



RETELLING THE STORY SERIES

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THE MISSION
OF THE
BODY OF CHRIST

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A LETTER FROM AN OLD FRIEND

Philemon 1-25

THE SERVANT WHO ANSWERED THE DOOR wore a look of disbelief. The last person she expected to find when she heard the knock was Onesimus, who stood there with his traveling companion Tychicus.

Tychicus was the first to speak. “Please tell the master of the house that we come bearing letters from the apostle Paul, who is in Rome. One is for the church that meets in this house. The other is for him personally; it concerns my brother Onesimus here.”

The servant looked at the letters in Onesimus’s hands and ran off to find Philemon.

Years earlier, Onesimus had been a slave in the city of Colossae. As such he’d had a tough life. But when he ran away to Rome it got even tougher. Colossae and Rome were twelve hundred miles apart.

The only means he had to traverse that distance were boats, horses, and his own two feet.

Onesimus was Philemon's slave. Slavery was essential to Rome's social order. The entire empire was built on the backs of slaves owned by "men of nobility" who believed it was beneath them to work. Though some slaves in Rome may have had kind masters, the reality was that slaves were still property with no rights or protection. Onesimus wanted out.

When Onesimus committed to his escape, he arranged some basic preparations: money for the road and belongings to disguise the fact that he was a runaway. These he took from Philemon. He knew the minute he stepped out on his own he was in trouble. Stealing from his master was a capital crime for slaves in Rome. This wasn't an uncommon practice, however. To escape meant to risk facing the wrath of the slaveholder anyway, so many who fled also stole from their masters on their way out in the hopes of funding a clean getaway.

But fleeing their current situation usually meant stepping into one that was worse. Since a flight like Onesimus's would have been close to impossible without help, he had to become part of the underworld of runaway slaves and criminals. He entered a society of fugitives evading arrest. Since there is no honor among thieves, this was a notoriously dangerous network to tangle with.

Along with dangers within, there were dangers without. Historically, for every society of fugitives seeking to stay underground there has been a countersociety of bounty hunters who make their living hunting them down and handing them back over for a reward. Onesimus was in trouble because runaway slaves were the bounty hunters' bread and butter—easy to find because they lacked the necessary means to purchase anonymity. This was the world

Onesimus entered when he ran—a world of fugitives, stowaways, thieves, criminals, and bounty hunters looking to get paid.

A large, diverse city like Rome was the perfect place to disappear. Many went there to do just that. With Colossae at his back, Onesimus set his face to the Eternal City. He paid smugglers for passage, made up stories to hitch rides, and changed his appearance often to blend in. He lived every one of those days looking over his shoulder. When he finally arrived in Rome, the hope of a new beginning rose inside him. Now he just had to figure out a way to make his lie his truth.

Having divided his years between being a slave and being a fugitive, Onesimus had plenty of time to ask why his life had become what it had. He would not have wished his plight on anyone. But in his heart raged a protest. He was not meant to be another man's slave. He was not meant to be known as the property of another. He was not a commodity. He was a man. He didn't choose to be born into his low position. Part of the reason he had run away was that he objected to being reduced to something so insignificant. He might die as a fugitive, but at least it would be on his own terms.

Onesimus's position softened a bit when his money ran out. Except for the company of thieves, he found himself alone in Rome—and broke. Like the prodigal son who blew through his father's inheritance, Onesimus began to shift from dreams of independence to a desperate need for help. In this underground world he was vulnerable. He needed to find safety.

He had heard there was a man in Rome named Paul, the apostle who'd led his master Philemon to faith in Jesus of Nazareth. Onesimus knew Paul was a man who specialized in helping people who were lost. He had seen firsthand the transformation of many people's lives through the church that met in Philemon's home. When

people heard Paul's gospel, something in them seemed to shake free. Peace and joy took the place of cynicism and contempt. When Onesimus learned the apostle was a prisoner under house arrest, he sought him out. Perhaps they could help each other, he thought.

Onesimus found Paul and told him parts of his story, but whatever thoughts he had about trading favors with the prisoner soon vanished when the old apostle told the runaway slave about Jesus. Paul spoke with an uncommon conviction—like he was prepared to die proclaiming the message of salvation by grace through faith in the life, death, and resurrection of the man from Nazareth.


Onesimus heard this gospel and put his faith in the same Lord his master had. It wasn't so much that Onesimus took hold of Christ. It was that Christ took hold of him. Onesimus attended to Paul like a son attended to an aging father, and Paul loved him as his own child.

