

Shepherding Notes

Philemon

By Caleb Bunch

Today we are going to cover an entire book of the Bible! Philemon is a short, personal letter from Paul to a man named Philemon. It was sent at the same time as the book of Colossians was delivered to the church in Colossae. In particular, this letter is in regard to a man named Onesimus. But, in order to understand this book, it may be helpful if I put a few pieces together for you. Here is the story.

The Background

Philemon was a wealthy man who lived in Colossae. He was a Christian man who owned a slave named Onesimus. (Don't think slavery in terms of the brutal slave trade that likely comes immediately to mind — think more like household servants.) Onesimus was useless to Philemon. (vs. 11) We don't know exactly what this means, but at the very least it indicates that he did not do his job well.

At one point, Onesimus ran away. He didn't just sneak out the back door and live on the street. He traveled more than 1,300 miles to Rome. One question that arises is this: how did a runaway slave have enough money to travel that far? Likely he stole from his master's house. We see that Paul refers to this debt in verse 19 and promises to repay it on Onesimus' behalf.

How They Met

When Onesimus arrived in Rome, he somehow came into contact with Paul. There are three main theories about how this came to pass. First, there are some who believe Onesimus knew about Paul beforehand and sought him out — I tend to reject this theory because there were likely many other godly men much closer that he could have gone to for help. Secondly, some scholars believe that Onesimus was discovered by Paul or one of his companions — I doubt this to be the case because Paul was imprisoned at the time along with most of his closest friends. Moreover, even if they did find Onesimus, they would likely have had no knowledge of his escape or theft. I tend to believe the third option, which is that Onesimus was arrested in Rome and was placed in prison alongside Paul.

"Can you imagine? Just like Jonah thought he could run, this man could not escape God. However he got there, Onesimus ended up in prison with Paul."

A Transformed Man

While in prison together, at least two things happened. First, Paul says that there was a spiritual transformation in Onesimus. When he left Philemon, he was a bondservant. But, while he was away he became "a beloved brother" both "in the flesh and in the Lord." (vs. 10) In other words, Onesimus became a Christian. There was now a spiritual dimension to his life that had not been there previously.

This spiritual transformation manifested tangible outworkings of grace. Where he used to be "useless," Paul refers to him as "useful" — and notably, "useful" is the very meaning of the name Onesimus. He served Paul in prison and helped him through his darkest times. So much so that Paul refers to Onesimus as "my very heart." (vs. 12)

But the greatest transformation of Onesimus is evidenced by the fact that he humbly obeyed Paul and went back to his previous owner. He basically hand delivered his own signed confession of a crime that carried weighty punishment. He did not know how he would be treated upon his return. Yet, in faithful obedience he went back to the person he had wronged in order to be reconciled as a brother.

The Letter's Purpose

However, this letter is not written to Onesimus. It is to his master, Philemon. All of these commands were given to Philemon so that he would respond to Onesimus in a godly manner. Paul was instructing him how to think of this man and how to treat him upon his return.

Takeaways

- You can't run away from God.
- Salvation results in life change. Sometimes that change is very uncomfortable.
- Do not hold a grudge. Be quick to forgive those who seek it.
- In Christ, we should not see ourselves as superior to one another. From the world's perspective, Philemon was Onesimus' superior. But, in the kingdom they are beloved brothers who are called to serve each other.

- God is sovereign. Sometimes we see the outworking of providence as He weaves together our lives in patterns like this one. But most of the time we will remain blindly oblivious to the handiwork of God until we are with Him in heaven. You won't always see the connections, but they are always there.
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"Pray that the Lord would give you a heart that is quick and ready to forgive those who sin against you – just like Philemon was called upon to forgive Onesimus."