

Envoy: Bible Basics
St. Paul's Letter to Philemon

I was a slave—*his* property. He owned me. He controlled every minute of my life. I could not think, act or decide for myself. I ate and slept when or *if* he allowed me to. I had no rights, no personal life, and no freedom. Few laws restricted the treatment of slaves in the Roman Empire. Some were treated with respect, as members of the household; others were ill-treated. I was a piece of property. Escape and freedom consumed my thoughts by day and my dreams by night. To have a family, to go where I wished, to be out from under the hard work and harsh laws—to be free!

My name is Onesimus and my master is, or should I say *was*, Philemon. I say *was* because I robbed him, escaped and ran. As a fugitive I traveled over a thousand miles toward Rome where I could be anonymous; lost in the teeming crowds and far from my old master. The punishment meted out to an escaped slave was brutal, especially to a thief. But when I finally crept into Rome under cover of night, I was soon surprised. The surprise changed all my plans. I ended up going back to my master *of my own free will*—but let's not get ahead of the story.

About five or six years ago an itinerant preacher had visited in Ephesus and since Ephesus was the gateway to Asia Minor everyone in our area eventually heard his message (Acts 19:10, 26). This preacher's name was Paul and he was announcing a new god—one that claimed to be the one and *only* true God. This new deity's name was Jesus Christ. I was a slave in the neighboring city of Colossae, about 100 miles to the southeast. (Col 4:9). My master Philemon passed through Ephesus on one of his journeys where he heard Paul preaching. He became a follower of this new deity and became a Christian. Paul never visited Colossae but his influence was sure felt. When my master returned home changes took place; he even turned the house into what he called a "church" where they had weekly meetings.

Sometime after leaving Ephesus, I heard that Paul was arrested and taken to Rome in chains. Later, when I arrived Rome—in my hour of need—I sought him out. Wasn't he the one that always talked about love and caring for the poor? I was a fugitive slave and in trouble. I thought he might take pity on me, even getting me out of trouble with my master. I mingled with a small group of arriving visitors as the Roman guard allowed them in. Paul was under house arrest but able to receive guests (Acts 28:30–31). I was surprised to find a short, wiry, baldheaded man. I was an unwilling slave who stole my freedom, but he said he was a Roman citizen who willingly gave up his freedom to become a slave of Jesus Christ (Eph 6:6). He counted himself a prisoner for his God and a prisoner for the sake of all men (1 Cor 9:19; Philem 9 NAB).

My time with Paul changed everything. He not only helped me materially in my desperate situation, but he also changed my eternal destiny. I believed his gospel, and as a gentile and a refugee slave I was baptized a Christian just as my master had been baptized. I became Paul's son in the faith (Philem 10) and in a real way his willing servant. Paul now called me his child and brother in the faith (Philem 16) just as he called

my master his brother in the faith (Philem 20). This fundamental change of relationships between master and slave within Christianity eventually changed the society. With Paul's encouragement I returned to my master in Colossae as a brother in the Lord, yet a willing and obedient slave (1 Cor 7:22). The world was turning upside down. Redemption was in the air.

There is much conjecture concerning the actual events and situation that surround the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon, but the scenario provided here is very probable and fits the biblical account and the Roman world. Paul had somehow met the refugee slave Onesimus and brought him to saving faith in Christ. Out of gratitude, Onesimus became Paul's willing servant; or rather, his fellow worker in the gospel—he served well while Paul was a prisoner in Rome (Philem 13). But the situation with his master needed to be addressed and Paul was determined to set things right between his two “brothers” in Christ. So he wrote his touching letter to Philemon appealing for his generous treatment of the runaway slave Onesimus. Onesimus willingly obeyed Paul and returned to his master along with Tychicus who was carrying the precious *Epistle to the Colossians* (Col 4:7–9).

It must have been a long journey back from Rome to Colossae, not just in miles, but in suspense and anticipation—how would his offended master receive him? Would he be flogged and executed, or embraced? No doubt the parable of the prodigal son came to mind. It was a great act of obedience and courage. But Onesimus had great hope as he clutched the precious letter from Paul.

The *Epistle of St. Paul to Philemon* is the shortest letter written by Paul in the New Testament. This little gem was written about AD 62 while under house arrest in Rome. It reveals a personal side of St. Paul—his compassion and generosity. It also demonstrates with no equal how the Gospel is not just theoretical or “spiritual” but reaches right down into the nitty-gritty of life. It affects our choices, our relationships, even our property and state of life.

Paul was the reconciler, doing the work of Christ, mediating between two believers who were at opposite ends of the social scale and with a grievous transgression dividing them. Forgiveness was the key. One had to repent and the other forgive. It was the *Our Father* in action—“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Redemption is at the heart of this letter; even a wicked slave could be redeemed and brought back into the household.

Slavery was an established institution in the Roman Empire. It is estimated that up to half the people living in Rome were slaves and even more than that in Greece. The institution of slavery was woven in the fabric of these ancient cultures and it could not be changed overnight. Individual freedom taken so for granted in the West today was a long time in coming. Paul was laying the groundwork of Christian morality which would eventually topple the institution of slavery—changing society from the inside out. Paul did not have to condemn slavery which could have caused riots and bloodshed. Instead, he planted a seed in the Roman world which would one day, as it blossomed, eradicate slavery. If two

men were “sons” of the same Apostle and equal before God, how could one man own the other and deny him freedom and dignity—they were brothers in Christ, ? Paul had written that in Christ there is neither slave nor free man but all are one in Christ (Gal 3:28). These words were profound and came to life in this epistle. The leaven of the Gospel was creeping into the world.

But in the meantime Paul encouraged Onesimus to return to his master Philemon as an obedient slave, just as elsewhere he commanded: “Slaves are to be under the control of their masters in all respects, giving them satisfaction, not talking back to them or stealing from them, but exhibiting complete good faith, so as to adorn the doctrine of God our savior in every way” (Titus 2:9–10).

In the original Greek, one couldn’t miss the clever word play Paul uses with Onesimus’ name. He writes “I urge you on behalf of my child Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment, who was once useless to you but is now useful to (both) you and me (Philem 10–11). The name *Onesimus* means “useful” or “beneficial”. He was once worse than useless, even a thief. His conduct betrayed his name. But now, with a new heart and a new birth, Onesimus will live up to his name and become useful to both Philemon and Paul—and the Gospel as a servant of God.

Text Box:

“Look at Paul writing on behalf of Onesimus, a runaway slave; he is not ashamed to call him his child, his very heart, his brother, his partner. What can I say? Jesus Christ lowered himself to the point of making our slaves his brothers. If they are brothers of Jesus Christ, then they are also our brothers” (St. John Chrysostom, *Homily on Philemon*, 2).

Background Info on Slavery

Slavery was an unquestioned part of ancient society. There number of slaves in the Roman Empire is debated with numbers from 1 in 5 in the Roman Empire to ½ of the population of Rome to ¾ of the population in Athens. According to Seneca the Roman senate defeated a proposed law requiring slaves to wear distinctive clothing; there was a fear that they would then realize how numerous they were (Seneca, *De Clementia*, 1.24.1; see Seneca : Moral Essays, vol. 1, trans. John W. Basore, London/New York: Heinemann/Putman, 1927), 421).