



ONESIMUS THE SLAVE

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GOSPEL ADDRESS

"I beseech thee for my son Onesimus."—PHILEMON, verse 10.

(Read the whole chapter).

THIS is a beautiful epistle. It is really a love-letter written by Paul to Philemon about a slave named Onesimus, who had run away from Philemon, his master, to Rome. There he met Paul and was converted, and Paul sends him back, but he interposes this letter (really himself) between Onesimus and his master, in order that this runaway might be received in all the affections of Christ.

You may notice that this letter is written to the Church, and it contains some very delicate touches as to those proprieties which are becoming to the people of God and which we do well to observe ; but I want to take it up in a somewhat elementary way.

Onesimus is a figure of every man. He is a figure of you and of me, for he was a runaway slave, and every man is that by nature. I shall not touch on the rights and wrongs of slavery, except to say that Onesimus was the lawful property of his master.

I do not know how Philemon acquired that right over him, whether it was by purchase or that he was born in his household, but he had an undoubted claim on him, and it was a most serious

thing for Onesimus to disregard it. This was accentuated by the moral excellence of Philemon. His very name means "affection." Paul speaks of him as "our dearly beloved" and calls him his "*fellow-labourer*." His wife, too, must have been a remarkably good woman. Paul speaks of her as "the beloved Apphia." She was in full sympathy with the testimony.

The assembly, too, was in their house, and the apostle adds, speaking to Philemon, "Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints; . . . for we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels (the affections) of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother." What an atmosphere of

love pervaded that home ! Upon that kind of an atmosphere Onesimus turned his back.

How illustrative this is of the sinner ! God has indisputable claims upon every man. He has a claim on all men creatorially, " For in Him we live, and move, and have our being " ; and yet, alas ! it is true of each of us as Daniel charged Belshazzar, " The God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified " (Daniel v. 23). But how much stronger is God's claim on us *in virtue of what He is !* The full light of this did not shine out all at once. It did not come out to Adam in the garden of Eden, though God's *goodness* was apparent enough there ; every evidence of it surrounded that man in inno-

gency. But now that the Son of God has come; He has made known the heart of God, and all that God is in infinite *love* has been declared in Him.

Then there is another feature connected with God that I love to think of, and my mind often reverts with deep thankfulness to it, and that is His providential, preventive care. I look back over my life as a young man and take a survey. I see the many pitfalls, snares and dangers into which my heart might have led me, had it not been for the watchful eye of the God I did not know. Many a time He preserved me from things which might have put a blight on my whole life and robbed me of the privilege of any little service in connection with His testimony. Think of turning your

back on a God like that ! We ought to have been devoted servants to such an One. We should have been Onesimuses, in truth, for that name means " profitable " ; but, alas ! like him, we have all belied our name. As we read in Romans iii. " They are together become unprofitable." The world is full of runaways.

If you know anything of sheep you may know that sometimes in a flock they have what they call the " bell-wether," a leading sheep with a bell about its neck. If that sheep goes astray it is serious, for wherever it goes, into deep tangles or ditches, the whole flock will follow. Now Adam was the bell-wether. He was the leader, and we have all followed in his footsteps only too well. As Scripture says: " All we like sheep have gone astray ; we have

turned every one to his own way." The world is full of run-away slaves.

Onesimus was determined to break away from his master. He did not like the restraint. Do *you* like divine restraint? The hatred of it is everywhere apparent. Lawlessness is on the increase. You can see it even in the children. What is a mark of the last days? "Disobedient to parents." Scripture does not say a great deal to children. The path marked out for them is simple. Almost all the teaching addressed to them may be summed up in one sentence, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right."

Scripture supposes parents to be so in the mind of God that they will represent God to their children,

and, in obedience to parental authority, their children will find practical salvation.

I remember a woman speaking to me once about her boy. She was a widow, but she had endeavoured to hold her boy for the Lord. Once he said to her, "Mother, I see nothing of the world as other boys do; your eye and your hand seem to be holding me all the time." "Well," she said; "my boy, there is a time coming when, if you come to manhood, I suppose you will be able to take your own way and go into that which is of the world if you wish to." "Ah," he said, "but, mother, by that time I shall not want to go." I thought, that is an illustration of salvation in connection with parental authority.

Well, Onesimus was determined to break loose from his master. He did not like the restraint, and he determines to get away to Rome. Why Rome? It was the world's metropolis. An old saying was, "See Rome and die." He had heard of its people, its streets, its mansions, its coliseum and those gorgeous pageants enacted within its walls, and he says, I must see Rome! I can understand very well the feeling in that slave's heart as he steals away from his master's house and off he goes. Rome is before him.

I remember when, as a young man, I first landed on these shores. I had been brought up under godly care, with respect for parental authority, but I was away from all that, and I thought, Now I can do

as I like ! I was a runaway like Onesimus.

