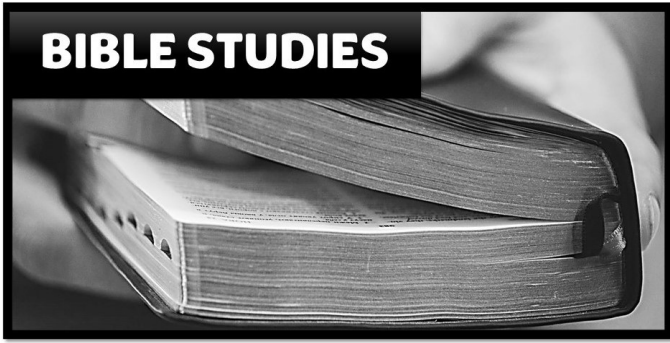


BIBLE STUDIES



BIBLE CHARACTER STUDY: ONESIMUS

SCRIPTURES: Philemon 1:1-19; Colossians 4:9

CONTEXT:

Onesimus was a slave to Philemon of Colossae. Because slaves in the Roman Empire outnumbered the citizens, harsh punishments were enforced to keep the slaves under control. A runaway slave could be branded on the forehead, have his bones broken, or be sent to the arena to fight wild beasts. Owners were permitted to inflict any punishment, including death. Slaves were valuable property. (In A.D. 79, a slave was recorded as being sold for 625 denarii—the equivalent value is more than \$27,000 in today's dollars.)

Onesimus was a runaway slave who came in contact with the Apostle Paul and was saved. Paul wrote the Epistle of Philemon to Onesimus' owner. "This Epistle stands alone among Paul's letters in being addressed to a private Christian, in being entirely occupied with a small, though very singular private matter" (commentary).

CONSIDER:

Why would a letter, written about one specific incident, be included in the Bible? Why did Christians own slaves? Was Paul supporting slavery by returning Onesimus to Philemon?

Philemon 1:1 Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer.

Paul wrote this letter as a Roman prisoner (described in Acts 28:30-31) while awaiting trial before Caesar. He was confined to a house and chained to a soldier. Paul preached from this house, and this is possibly how Onesimus came in contact with Paul, heard the Gospel, and was saved. Onesimus became like a son to Paul.

Paul was also responsible for Philemon's conversion. He was a dear friend of Paul ("our dearly beloved"). Notice, in this Epistle, Paul does not identify himself as an Apostle in the salutation (as he did in the majority of his other Epistles). Paul was appealing to Philemon as a friend. He was not *ordering* but *asking*.

In this letter, Paul was endeavoring to reconcile the runaway slave and his master. It was unlikely a slave would voluntarily return to his slavery, given the harsh punishment that might await him. Legally, Philemon was within his rights to exact such punishment. Paul was working to help Onesimus make things right with Philemon, and he was also asking Philemon to be merciful.

Philemon 1:2 And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house.

Apphia was believed to have been Philemon's wife. One commentary states, "In the customs of that day, Philemon's wife Apphia was the supervisor of the slaves in the household, so the letter concerned her as well." Paul's affectionate address ("beloved Apphia") shows not only did she hold a physical position as a leader in her home but that she obviously was an integral part involved in the church that was in her house.

Archippus was believed to have been Philemon's son or an important member of the household. The term "our fellowsoldier" appears to denote he was a minister of the Gospel. It was crucial for the entire household to be open to Onesimus' return. (Compare with the anger of the older brother when the prodigal son returned.)

"To the church in thy house": in the early days, Christians met in homes, often called "house churches." The Colossian church met in the home of Philemon.

Philemon 1:3 Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

A common Greek greeting was "grace," and the usual Jewish greeting was "peace" (shalom). Paul often combined these two words in his salutation. The early church was composed of Jews and Greeks who had recently converted to Christianity.

Philemon 1:10 I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:

11 Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me.

Onesimus means "profitable." Paul stressed the fact that in the past, Onesimus had been "unprofitable" to Philemon, but now (as a Christian), he had become "profitable to thee and to me." "In Christ, the useless person has been made useful" (Barclay).

Philemon 1:12 Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:

13 Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel:

14 But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.

Although Paul could have kept Onesimus with him, where he could have "ministered to me in the bonds of the gospel," by law, Onesimus belonged to Philemon. Due to Philemon's great respect for Paul, it is doubtful he would have demanded Onesimus' return. Yet, this could have caused hard feelings toward the Apostle Paul. Thus, Paul said, "I did not want to do anything without first getting your [Philemon's] consent" (AMP). Paul would not use his great influence to keep Onesimus with him, much as he needed him.

Philemon 1:15 For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever.

"Perhaps" the good from Onesimus running away was that he became a Christian. God used this departing "for a season" to bring about a divine change in Onesimus' life. "In running away from his master, he was running straight into the arms of his Savior" (commentary).

Philemon 1:16 Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord? 17 If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.

While Onesimus' position as a slave had not changed legally, Paul encouraged Philemon to receive Onesimus not "as a servant," but as "a brother beloved." Philemon and Onesimus were now brothers in Christ. This portrays that they were "members one of another" (Romans 12:5) and both part of "one body" (Ephesians 4:4).

To treat a "servant" (often considered property under Roman law) as "a brother" (a spiritual equal) would forever change their relationship. Paul did not advise Onesimus to be set free, nor was he putting his approval on the practice of slavery. In asking Onesimus to be regarded as "a brother beloved," Paul was asking him to be received "as myself."

Philemon 1:18 If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account; 19 I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.

It is possible, before running away, that Onesimus robbed Philemon. This would have made returning to his master even more difficult. Or it could be that Paul was

speaking of Philemon's loss of his servant's services. Whatever the reason for the debt, Paul offered to take care of it, saying, "Put that on mine account . . . I will repay it."

Colossians 4:9 With Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They shall make known unto you all things which are done here.

Traveling from Rome to Ephesus and Colossae, Tychicus (one of Paul's faithful ministers; Ephesians 6:21) carried Paul's letters to the Colossians, the Ephesians, and to Philemon. In Tychicus' care was Onesimus, who was returning to Philemon. (This may have been to protect Onesimus from professional slave catchers.) Paul described Onesimus as "a faithful and beloved brother," a brother to Tychicus, to Paul, and to the Colossian church ("one of you").

CONCLUSION:

Sending Onesimus back to his previous owner might appear as though Paul was supporting slavery. The institution of slavery had been an accepted part of the culture for centuries. The Grecian and Roman empires were dependent on it. To attack slavery outright would have brought about political turmoil. While Paul and the early church did not directly denounce slavery, a foundation was being laid in teaching that (when saved) slaves and owners are brothers in Christ. This had a greater effect, establishing the Biblical principle, "All are one in Christ Jesus." In time, the truth exposed the wrongs of slavery. The number of slaves greatly decreased as the Gospel spread throughout the Roman Empire. By the tenth century, slavery was mostly eradicated.

The reformer Martin Luther said: "As Christ does for us with God the Father, so does Paul with Philemon for Onesimus. We are all God's Onesimus!" Like Onesimus, we were slaves to sin and owed a great debt. We were also runaways (running away from God), and we faced the penalty of death (Romans 6:23). Yet, just as Paul promised to pay Onesimus' debt, Christ (through His death on the Cross) has paid our debt as well. Through Him, we (who were unprofitable runaways) become beloved brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus.

*Bible Characters & Events Studies
can be downloaded at GodsAcres.org
(click on "Youth" and "Bible Studies")*