

“Hey Look! I’m No Longer
A _____!” (v. 16)

In this life there are always certain “granted’s”—things that are so sure to happen that their occurrence is normal. One of these is that obedient faith *always* produces a marvelous, winsome joy. Such was the case with the eunuch (Acts 8:39) and with the jailer (Acts 16:34). This joy is seated deep within our hearts, and within it is rooted a great peace.

One of the evidences of this joy is the total change that overcomes the obedient believer—he becomes a totally “new” person. Paul discusses this change in Romans 6:4 when he writes, “So we too might walk in newness of life” (cf. Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10).

A young apprentice in New England was converted and applied for admission into a church. The practice was for the preacher to examine each petitioner to see if the person was worthy of being counted as a member. The preacher went to the boy’s employer and asked about his work. Pointing to an iron chain hanging in the room he said, “Do you see that chain? It was forged for him. I was obliged to chain him to the workbench each week to keep him at work. He was the worst boy I ever had. No punishment seemed to have any salutary influence upon him. I could not trust him out of my sight. But now, sir, he is completely changed; he has become a lamb. He is one of my best apprentices. I would trust him with untold gold. I have no objection to his being received into communion. I wish all my boys were prepared to go with him.” Such a total change is a good commentary on 2 Corinthians 5:17: “Therefore if any man is in

Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.”

In verse 16 we find one of the best illustrations of this total change—Onesimus, the runaway slave. He was totally “renewed” by the gospel. The emphasis of Paul is upon the changes that resulted when Onesimus obeyed the gospel. For Onesimus, the past in no way compared to the present.

THE DRAMATIC DIFFERENCES OF HIS CHANGE

As you study the epistle of Philemon, you will discover that the following changes were obvious in Onesimus’ life.

He became a “brother” (v. 16). This term refers to the bond of fellowship that is shared by Christians. Christians are all a part of the body of Christ and members of God’s spiritual family. This fact is wonderfully addressed in Ephesians 2:

... that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. . . . So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, . . . (Ephesians 2:15b, 16, 19, 20a).

In becoming a “brother,” the slave was united with his master. There existed a unique “oneness” between the two that previously did not exist. Because of the common brotherhood shared, there was “neither slave nor free man” (Galatians 3:28). Once Onesimus was opposed to Philemon—en-

mony existed, and hatred was spawned. But no more! Now they were “brothers.”

In our world, where isolation is common and tender ties of unity are scarce, it is wonderful to know that one can find a tender relationship like this. The dramatic difference that the brotherhood of believers makes in life becomes evident when one becomes a Christian!

When King Antichus was marching upon Greece with his powerful forces, all in his path trembled. The report of his equipment and numbers terrified the armies who were to oppose him. T. Quincticus rallied the Achaians to heroic courage with this remark, “Once I dined with a friend in Chalcis, and when I wondered at the variety of dishes, my host said, ‘All of these are but pork, only in dressing and sauces are they different.’ Therefore: be not amazed at the king’s forces when you hear talk about spearmen and men-at-arms, and choice footmen, and horse-archers, for all of these are but Syrians with some little differences in weapons.” Such is true with brethren in the church—we are all the same; a part of a great brotherhood. The wonderful fact to contemplate is that we are all “brothers” together! There may be differences in how we look, but we are still brothers. There may be tragic actions in the past that gender hurt feelings, but we are still brothers. There may be wide differences in economic status, vocations, and geographical regions, but we are still brothers! It was this bond of fellowship that made the first dramatic difference in Onesimus.

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He became “useful” (v. 11). There is a play on words here that is unnoticed in our English versions of this book. The name “Onesimus” literally meant “useful.” Paul adds that before his obedience to the truth, Onesimus was useless, but now, for the first time, he was useful! Now Onesimus could live up to his name. The phrase “but now” marks the radical difference. This dramatic difference is evident in all believers. Before obeying

the gospel all live a life of “uselessness” to God, to self, and to others (Ephesians 4:18, 19). But once one obeys the gospel the “useless” becomes “useful”! (Ephesians 4:20-24).

