

## THE BOOK OF COLOSSIANS

Onesimus: “Man with a Past”

Colossians 4:9; Philemon

### Introduction

1. Tychichus is one of the “nobodies” of Scripture, but God’s grace employed him with the Apostle Paul. Along with Tychichus must be included Onesimus.
2. Tychichus was a man with a message while Onesimus is a man with a derelict past. It is easy for most to identify with him for we all are sinners by birth.
3. Outside of the book of Philemon, which is a personal inspired by God letter from Paul, Onesimus is only mentioned one other time in the Bible (Col. 4:9). But God determined he would not be overlooked by believers.
4. Study diligently the lessons this man teaches.

### Lesson #1 HIS CONDITION

#### a. In Society

Onesimus was a slave from Colossae who had run away from his master, Philemon Gibbon, the historian, (Decline & Fall of the Roman Empire), estimated one half of the Roman empire were slaves (30 million). Life for a slave was cheap, hence masters become incredibly brutal and the slaves became morally corrupt. History is too full of the horrible depths to which humanity fell in the punishment of a slave. In brief, Roman law relegated a slave to a sub human status with this dictum: “The slave has no rights.”

#### b. In Sin

1) He departed v. 15. The sovereign act of God in Onesimus’ departure is noted by the aorist passive form of the verb (“he was severed from you”). Thus more than a “run-away” slave is taught here. In fact, the word “perhaps” patently teaches this!

2) He wronged v. 18. The first class condition assume Onesimus did wrong and without justice, as the verb denotes. The suggestion is that Onesimus robbed Philemon before he ran away.

3) He owed v. 18. This is a delicate way to say “stealing.” Apparently Onesimus was entrusted with some money, but abused the trust.

Note: 1. The tactful manner with which Paul speaks of Onesimus’ wrongs. The runaway’s misdeeds are treated with consummate delicacy. 2. Paul’s way of talking about Onesimus’ faults to Philemon are a lesson that brutal frankness is neither necessary nor helpful when dealing with a genuinely repentant sinner. It is not always justifiable to “call a spade a spade.” Augustine said “my daily furnace is the tongue of men.”

## Lesson #2 HIS SALVATION

#### a. Through Paul vv 9, 10.

Paul’s approach to Philemon is 3-fold: 1) He beseeches. 2) He pleads his age (or ambassador). 3) He confesses his imprisonment (of Christ). Then he affirms Onesimus to be his own son in the faith. He actually “begat” him (aorist tense).

#### b. For Philemon v. 16.

Onesimus is now truly a “beloved brother.” This is indeed remarkable, but in concert with the reality of the new birth (Gal. 3:28). Salvation changed the status of Onesimus!

#### c. To Believers Col. 4:9.

Faithfulness or trust worthiness become hallmarks of the former thief. Unbelievable, but true. Christ transforms people to be new creatures in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 5:17).

## Lesson #3 HIS POSITION

#### a. Received vv. 12, 15, 17.

“Receive” (v. 12), while not in all Greek texts, does make sense (cf. v. 17). On the other hand, it may mean that Onesimus is to be taken back “in his own person” i.e. like Paul’s vitals as one with Paul in the link of the spiritual birth. The point is clear; Onesimus is my other self who comes to you. Incredible position for a runaway slave!

#### b. Utilized v. 11.

The name Onesimus means “helpful” or “profitable” so Paul employs a bit of humor: Onesimus was an “un-Onesimus, but he really is now an Onesimus to you (Philemon) and to me (Paul). So, with the stroke of the pen, Paul entwines Philemon and himself to Onesimus.

#### c. Accepted vv. 16, 18, 19.

Paul puts his heart on the line for Onesimus: 1) He is a brother beloved to Paul (v. 16). 2. He is Paul’s obligation for debt. What Onesimus owes goes to Paul’s account (v. 18). 3. Paul’s words are not an empty gesture, but a true promissory note (but with a gentle reminder how indebted Philemon was to Paul for his own spiritual life).

### Conclusion

God is still in the business of taking runaway slaves and saving them by His matchless grace. Those who receive Christ as Savior are received by Him forever. If you are an un-Onesimus, come now to the Lord Jesus and get forgiveness forever. Come! Come! Come!