” But it is not because we deserve to be saved, but because of the intercession of Christ. I have a hard time thinking that the Lord Jesus would plead with God the Father for me as Paul pled for Onesimus, but I am sure that He has: “receive him,” “receive him forever,” “receive him as myself.” Oh, what grace this is! We, too, were most unprofitable, but because of the work of Christ on our behalf, His death and His intercession for us, by God’s grace we have become, or can become, “profitable.”

But there is more here. Look with me at verses 18 and 19. (Read.) Have we wronged the Father? Do we owe Him anything? We all have to answer “yes” to both of those questions. We deserve nothing but His judgment, do we? How can we pay our debt? Just by spending eternity in hell. Is there any other hope? Yes, there is! Can’t you hear the Lord Jesus saying, “If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on My account. Father, I give you my signature with mine own hand, I will repay it!” And that is what our Savior did when He died on the Cross. He paid my debt, and He paid yours, too! He paid it all in full. That is why we can sing, “Jesus paid it all. All to Him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain; He washed it white as snow.”

Onesimus may have robbed Philemon before he ran away. We can’t say that for sure. But what we can say is that Paul sent Onesimus back a debt-free bondservant. And this is the way the Lord Jesus has brought us to be Father – debt-free! You say, “Well, Paul might have been assuming a greater debt than he realized when he said that to Onesimus and put his signature to his promise.” And you are right. But that is nothing compared with what the Lord did for me when He went to the Cross to pay what I owed to the Father in full!

But then look at verses 20 and 21, and with this I will close.

Paul knew Philemon very well, and the Lord Jesus knows the Father perfectly. But we see in verse 20 that Paul told Philemon if he would only receive Onesimus back, it would make him very, very happy. But that is not all. Paul told Philemon, “I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt do more than I say.” That is what the Lord Jesus has told the Father. “Father, I know that you will receive them. And I know that you will

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receive them forever. And I know that you will receive them as you receive Me. But I also know that You will even do more than I am asking you to do.”

The Lord Jesus went to the Cross to die for the sins of those whom the Father had given to Him. And He by His death paid our debt in full. That would be enough, but since we have been saved, haven't we learned that He does for us far more than we ever thought He would or could. What a friend Onesimus had in the Apostle Paul, and “what a Friend we have in Jesus!”

**Concl:** What could Onesimus do to repay Paul or Philemon? He didn't need to worry about that, did he? What can we do to repay our Lord for what He has done for us? We don't have to be concerned about that either, do we? We just need to love the Lord our God (which includes His dear Son, and the blessed Holy Spirit Who brought us to God just like Tychicus brought Onesimus back to Philemon. Tychicus made it easy for Onesimus to go back to Philemon, just as the Holy Spirit makes it easy for us to make our way to God.

Thanksgiving Day is Thursday, but every day should be Thanksgiving Day for those of us who know the Lord. We are all the Lord's Onesimi! But they are the very ones the Lord died for. The Lord Jesus did not come for those who feel that they are already righteous, but for those who know that they are hopeless and helpless sinners apart from the saving work of Christ.

If you are not trusting in Christ for your salvation, ask the Lord to show you that spiritually you are an Onesimus. When you understand how unprofitable you are before God, then you will come to Christ that He might meet every need you have in order to be reconciled to God. It is not what you can do for God, but it is what Christ has already done for all who come to God through Him and the merits of His death on the Cross.