

One Hit Wonders - Philemon

It's one of the most amazing stories in the Bible. It's the story of a wealthy man named Philemon. We know he's wealthy because in a Roman city where most people just have a room, he has a whole house. It is a home big enough to host a large gathering.

At some point, Philemon, because of his wealth and influence found himself in the neighboring city of Ephesus where Paul ministered for two years. It was from Paul, Philemon first heard about Jesus. It was under Paul's leadership, Philemon became a Christian.

Over time, Philemon became a valuable partner and supporter in Paul's ministry. He went back to his city of Colossae and took the good news of Jesus with him. He provided his home for the new church to meet. He became one of their leaders and ministers. His devout faith in Jesus and his incredible love for the church are widely known.

We also know that Philemon was a wealthy man because he owned slaves. This sounds so shocking to our 21st Century American ears. What is a Christian man, a leader in the church doing owning slaves?

Slavery in 1st Century Rome – Who became slaves.

That is a long and complicated question. However, it should be pointed out that slavery in the 1st Century Roman world was very different from the slavery that stains our own American history.

Roman slavery was not race based, nor did they enslave a whole class of people. In Roman society, anybody could become a slave. For instance, you could become a slave as the result of battle. If you fought against the Romans and lost, you could end up as the spoils of war as a slave.

You could also become a slave because of a crime you've committed. The Roman justice system could sentence you to a period of slavery until you had paid for your crime.

You could also sell yourself into slavery, or you might sell your children. We might wonder, "Why would anyone do that?" Because sometimes slaves were often better off, better provided for, and had a more secure living situation than the free poor. During times of financial hardship, it was quite common for people to sell themselves into slavery.

You could also become a slave because of debt. If you had a debt, you couldn't repay, you didn't file bankruptcy. You became a slave until the debt was repaid. Your own life was security for the loan.

Roman slavery was often not a permanent station. Many slaves served from periods lasting from 7 to 20 years. People entered into and left slavery all the time. Freed slaves could even become full-fledged citizens and have the right to vote.

Slaves served in all walks of life and filled many different social strata. They didn't just perform menial manual labor. They could be doctors or ship captains, or accountants, or artists, or craftsmen.

The fact is that such slavery was deeply woven into Roman society. It was a cultural reality on which their entire economy was based. In the 1st Century a full third of the population were slaves. Jesus didn't come to topple the Roman government. The mission of the early church wasn't to launch a political movement to protest and boycott slavery. The New Testament neither condones, nor condemns slavery. Rather, it simply deals with the cultural reality as it existed.

This is not to paint an idyllic picture of slavery in the ancient Roman world. Unskilled slaves worked by the thousands in mines and quarries where conditions were brutal and lifespans very short. Some owners treated their slaves harshly. They were regarded as property and not persons, and owners could do with them as they saw fit.

For this reason, runaway slaves were a real issue. Professional slave-catchers hunted down escaped slaves. In the cities, advertisements were posted with detailed descriptions of escaped slaves and offered rewards. Returned slaves could be beaten severely, or even killed. Often, returned slaves were branded on their foreheads with the letters FUG for *fugitivus*.

Early church leaders such as the apostle Paul and Peter sought to redefine slave and master relationships. They taught both slaves and masters within the church to recognize that they both serve a greater master, and that they are brothers in Christ. Biblical teaching completely undermines the foundation for slavery both in the ancient world and in the modern. Though the early church didn't force change on the empire through political pressure from the outside, it surely planted the seeds that led to the eventual abolition of slavery by recognizing the value and worth of all people. They changed things not from the outside in, but from the inside out— one life and one heart at a time.

Onesimus

This brings us to the second major character in our story. His name is Onesimus. He was a slave. There are suggestions in Paul's letter to Philemon that indicate that Onesimus was a debt slave. Paul mentions repaying Philemon whatever Onesimus owes. He also reminds Philemon that he owes Paul for his very own eternal life. We don't know what Onesimus' debt was for. We don't know how much, but Onesimus thought he could never repay it, so he ran away.

Onesimus fled the province and went a thousand miles to Rome. What better place to escape than to the sprawling capitol of Rome with its bustling population of more than 1 million people. Just like people do today, Onesimus went to the city to get lost in the crowd.

Here we mind the first amazing twist in our story. Here is the fugitive slave, Onesimus disappearing into the big city, but somehow, somehow, Onesimus runs into the apostle Paul, the very man who led his former master to Christ. We don't know how this happened. Paul was in Roman custody. Because of his advanced age and good conduct he had the 1st Century equivalent of an ankle monitor. He was chained to a Roman soldier under house arrest.

Perhaps, Onesimus heard about a group of people who cared for those who had nothing. Maybe he heard about a people that treated slaves as family, as brothers and sisters. Perhaps he recognized Paul's

name from years earlier in Ephesus, and Onesimus thought he could help. But for reasons we won't know until eternity, Onesimus finds himself in Paul's house hearing the good news of Jesus.

