

## Palisades Community Bible Church

### Online Bible Study

# Why Get To Know Onesimus?

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**Onesimus** is a rather obscure person in New Testament history, who played an important role in the early church. Let's get to know this unsung fellow and find out how even very quiet and humble people play critical roles within the body of Christ.

When God inspired the writing of the books of the Bible, He did some amazing things - which makes the Bible one of His greatest miracles! Just one of the amazing things is that each scenario, each lesson, each example is TIMELESS. This means they can never go out of date, out of style or become "old fashioned" as opponents of the Bible often claim. When we look at Onesimus we find such a lesson.

Additionally, many scenarios in the scriptures are "layered" with teachings; meaning that there is an obvious lesson at the onset. The deeper one digs into the context of that scenario, the more lessons one discovers, which are often woven through other books of the Bible.

So, it is with this study. Our pastor preached on the book of Philemon on the Sunday before Thanksgiving, focusing on Philemon as a strong supporter of the Christian congregation in the city of Colossae. In this study, we'll focus on Paul's compelling reason for writing to Philemon, and just how Onesimus figured into a very important part of early church history. As you read through this study, try to determine which of the characters YOU most identify with.

If you are familiar with Paul's letter to the Colossians (the church in Colossae), its theme is the centrality of Jesus:

**Colossians 1: 13 For He (Jesus) has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.**

## The Supremacy of the Son of God

**15 The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. 19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.**

In fact, MOST of Paul's letters to the various churches contain powerful encouragement toward keeping Jesus Christ, as savior, preeminent in their worship, and in rejecting false teachings that arise within the church. Why was this such a recurring theme to the churches? Why is this NOT the theme of Paul's letter to Philemon? Is this not a critical priority of the body of Christ, today? What does Onesimus have to do with it all?

Let's look at the city of Colossae, which was situated on a busy trade route. This meant that many people of diverse cultures and religions passed through and/or settled there. Paul's letter to the Colossians points to an early Christian community immersed in a fusion of religious practices which included Jewish, Gnostic, and pagan influences that in the first century AD were described as an "angel-cult."

To better understand the ideological pressures that these early Christians faced, think of a Christian kid graduating from high school, then going three states away to attend a secular college. There, they become immersed in secular teachings in the sciences, social studies, philosophies, anthropology, history, ethics, etc., all focused on disproving God's existence. They also find themselves awash in peers who drink, smoke pot, have casual sex and who ridicule "goody two-shoes" for not joining in. Is it any wonder so very many Christian kids come home from college with their spiritual rudders completely torn off?

This is the kind of influence the early churches were facing! While functioning as "Saul of Tarsus," Paul's persecution had scattered these small groups of Christians out of Jerusalem into the far reaches of the region. (See Bible Study: They Were

Scattered.) Then, Jesus confronted Saul and made him a powerful influence for maturing these small church groups. As “Paul the apostle” learned of the pressures on these churches, he visited and wrote letters compelling them to preach Jesus and resist false gods and false teachings.

**Ephesians 1: 3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. 4 For he chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love 5 He predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will— 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, which He has freely given us in the One He loves. 7 In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace 8 that He lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, 9 He made known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Christ, 10 to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.**

**11 In Him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will, 12 in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of His glory. 13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of His glory.**

So, we see that a major thrust of Paul’s mission was to cement each church’s faith in Christ and to call them to maturity in resisting the social ills that surrounded them. Can any Christian possibly think that this call to righteousness is old fashioned and no longer applicable today???

If we turn to the New Testament, to the third shortest book in the Bible, **Philemon**, we find a letter the Apostle Paul wrote from prison. It’s addressed to Philemon, a Christian and a rather wealthy Colossian. He had people working for him, and had a large house in which he hosted the meetings of the new Christians congregation. He was, as our Pastor taught; a “Patron” of the church in Colossae. If we look to Webster’s for its definition we find a two-sided explanation:

## **Patron:**

**1a: a person chosen, named, or honored as a special guardian, protector, or supporter (such as a patron of the arts)**

**b: a wealthy or influential supporter of an artist, or writer**

**c: a social or financial sponsor of a social function (such as a ball, concert)**

**2: one that uses wealth or influence to help an individual, an institution, or a cause (a patron of a library)**

**3: one who buys the goods or uses the services offered especially by an establishment (a restaurant's patrons)**

So, we see that a patron can be a supporter, protector, financier and influencer of a specific cause or effort. But, look at definition #3. It can also mean one who supports from the other end of the cause or effort; like a customer.

