

No Longer As a Slave

(Philemon 8-10)

PHILEMON was a good Christian man. He was a leader in the church in Colosse, and the church met in his house. In all probability, his wife was the one Paul addressed as the beloved Apphia. So they were a team working for God. Philemon was also a quite wealthy man who owned slaves. One of those slaves was a man named Onesimus. Onesimus had run away from Philemon, and it seems he stole some things when he left. Some time later Onesimus was arrested in Rome; whether for his stealing from Philemon or some other crime, we do not know. But he was thrown into prison and into direct contact with Rome's most well known prisoner—the apostle Paul. In the course of time, Paul taught this runaway slave, who was also a thief, the gospel of Christ. And Onesimus was saved. Thus, he became a close friend and brother to Paul. But time came for his release from prison and a dilemma arose about what to do. Paul sent him back to Philemon to make things right, and wrote Philemon this letter to make certain he was received well.

I. THIS LETTER TEACHES US ABOUT CONVERSION

You never know who may be reached. A runaway slave who has stolen from his owner does not seem like a good prospect, and a prison does not seem the likely place to teach people. But the greatest teacher of that time was there. This prisoner was ready for good news and a change in life.

When one is converted he wants to correct old sins and failures. Repentance is a change of heart

that results in a change of life. Some sins cannot be corrected. Murder, for example, as when David killed Uriah, can not be corrected. Neither can we take back gossip or lies. But we can plea for forgiveness and change the way we live from then on. In the case of immorality, if a woman becomes pregnant, she cannot undo that sin! But she can, through repentance, determine to quit being selfish and start thinking about what is best for that child.

II. THIS LETTER TEACHES US ABOUT FORGIVENESS

Philemon had a right to be angry. He had been mistreated. But as Paul pleaded with him to forgive, he gave us insight to the nature of forgiveness. "Receive him" (Philemon 12), "no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother," "in the flesh" and "in the Lord." (Philemon 16). "Accept him as you would me" (Philemon 17) and "put his wrongs on my account" (Philemon 18).

This lesson on forgiveness has always been hard to learn. It was hard for the disciples (Luke 17:1-5; Matthew 18) and for the Corinthian church (2 Corinthians 2:6-8). There is no other way to be more like Christ and the Father than in learning to really forgive (Hebrews 8:12). It is impossible for us, as humans, to completely wipe a thing from our minds. But we can keep from dwelling on it, brooding about it, or acting on it.

CONCLUSION

These two elements belong together—true repentance and true forgiveness. It is hard to

have the latter without the former. But if others will not forgive us even when we repent,

God does! All true followers of His will also.

—Leon Barnes

©Copyright, 1986, 2005 by Truth for Today
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED