

Forward thinking from Philemon ...

A Changed Man

Does the message of the gospel really work? Is there any reference in the inspired record that would give credence to the idea that when people turn from darkness to light, there is actual change? There is an account of such a man in the sacred scriptures, a man who in human terms was a lowly slave, and a runaway at that. As testimony of the reality of that change, the apostle Paul was willing to put himself on the line, and the Holy Spirit furthermore was willing to have it recorded for all eternity. That man was

Onesimus, of whom Paul wrote in addressing the Christian slave master Philemon, "I appeal to you for my child, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, Onesimus."

▼ **Formerly useless** — The apostle Paul, in this letter, does not directly say that Onesimus damaged things when he ran away, but he hints at it. What he does say is that Onesimus "formerly was useless to you" (Philemon 1:11). The whole institution of slavery is demotivating; there is no reward for a slave whether he works hard or whether he figures out how to get out of as much work as possible. It is easy to visualize Onesimus as an angry young man, locked in to a box of frustration, and just plain worthless as a worker. But he has some inner drive, and is willing to take the risks connected with being a runaway. He also makes a good choice as long as he is a runaway; he tracks down the apostle Paul! It is clear that Paul really cares for the soul of each individual, and is willing to work with this man, teaching him the gospel and helping him get his life and attitude straightened out. "Now," says Paul, "he is useful both to you and to me." Slaves were often given names that were numbers, such as *Tertius* (#3 — from Romans 16:22), or descriptions. *Onesimus* means "useful," so Paul is making a play on words to drive his point home.

▼ **Changed man** — Paul does not limit himself to simply describing Onesimus as now useful. "And I have sent him back to you in person," he comments, "that is, sending my very heart, whom I wished to keep with me, that in your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel" (Philemon 1:12,13). The expression, "sending my very heart," is a very touching and powerful statement about how Paul's love had developed for this slave, and would also indicate how different a person Onesimus is following his conversion. But Paul also is emphatic in noting how useful Onesimus is, stating that "he is useful to me," and that the apostle wished to keep him "that he might minister to me in my imprisonment." If Onesimus were still useless and worthless, Paul in honesty could not have made those statements. This is definitely a new creation in Christ who has made a total turnaround.

▼ **Teamwork** — It is difficult to imagine what conditions were for Paul in prison in Rome. He is certainly sincere when he says that he would like to keep Onesimus there so that Onesimus could provide whatever ministrations Paul would need while incarcerated. "But without your consent I did not want to do anything," asseverates the apostle, showing his respect for Philemon and his desire to engage in teamwork for the cause of Christ, "that your goodness should not be as it were by compulsion, but of your own free will" (Philemon 1:14). Paul did not want to force a decision about Onesimus; he wants Philemon to make his own decision (implying that the decision will be under the heading of "goodness" as God defines it).

Onesimus, a run away slave, was such a changed man — as a result of his desire to be obedient to Christ, as a result of his hearing the word of God, and as a result of the Holy Spirit



..welcome him
as you would
welcome me.

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