

West Van Baptist, February 22
Onesimus, The Prodigal Slave
Philemon 1-25

I. Another easy-to-overlook passage

Two weeks ago we finished a sermon series on the book of Colossians. We looked at the last 12 verses of the letter—which are full of names, greetings, personal news, and a “good-bye” from Paul. It’s not the most exciting passage in the Bible. Most pastors avoid it. After the service a number of you came up to me and said you’d never heard a sermon on that passage before.

Still, it’s part of God’s Word, so we explored the text together. As usual, I found the study valuable. I trust others did, too. I really hope so, because we’re going to spend another 3 weeks in Paul’s letter to Philemon, which is a “sister letter” to Colossians.

I’ve talked a bit about the relationship between these letters already.

- Both were written by Paul and Timothy.
- Both were carried to Colossae by Onesimus, who was from that community. (See Col 4:9, Philem 10, 12. Colossians tells us that Tychicus went along on the journey too.)
- Both include greetings from other brothers serving with Paul—and the same 5 individuals are mentioned in each letter. (Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, according to Philemon 23-24. Colossians 4 lists the same people in a different order, adding Jesus-Justus.)

In other words, these letters were written and sent together. In fact, it’s quite likely that Paul decided to write Colossians because he was planning to send Onesimus home to that city. (That’s the historical situation. Of course, God’s Spirit was at work behind it all.)

Philemon is one of the shortest books in the Bible. Like that last section of Colossians, it’s full of personal information. It doesn’t offer any profound “spiritual” teaching or grand principles for Christian living, just a request from Paul to a friend. It’s really easy to overlook Philemon—just to skip past it. (In fact, let me ask: how many of you can remember the last time you heard a sermon on Philemon? I can. I was a teenager—so that was a long time ago.)

But the Spirit of God inspired this little letter, and chose to include it in our Bibles. It is filled with our Lord’s life-giving power, able to enrich our walk with Him. It’s worth a few weeks of study. And I can’t think of a better time to do that than right on the heels of our series on Colossians.

So, we’re going to do a short 3-week series in Philemon. We’ll take a slightly different approach than we did in Colossians. Rather than working through the book verse by verse, I’d like us to consider the 3 main characters we read about: Paul, the author; Philemon, the recipient; and Onesimus—the man carrying the letter and the person it’s really about.

We’ll start with Onesimus. To help us picture the situation, let me begin with a story.

II. A story about Phil and Benny

Now please understand: this story is partly made-up. We actually know very little about Philemon and Onesimus. Onesimus is mentioned twice in the Bible (in Col 4:9 and in Philem 10). Philemon is only named once. Pretty much everything we know about them comes from this short letter, with a little background from Acts, Paul's other writings, and some historical information about Colossae and Ephesus. So please don't treat everything in my story as though it's God's Word. I'll try to highlight the things we do know from Scripture. The rest is a guess at what *might have happened*. It may not be completely correct. But it will give a sense of what's going on behind the letter—and it will be more interesting than a dull list of facts.

My story begins with Philemon. To make things easier, I'm going to call him "Phil."

Phil was a prominent businessman who owned a sheep ranch just outside Colossae. He also had a factory in the city where wool was woven into fine, valuable cloth. Some of that cloth was sold in Colossae; but because the city was surrounded by sheep farms, he did most of his business along the highway west to the port of Ephesus, about a 4-day journey away. Phil had a warehouse and a successful store in Ephesus, selling cloth and clothing in that much larger center and exporting it by ship to other parts of the empire.

To make this work, Phil traveled back and forth frequently for business, often staying in Ephesus for weeks and months at a time. On one of his trips, he ran into a friend from Colossae who also sold goods on the coast. That friend's name was Epaphras. Epaphras had exciting news. "Phil, you won't believe it! You know that new religion in town—the group they call 'Christians'? Well, I've recently met some of them, and they're *wonderful* people. And they have a message you simply have to hear. In fact, I've become a follower of Jesus. You should come and meet them. I think you'll be very interested in what they share."

This was a surprise, but interesting too. Later that week, Epaphras took Phil to a church gathering and introduced him to one of the leaders—a man named Paul. You can guess what happened. Phil became a Christian. He became very involved in the church, and worked with Paul and the others whenever he was in Ephesus.

The first time Phil returned home to Colossae, he learned that Epaphras had already come and started to share about Jesus with other friends and family. In fact, Epaphras had planted a brand new church in the city. Phil understood. He was eager to share with his family, too. Soon his wife Apphia and the rest of his household had joined the new Colossian church. When numbers grew and they needed a bigger place to meet, Phil and Apphia offered to let the church gather in their home, which had a good-sized portico.

Over time, the church grew. Phil and his family grew in their faith as well, taking on more leadership responsibilities. In fact, one of Phil's sons, Archippus, was a gifted teacher who was soon invited to help lead both in his own house church and in other gatherings in the area.

Around 5 or 6 years later, Phil decided it was time to expand the family business. A lot of his merchandise was being shipped to Rome. It would be more profitable to open up his own store there rather than letting others sell his goods. So Phil organized a team of servants to make the trip

to Italy. He supplied them with stock and enough resources to set things up. Their task was to establish a new store, then report back on their progress so he could make longer-term plans.

One member of the team was a slave named Benny. (Actually, his name was “Onesimus.” But that’s a mouthful. Onesimus means “profitable” or “beneficial,” so we’ll call him “Benny.”) Benny was a decent servant. He was skilled and trustworthy enough to be included on the team. But he was still learning and hadn’t proved himself yet; he was included on a trial basis.

It turns out Benny wasn’t as reliable as Phil hoped. Far from home and master, in a new city full of possibilities, Benny thought to himself, “If I take a bag of money and disappear, I can start my own tailoring business here in Rome, be my own master, and not need to serve anyone anymore. No one will find me. I’m going to do it!”

And he did. Benny left the team, moved to another part of the city, and tried to create a life for himself. This wasn’t as easy as he expected. He didn’t have a supply of fabric, and couldn’t get stock from his master’s company. People would ask where he came from (since he had a funny accent), and someone might ask to see his papers—knowing that there were many runaway slaves in Rome. He wasn’t trusted. He had no friends. The money would run out soon, and then what? Benny was a prodigal—not unlike the Prodigal Son in Jesus’ story. He had run away, and soon he would be poor and in trouble. What to do?

Back home in Colossae, Benny had lived in a Christian household. He remembered that Christians were kind people, willing to help, even to help slaves. He decided to look for a church in Rome, to see if they would help him out.

He found one. And wouldn’t you know it, one of the key leaders in that church was a man named Paul—the very man who had shared the message of Jesus with his master Phil years before.

Paul was kind and understanding. He talked with Benny, and did what he could to help with Benny’s immediate needs. He also shared Jesus. And for the first time, Benny really understood the message, and he embraced Jesus as his own Lord.

For the next few months, Benny worked where he could, and he spent as much time as possible with Paul and his friends—learning about Jesus and serving the church. He also gave practical help to Paul, who was under house arrest and unable to move around freely. It was a special time. But it was a temporary time. Gently, but firmly, Paul pointed out that Benny was living a lie, and cheating his master Phil. He needed to go home and make things right. Along the way, Paul’s friend Tychicus decided to make the trip from Rome to Ephesus. Benny could go with him. Tychicus, in turn, would travel to Colossae with Benny and speak on his behalf to Phil.

So, in the end, Tychicus and Benny—Onesimus—traveled back to Ephesus, then up the road to Colossae. They carried letters for the churches along the way, including a special letter for the church in Colossae. And they carried a letter from Paul to Philemon, sharing the news that Onesimus is now a Christian, and asking Philemon to receive him with grace and kindness.

That’s the story. It’s my story, and many parts are made-up. But we know Philemon was a friend and coworker of Paul (Philem 1) who came to faith in Jesus through Paul’s ministry—presumably in Ephesus (Philem 19, Acts 19). We know that Onesimus was Philemon’s slave (Philem 16), that he

met Paul while the Apostle was in chains and came to faith in Jesus (Philem 10), and that Paul sent him back with Tychicus as a traveling companion (Philem 12, Col 4:9). So the main outline is fact, even if I've filled in some creative details. Hopefully this helps to give us a sense of what Philemon is about.

What happens after my story? Again, we don't know for sure. Most likely Philemon did what Paul asked, forgiving Onesimus and welcoming him back as a brother in Christ. After all, Philemon didn't burn the letter. It was read to the church along with the letter we call "Colossians," and it was kept as part of our New Testament. I'm pretty sure it had a powerful impact on the church at Colossae, and everywhere the story of Onesimus the Prodigal Slave was told.

