

“Profitable, Brother”

Character Study of Onesimus ¹

Good morning! I hope you haven't been waiting long. I've been tied up in a meeting. One of our oldest saints has been telling us about some pretty incredible visions he's received from God. His name is John, and he's one of the few believers left who knew our Lord Jesus in the flesh. John was Jesus' cousin, and they truly were “best friends.” My, the stories he can tell! I could listen to them forever. When we both get to Heaven, that's one thing I plan to do!

I'm really glad you could join me here in Ephesus today, thanks to the modern technology available to you. In your time, Ephesus is a magnificent ruin; but in my time, Ephesus is an impressive city, a significant international seaport, with streets paved with marble from the city center all the way to the sea! I'm from the small town of Colosse, a few miles east of here, in what you know as western Turkey.

Colosse is a beautiful place, too, and it was a good place to grow up. Like many of you have done, though, I moved from my country roots to the city. Now I serve as a bishop, a regional church leader, here in Ephesus. I'm often amazed that God in His grace has chosen to use me to serve His Church after I began as I did. I'll tell you more about that later.

I'm pleased to be able to tell you that the church in Ephesus is doing very well. Paul began this church some years ago, together with Priscilla and Aquila. You've probably heard of Paul—you may even have read some of his letters—but you can't begin to understand what an amazing fellow he was.

Back in the early days of the church here in Ephesus, the Gospel was reaching so many people that it led to a huge riot among the silversmiths, who were losing money as people gave up their idolatry. Twenty-five thousand rioters filled our world-famous amphitheater that overlooks the sea. Paul wanted to enter the theater and preach to them, but his friends stopped him. Had he gone into that mob, that would have been his last sermon, for sure.

Paul had been involved in riotous situations before, of course. It seemed as though trouble followed him around wherever he preached. Paul had both confidence and courage in generous measure, and that was a good thing, because he needed those qualities pretty often.

Even in his later years—that's when I knew him—Paul was clearly a man disciplined by continual training. Paul often said that he was “pressing on toward the goal,” as an Olympic runner might do. And I'm proud to tell you that I consider Paul to be my spiritual father . . . I'll come back to that later, too.

Now about the meeting from which I've just come . . . a number of the leaders of the Church have gathered here this week from all around the Mediterranean to discuss the writings that would be best for our churches to study. There have been many, many stories written about Jesus, and the apostles themselves have written some marvelous letters. Sadly, some of these documents have already been lost, so we who lead the churches decided that we'd better collect what documents we could and begin taking steps to preserve them.

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The church here in Ephesus brought one of Paul's letters to the meeting—the same letter that Tychicus and I delivered to them long ago. One brother brought a letter from Peter. And of course we have several lengthy accounts of the life of Jesus. The main ones were written by Mark and Matthew, and by Luke, Paul's personal physician.

Dr. Luke also wrote a history called the "Acts of the Apostles," which tells the story of the early days of the Church. And John told us this morning that he's thinking about writing down his memories of Jesus, too. That would really be wonderful—to have a "best friend's journal" about Jesus!

My home church in Colosse has treasured a letter that I delivered to them from Paul many years ago, and I brought it today to be included in the collection. I also brought this . . . [*hold up scroll*] but I haven't had the courage to show it to anyone. I'm afraid they will consider it worthless—or else they will be terribly embarrassed for me.

This is a letter from Paul, too, but it's not written to a congregation like all the others were that have been brought today. This letter is to just one person. And Paul doesn't discuss theological things in this letter, as he usually does. No, in this letter, Paul mostly talks about me—and the worst side of me, at that. This letter was written during the most awful time of my life.

I was nineteen then, and I had run away from home. Things were really not all that bad, as I look back, but, hey, I was a teenager, and nothing could hold me down. I wanted to see the world. I didn't want to be stuck in Colosse: "This is nothing but a muddy backwater!" I told my friends. So one night, when everyone else was asleep, I crept into the master's study, stole some money I knew he kept there, and snuck out of the house. I was off on a great adventure!