If we look at most Christian churches, today, we have patrons who use their influence in their community to keep good relations, and we have congregants who tithe and fund, we also have those who attend services and participate in worship and ministries. A patron in the church can take many forms....as we will soon see with Onesimus.

As was alluded earlier, Paul's letter to Philemon was unique among the "Pauline Letters" in that it does not contain admonitions to keep Jesus Christ central. Rather, it's a letter to Philemon, a Patron of the Colossian church, to receive Onesimus as a fellow Christian.

**Philemon 1: 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.**

Then, Paul transitions to a plea on behalf of Onesimus.

**Philemon 1: 10 that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, 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.**

**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.**

Paul is asking Philemon to receive Onesimus, who was “**...useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.**” What is Paul talking about? What does Paul mean by; “..I am sending him...back to you...”? Could Philemon and Onesimus know one another?

Look at verse 10. “**...for my son, Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains.**”

Paul became acquainted with Onesimus, and Onesimus had received Christ, while Paul was in a Roman prison. Why was Onesimus in Rome, instead of Colossae, if he knew Philemon?

Onesimus was a fugitive slave, running from Philemon! In the first century, one of the only forms of employment was slavery. A slave often voluntarily committed to serve a master, or the master had purchased them. In both cases, the reward for faithful service was shelter, food, medical care, etc. The wages of slavery was a home, and the master was due their services in return. For a slave to run away, was a serious offense. It is also assumed that Onesimus had robbed his master and run a way. He likely went to the large, bustling city of Rome to hide.

As is so oft illustrated in scripture, when the sinful servant runs away from his/her master, they soon find themselves faced to face with God:

- Adam and Eve
- Cain and Abel
- Jonah
- The Prodigal Son
- Saul of Tarsus
- Judas Iscariot
- Can you think of others?

As a slave, he ran from his master but came face to face with the living God through the Apostle Paul. Through salvation, the fugitive sinner finds grace, forgiveness, and the freedom that is found only in Jesus Christ. Paul offers this explanation to Philemon:

**Philemon 1: 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.**

How would you feel if an employee had robbed you and run out on you? Do you think Philemon was angry? Perhaps hurt? Philemon had personal and legal authority to punish this criminal! However, Paul is now telling this Patron of the Christian church that has just gained a brother in the faith! Paul was telling Philemon that, rather than losing a slave, he has gained a brother! He has gained a fellow worker in sharing the Gospel. (can this be one of the reasons for **Matthew 5: 44 “But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,”?**)

If Philemon is a true Christian, and a true supporter of the Christian church, do you think he was as joyful at Onesimus’ conversion, or did he hold some resentment? I believe he was joyful, because there is evidence that Onesimus became part of that church and continued to serve by carrying Paul’s letters to the church. Can you identify with Philemon? Can you identify with Onesimus? How about Paul...have you ever been the peacemaker between two parties?

Paul used a play on words in verse **11: “Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.”** The name Onesimus means “helpful,” “useful,” or “profitable.” It was a common name for slaves in that day. Before salvation, Onesimus had been useless or unprofitable. Before salvation, Onesimus failed to live up to his name! Now he had become immensely beneficial to both his master and to Paul. As a believer in Jesus Christ, Onesimus lived up to his name.

Onesimus had proven so valuable to Paul, that he described Onesimus as “**...who is my very heart...**” What special skill or trait did he possess that Paul would describe him in this way? How often have we seen the way God looks at the inner person, and not the outward appearance when estimating the value of a

person? Consider David, whom God said was a man after his own heart. Consider Saul of Tarsus who persecuted Christians, then ministered to the very churches he drove out of Jerusalem. Consider Jesus; the stone the builder rejected.

The story of Onesimus and Philemon is a beautiful picture of the distinction between law and grace. Both Roman law and the Mosaic Law of the Old Testament gave Philemon the right to punish a runaway slave and exact restitution. But the covenant of grace through the Lord Jesus allowed both master and slave to fellowship in love on an equal basis in the body of Christ.

When you are wronged, you in effect become the master of the wrongdoer, until the wrong is satisfied. An offense can only be satisfied in one of two ways: punishment and repayment, or forgiveness.

Through Jesus, we have forgiveness of debts we can never repay. Likewise, we are to forgive our debtors: **masters and slaves are equals in Christ.**