Just like his master before him, Onesimus' heart is changed by the gospel. He believes and he gives his life to Jesus. Now, as a brother in Christ, Onesimus gives himself to the service of Paul and to Jesus; service, not bound by chains, but bound by love. He becomes a valuable and trusted companion to Paul.

But Paul and Onesimus have a problem. He is a fugitive slave. Legally, he still belongs to Philemon. Roman law requires that Paul return Onesimus to his rightful owner or face penalties. Christian teaching holds that Onesimus should obey the law of the land and leave no debt outstanding. What will they do?

We have the answer right here. We're doing a series called one-hit wonders. We're looking at the one chapter books in the Bible. This morning we're looking at this little book of only 25 verses found just before Hebrews in your Bibles.

Paul sends Onesimus, along with another one of his fellow ministers named Tychicus, back to Colossae with two letters. One is his letter to the Colossians, and the other is this little letter. It is the most heartfelt and intimate letter to be written by Paul. It is gut-wrenchingly personal. We see how important this is to Paul in that he writes this letter with his own hand. Most of his letters were written with the help of a secretary, and Paul would dictate the letter to them, but not this letter.

Imagine Onesimus standing on Philemon's doorstep, this letter in hand. What fear and questions filled his heart? What about Philemon? What went through his mind when he first saw his escaped slave return of his own free will? Was he angry? Did he want to get even?

Imagine them staring at each other with a loss for words. In my mind it's raining, because everything is more dramatic in the rain. Philemon stammers. What? How did? How dare you... Onesimus reaches into his satchel and pulls out a small roll of parchment paper. Philemon starts to unroll it. Onesimus quietly mumbles, "It's for you...and the whole church." Philemon unrolls it far enough to see that it is from his dear friend the apostle Paul. Philemon gestures, "Come in, I will call the brothers and sisters together. You must be hungry. Get yourself something to eat. Then we will decide..." He looks Onesimus up and down... "what to do with you."

Later that evening. Tychicus stands before the gathered body of believers. He unrolls the scroll and begins to read.

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker— also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Though this letter is very personal, we might be shocked to see that it's not private, for this letter is not only addressed to Philemon. Also mentioned are a woman named Apphia. likely this is Philemon's wife, although it could be a sister who helps manage his affairs. Paul calls her a sister. Sister could mean sister, or it could mean sister in Christ. The letter is also addressed to another man in the household

named Archippus, probably a son. Paul calls him a fellow soldier in Christ. Finally, the letter is also addressed to church that meets in their house.

Imagine this letter being read before the entire church, with both Philemon and Onesimus sitting right there. I can hear our 21st Century American objections right now. We would have said, “Paul, this is a private, personal matter. This is none of their business.” Paul did not see it that way. The body of Christ has a role to play in our personal lives. When it comes to accountability and encouragement to do the right thing, your Christian brothers and sisters have a role- not in a gossipy, salacious, judgmental sort of way, but in a “I love you. I’m there for you; I’m in this with you; and I want what’s best” sort of way. One of the clear lessons from Philemon to us is this: “Get over yourselves, and let the church be the church.” The New Testament doesn’t recognize any of our “this is my church life and that is my private life, and never shall the two meet.”

Tychicus continues reading

4 I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, 5 because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. 6 I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. 7 Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord’s people.

We may want to judge Philemon according to our 21st Century sensibilities, but let there be no doubt about the genuineness of Philemon’s faith. His love for God’s people is well known. He has been a reliable supporter of Paul’s ministry. Paul is genuinely thankful for all that he has done. As Tychicus reads these words many in the congregation look with smiling faces toward their host. Several nod approvingly, and a couple people even shout “Amen.” Philemon sits with his hands folded and returns a thin smile. Off to the side sits Onesimus, who nervously stares at the floor. Tychichus continues.

8 Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, 9 yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— 10 that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus,[b] who became my son while I was in chains. 11 Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

Paul is not one to throw his apostolic weight around unnecessarily. He doesn’t want Philemon to do the right thing because he has to, but because he wants to. And yet there is a subtle pressure being applied here. “Philemon, here’s a chance to be the type of Christian we all know you are.”

He calls Onesimus his son. He spiritual son, his child in the faith. He is one of Paul’s converts. Onesimus is Paul’s son in the faith, just like Philemon is Paul’s son. Philemon is returning not just as a fugitive slave, but as a brother in Christ.

There's also a beautiful turn of phrase here that we miss in English. Onesimus' name means useful. But as a runaway slave, he was anything but useful to Philemon. But in Christ, Paul points out, he is more useful than ever. Tychicus chokes up at this turn of phrase.

What a beautiful picture of the life transformation that can happen only in Jesus. Useless becomes useful. Quick tempered becomes patient. Surly becomes gentle. Fear becomes hope. Soused becomes sober. Onesimus' story is your story. It's my story. Tychicus clears his throat before continuing.

12 I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. 13 I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. 14 But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary.

We hear Paul's heartfelt tenderness in these words. He calls Onesimus his very heart. It is obvious Paul cares deeply for this man. Onesimus provided invaluable service to Paul while under house arrest, but Paul did not want to presume upon Philemon, nor take advantage of him.

I believe Paul's hope here is that Philemon, will let Onesimus return to Paul, this time not as escaped slave, but willingly to support the ministry.

15 Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— 16 no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

Paul's language here is most interesting. He talks about Onesimus' separation from Philemon as though it was brought about by someone else. The Greek grammar assumes that someone else did the separating. Bible scholars call this the divine subjective.

This isn't to say that Onesimus didn't run away of his own choice, but the implication here is that even in his rebellious choice, God was behind scenes working an ever greater plan. Onesimus had his plan and his purpose in running away, but God had a greater plan and a greater purpose. Even when we're doing our own thing. God is still doing His thing. One of the great lessons in Philemon is the providence of God. God is the great cosmic conductor working behind the scenes, even using our mistakes and our sins to accomplish his beautiful purpose.

Think about it. What are the chances that Onesimus runs a thousand miles away; he disappears into a city of a million people, only to find the one man on the entire planet who could not only tell him about Jesus, but had also led his former master to Christ? That's not coincidence. That's providence.

The same providential hand that was working in the life of Onesimus, is working in your life, even through your mistakes, and through failures. You can't run far enough, you can't hide well enough to keep God from using even the worst experiences in your life to accomplish something better. But like Onesimus, to experience that something better we have to go back and do the difficult thing. We have to face that fear. We need to talk to that person we never wanted to talk to again. We need to forgive the one person who hurt us so deeply.

Do you think it was easy for Onesimus to go back? He fled a thousand miles to leave this place, and to leave this man, and now he is back. This was likely the toughest thing he's ever done. What were his thoughts as he walked to Colossae? Did he rehearse his speech? Did he argue with God, asking, "Why do I have to reconcile with this man?" Did he think about turning back?

God has something better for you, but often the path to something better is the difficult path. God's best for you is rarely found down Easy Street.

Jesus asked Onesimus to do the hard thing. Now he asks Philemon to do the hard thing. But there is a reward. Paul says you now have Onesimus back, not as a slave, but as a brother. Roman law may say Onesimus is not a person, but property. But Paul says not only is he your fellow man, a human being just like you, with the same red blood, the same feelings, the same hopes, and dreams and fears as you; he is now your brother in Christ.

17 So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 18 If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. 19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. 20 I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. 21 Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

Paul asks Philemon to do what would be unthinkable outside of Christ. Welcome Onesimus as a brother, and a partner, just like he would Paul himself. Here is another great lesson from this one hit wonder. Who you were outside of Christ, doesn't matter in Christ. Who you were before you met Jesus, doesn't define you now.

We live in world of cliques and factions. We love to slap labels on people. We divide ourselves over politics, skin color, income, education, and social interests. Yet all of that becomes secondary as soon as you come through those doors. At the feet of Jesus there are no democrats and Republicans, left and right. White and black, brown and red don't matter. You might be a jock, a cheerleader, a bookworm, a geek, a nerd, emo or goth. You might be redneck or a hipster. You might be the most popular kid in school or a loner on the fringe. You can be white collar or blue collar. You might drive the biggest 4 wheel drive F-350 or the most environmentally conscious Toyota Prius. None of it matters, because in Jesus we are brothers and sisters.

There is one more thing I want to point out to you in this story— and that is the power of a peacemaker. Paul is a peacemaker. He lays his own neck on the line to bring these two divided souls together. Whatever debt that Onesimus had, Paul will pay it from his own account. If Onesimus stole anything, Paul's got it covered. He's not willing to let anything keep this reconciliation from happening.

Are there any broken relationships in which God can use you as a peacemaker? Can common ground be found in Jesus through you? What are willing to give, what are you willing to do to make peace possible?

Paul then ends his letter with tender expectation and personal greetings from loved ones.

22 And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. 23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. 24 And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers. 25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

With those closing words, Tychicus, rolls up the small papyrus, looks both Philemon and Onesimus in the eye, and then bows his head in prayer.

This is where we need Paul Harvey to come in and tell us the rest of the story. How does this story end? What does Philemon do? What happens to Onesimus?

The Bible doesn't tell us the end of the story. However, church history does give us one clue. An early church father, by the name of Ignatius, about 50 years later wrote a letter to the bishop of Ephesus. His name— Onesimus. We don't know if it was the same man, but if Onesimus was a young man, as prized slaves often were, when Philemon was written. It is certainly possible. Church tradition holds that Philemon became the bishop of the church in Colossae, and Onesimus the bishop of the church in nearby Ephesus. Think of that— Brothers in Christ serving in sister churches. Only Jesus makes that sort of thing possible.

Regardless of how this story ends, it's not over. It's still being written. It's being written in my life and yours. How will the next chapter go?