At last he reaches Rome ! You can go no further than that. Rome is the limit. He goes the limit—and then—*he is captured*. How ? By another slave ! Onesimus ought to have been a slave of God. He had been the slave of his own will. But at Rome he falls in with another sort of a slave—a bond-servant of Jesus Christ, a poor prisoner. Evidently Onesimus had got into prison. What took him there ? His own will.

My friend, if you are following the bent of your will it will land you in the prison-house of death ! When Onesimus gets into prison he meets another prisoner, a prisoner of Jesus Christ—Paul. Why was *he* in prison ? For his own will ?

No! He was there for the will of God. And what is he doing there? Travailing! Travailing for what? Travailing for souls — begetting sons. And this runaway slave comes under the mighty travail of that prisoner of Jesus, and he is begotten—a son in the faith. Paul can say, “ My son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds.”

But Paul is not alone active on the line of *life*; he is active in connection with *righteousness*. He secures to Onesimus the forgiveness of his sins. How can he do it righteously? By charging himself with all that man's miserable breakdown. He overlooks nothing. Ah, what a picture of Jesus! It was that, my friends, that captured my heart. I was a poor runaway slave, a regular Onesimus, heading for

the prison-house of death, with eternal doom before me, when God, by His Spirit, awakened me. It was an intensely solemn, but a blessed moment too, for then and there I learned that Jesus had been into the prison-house of death before me, down into the dark gloom for which I was heading, that He might secure to God the right to administer to me the forgiveness of all my sins.

I see Him standing there in the breach, the blessed Son of God ! I see Him with all the Onesimuses—myself amongst them—ranged before Him, and as I take up the language of Paul in this chapter, and with holy reverence apply it to Jesus, I hear Him speaking to the blessed God in words such as these: “ If he hath wronged Thee, or

oweth Thee ought, put that on Mine account; I, Jesus, have written it with Mine own hand, I will repay it." Where did He write it? He wrote it indelibly, in letters of blood, on His cross. That is magnificent. Does it not touch your heart? Every claim of the throne has been met in the prison-house of death.

Then he sends him back again. Paul would fain have kept him. He says so to Philemon, "Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel." He saw material in this young convert that could be used in the service of Christ, and gladly would he have kept him as a companion and fellow-labourer for he was linked to Paul's heart in

indissoluble bonds. And I can well understand Onesimus feeling like the delivered demoniac, who desired that he might be with his Benefactor.

Yet, Paul sends him back. Why? Because, using the figure, Paul would set none of his converts to work till they were clear in their relationships with God. He would not attempt to use him until every question between that runaway slave and his master was cleared for ever. How does he send him back? In the most affecting way, he puts himself between that runaway slave and his master. Is not that what Christ has done? Paul sends him back so perfectly cleared that no charge could be raised against him. How could it be? If Paul had charged himself with all

Onesimus' breakdown, how could his master charge *him* with it, too? So we sometimes sing—

“ God will not payment twice demand,
 First at my bleeding Surety's hand
 And then again at mine.”

But blessed as that is it goes no further than clearance, and Paul would send him back after a larger fashion than that. He says, “ Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels.” He says, as it were, to Philemon, I count upon this runaway slave of thine receiving just as royal a welcome as I would receive myself.

Do you think that Christ will put you in the presence of God on any lower level than that? No! As I hear the Lord Jesus speaking to the Father in the seventeenth.

chapter of John, I see, with holy joy, the place He has won for me. "O righteous Father, the world hath not known Thee: but I have known Thee, and these have known that Thou hast sent Me. And I have declared unto them Thy Name, and will declare it: that the love wherewith Thou hast loved Me may be in them, and I in them." You get the same thought in Ephesians i. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has marked us out beforehand for adoption through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, wherein He has taken us into favour *in the Beloved*. So Paul says, "Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels." He is sent back

in all the value of redemption, in all the sweetness of relationship and in all the dignity of sonship.

And then he adds : " For perhaps he therefore departed *for a season*, that thou shouldest receive him *forever*." This is an answer to many a quibble. On all hands people call in question the divine ways. They say, If God is merciful, why did He not hold His creature in innocency ? Why did He allow the devil to come in on that fair scene and lead man into sin, with its ensuing harvest of sorrow and death ? Well, I am certain of this, that both God and man have gained infinitely by the fall.

I heard a brother some time ago relating an incident in the life of a dear servant of the Lord. On one occasion he went to call on a young

woman who had lately been converted. He sat down in a fatherly way, and thinking to test her as to her foundations, after speaking of her newly found joys, said to her, "Now, Miss ——, are you not afraid that, after all, you may be lost?" "No," she said, "I am not." "How is that?" he enquired. "Ah," said she (and mark you, she was only a young convert), "What God has set up on the ground of responsibility might break down, but what God has set up on the ground of redemption never can break down." Magnificent answer! When the prodigal left home, he was well attired—illustrative of Adam in innocency—but in the far country he lost those garments and returned in rags. But once attired in the best

robe—CHRIST—he never lost nor could lose that. I repeat it, that both God and man have gained by the fall.

