

Who was Onesimus in the Bible?

Onesimus was the fugitive slave of Philemon, the apostle Paul's friend. Onesimus had robbed his master Philemon and fled to Rome, a large city where he could easily hide. Providentially, Onesimus encountered Paul in Rome where the apostle was serving time in prison.

Some scholars suggest that Paul had led Onesimus to Christ previously and that, when Onesimus ran away, he sought out Paul on purpose. However, it is more likely that Onesimus became a Christian after running away from Philemon and running into Paul in Rome: "I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains" (Philemon 1:10).

Paul uses a play on words when he refers to Onesimus 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 to Philemon, but 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.

On behalf of Onesimus, Paul, still imprisoned in Rome, wrote his letter to Onesimus's master, Philemon. The apostle pleaded with Philemon to accept Onesimus back, not as a slave but as a believer and a brother in Christ. Paul cared deeply for Onesimus because the young man had been a great blessing to him. In fact, Onesimus had been so helpful that Paul longed for him to stay at his side: "I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. 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. 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” (Philemon 1:12-14).

Philemon and his family lived in Colossae, and the Colossian church met at his house. Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians at the same time he wrote to Philemon. In that letter, Paul mentioned that Onesimus would be coming home. Paul gave both letters to Tychicus and Onesimus to carry back to Philemon (Colossians 4:9).

The heart of Paul’s plea to Philemon is summed up in verses 15-19: “Perhaps the reason [Onesimus] was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever—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. So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self” (Philemon 1:15-19).

Forgiveness and reconciliation are spotlighted in the life of Onesimus and the book of Philemon. Paul challenges Philemon to receive Onesimus back in the same way he would welcome Paul, as a brother and a partner in the gospel. And Paul promises to pay back anything Onesimus owed. The apostle authenticates his promise by writing in his own hand, essentially demonstrating his commitment to see the relationship between these two brothers fully restored. Then Paul applies some gentle pressure by reminding Philemon that he owes his life to Paul, confirming that the apostle was the person who had led Philemon to Christ. By reminding Philemon of his own salvation, Paul hopes he will look beyond Onesimus’s transgressions and reflect on the broader reality of forgiveness in

Jesus Christ, the One who pardons our every wrong.

Philemon was a committed Christian who had opened his home to the whole community of believers. In verses 4-7, Paul talks about his strong faith and love for God's people. In verse 21, the apostle expresses his confidence that Philemon will indeed follow through with his appeal to forgive and restore Onesimus.

Philemon may have been a kind and gracious master, but for whatever reason, Onesimus wanted to be free. As a slave, he ran from his master but came face to face with the living God through His servant Paul. Onesimus's story is the classic picture of one who tries to run from God, a good and gracious Master, but instead runs right into His arms. Through salvation, the fugitive sinner finds grace, forgiveness, and the freedom that is found only in Jesus Christ.

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. 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. Paul's payment of all of Onesimus's debts parallels Christ's payment for our sins. Philemon's acceptance of Onesimus as a brother in Christ helped lay the foundation for the abolitionist movement centuries later—master and slave are equals in Christ.