

The Epistle of Paul to Philemon

The Character of Onesimus

Philemon 10-16

1. An Appeal for a Child of God (v.10)

Paul makes it clear that Onesimus is returning to Philemon in a radically different condition than when he departed (John 3:3ff; 2 Cor 5:17-19; 1 John 3:14; Eph 2:1ff. Paul clearly refers to Onesimus' salvation and to the part he played in it (cf. 1 Cor 4:15). This new dimension is critical in explaining the entire context and content of the letter.

2. Presenting the Character of Onesimus (vs.11-13)

A. He is Changed and is Useful to the People of God (v.11)

Onesimus means 'useful', and while he did not previously live up to his name, now he could do so both to Philemon and to others. One distinctive reality about being born again is that there is a definite and lasting change in the person. That change results in Holy Spirit empowered service for Christ (1 Cor 12:11; Eph 2:10).

B. He is Cherished by the People of God (v.12)

In a very short time, Onesimus had so blessed Paul that it was supremely emotionally costly for Paul to send him back to Philemon. One result of faithful ministry is a deep affection for those with whom you serve (cf. Phil 1:8; 2:1).

C. He has a Ministry with the People of God (v.13)

At this point, Paul was not bereft of companions (cf. vs.23-24; 2 Tim 4:9-12), and Onesimus stood out even in the company of Paul's other faithful friends.

3. A Desire for Philemon's Intentional Benevolence (v.14)

God has never been interested in coerced benevolence or merely external compliance (cf. Ex 35:5; Ps 51:16-17; Acts 4:32ff); He desires obedience and benevolence from the heart (Rom 6:17; 12:1-2).

4. Evaluating with An Eternal Perspective (v.15)

Regardless of all else, Christians must strive to see that God truly causes all things to work together for the good of every believer (cf. Rom 8:28ff). Only in God's amazing providence can a runaway slave end up meeting an imprisoned Christian minister who leads him to Christ before sending him back to his master.

5. Responding with an Eternal Perspective (v.16)

Paul did not demand that Onesimus be freed, but instead he urged that he be received as a fellow believer (1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:28; Eph 2:14-17; Col 3:11).