

Episode #322 – Philemon 3: Onesimus the Runaway

I. In the book of Philemon, written shortly after Ephesians, Paul illustrates the great principle of Ephesians that God always deals graciously with us (Ephesians 4:32) in the way he acts towards Philemon and his runaway slave Onesimus. Paul in how he treats these two becomes an example of how God treats us in the dispensation of grace.

II. In Philemon 4-7, Paul and Timothy were thankful for the love and faith of Philemon and his family. Yet in 8-9, they had a request of them. Though Paul, as an elder and bound one of Christ, has the right to require that Philemon do what he wants, he does not choose to act like this, but instead exhorts him to do it for loves' sake. Now, we learn what his request is all about.

III. Philemon 10-12. The Runaway Onesimus.

A. Philemon 10. Suddenly Philemon is reminded of Onesimus, who is standing before him, having been one of those who delivered the letter.

1. Philemon would have considered him as a runaway slave and a thief.
2. Paul reveals to Philemon that he had begotten or generated him in his bonds. He refers not to physical birth, of course, but to the fact that it was through the proclamation of Paul that Onesimus had been generated to faith in Christ.
3. Paul had done this while as a bound one for Christ in Rome.

B. Philemon 11. Onesimus means “Profitable” or “Useful.” Paul makes a play on his name. In the past he had been a useless slave when he had stolen from his master and run away. Now that he has come to faith in Christ, however, he is a useful person, not only to Philemon, but to Paul as well, who has made use of him in his bonds in Rome.

C. Philemon 12. Paul has sent the runaway back to his former master.

1. Onesimus must have been reluctant to do this, yet as a believer in Christ now, he must do the right thing. A runaway slave could be executed.
2. Paul urges Philemon to accept him and receive him back, as if he was receiving Paul’s most tender feelings, his very heart, when he received Onesimus, for Paul indeed had such feelings for this man.

IV. Philemon 13-16. Paul’s Desire for Onesimus.

A. Philemon 13. Paul perhaps would have preferred to keep Onesimus with him.

1. Since Philemon was a good friend of Paul but could not be there to help him, Onesimus could have ministered to Paul in Philemon’s place, as he would gladly have done if he had been there.
2. Paul calls his imprisonment “the bonds of the gospel,” for Paul was bound in Rome by Christ and not allowed to go out from there to spread the gospel any longer. The Lord wanted others to begin to take the task upon themselves of spreading the gospel, so He saw to it that Paul was out of the picture so they could get their start.

B. Philemon 14. Yet Paul did not wish to act without Philemon’s permission to keep Onesimus with him. This would be a good thing for him to allow Onesimus to serve Paul, but if Paul just kept Onesimus it would be a necessity for Philemon to allow this, rather than something he did by his own free will. It would not really be a “gift” if it was done without his consent.

C. Philemon 15. Perhaps his departing from Philemon for a season was by God’s purposes, so that now he may receive him for ever. “For ever” here is the Greek *aiōnios*, and means that he would receive him for the outflow, or perpetually.

D. Philemon 16. He can now receive Onesimus perpetually, no longer as a bondman, but above a slave, as a beloved brother.

1. “Beloved” here is *agapetos*, speaking of God’s self-sacrificing type of love.
2. Paul considers Onesimus specially loved like this by himself, but should he not be much more thus loved by Philemon, both in the flesh as his former worthless slave now reformed, and in the Lord as a brother in the faith?

E. Paul is making it most clear to Philemon what he should do. Yet this would not be easy for Philemon to do! If he let this one runaway slave off without punishment, how will that affect all his other slaves? Moreover, Philemon as a wealthy man must do business with other wealthy men who own slaves. What will they think of Philemon if he sets the “bad” example of letting his slave off like this? Yet this is what he must do if he is to please Paul and the Lord, to whom Onesimus now belongs!

V. Conclusion. Paul appeals to Philemon regarding his runaway slave Onesimus. Paul had begotten him to faith in Christ while in bonds in Rome. He had been a useless slave to Philemon, finally running away and stealing from him while doing it. Yet now that he is a believer, Paul has sent him back to Philemon. Paul might have kept him to serve him in Philemon’s place, yet that would not have been appropriate since it would have been a “forced” gift, not a voluntary one. He wants Philemon to receive him now, not as a slave, but as a beloved brother. What an example of love and grace this would be! Yet this is also what God asks of us: that we would treat our brothers in Christ graciously this same way! Are we willing to show God’s grace to each other?