



Jeremiah 18:1-11, Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18, [Philemon 1:1-21](#), Luke 14:25-33

The letter of Paul to Philemon is unique in the New Testament. It is the shortest of the letters of Paul, but other things set it apart too. While the others are addressed to entire churches and all are focused on the matters of church life, this one is really only focused on one individual, on Philemon, and it is seeking to resolve a personal matter between the two of them – a matter of property.

The Letter About Onesimus

Philemon, who was a leader of the church that met in his home, was also a relatively prosperous man. The measure of prosperity, in that ancient world, was defined by one thing: the ownership of slaves. A poor person in ancient Rome was someone who couldn't even afford a single slave so Philemon, apparently, must have owned several. One of them was named Onesimus.

Does it surprise you that an early Christian leader was also a slave owner? It probably shouldn't. The idea that good Christians could own slaves is taken for granted in much of the New Testament. When the topic comes up, New Testament writers never condemn the practice, though they do advocate for good and fair treatment of slaves.

Was Philemon at Least a Good Master?

But at least Philemon must have been a good master – one who treated his slaves well, right? You might hope so, but Onesimus doesn't seem to have thought so because he ran away.

Onesimus, by fleeing, became a thief and an outlaw. He also became stolen property. So, I can't imagine that he did it lightly. He must have had a good reason to run. Being a slave of Philemon couldn't have been a great experience. Though he was a church leader, that apparently did not mean that Philemon lived out Christian ideals in every relationship in his life. Sadly, he is hardly the last church leader to have had *that* particular problem.

Paul and Onesimus

The occasion of the letter is that Paul has become acquainted with this fugitive slave. In fact, Onesimus has become a convert to faith in Jesus under Paul's influence. But, now that he knows he is stolen property, Paul has a legal obligation to send Onesimus back to his owner. What we have in our Bibles is a copy of the letter that he writes and places in Onesimus' hand to give to Philemon on his return.

In this letter, Paul pulls out every trick he can possibly think of to persuade Philemon to grant Onesimus his freedom when he returns. And the mere fact that Paul puts so much pressure on him suggests that Philemon needed a lot of persuasion.

That is where the attention is usually placed when people read this letter, on Paul's persuasion. But I have always wondered about Onesimus. Even if the title of this letter is, according to tradition, the letter to Philemon, it is the letter *about* Onesimus. The mere fact that this letter made it into our Bibles tells us something about God's priorities. So, who was Onesimus?

Born a Slave

When he was born to a female slave in Philemon's household, his mother, who was a Judean by birth, wanted to call him Simon. It was a common name in her family. But Philemon wouldn't hear of it. He preferred it if his slaves didn't have too strong a sense of personal identity and he didn't like for them to feel a strong attachment to their ethnic heritage either. He wanted them to see themselves as belonging primarily to the household and he wanted them to understand that their value was found in one thing only: their utility to him. So long as they were helpful and beneficial to him, fine, but the moment they weren't, they became disposable.

So, Philemon looked at the little baby that his mother wanted to call Simon and he said no. No, this one would be called Onesimus. It was not a name, not really. It was an adjective. It meant “useful.” Anytime anyone used it for the rest of his life, Onesimus would be reminded that there was only one thing that gave him any value or meaning. He was there to be useful.

Being Useful

Onesimus never allowed to forget it. As soon as he was old enough to contribute, in any way, to the household or the comfort of his owners, that became the entire purpose of his being. As paterfamilias, Philemon had the power of life and death over every member of his household. He certainly had the right to employ corporal punishment for any reason. I’m not saying that Onesimus was constantly beaten. It was just that he was never allowed to forget that beatings were possible.

But more than the fear of punishment, he grew to resent the narrow definition of his value of which he was reminded every time he heard his name. He couldn’t help but wonder if there was more worth in him than whatever usefulness his master found.

Some Things Change for Philemon

One day, something changed in Philemon. He encountered a traveling preacher named Paul and became a believer in someone called Christ Jesus – a man who Paul said had been raised from the dead and who reigned in heaven at the right hand of power.

Coming to believe in Christ and becoming part of the church didn’t really make much difference to Philemon’s treatment of Onesimus though. When someone has been conditioned all their life to think of a slave as little more than a useful object, it is not a pattern of thinking that is easily changed.

Onesimus was glad, he supposed, that his master had found something that gave a sense of meaning and purpose to his life, but where was there anything like that for Onesimus? He was so convinced that there was something more for him, something beyond mere usefulness to his master, that he simply couldn’t bear it anymore. He saw his opportunity and he took it. Onesimus ran for freedom.

Life on the Run

Once he was free of the household, there was something exhilarating about being responsible for the course of his own life. He could scarcely believe that he didn’t need to be useful to anybody and yet he still existed. But, at the same time, the life of a fugitive slave was filled with many

pitfalls. It was not easy to find work. Who would hire a man who had to constantly keep on the move, who was always looking over his shoulder?

Onesimus quickly found that he had to resort to petty theft just to survive. That is how he came to be caught while thieving and, while the authorities were trying to figure out where he properly belonged (for Onesimus was not about to tell them where he had come from) he was placed in detention.

