

## **The Story of Philemon, Onesimus and Paul**

This very short and very personal letter, from Paul to Philemon is interesting, but why was it included in the bible? Well, I hope that by unwrapping it a bit we might see why.

Like all good letters we have an author a recipient and a subject.

Our three main characters, the Apostle Paul (The Author), Philemon (The Recipient), and of course the runaway slave Onesimus, (The Subject.)

The letter starts in a similar way too many of Paul's letters. Although it is primarily written to Philemon, Paul includes in his greeting 2 others, and the church that meets in Philemon's house.

He then praises Philemon in his faith and good works, but this is before the real nub of the letter, which we will come to, but first, let's look at our main characters.

I think Paul needs little introduction, we know he had travelled extensively around the Mediterranean, staying with different people and telling them about Jesus, and founding many churches; but now he was imprisoned in Rome, and he knew his time on earth was limited. In a way a good thing for us as it gave the opportunity for him to write to the many churches he had established, travelling was over, and now it was important to consolidate these churches with sound teaching and to correct when things were going a bit astray. So, thanks to his imprisonment we have all the epistles we know and love so well.

So, what about Philemon? He lived in the city of Colossi, and by all accounts was quite wealthy, he was heading up a church which met in his house, and he had slaves. Now today we would rightly bulk at this, but it was the way of the times and if we remember Paul gave very clear instructions how masters should treat their slaves, and slaves their masters.

Then we have Onesimus, the runaway, he was a slave in Philemon's household, and he had runaway, worse still it would seem he had stolen from his master. In Roman society a runaway slave who stole from his master was indeed in big trouble and if caught would normally be tortured and killed.

Now quite how Onesimus had ended up in Rome with Paul, we don't quite know, but I suspect he would have heard Paul preach when he was setting up the church in Colossi, and when you are on the run, Paul would perhaps have been a safe haven.

It would seem that Onesimus has undergone a transformation whilst with Paul, we don't know exactly what, but certainly he is now a Christian, even if he wasn't when he ran away.

Now let's think for a moment, from Philemon's point of view, he may well have thought, (Paul said, he was a useless slave), good riddens, I don't ever want to see you again.

So, I wonder how he would have felt receiving this letter. The wording is interesting, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love.

Paul is clearly wanting to show the gospel in action, Philemon must have been surprised, Onesimus must have been full of trepidation, yet Paul wanted to show the truth of the new way, the Christian way, in action.

Paul also promises to repay anything that Onesimus owes, presumably what he had stolen. And he reminds Philemon that he has been himself saved through Paul's ministry! *'I say nothing about your owing me even your own self.'*

This has, I think, 2 lessons for us. Firstly, it reflects how God treats us. How often do we runaway and hide from him, especially when we know we have done wrong and may feel ashamed and guilty. How does he react, he says come to me, he forgives and forgives and forgives, he restores us to our relationship with him as precious children, not as slaves! He pays the price, we are redeemed, all that we owe, remember the wages of sin is death, he pays, and we are free, at no cost to ourselves.

Secondly, this short letter tells us how we should behave with those who have wronged us. Onesimus would have been in big trouble if he just returned to his master, or worse still been caught on the run, instead he is, we presume, welcomed back, restored, forgiven, and treated not as a slave but as a brother.

It would have been so easy for Philemon to want to have nothing more to do with this troublesome slave, but Onesimus had changed, and so must Philemon.

We all go through life being wronged by others, somehow thoughts of resentment, bitterness and revenge are much more comforting than, forgiveness, restoration, and reconciliation. You may even be aware, as I speak, of someone who has done you harm, even great harm, God is calling you to consider, and to act as we presume Philemon did in forgiving and restoring Onesimus, not just to his former position as a slave, but as a brother.

So, this short letter is there to teach us about God's redemption of us, and how we must do the same and forgive each other, so that we are all held together in God's love, remember what Paul said about love in another of his letters,

*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup> It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*