The first few weeks were marvelous. I got work as a deck hand on a cargo ship—such people knew not to ask many questions—and I headed for Rome, the city of my dreams. I ate well—sailors do, you know. I enjoyed the beaches when we put in to port, and I bought lots of new clothes.

Once I got to Rome, I continued to live pretty well off the money I had stolen. I did the bar thing quite a lot, but I made a lousy drunk. And after one particularly nasty fight, I ended up in the drunk tank—in Rome.

Talk about scared. I was terrified! The other prisoners spoke fearfully about the punishments they might get. Many were expecting to be forced into the huge Coliseum to fight wild animals for the crowd's amusement. "That's pretty great," I thought. "I've run away from a quiet, peaceful city, and from a safe home, only to die as the main course for caged lions in Rome!"

After several days there, one of the prisoners in that filthy cell spoke to me out of the darkness. The place was so dark that I never even saw his face, but his voice was very kind. He told me that he knew how I could get out of prison, alive . . . and suddenly he had my complete attention! This man told me about a famous prisoner named Paul who was under house arrest elsewhere in the city. Inmates were being recruited from our prison to be the servants of the soldiers who were guarding Paul.

Most of the other prisoners warned me not to ask for such duty. They said that Paul was a dangerous member of a splinter group of Jews who were said to eat human flesh and drink human blood as part of their religious rituals. Despite those warnings, I chose to trust

the man with the kind voice, and I applied to work in Paul's house. It wasn't long before I was transferred.

I knew very well how to be a good servant, since I'd been born a slave. I don't even know who my parents are—or were. My given name means "Useful" or "Profitable"—like a good tool or a strong ox; and, having grown up as just another piece of property in my master's household, that's how I felt—more like property than a person. My master was a kind man, though, and he sometimes let me listen in the background as his children learned from their tutors.

And sometimes I stood in the corner listening when a group gathered in the master's home to sing and pray to their God. They said that their God's name was Yahweh, and that He had sent His son, named Yeshua, or Jesus, to the Jews in Palestine.

They acted as though this was very important, but I was unimpressed. Romans have many gods, and this seemed like just one more. The gods had done nothing for me. Besides, Palestine was just a mud hole on the farthest edge of the Empire. How could anything important possibly happen there?

But all that began to change when I met Paul. Paul was very kind to me, and he spoke to me in a way that touched me—no, his words pierced me—in my heart! Paul told me more about this Jesus . . . that He was still alive, though the Romans had crucified Him in Jerusalem. Paul said that Jesus has a purpose for every person—even for me!—in God's kingdom.

I certainly knew how to be a servant—a slave, really—but could I be the servant of the Most High God? I struggled with that idea for days, tossing and turning on my cot at night. I couldn't imagine that this God would accept a servant who was both a runaway slave and a thief.

Paul thought Jesus would want me to return home to my master . . . but if I were to return to him, he could do anything he wanted to me. Runaway slaves were often flogged, and some were branded, like animals, and a thief might have his hand cut off. Sometimes runaway slaves were simply killed. Accepting Jesus as my Lord could cost me dearly.

Paul understood all this, of course. We talked about it for weeks. I talked with Paul's friends, Luke, Mark, Demas, and Tychicus, until finally I agreed that they were right. I had to return to Colosse, to my master, ask his forgiveness, and then offer to remain his slave for the rest of my life. There was no other choice, if I was going to choose to follow Jesus.

I did accept Jesus as my Savior that night, and there were many tears and much singing that followed. Paul said I could indeed live up to my name now. Now I could be "useful," I could be "profitable" . . . to Jesus!

The weeks that followed passed much too quickly, and finally, after much negotiation, the brothers in Rome were able to arrange my release from my imprisonment. Paul wrote letters to the churches along our route, including the letters to Ephesus and Colosse that I mentioned earlier, and he wrote this letter to my master. Let me read it to you . . .

