

THE LORD'S ONESIMI

Philemon 1-25

Intro: This delightful letter from the Apostle Paul to a wealthy member of the church in Colosse, gives us one of the outstanding stories of the grace of God to be found in the Bible.

It was written by Paul during his first imprisonment in Rome in 62 or 63 A.D. It was written at the same time as Paul's letter to the church at Colosse, where Philemon lived, and at the same time as the letter to the church at Ephesus was written. It had to be a time in some respects when the Apostle Paul could have been discouraged because he was hindered because of his imprisonment from going from place to place either preaching the Gospel where it had not been preached before, or visiting churches which he had had a part in establishing throughout the Empire.

But it is a wonderful story of the providence of God in turning a time of imprisonment into a time of great blessing in the spread of the Gospel.

We see from verse 1 that Paul was a prisoner, but instead of saying, "of Rome," or "of Caesar," he said, "of Jesus Christ." See the same in verse 9. This was Paul's way of saying that he knew that he was where he was by the will of God.

Timothy, his son in the faith, was with him, which was another blessing from the Lord.

Paul had evidently been the one who had led Philemon to Christ. See verse 19. And Philemon had become a very godly man. (See verses 4-7.) It is thought that Apphia mentioned in verse 2 was his wife, and many believe that Archippus whom he called his "fellow soldier" was their son, and the Pastor of the church in Colosse. And we also see in verse 2 that the church in Colosse met in his house.

Now it may have been that Paul's letter to Philemon about his slave, Onesimus, was what actually prompted the writing of Paul's letters to the churches at Colosse and Ephesus at the same time. The only other time that Onesimus is mentioned in the NT is in Colossians 4:7-9 where we are told that Tychicus and Onesimus were the ones who brought the epistle of Colossians to the church and the epistle to Philemon about Onesimus. (Read Col. 4:7-9.)

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Now we don't know any more about how Paul and Onesimus got together than the information we have in these two epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon. But somehow they got together, and Paul led Onesimus to Christ. We don't know if it was shortly after they met, or if it took some time. But what we can be sure of is that Philemon had laid a foundation for the Apostle Paul when Philemon had presented the Gospel to his slave, Onesimus.

But Paul indicated that Onesimus had been saved long enough, and had responded so well to the teaching of the Apostle Paul, that Paul was certain that Onesimus had been saved. See verses 10 and 11. That always takes time. When people profess faith in Christ, only time and the changes that take place give evidence that a person's profession is real. Verse 10 leaves no doubt as to how Paul felt about Onesimus.

Paul would gladly have kept Onesimus with him, but he felt that Philemon was the one who should make that decision. One of the great evidences that Onesimus had been saved is expressed in verse 11. He had been not only worthless as a slave to Philemon, but he had been a detriment. Philemon would have been far better off without Onesimus. But since he had been saved, he had proved himself to be very profitable to Paul, and Paul knew that Philemon would be quick to see the transformation that Christ had made in the character of Onesimus as well as in his work!! Now follow in your Bible as I read verses 12 through 16. (Read.)

As much as Paul would love to have kept Onesimus with him, he felt that Onesimus had to go back to Philemon, and then Philemon could make the decision.

But Paul wanted Philemon to know that he was not sending back the old Onesimus, but a new Onesimus. Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17. The name Onesimus means *profitable*. Who gave him that name, we do not know. Maybe his parents had been slaves. Maybe Philemon had given him that name. However it may have been it took the Lord to enable him to live up to his name.

But notice that the Apostle Paul was not indifferent as to what Philemon's decision would be. *He strongly urged Philemon to take him back.*

But Paul wanted Philemon to know that he was not to accept Onesimus just as a slave, "but as a brother beloved." Now I don't think that Paul

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was appealing for Philemon to give Onesimus his freedom. Philemon could have done that if he chose to do so. But Paul was not one to pressure Philemon to do that. Often among masters and slaves there was a great bond of affection. And sometimes when slaves were offered their freedom, they chose to remain as slaves because of the love they had for their masters. What Paul was concerned about was that Philemon could henceforth look not on Onesimus just as a slave, but as a brother in Christ!

Paul added in verse 17, “If you count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself,” *i.e.*, receive him as you would receive me.

But then Paul added one more word. And it is truly amazing. He said in verse 18, “If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account.” It may have been that when Onesimus left Philemon, that he stole enough from him to pay for his passage to Rome. Maybe he had even stolen from Philemon before. Paul told Philemon in so many words, “Take his name off of his bill, and put mine in its place.” What more could the Apostle Paul have said? See verse 19.

Now read verses 20 and 21.

Verses 22 through 25 give us the conclusion. But how heartwarming it is! Paul knew that Philemon prayed for him, and he gave evidence both at the beginning, and at the ending of this letter that he prayed for Philemon, and that they both were members of a great fellowship of believers of whom Onesimus was also a part.

It is a truly wonderful story, isn't it? And I know that stories very much like this are recorded in heaven where the power of the Gospel is shown in the transformation of multiplied millions whose lives have been forever changed through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

But I am not through yet. Have you seen in this story a picture of your own salvation? I think we have a wonderful illustration of the Gospel when you look at the main characters in this epistle.

