

TBC – 11/29/09 a.m.

A RUNAWAY SLAVE COMES TO CHRIST

Paul's Epistle to Philemon

Intro: In the epistle of Paul to Philemon we have one of the most delightful stories to be found anywhere in the Bible. It is the story of a Roman bondsman by the name of Onesimus who belonged to a wealthy Christian by the name of Philemon. So we are reading here about two men who were on the opposite ends of society: Philemon at the top; Onesimus at the bottom. Philemon was a master; Onesimus was a bond-servant. Masters could be very harsh and demanding of their slaves, or they could be very kind and gracious toward them. Philemon obviously was a good master. And that may have been the reason that Onesimus felt safe in fleeing from him. I am quite sure that Onesimus could have paid what he had done by suffering the death penalty. But Philemon did not go after him. We can be sure that Onesimus had seen much evidence in Philemon's life of what it means to be a Christian. I feel that I am safe in saying that Philemon had prayed for Onesimus from the day he had purchased Onesimus. But then when Onesimus suddenly was gone, a runaway, we can be sure that although Philemon did not know where he had gone, he followed Onesimus with his prayers. It is an amazing story of the grace of God in action in Philemon, in Paul, and, last of all, in Onesimus. It is truly a delightful story, and it ought to be an encouragement to all of us who are praying for those we love who still will have nothing to do with God or with Christ.

Philemon was a Christian. The church at Colosse met in his home. And if we are right about those names who are at the beginning of this epistle he had a Christian wife, and his son was his pastor. The Lord had been very good to Philemon, and he was using the material resources that the Lord had given to him in the service of the Lord.

When the Apostle Paul wrote his epistle to the church at Colosse, he also wrote to Philemon in whose home the church at Colosse met. Paul did not mention Philemon in his letter to the church, probably because he knew that he was going to write, or had just written, a personal letter to Philemon. The way we identify Philemon with Colosse is by the mention of Archippus in the Colossian letter, and in the exhortation that was given to him in Colossians 4:17. As we begin Paul's letter to Philemon, we find Archippus mentioned in verse 2. And it is thought by the mention of Philemon first, then Apphia, and finally Archippus, that Paul was mentioning Philemon's family: his wife Apphia, and their son,

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Archippus, who probably was the pastor of the Colossian church at that time. I went over this with you last Sunday when we were going through the names that Paul mentioned in the final verses of the Colossian epistle.

Although Paul had not had a hand in establishing the church at Colosse, Philemon was a personal friend of his, so much so that Paul asked to stay in his home (see Ph. 22) because Philemon evidently had been praying that Paul would visit them in Colosse. We don't know if that ever happened, but I am inclined to think that that visit must have taken place. You can see from the first seven verses of Paul's letter to Philemon that the two men were very good friends.

But the Apostle Paul had a very specific and very important reason for writing to Philemon. It had to do with a slave named Onesimus who had run away from Philemon's house, and somehow the paths of Onesimus and Paul had crossed, and Onesimus had been saved. And the evidence that he had been saved was that his life had been changed. The Apostle Paul said in verse 11, speaking of Onesimus, "which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me."

We are not told how long Onesimus was with Paul, but it must have been several weeks, and possibly even months. I say that because Paul was absolutely certain about Onesimus' salvation. In verse 10 Paul called Onesimus, "my son . . . whom I have begotten in my bonds." In verse 15 when he was appealing to Philemon to take him back he said that Onesimus may have "departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever." And then Paul added in verse 16, "not now as a servant, but above a servant," that is, more than a servant, "a brother beloved."

Paul had observed Onesimus long enough to be sure that Onesimus had really been saved. We can't say how long that would be with anyone, but Paul was absolutely certain that Onesimus had been saved. He had been changed, and he remained changed. This did not mean that he was perfect, but it did mean that there was continuing evidence of salvation in Onesimus' life.

Paul doesn't say how they met, or where. It seems from verse 18 that Onesimus may have robbed Philemon when he left, or that he had been in the habit of stealing from Philemon right along. But Paul agreed to make that right with Philemon himself, if anything needed to be paid back.

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Now we can't always make everything right with people we have wronged after we are saved, but in this case Paul felt that he had to send Onesimus back to Philemon. He belonged to Philemon, and Paul did not feel that he had the right to decide whether Onesimus should stay with him or return to Philemon.. That right belonged to Philemon, and Paul wanted Philemon to make the decision about Onesimus without any pressure from him, that is, from Paul. So Paul wrote to the church at Colosse, and he wrote a letter to Philemon, and he gave the letters to Tychicus and Onesimus, and sent them off to Colosse. We have no more information than that. We are not told what Philemon did, but in the light of all that Paul said in this letter, it is impossible for me to think that Philemon did anything but welcome Onesimus back with open arms, and that Onesimus resumed his duties with Philemon and became a very active member of the church at Colosse.

But I want all of you to see in this letter how Paul has given us an amazing illustration of the Gospel. It was Martin Luther who said, "We are all the Lord's Onesimi (the plural form of Onesimus). I want you to see in this epistle how Paul spoke to Philemon in this letter the way our Lord Jesus Christ may have spoken to God the Father about your salvation and mine. We were all the bondservants of sin, running away from a kind and loving God, but our lives are different today because of the way the Lord Jesus Christ has acted as a Mediator for us to bring us to God. The part of the epistle that I am thinking in particular about now begins with verse 8.