I am sure that Onesimus, on his return, got a look into Philemon's heart he had never had before, and that Philemon found in him a servant such as he had never had before. Indeed Paul can now speak of him as "profitable," and to the Colossians (Col. iv. 9) he gives him the highest of commendations, that of "A faithful and beloved brother." Such is the effect of grace! Blessed as innocence was, and the rest that God had in that condition, consequent upon the fall God has come out in the revelation of Himself in such a way as Adam never knew nor could know Him, and God has taken up

man in Christ for the satisfaction of His heart in a fashion He never could have had in innocent Adam. So Paul says, "For perhaps he therefore departed *for a season*, that thou shouldest receive him *forever*; not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me; but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord? If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself."

If there is a speck of distance between your heart and the blessed God, let these words, as the words of Jesus, sink into your spirit, that you may enjoy the wealth of the position in which He has set you, in that place of tender and intimate affection which He has, as Man, in the presence of His God.

And then he adds, most suggestively, most touchingly, "Albeit, I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides."

In seeking to apply this to divine Persons. I would do so with the greatest reverence, but I think it is permissible to speak of anything that is inside of the sphere of divine revelation, and this Scripture suggests a profound truth, viz. that God has become indebted to a Man. Needless to say, I speak of the Son, but the Son in Manhood. What is He indebted to Him for? For the moral reproduction of HIMSELF. Now that God is revealed, we can let our minds travel back to the time when the Son, as Wisdom, was the nursling of the Father's love (Prov. viii. 30).

How well He knew that heart and the counsels of love which were treasured there, and in full sympathy with the Father His heart went out to the sons of men. He would share those affections of which He had been the unique object, and that place too, which had been peculiarly His own, with others. He would expand the sphere of that in which the Father could find delight. But to effect this, He must become a Man, go to the cross, take up and settle, at infinite cost to Himself, every moral question that sin had raised, and tell out the heart of the blessed God. In deep, devoted love to God and man He does this; then He goes back to heaven as Man, and sends down the Holy Spirit, and by the Holy Spirit the writing

begins on the hearts of men, and it is going on now.

What is being written ?

All that God is in His holy nature, as revealed in Christ. Paul's prayer in Ephesians was that the assembly, the first item of the universe of glory, should be filled to all the fulness of God, and while that witness should be seen now, it will be fully displayed when, as the city, the church, shines resplendent with the glory of God. No sun nor moon—no natural light—is needed there. That vast city will be the moral reflex of the blessed God.

When the Church has been translated, what God is morally will be written on Israel's heart and then on the nations. Nor will the writing cease then, for Christ will

write Himself (Who is the Image of God) on the heavenly intelligences, for He is the Head of all principality and power and, God shall be all in all. When this has been effected, Christ will take His place publicly as Head, leading the whole vast system in to God, and God will have His eternal rest in that which, secured for Him by Christ, as Man, will be, by the power of the Spirit, the moral reflex of HIMSELF. Do you wonder that THAT MAN has been placed at the apex of glory? And I trust your heart and mine puts Him there too. How rightly crowned is Jesus! "Albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides."

One thought more. Paul here speaks of himself as "Paul the

aged." Doubtless he was getting on in years and was about to pass off the scene, but I think he had become *aged* through his sorrows and sufferings connected with the testimony ; none the less, he was full of vigour. Then he adds, " But withal prepare me also a lodging : for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you." He looks forward to the happy change from his prison to the congenial atmosphere of Philemon's home. So *we* are drawing to the close of what people commonly call the present dispensation.

That with which Paul was connected is becoming aged. Full of vigour still, thank God, but aged. It is soon going to pass off the scene. The Church is about to be translated and the telling out of Paul's

gospel will soon cease, and your opportunities of hearing it and sharing in the blessings of which it speaks are rapidly growing fewer. My prayer is that before God removes the Church to heaven, you may be brought to the knowledge of and to a good confession of Christ. The thought of His coming will then be no dread moment to you, as it may well be to a Christ-rejecting world, but it will be the brightest of prospects to your heart.

Meantime you may have a goodly portion here—the privilege of mixing with the excellent of the earth, a wonderful people. Paul alludes to some of them. “There salute thee Epaphras, my fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus; Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my

fellow-labourers." What are their characteristics? "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ" is upon their spirits, and into companionship with such the precious gospel of God invites you. It is a dignified circle, for, be they rich or poor, scholarly or illiterate, they are such as have to do with divine Persons, and next to the knowledge of Christ Himself, the greatest favour God could confer upon you is to fit you for companionship with those on whose spirits the grace of Christ rests.

May God bless His word, and may the greatness and the dignity of that which the gospel presents abide with us, giving us to value increasingly the infinite grace that has called us to have part in it.

H. G.

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