

A LIBERATED SLAVE

Scriptures: Philemon; I Corinthians 7:21-24

(Paul is sitting on a stool just left of center stage. Onesimus approaches from stage right.)

Paul: Oh, Onesimus, come in. How are you?

Onesimus (cautiously, a little fearfully): I'm fine, sir. Wh...Wh ... Why did you want to see me?

Paul (standing up and moving stage left): Onesimus, how long have you been with me?

Onesimus: About six months, sir.

Paul: Why did you come?

Onesimus: W ... Well, as I ... I... told you, Philemon sent me to you. He ... He wanted to help you while you were imprisoned here in Rome.

Paul: Ah yes. It was very generous of him to send one of his own personal slaves. You have been very helpful to me: running errands, delivering messages, bring things that I need. I appreciate it very much, Onesimus. Your name is well chosen: the Useful One.

Onesimus: Thank you, sir.

Paul: It's funny, though, that Philemon did not send a letter to me about your coming.

Onesimus: I ... I ... guess he thought I would tell you myself.

Paul: Ah. (He walks around to other side of Philemon) Oh, by the way, Tychicus just got back today from a visit to the church in Colossae. He stayed with Philemon. He said that Philemon lost one of his slaves. He ran away. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you Onesimus?

(Onesimus starts to answer, but cannot think of anything to say, so he simply looks down.)

Paul (gently): Philemon did not send you, did he Onesimus?

Onesimus (looking down): No, sir.

Paul: Why did you run away? Did he mistreat you?

Onesimus: No, not really. (suddenly becoming cautiously defiant) But it was wrong. It was wrong! No human being should be a slave to another human being. When you preached at our

house back in Colossae, you said, “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” Didn’t you say that?

Paul: I was talking about being a slave to the Jewish law.

Onesimus: But doesn’t the same idea apply to any form of slavery? And when you sent a letter to the Corinthians, you said, “Were you a slave when called? Never mind. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.” I simply availed myself of the opportunity.

Paul: I meant that we should use every opportunity to serve Jesus whether we are a slave or a master, whether we are a worker or an employer.

Onesimus: But when I was baptized you said, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Didn’t you say that?

Paul: Hmmm. Yes, I did.

Onesimus: That’s right! All human beings are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. Among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Paul: Hmmm. Maybe some day that will be written down.

Onesimus: It ought to be written by you!

Paul: Onesimus, you are right. Anyone set free by Jesus can never be a slave to any other master. But that does not mean we are free to do whatever we want. Following Jesus is not about the pursuit of happiness; it’s about the pursuit of holiness! We have been set free, not to be greedy but to be grateful, not to be selfish but to be serving—serving Jesus and not ourselves.

Onesimus: But how do you serve Jesus, if you are someone’s slave?

Paul (thoughtfully): Ah, you have a point there. Whoever is called as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord. You are free, Onesimus. You are free in Christ. I hereby release you.

Onesimus (incredulous): You ... You mean it? I ... I’m really free?

Paul: Yes. But remember this: whoever is free when called is a slave of Christ. You are not your own; you were bought with a price—the price of Jesus’ own life. So glorify God in your body.

Onesimus: So what does God want me to do?

Paul (slowly, thinking): Hmmm, that’s a good question. (He turns to Onesimus.) I think, Onesimus, that God wants you to go back to Philemon.

Onesimus: What? Why should I do that? Why can't I stay here? Haven't I been serving Christ by serving you?

Paul: Yes, you have. And I appreciate it. But there is a relationship that needs to be reconciled. Jesus once said, "When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." (He puts hand on Onesimus' shoulder.) Onesimus, you must make peace with your brother Philemon.

Onesimus: What if he does not want to make peace? What if he decides to beat me or hang me as an example to other slaves?

Paul: I am not going to send you alone. I'm sending Tychicus with you. Philemon respects him. Tychicus will look out for your safety. After all, if Philemon beats you or abuses you, then Philemon is betraying his own relationship to Jesus, and we don't want that to happen. People who submit to abuse without trying to stop it are damaging the soul of the abuser. We do no one a favor by allowing them to be abusive.

Onesimus: So why send me back?

Paul: So that Philemon will learn the meaning of new life in Christ. I want Philemon to remember that he too has a master. Philemon must remember that he too has been set free by Jesus, not to pursue happiness but to pursue holiness, not to be a master over other people but to be their servant, not to become as rich as he can but to become as loving as he can. And you, Onesimus, are going to help him. I am sending you back to him, because I want him to receive not as a slave but as a brother—a beloved brother in Christ. That is the only way he will ever understand what freedom in Christ really means.

Onesimus: I ... I don't know. Do you think this will really work?

Paul (grabs a tablet from the pulpit) Here, I'm going to write him a letter and send it with you and Tychicus. It will be in my own hand, so he knows it is from me.

(Paul sits down on the stool and pretends to write while reading the letter to Philemon. When finished, he hands the tablet to Philemon.)

Paul: There, take that with you to Philemon.

Onesimus (looking at it): I hope that Philemon is not the only one who ever reads this.

Paul (laughing): Maybe someday, it will be read with my other letters. (He puts his arm around Onesimus, and they exit.)

- Ken Onstot
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