

ONESIMUS

The story of Onesimus is one of the most beautiful stories in the history of the Early Church. He was a runaway slave who was saved, then restored to his master, and who later became a pastor. His story is an encouraging account of God's power to restore a castaway into useful ministry in the house of God.

One of the epistles of the apostle Paul was written to his friend Philemon, who was the bishop (or senior pastor) of the Colossian church. He gave the reason for writing Philemon in verse 10 when he wrote *"I beseech you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds."* Paul had led this man to the Lord while he was a prisoner in Rome.

Paul wrote to Philemon and pleaded with him that he forgive and receive back Onesimus, who was his runaway slave. In verse 11 Paul wrote to Philemon that his slave Onesimus *"once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and me."* The name "Onesimus" means "profitable," and Paul was using this play on words to show that Onesimus had begun to fulfill the meaning of his name. Yet while he had become profitable to Paul in Rome, Paul had to send him back to his master. Sometimes we also have to return people to other churches, because while they are helpful to us, they rightfully belong somewhere else.

In verse 16 Paul went on to write that he was asking Philemon to receive Onesimus back not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ. This was a very unusual request that was unheard of in those days. A slave would never be treated on the same level as his master. There were about 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire at this time, and they did not have any legal rights. A slave was owned by his master who had absolute control over his life. Many masters were very cruel to their slaves. When a runaway slave was caught he was often killed or else branded with the letter "F" on his forehead. For the rest of his life this declared that he had been a fugitive, or a runaway slave. Bishop Philemon was being asked to forgive Onesimus and receive him back as a brother. In a similar manner God will at times ask His ministers to receive back those who have wronged them, and we must have hearts of forgiveness to welcome them with open arms.

Paul wrote in verse 15, *"Perhaps for this reason he departed from you for a season, that you should receive him back forever."* Here we find a valuable spiritual truth. Sometimes people have difficulties in their lives that they cannot seem to overcome in the place that God put them. Perhaps they leave us and we think that we have lost them. But God will lead them to a place where He can change them, and when they become ready He will bring them back and restore them.

This is why Paul said that Onesimus left Philemon for a season, so that he could receive him back later in a much more developed spiritual state. There had to be something worked out in Onesimus. He had to meet Paul in Rome and be converted. We should have a generous attitude towards some people who leave us. There are things that have to be worked out in their lives, and it is necessary for them to take a detour and leave so that they can come back to us in the future and be profitable to us. An example of this is when the nation of Israel had to uselessly wander around in the wilderness. It was 38 years before they were ready to return to the plan of God and enter into the Promised Land.

What happened to Onesimus after he returned to Philemon? Church history goes on to tell us how he became a successful minister. Almost 50 years after this time, one of the famous leaders of the Early Church named Ignatius wrote about him. In a letter he wrote about the wonderful bishop of Ephesus who was Onesimus, the former runaway slave. Ignatius said about him, "Onesimus is Onesimus by name; and he is Onesimus by character." As Paul had done, Ignatius was using the meaning of his name to say that Onesimus had become profitable as a servant of God.

As you read this, may you be encouraged about those you know who may be like Onesimus. Perhaps you have someone who has been an unprofitable member of your family, or church, or ministry team. Be encouraged that they can be turned around by the power of God to become fruitful in the very places where they have already caused shame. Believe God to restore the Onesimus in your family or church. And let us ask the Lord that He will give us converts like Onesimus, who will give us much eternal profit. Fruit was still being added to Paul's account years after he had died, through the ministry of his convert Onesimus who had become the "profitable" bishop of Ephesus.

-ARTICLE BY BRIAN BAILEY