Soon Onesimus began to struggle with what to do about his broken relationship with Philemon. His faith had an ethic. Though he had plenty of reasons to justify running away—reasons that, in turn, justified his thievery—he knew that because he and Philemon were both followers of Christ, they could not leave this fracture between them unaddressed.

Onesimus eventually told Paul the whole truth about what had happened and how he had come to Rome. He wanted to be reconciled to Philemon, who was now his brother in Christ, and Paul agreed that it was the right thing to do. They could not control how Philemon would react upon seeing Onesimus, so they would have to act on faith that the gospel would be stronger than one man's transgression against another—a scenario that, for Onesimus and Philemon, ran both ways.

Paul said to Onesimus, "I have been working on a letter to the church that meets in Philemon's home, your old home. I will send

you and our brother Tychicus to deliver it, along with another letter from me to him about you.”



Philemon was a leader in the church in Colossae. When he saw Onesimus standing in his doorway, Philemon had to wrestle internally with what the law permitted and what his faith required. What would he do with the anger he felt in his heart toward Onesimus? With his sense of betrayal? With the fact that Onesimus was now a Christian? Their shared faith changed not only who they were but who they were to each other.

Philemon's life had been transformed by the work of Jesus. Who he'd been before he met Christ was not who he was now. He had become a man with a reputation for love and faith. He poured himself out for the benefit of others, and people's lives were changed by Christ as a result.

Philemon took the personal letter from his runaway and began to read.

“My brother,” Paul said in his letter to Philemon, “the same grace you so effectively apply to others has taken hold of Onesimus. As sure as you are a changed man, so is he. Christ has overcome his past just as he overcame yours. Now all that matters between the two of you is what happens next. If Jesus has changed both of you, then I ask you: Who are you to each other? Perhaps this is the reason you and Onesimus were parted for a season—so that you might have him back, no longer as a slave but as a brother.”

All three of these men had been transformed by Jesus. Being present for Onesimus's and Philemon's conversions, Paul held a deep affection for them both. He wasn't just contending for Onesimus in this letter; he was pastoring his friend Philemon. God was

moving all three of them deeper and deeper into his unfolding purpose for their lives—a purpose to redeem the lost while bringing glory to his Son, who was their peace.

As Philemon read the letter, he remembered Paul's gift for persuasion.

“Look,” Paul's letter continued. “I could command you to do what I am about to ask, but I don't want to. I want to give you room to respond with your heart. I want you to think, to love, and to live under the banner of the truth that Christ changes us. Your runaway slave has become like my son. And I his imprisoned father. Onesimus gave himself in service to me. For that I am grateful. He has been very useful and I have regarded his service as though it came from you. Your servant Onesimus has become my heart. If there is anything he owes you, name the price. I will repay it. And I will not ask you to repay what you owe me, which is your life. If you consider me your partner in the faith, receive Onesimus as you would receive me.”

Philemon smiled at this bit of rhetorical flourish. Paul was saying, in essence, “I gave you the hope of eternal life—and now I have taken Onesimus's debt. How much do I owe you?”

Money aside, Philemon had to do more than forgive a debt. Paul hadn't just sent him the letter about Onesimus—he had sent Onesimus to deliver it. Paul wanted Philemon to receive Onesimus back as a brother. Onesimus wanted this too. The proof was in the fact that, just as his escape had led him twelve hundred miles away, so now his desire to be reconciled brought him twelve hundred miles home.

Paul would have been glad to keep Onesimus, but there was, in fact, a particular opportunity they owed Philemon—the chance for him to receive his slave back as a brother. To forgive Onesimus was to take him as an equal, which not only forgave what was in the past but renewed the purpose for their future together.

Paul appealed to these two participants in the system of slavery to see each other's inherent dignity as a brother in Christ. This was deeply abolitionistic. The gospel of Jesus undermined any hint of any right one person could claim over another as his or her own personal property. Instead it set the example that their lives should be offered up for the sake of each other.

Because of Christ, Philemon and Onesimus were now brothers. This truth lay at the heart of Christianity. There was no longer slave or free, Jew or Gentile, male or female. All were one in Christ Jesus. This was the impact of their new faith, and it was revolutionary.

The faith that took hold of Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus continues to this day, making families out of strangers and friends out of enemies. Though the plan for the church of Jesus Christ dates back to the days before Eden—that mysterious era before time began—its visible formation came together when a man from Nazareth was crucified, died, and was buried and on the third day rose again.

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