III. So what?

Well, that's all very interesting. But so what? What does the story of Onesimus offer to you and me today? I can think of several lessons for us from this runaway slave.

The first is that ...

(1) "Prodigal Son" stories aren't make-believe

One of Jesus' best-known stories is about a son who took his share of the family inheritance and ran away from home (see Luke 15). We call him the "prodigal," because he didn't leave with his father's blessing and it wasn't a good situation. He ran away to live a wild, immoral, self-centered life—partying, gambling, hooking up with prostitutes, doing all kinds of evil things ... until his money ran out. Then, suddenly, his "friends" abandoned him and he had to do the lowest of unpleasant jobs just to survive.

Eventually the young man came to his senses and returned home. He expected to be hated, and hoped for nothing more than to be hired as a servant. But Jesus surprises us with a happy, grace-filled ending. The father welcomes his son, forgives him, and restores him fully—because he, like our Heavenly Father, is full of love.

It's a familiar story. And it's a lot like the story of Onesimus. He wasn't a son, but he was part of a wealthy, loving household. He ran away, almost certainly taking some money with him. He met Paul, he met Jesus, he came to his senses and realized he needed to return home. And, thanks to Paul's letter and to the kindness in Philemon's heart, we're pretty sure he was forgiven and welcomed back.

We don't know whether Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son was something He invented, or whether He actually knew someone who had run away and come home. In Luke 15 it doesn't really matter. But Onesimus reminds me that in this world there are plenty of real-life "Prodigal Sons and Daughters." Many people leave behind a good life, a good family, good friends, a good place, to go out and live in a very bad way. When they do, the result is almost always very bad. But by the grace of God, many of those "prodigals" come to their senses and come home. And every time they do, God the loving Heavenly Father is willing to welcome them back and restore them.

Some of you have “prodigal” stories. Almost all of us know some real-life prodigals. The details vary from person to person. But this world is full of people who wander away, and full of stories of the grace of God which welcomes them back again.

So ...

- Perhaps someone you know is a “prodigal” right now. It’s hard to watch. It’s painful to be the parent, or spouse, or sibling, or friend, of a runaway. But be encouraged. God is in the business of working in the hearts of prodigals, and He is always willing to welcome them back.
- Perhaps some of you are waiting for a “prodigal.” Someone you love who has wandered off. The main point of Jesus’ story—and one of the important applications of the letter to Philemon—is that we need to reflect that Father’s loving embrace. Be like the Heavenly Father, be ready to welcome the “prodigal” when he or she comes back.
- It’s possible that someone here, or someone listening online, is a runaway right now. That you’ve wandered away from a good place into a life that isn’t so good. If so, remember that God waits with open arms (as do your godly friends and family). Come home.

(2) There are no accidents with God

We don’t know exactly where Paul and Onesimus met, or how. Did Onesimus look for a church? Did he look for Paul? Did they just run into each other “by accident” one day? We don’t know.

If they were in Rome, the chances of an “accidental” meeting were pretty small. Something like a million people lived in Rome in Paul’s day. Even Ephesus had 200,000 or more. However they met, it was a pretty amazing coincidence.

If you believe in coincidences.

When I read the Bible, when I look at history, and when I look at my own life, I’m constantly amazed at the way God coordinates circumstances to accomplish His plan. Over and over He brings together these crazy “coincidences” in answer to prayer, to provide and help His people. I shouldn’t be surprised, really. I know He is in charge of history and all that happens. But it is amazing. He seems to love arranging things that only He could arrange, as a reminder that He is present and working in this world.

Onesimus’ story is one of those amazing coincidences. Paul reflects on this in verses 15 and 16. Did you notice? He says: *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.* “Perhaps the reason” Whose reason? God’s reason! God had a reason, even for Onesimus to run away, and certainly for his meet-up with the Apostle. God works all things together for good for those who love Him (Rom 8:28).

Never underestimate God’s ability to work things together for good—even when it seems impossible. He did it in Onesimus’ life. He will do it in our lives. Expect it, pray for it, notice when it happens, and give Him thanks and praise.

