



# MEN AND WOMEN OF THE BIBLE

## ONESIMUS

### THE STORY OF ONESIMUS AND ITS VALUE FOR US

Onesimus was a runaway slave who belonged to Philemon, a wealthy Christian who lived in Colosse.

Paul was in Rome under house arrest (59-61/62 AD) when Onesimus ran from his master Philemon. Apparently, Onesimus stole money, or valuables, which he used to pay for passage on a ship bound for Rome. Rome was a frequent destination of runaway slaves. In a population of one million people, it was easy to remain hidden; however, Onesimus didn't remain hidden from his destiny.

In Rome, Onesimus heard Paul, or another missionary, preach. He converted to Christianity. Soon Onesimus began to help Paul with his ministry. Onesimus and Paul became so close that Paul described himself as Onesimus's father and Onesimus as his son. Although they wanted to stay together, both agreed that Philemon had a prior claim on Onesimus. Onesimus must make restitution to Philemon. Onesimus returned to Philemon in Colosse. With him, Onesimus took a personal letter from Paul, begging Philemon to be lenient toward his runaway slave.

*"I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, who formally was useless to you, but now is useful to you and to me. I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart... For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me. But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account."*

#### **Philemon 1:10-18**

Paul knew that there was still a debt that Onesimus owed Philemon, and justice demanded that this debt be paid. It is because of this that Paul wrote *'if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account.'* What fantastic words for Onesimus, who probably had no way of paying his master back what he had stolen. And what fantastic words for us, because we too had no way of paying the debt which we owed God. But God is a God of justice and for this reason we read -

**Romans 3:25-26** *"God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood... He did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus."*

And the Lord Jesus, for His part, said *'whatever debt of sin that is owed to you Father, charge that to my account.'* Your debt of sin was not overlooked but was entirely paid for by the once and for all sacrifice of our wonderful saviour Jesus Christ.

Paul didn't deny or negate the seriousness of Onesimus action when he ran from Philemon; yet, Paul saw the hand of God in Onesimus's flight. Now, Philemon will have Onesimus back, no longer as a slave, but as a dear brother. Tactfully, Paul asked Philemon to forego punishment of Onesimus. Paul used a lighthearted play on Onesimus's name in the request. The name Onesimus meant "useful" or "profitable." When Onesimus ran away from Philemon, he was "useless." Now as a Christian brother, Onesimus is "useful," both to Paul and to Philemon.

Ecclesiastical tradition represented Onesimus as the first Bishop of the Berean church. He was martyred, along with Philemon, during the general persecution of the Christian church under Emperor Nero.