The one who initiated a reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus was Paul. The One Who came to effect a reconciliation between us and God was the Lord Jesus Christ. You and I did not seek a reconciliation with God. Jesus Christ sought it for us in the same way that Paul sought a reconciliation between Onesimus and Philemon. And our Lord sought it now only because of His love for us, as Paul loved Onesimus, but the Lord sought it on the basis of His love for the Father and the Father's love for Him. Nobody could have appeal more forcefully and effectively for Onesimus with Philemon than the Apostle Paul. And no one could possibly have interceded more effectively for us with God than the Lord Jesus Christ did. That is the first point that I want you to see from verses 8 and 9.

The second point is in verse 10. Paul told Philemon that he had begotten Onesimus in his bonds. Paul looked upon his own imprisonment as the means that God had used to get the Gospel to Onesimus. And has it not

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be that way in our relationship with Christ. We have been begotten, born into the family of God, by the bonds of Christ. He became sin for us that we might be made the righteous before God in Christ. It is by Christ's stripes that we have been healed. Paul could look back upon that difficult trip to Rome, and his difficult time in Rome, his stripes, his chains, as what God had done to bring salvation to Onesimus.

And then look with me at verse 11. What better word could describe Onesimus than the word, "unprofitable." And what better word could be used to describe what we were worth to God than the word "unprofitable." God was actually better off without us, just as Philemon was better off without Onesimus. Grace is written all over the verse, isn't it? It was by grace that Paul could write to Philemon the way he did about Onesimus. Whatever there was about Onesimus that could make him profitable to Philemon, was what Paul had done for him in leading him to Christ. And who can begin to measure how the Lord Jesus Christ has changed our standing before God from unprofitable to profitable. And it has all been a work of God's grace.

But we are not finished. There is more here for us to see.

Here I want to bring together verses 12 and 17. Paul wanted Philemon to receive Onesimus as Philemon would have received Paul. And isn't this the standing that we have before God? We are received by God as God receives His own Son. Our standing before God is in Christ, equal to that of the Son of God Himself. Paul wrote, "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature. We are accepted in the beloved. Philemon basically was not showing favor toward Onesimus by accepting Onesimus, but he was showing favor toward Paul. And when God accepts us, forgives us, and claims us as His own, it is because of His love for us, but it is much more because of His love for His Son.

And then in verses 13 and 14 Paul said to Philemon that he would have kept Onesimus for himself, but that he would not do anything apart from Philemon's agreement. And isn't this what the Lord Jesus did. He did all that God required to make us acceptable to God, but God has accepted us because it was His own will that the Lord Jesus carried out when He came to earth for our salvation. God was in Christ reconciling us to Himself. So we see that our salvation is not something that Jesus Christ came to accomplish, but that God was working in Christ in all that He did to secure our salvation.

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Now look at verse 15. Isn't this a picture of our salvation? We were born in sin, and all of us have lived for a time in sin, but just as when Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon, he sent him that Onesimus would be restored to Philemon for the rest of his life. For how long a time has the Father accepted us? He has accepted us FOREVER!!! And God has accepted us, and in one sense we are His bondservants, but in another we are members of His family. God is our God, but God is also our heavenly Father. "Beloved, now are we the children of God," the Apostle John wrote just after he exclaimed about what kind of love it was that caused God to bring us into His family. How could Philemon give a worthless, runaway slave, the status of a brother? It was only by the grace of God, and that is exactly how you and I have gotten into God's family, and our Lord is not ashamed to call us brethren.

Don't you see the Gospel in verse 18? Paul said to Philemon, not knowing what Onesimus may have stolen from him, "Put that on my account." The Lord told the Father that about us, didn't He? "But He was wounded for our transgressions: He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and with His stripes we are healed" (Isa. 53:5). And just as Paul gave Philemon his signature as a guarantee that he would do for Onesimus as he has said, so the Lord has guaranteed the payment of our debt of sin by the shedding of His precious blood.

Finally let me call your attention to verse 21. Paul told Philemon that he was confident that he was convinced that Philemon would do even more than he, Paul, had asked him to do. And haven't we found our salvation to be just like that?

Do you remember what the Queen of Sheba told Solomon after she had seen all of Solomon's glory? This is what she said to him. The word are recorded in 1 Kings 10:6-7:

6 And she said to the king, It was a true report that I heard in mine own land of thy acts and of thy wisdom.

7 Howbeit I believed not the words, until I came, and mine eyes had seen it: and, behold, the half was not told me: thy wisdom and prosperity exceedeth the fame which I heard.

Didn't Onesimus feel like this after Philemon received him back? And don't we feel that way about our salvation. Nobody could have adequately explained all of the glory of salvation, but having come to Christ we are learning more every day about how wonderful our salvation is. Cf. Eph. 3:20 and 21; Phil. 4:19.

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Concl: Couldn't we really call Paul's letter to Philemon *the Gospel according to Paul*? On almost every point as Paul appealed to Philemon, we can hear our Lord making the same appeal for us to the Father, only as I am sure Onesimus found when he went back to Philemon that the half has never been told of what Philemon did for him. And all because of Paul. Neither can we tell all that the Father has done for us willingly because of what Christ did for us at the Cross, and has continued to do down to this very hour. And the complete story has not yet been told, and we know that for us the story will never be completed for all eternity.

As I close, let me ask: Are you the old Onesimus, or the new Onesimus. What God did for Onesimus through Christ, He is still doing to those who turn in faith to Christ. Don't look to your faith; look to Christ. Look to Him to make you a new creature and to change you from the unprofitable status to the profitable by the grace of God.