(3) Faith should make us useful

If you're reading the footnotes in your Bible, or if you've studied Philemon before, you will know that Paul makes a play on words in verse 11. He says, *Formerly [Onesimus] was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.* I nicknamed him "Benny" because his name means "beneficial" or "useful." Obviously, Onesimus wasn't very useful to his master when he ran away. But Paul observes that he has become very useful now that he is a follower of Jesus.

(There is, in fact, another play-on-words here if you read the verse in Greek. Paul's word "useless" is "*a-chrestos*," and "useful" is "*eu-chrestos*." The word "*chrestos*"—useful—is not the same as the word "*Christos*"—"Christ." But it sounds very similar. Paul makes a joke. Now that Onesimus is a follower of *Christos*, he is a *eu-chrestos* servant.)

All joking aside, Paul links faith in Jesus with usefulness. Onesimus isn't changed because he has adopted a new philosophy or found a better work-ethic. But as a follower of Jesus he has adopted a new value system. We read about that several weeks ago when Aldo preached on Colossians 3 and 4. Remember Paul's instruction?

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters.... It is the Lord Christ you are serving. (Col 3:22-24)

People sometimes complain about Christians being "so heavenly-minded that they are no earthly good." It's possible to be this way. But it isn't what the Bible teaches us to be. We're called to live every aspect of our lives as servants of Jesus. Everything we do is an opportunity for worship, and it should all be done as if we are serving Him. This is true whether we are slaves or masters, employees or employers, students or professors or carpenters or brick-layers or computer scientists or investment bankers.

Being a follower of Jesus doesn't guarantee that you and I will be the best player on the team, or the best musician in the orchestra, or the best employee in the company. People have different gifts and abilities. But being a follower of Jesus should change everything we do. It should make us better team-members, better students, better workers, better employers, than we would be without Jesus—because we live to serve and honor Him, all the time, when people are watching and when they aren't. Christians should be the kind of people others want to play with, to hire, to work beside.

Onesimus was different because he trusted Jesus. We should be different too. It's part of our witness, and part of our worship.

IV. The importance of small things

Those are some practical applications from the story of Onesimus. Let me add one final comment: on the importance of small things.

Onesimus and Philemon aren't big characters in the New Testament story. Philemon is a tiny letter. It doesn't have a lot of profound teaching. So it might be tempting to ask: would it really make any

difference if this little epistle had never been included in our Bibles? Would it matter if we *never* studied it?

There are at least 2 reasons why Philemon matters. I've already suggested one. If Paul hadn't sent Onesimus back to Colossae, our book of Colossians wouldn't have been written. It was written because God knew we needed it. It's an important book with a lot of valuable teaching. But God used this situation as His means to get Colossians written. Aren't we glad Paul sent Onesimus and Tychicus back to Colossae with these letters!

Second: Philemon is probably the most important book in the whole Bible on slavery.

I'm sure we would all agree that slavery is evil. It's not consistent with the truth that God made all men and women in His image. Nevertheless, slavery has been around all through history, in almost every human civilization. It was present in Israel in Old Testament times. It was so woven into Greek and Roman society that we find it in the New Testament churches—like Colossians, where Onesimus was Philemon's slave. The Bible, especially the New Testament, teaches truths that would ultimately convince the church that we must not only get rid of abusive slavery, but all slavery. But that took a long time, even in countries that considered themselves to be Christian. Too many Christians read Bible passages about slavery out of context, ignoring the more fundamental truths about human value.

When Christians did finally take a stand to eliminate slavery in the Western world, a big part of their argument rested on the book of Philemon. Philemon was a practical example of what other Bible passages mean when they teach equality. It shows that when they live together in the body of Christ, the slave-owner and the slave are brothers, both serving one Lord, both obligated to love and care for each other. They might play different roles. But in God's eyes they are equals.

Philemon became the capstone in the argument that people can't really "own" each other, especially not if we call ourselves servants of Christ.

Philemon is a little letter, about a fairly unimportant person in church history. But God loves using the little things, and the little people of the world, to accomplish His purpose. So the next time you feel little, unimportant, unable to make a big difference, remember Philemon and Onesimus and be encouraged. In God's plan, everyone is important—every person, every church, every ministry. That's part of the reason we're studying Philemon this week and for the next 2. May this little letter be an encouragement to all of us.