Think with me in the time that remains of Philemon being in a place that is similar to God. And then think of the Apostle Paul as being in a place which illustrates the place that the Lord Jesus Christ has in our salvation. And then let me think of myself, and you think of yourself, as Onesimus.

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I have give my message this morning the title, “The Lord’s Onesimi.” I got that, as some of you know, from Martin Luther. He said probably many times, “We are all the Lord’s Onesimi.” Onesimi is the plural in Latin for Onesimus. We would say today, “We are all the Lord’s Onesimuses!”

We don’t know how Onesimus became a slave, but it is very possible that he was born of slave parents. You and I were born as slaves of sin. We by nature are totally unprofitable to God. God would not have been better off to take any one of us for Himself. But just as Onesimus could see the grace of God in leading him to Paul. And then hearing from Paul what he had heard over and over again from Philemon, God touched his heart through the Gospel presented to him by Paul. And he was saved, and being saved, he was changed.

When you read in this epistle about how the Apostle Paul pled with Philemon to receive Onesimus, let that picture how the Lord Jesus pled with God the Father for you and me.

Remember that types are never perfect in every detail because we know that God sent His Son to save us, whereas Philemon had no idea what was going on with Onesimus. He may have even thought that he would never see Onesimus again. However, our acceptance with God is through Jesus Christ and His death for us on Calvary’s Cross. The basis of Paul’s appeal to Philemon is “I have begotten [him] in my bonds.”

Paul was telling Philemon, and Christ has told His Father, “I have begotten him in my bonds.” Paul knew that he had suffered imprisonment because that was how he was going to be led to Onesimus to give him the Gospel. What did Jesus Christ suffer death on the Cross? He came to Calvary to purchase our redemption from the bondage of sin. Christ was born a Man, suffered and died on the Cross, and was raised again to guarantee the salvation of us who are the Lord’s Onesimi.

And just as Paul told Philemon to receive Onesimus, so the Lord Jesus pled with the Father to receive us because of His love for us, those of us for whom he died. Verse 12 indicated that Onesimus was as dear to him as his inmost vitals, his whole being. That is why the Lord died for us, not because we deserved it, but because of His great love for us.

But let’s take that word “receive” a little farther. See verse 15. How long

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did Paul want Philemon to receive Onesimus? “That thou shouldest receive him forever.” How long did Christ want the Father to receive us? Can’t you hear the Lord Jesus saying to the Father about you, “That Thou shouldest receive him forever”? Paul was not seeking just a temporary restoration for Onesimus, but one that was permanent. That is what the Lord Jesus has obtained for us, and which has the full approval of the Father. Didn’t our dear Lord say, “My sheep hear my voice ... (John 10:28 and 29).

Philemon agreed to all of this. He received Onesimus, but not just until he made the first mistake. His permanent acceptance was all that would satisfy Paul, and that is what Christ sought and has obtained for every one of us who has been saved. Salvation is not an in and out gift, but it is in to stay!

But we are not finished with the reception that Paul sought for Onesimus with Philemon. Look at verse 17. Paul really sought everything for Onesimus didn’t he? Do you know the kind of acceptance you as a believer in Christ have with God? You have the same acceptance that the Lord Jesus has. I wouldn’t dare to say that if the Word of God didn’t say the same thing. We are “accepted in the Beloved,” and the Beloved is Christ. Being in Christ, as we are, there is no need for anyone else, or anything else, to give us greater acceptance with God than we have in Christ.

Do you remember that little verse which goes like this?

Near so very near to God, nearer I could not be;
For in the Person of His Son, I am as near as He.

Christ on the basis of His work on the Cross, says to the Father concerning you and concerning me, “Receive him (or her) . . . receive them forever . . . receive him as you receive me.” What more can we ask? There is no more than that.

But I still have two points to make.

Paul said in verse 18, “If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account.” The Father did that to Christ on our behalf, didn’t He? “The Lord (the Father) hath laid on Him (the Son) the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:6). The Father charged our sins against Christ, and He paid our penalty in full, thus securing our salvation. There is no sin that you

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have ever committed, or will ever commit, that was not charged against Christ at Calvary, and full atonement made.

One more point – and it is in verse 21. (Read.) Isn't this the way that you would describe the salvation that we have in Christ? The Father does all that the Son has asked Him to do for us, and then the Father keeps going on to more and more great blessings. If the Queen of Sheba said about the glory of Solomon, that the half had not been told her, isn't that how we feel about God. He is not only able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, *but he is continually doing it, isn't He?*

Concl: I would like to ask you a question as I close.

Paul said in verse 22 that he hope to come to see Philemon, and asked him to prepare a place for him to stay. He had just said to Philemon, I want you to receive Onesimus when he comes just like you would receive me. I've wondered if when Onesimus got back to Colosse, and to Philemon's home, that Philemon had prepared the guest room for Onesimus. It is just a thought, but such a thing would even begin to compare with the reception that we are going to receive when we enter our heavenly home.

This little epistle has given us plenty to think about, hasn't it? Let us thank the Lord that we are all the Lord's Onesimi – undeserving as we are, yet brought into the eternal blessing of God through our precious Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.