I, Paul, am a prisoner for the sake of Christ, here with my brother Timothy. I write this letter to you, Philemon, my good friend and companion in this work—also to our sister Apphia, to Archippus, a real trooper, and to the church that meets in your house. God's best to you! Christ's blessings on you!

Every time your name comes up in my prayers, I say, "Oh, thank you, God!" I keep hearing of the love and faith you have for the Master Jesus, which brims over to other Christians. And I keep praying that this faith we hold in common keeps showing up in the good things we do, and that people recognize Christ in all of it. Friend, you have no idea how good your love makes me feel, doubly so when I see your hospitality to fellow believers.

In line with all this I have a favor to ask of you. As Christ's ambassador and now a prisoner for him, I wouldn't hesitate to command this if I thought it necessary, but I'd rather make it a personal request.

While here in jail, I've fathered a child, so to speak. And here he is, hand-carrying this letter—Onesimus! He was useless to you before; now he's useful to both of us. I'm sending him back to you, but it feels like I'm cutting off my right arm in doing so. I wanted in the worst way to keep him here as your stand-in to help out while I'm in jail for the Message. But I didn't want to do anything behind your back, or to make you do a good deed that you hadn't willingly agreed to.

Maybe it's all for the best that you lost him for a while. You're getting him back now for good—and no mere slave this time, but a true Christian brother! That's what he was to me—he'll be even more than that to you.

And now you know "the rest of the story." My master's name was Philemon; and I am Onesimus. Can you see how Paul was building his case in the letter? Now Paul "calls in all his cards" to convince Philemon to take me back

So if you still consider me a comrade-in-arms, welcome him back as you would me. If he damaged anything or owes you anything, chalk it up to my account.

This is my personal signature—Paul—and I stand behind it. (I don't need to remind you, do I, that you owe your very life to me?) Do me this big favor, friend. You'll be doing it for Christ, but it will also do my heart good.

I know you well enough to know you will. You'll probably go far beyond what I've written. And by the way, get a room ready for me. Because of your prayers, I fully expect to be your guest again.

Epaphras, my cellmate in the cause of Christ, says hello. Also my coworkers Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke. All the best to you from the Master, Jesus Christ!

When I arrived in Colosse, I went to see my master, who was quite surprised to see me walk through the door, you may be sure! Philemon was a wealthy and powerful man, and I had no idea how he would respond to the letter.

When he had finished reading it, I extended my right hand, indicating that he had the right to cut it off. But rather than invoking the power of the law, Philemon grasped my hand . . . and then he embraced me. “Onesimus,” he said, “There will be no punishment. The blood of Jesus has paid your debt and has bought your freedom. Now, my friend, you are no longer my slave. You are my brother.”

Philemon put me back to work in his household preparing a room for Paul—but now I was working as a free man. And when the room was finished, Philemon said I should use it myself, until Paul could come.

Paul was never released from prison in Rome, and he never saw his room in Colosse. When it became clear that Paul would not be released, Philemon sent me back to Rome to help him . . . until he was finally executed. What a horrible day that was! But Paul was calm—even eager—when the time came at last. “I’m going to see Jesus, Onesimus!” he said. “I’m going to see Jesus!”

After Paul’s death, I returned to Colosse, and then I was called to lead the church here in Ephesus. There are many believers here who knew Paul well, and who loved him very much, as I did. And Paul loved them.

Yes, my friends, Jesus is alive! I owe my very life to the fact that Jesus rose again, then saved my master, and finally saved me! Jesus is still alive through His Spirit in our hearts, and He is alive in His churches. I hope that our gathering of church leaders here this week will help the churches focus on those writings about Jesus that will do them the most good, that will encourage them to follow Jesus even in these times of great persecution.

It’s now been sixty years since Jesus was resurrected. Surely He will return soon. We must do everything we can to share the good news about the changes Jesus can make in people’s lives—not just for wealthy people like Philemon, but for slaves like me. . . .

I may submit this letter to the meeting after all.