

“The Desire To Own Up To Sin”

Profiles of Faith #5: Onesimus
Read Philemon

I once studied the Bible with a young man who was so eager to know more about the scriptures. He was reading large chunks of the Bible, and couldn't wait until we met each week. We were making such progress, and he truly was growing into a disciple of Jesus...until one fateful Bible study. We got together to discuss how he could go back and make things right with those he sinned against. Oops. I took for granted that an eagerness to know God's word is the same as being willing to own your past and face up to the consequences! He wanted no part of it, and after I pleaded with him to reconsider, he stopped getting with me. This is a common story. It takes a deep faith in God to face what you've done.

The story of Onesimus is simply awesome! He was a runaway slave from Colosse. Apparently he ran away from his owner Philemon after stealing from him. Somehow, after arriving in Rome, he was introduced to Paul through the ministry. Paul was under house arrest, but still able to study with people. I can only imagine the hours Paul spent with this young man, convicting him about his old life and inspiring him about his new life in Christ. They must have become so close, because Paul says Onesimus has become like a son to him (v. 10) and was his “very heart” (v. 12). He eventually became a Christian, and was now willing and eager to go work things out with Philemon. Paul writes this letter as a way of preparing Philemon to welcome him back gently and forgive him in the Lord. What a cool story!

You may be wondering why Paul didn't send him back to work things out sooner. It is a good question, but the answer is probably very simple. First, Rome was quite a ways from Colosse, and travel wasn't as easy. Also, it's not like Onesimus could have picked up the phone and called his former boss! Information was so much slower than it is today. The truth is, this fact probably should convict us more today – there is simply no barrier to communicating quickly and effectively, and our repentance or reconciliation should reflect that. Second, stealing from your owner was terrible, but a slave running away was punishable by death according to Roman law. Considering the history of slavery in our country, it's hard to admit there were actually slaves and slave owners in the first century, even in the church! But, it was much different, and by the time of the Christian church, did not resemble the oppressive slavery and racism that we think of or experienced. Slaves had quite a few rights. They could own their own property and investments. They could actually buy their freedom from their masters (1 Cor. 7:21), and there were many cases where masters and slaves were very good friends. The Christian faith certainly created a better environment, because it taught that everyone was equal in God's eyes, and abuse or cruelty was a sin. However, the Romans had rules in place for slaves, and unfortunately running away from your master was very bad indeed. Neither Paul or Onesimus had any idea how Philemon would react? Would he turn him in to the authorities? Disown him? Warn others about his reputation? There was a lot at stake for Onesimus.

This is precisely what makes his faith so inspiring. He didn't know how Philemon would react. I'm sure Paul spend many hours helping him understand the importance of going back, owning up and making things right. Still, he could have refused. But, he trusted God, did what was right and was rewarded. He became a faithful brother and was a big part of Paul's ministry (Colossians 4:9). What a great story, and a humbling reminder to never fear man or consequences. Owning up to our sin is difficult, but is a big part of our faith. Let's imitate Onesimus and always have the desire to make things right!

