

Philemon 1-21

There are only twenty-five verses in the book of the Bible called Philemon. One chapter, twenty-five verses. And yet, this letter written by the Apostle Paul to Philemon speaks volumes to us. But we have to read this letter not as people on the outside looking in, not as listeners detached from the story, but as people who are drawn into it. This is your story...it's my story. We are in the shoes of Onesimus right now, and we will be in his shoes on the Day of Judgment. Let's understand his story well, for within it lies the hope of our salvation.

Onesimus was a runaway slave. Philemon, who lived in Colossae, was his master. As was the custom in those days, Onesimus when running away from Philemon, lined his pockets with his master's goods...money and other treasures so he could survive away from home. Onesimus would have planned this act of rebellion for some time before carrying it out. He intentionally, deliberately sinned against his master. He rejected him, stole from him, stealing even himself away from Philemon.

Now some might say that it was mere coincidence that Onesimus made his way to Rome and somehow, while in Rome, made his way to St. Paul who was living there as a prisoner at the time. But we know better. This was by the hand of God. For when Paul encountered Onesimus, he welcomed him and converted him to the Christian Faith. Now that Onesimus was a Christian man, Paul would have kept him, for he was very useful to him, but he did what was right and proper. He sent Onesimus back to Philemon...only, with a letter asking Philemon to receive his slave not as a wicked, rebellious slave, but as a brother in Christ, one with him in the Faith.

The letter we have here in our Bible is the letter Onesimus carried back with him to his master. How he would have guarded that letter! It was his salvation, his only hope against punishment. Were Onesimus to return without that letter, he would be severely punished. But with that letter in hand, Onesimus would have dropped to his knees before his master and quickly said, "Sir, before you punish me for my wickedness, read this." And is there any doubt that after reading the letter, Philemon did exactly what Paul asked him to do? He did not punish Onesimus. Instead he received him with joy as a brother in Christ.

This is, just as clear as can be, both your story and mine. You and I are runaway slaves before God. We have rejected Him by our sinful living. We have stolen from Him, lining our pockets with His goods, acting as though the treasures, and time, and talents He gives to us are not given as a loan, but are ours to keep. We steal from God by claiming to be owners, not stewards, of all the gifts He gives. And day after day we run away from Him. He commands us to love one another, but we run away in the opposite direction choosing to be angry with those who hurt us. He commands us to honor our parents and all in authority, but we run away from His command. He commands us to keep ourselves pure sexually, to be content with what we have and not covet, to speak well of our neighbor, but day after day we run away from what He wants us to do. Like Onesimus we are runaway slaves, and as punishment we deserve the most severe penalty of all--a place in the fires of hell forever.

Onesimus had a letter in his hand. He had the words of the Apostle Paul written down on paper, and that is why he returned to his master. He would never have come back without that letter. If Paul had not welcomed him and written these gracious words on his behalf, Onesimus would have been a runaway slave for the rest of his life. And that explains why so many people today--the vast majority of people--want nothing to do with God. They fear Him. They have sinned against Him and are afraid of His punishment. And they do not have, within their grasp--within the hand of faith--the

gracious words of Christ on their behalf. They do not have a Paul pleading to Philemon for them. Either they do not know Jesus as their Savior, or they think their wickedness is too great that God would never receive them back and forgive them.

If you have ever been there, then you know what a lonely place that is. You've been on the run for so long, you've forgotten your baptism into Christ, you've forgotten the mercy of the Lord's Supper, you've forgotten what it's like to live in peace and joy. But friends, it is no mere coincidence that you are hearing the story of Onesimus today. I am here to tell you the good news that you have within your grasp the letter, the words of Christ on your behalf. You can stop running from God. You have a Paul pleading for you; His name is Jesus. He died for you. He took your place as a rebellious slave. He endured the punishment you deserve. He paid for everything you stole from God. You can stop running now. Onesimus returned, and so can you. God is not waiting to punish you. He is not cursing your name under His breath. He forgives you. You have the word of Christ on that. You have His blood covering you--you are baptized into His death. You have His flesh and blood here for you--a sure sign and seal that His promises are real, that His words to you are true.

I don't know about all the other runaway slaves out there...whether they will come back or not. Many of them have found new masters. The world of drugs and alcohol is their master now. These things control their life. Or they are being mastered by the world of sex and pornography. Or they are being mastered by a grudge, an unwillingness to forgive someone in their life, or mastered by their love for money and the things money can buy.

But friend, listen to what Jesus says to you, "I am your Master." He has freed you from the shackles of your sin. You do not need to go out and seek a new master. You can resist the temptation to do what your flesh wants and desires. Jesus is your Master. His love controls you, not something from your past, not your sex drive or a bottle of beer. You can return to your Heavenly Father with the full assurance that Jesus is on your side. He doesn't just send you to His Father as Paul sent Onesimus to Philemon. Jesus goes with you. He stands before the Heavenly Judge and He pleads for you. He shows Him the nail marks in His hands and feet..."Forgive him, forgive her," He says, "I died for this one; this one belongs to Me."

Maybe at one time in your life you were a worthless, runaway slave. Maybe you were mastered by everything except God. But now you can be at peace. You are a forgiven slave of your Heavenly Father. Jesus' words are yours forever. You stand now before God innocent of all guilt. You will stand on the Last Day before Him worthy of eternal life because Jesus pleads for you--you trust in Him alone. His words of mercy for you, like Paul's words for Onesimus, are the only assurance you need. Guard Jesus' words always. Treasure them. As Onesimus would have safeguarded Paul's letter to Philemon, so you safeguard, through the regular hearing and studying of them, Jesus' words of life for you.

The name Onesimus means "useful." And that's what he became thanks to God. At one time a worthless, runaway slave, he became useful both to Paul and to Philemon. And that is your name. You are Onesimus...useful. No matter who you are, you who were once a runaway slave, are cleansed of your sins by the blood of Christ, and you are now useful to Him. Through the talents He gives you, through the time He gives you, through the money He gives you, you are useful in His kingdom. You do not need to live as a worthless slave any longer. Consider yourself Onesimus, useful to God because your Paul, Christ Jesus, lives for you and through you. Amen.