Imagine his surprise when he found himself incarcerated alongside the very man of whom his master had not ceased to speak ever since he had first met him. There, right beside him, sat Paul of Tarsus. And, to tell the truth, Onesimus was not particularly impressed with the man at first. What he had heard from his master had led him to believe that Paul was just like everybody else, that he had won Philemon over by flattering him for his wealth and his ownership of so many other human beings. But, as he came to know Paul, he started to realize how wrong that initial impression was.

A New Creation in Christ

Over the following days and then weeks, Onesimus learned a great deal about the Jesus that Paul preached. One thing stood out to him. Paul taught him that, when Jesus was raised from the dead, he transformed the previous structure of this world. In particular, Paul said that if anyone was in Christ Jesus, that person became a completely new creation. Everything old had passed away; all had been made completely new.

Even more stunning, as far as Onesimus was concerned, was the church that Paul said had been created because of Christ. It was, he said, like a body in which every member could play a vital role. He also said that when all were one in Christ, there was no longer Jew or Greek, there was no longer slave or free, there was no longer male and female. The more Onesimus heard about this church, the more he felt as if it could be, for him, a place where he could find himself, where he could truly belong. Onesimus began to look to this Christ Jesus to save him.

Father and Son

The more Onesimus remained with Paul, the more he saw him not only as a teacher and preacher, but also as a father – the father he had never had and the father that Philemon had certainly never been to him. And, as that bond was formed, something very strange began to happen. He started to feel a deep desire to be useful to Paul – to serve him in ways that would allow him to pursue the important work he was doing.

I am not sure you understand how significant such a thing was to one such as Onesimus. For him, his usefulness had always been his only

currency – the only thing he could offer to justify his existence. It was an obligation, an imperative. And so, he had always experienced it as something that drained him of energy and of identity. But now, with Paul who treated him like a son and did not require that he be useful in order to be loved, Onesimus felt filled with the desire to be useful to Paul in whatever ways he could. Even in the menial tasks he performed, tasks that had once only irritated him, he found a sense of meaning and of purpose because he offered them freely.

The Letter

Onesimus came to feel that there should be nothing that he could hide from Paul, and so he did reveal to him what his status was. Paul actually laughed when he discovered that he knew Onesimus' master. He was also pleased because he knew that Philemon would really have no choice but to give to Onesimus his freedom, at least if Paul asked with the right degree of pressure.

There was really no choice. Now that all was revealed, Paul would have to send Onesimus back to his master. But Onesimus was in the room when Paul dictated the letter. The words that Paul said would remain with him always. As he carried the letter with him on the way to his old household, he repeated the words again and again to himself.

What Paul Wrote

“I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.”

As he clutched the letter close to his heart, Onesimus felt certain that everything would be well.

Slavery and Early Christianity

There are some uncomfortable things about the attitude of early Christians towards slavery. We would like to think that they would be against slavery because of what they had learned from Jesus. But the practice of slavery was so deeply entrenched into every aspect of society

that most Christians simply couldn't imagine going on without it. What we mostly find in the New Testament, therefore, are passages that just take for granted that slavery will continue to exist but put forward measures that will at least make it a little bit less cruel and that will create a certain amount of mutual respect between masters and slaves, at least within the church.

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, says something that is very provocative about life inside the church. **“There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”** (Galatians 3:28) There is also another similar statement in Colossians 3:11.

Internal Practice of the Church

And this does seem to reflect an attitude that was common in the early church. There is evidence that people who were slaves did hold important leadership positions in the church, as did women. But, at the same time, it seems clear that this attitude towards slaves, and probably women too, only applied inside the dynamics of the church. As soon as you left the meeting, you became a slave again and your life once again belonged to your master, who may have called you a brother or sister and even acknowledged your leadership moments before.

So, the early church did begin the work of changing attitudes towards slavery in its practice. But it did not confront the institution, at least not outside of the church. And that's what makes the letter to Philemon so significant. Here we do see Paul looking at Onesimus and seeing more than just a slave. Paul is keenly aware that Onesimus' name means useful. It was a common name for slaves. Paul makes reference to this meaning several times in his letter. But he does it in a way that looks beyond Onesimus' utility to his master.

How we See People Matters

Paul sees Onesimus as a true person in every sense of the word and that, my friends is the beginning of revolutionary change. In fact, I would suggest that Paul's decision to see Onesimus as being more than useful, to see him as a multifaceted person, contains the roots of the eventual destruction of the institution of slavery. The world changes when the people we saw as categories we learn to see as people.

And I know that we see ourselves today as well beyond the scourge of slavery. In many ways we are and that is a very good thing. But I will tell you that I am often disturbed by the way we talk about people in our modern economy. We have a great tendency to judge people according to

their productivity. That is to say, we judge them based on whether they are useful – whether they are *Onesimus* – to the economy or not. And whenever we fall into that kind of thinking, whenever we see usefulness as the only thing that matters, we may be heading down a dangerous road.

I would also add this. I think many of us tend to see our own value only in terms of our usefulness to others. Onesimus discovered his value beyond simple usefulness, I believe that God wants you to discover your true value in the same way.