He was bound with affection—“beloved” (v. 16). It was no longer chains and fetters that bound Onesimus to Philemon. It was not leg-irons that brought Onesimus back to Colossae and compelled him to submit once again to his master. What compelled Onesimus was a love grounded in Christ. It was the same love that “knit” the Colossian brethren together (Colossians 2:2). No longer did Onesimus function from a selfish motive; now he worked from love (Ephesians 4:31, 32).

He was God’s servant (v. 16). Although still owned by Philemon, Onesimus had become God’s slave. This dramatic change is noted by Paul as occurring in every obedient believer, “But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness” (Romans 6:17, 18). As God’s servant, Onesimus was duty bound to follow God’s will.

Surely these differences were obvious to all who saw Onesimus. Realizing that these dramatic differences had been demonstrated by Onesimus, Philemon would find it easier to accept him back.

While it is easy to observe these drastic differences, it is more difficult to understand how one could change in such drastic ways. The explanation for the change is found in observing . . .

THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF HIS CHANGE

Onesimus’ changes did not occur without reason. The dramatic changes occurred because of three things. . . .

Hearing the Gospel Story

Somehow Onesimus became a part of Paul’s audience and had listened to him tell the grand story of Christ’s salvation (1 Corinthians 15:3, 4). That story, so simple yet so profound, had a powerful effect upon the straying slave.

Believing the Gospel

He believed the gospel. We know that “faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of

Christ" (Romans 10:17). As Onesimus listened to the gospel message, faith was founded—he believed. But simple faith alone is not sufficient. (James 2:19).

Obeying the Gospel

Having understood what God's great love had done for him and understanding the meaning of Christ's death, Onesimus obeyed God's commands. His obedience is alluded to in verse 10. From other references in the New Testament, we understand what Onesimus did to "obey" God and be "begotten" of God. He had to repent (Luke 13:3). This involved his turning from self direction to divine direction. He had to confess the deity of Christ (Acts 8:37). This involved a solid faith and conviction of Christ's deity. And he had to be baptized (Acts 22:16; John 3:5). In baptism the believer becomes a part of Christ's body and is born into God's family.

By doing these three things, Onesimus became a Christian and embarked upon the life-long habit of living as a "beloved brother" to his fellow saints, becoming a "slave" to God, and being "useful" to everyone he contacted! Indeed, Onesimus shows us the truth of 2 Corinthians 5:17—"Behold, new things have come!"

Having examined the differences and the elements necessary for the differences to exist, we are left to consider . . .

THE COMFORTING CONTEMPLATIONS OF HIS CHANGE

Let us realize how wonderful the gospel message is! Total failure in our past does not have to dictate total failure in the present! We can find a drastic difference. We can find a peaceful contentment in our present and a triumphant victory in our future! This is all possible because of God's "amazing grace" and our willing obedience (Ephesians 2:1-13).

Let us realize the folly of not obeying the gospel. There is only one way that enables us to cast aside the old, corrupt life and find the "new." That one way is the simple gospel message. Look at the life of Onesimus and how it was changed because of obedience to the gospel! No wonder it is called the "Good News"! Only through obedience can genuine blessings be found. Paul is another illustration of how obedience to the gospel brings hope to the hopeless (1 Timothy 1:13-16). Only through obe-

dience can God's grace and mercy be found. Is it not foolish to fail to obey?

CONCLUSION

From the story of a runaway slave comes a great message of hope and cheer for our society that is controlled by sin. To all who hunger for a "new beginning," the story of Onesimus is a

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welcomed discovery. To all who labor with the burdens of past sins, past failures, and past weaknesses, Onesimus says, "Hey! Look at me! I once was just like you, *but now* I'm no longer a slave to sin, but much more than a slave! I'm now a beloved brother who is God's useful servant."

Such describes the amazing change that takes place in one who puts off the "old life" and puts on the "new life." It is a change that all can see. It is a change that the obedient saint will take delight in demonstrating. A converted Chinaman said to a missionary, "I want every person to know that I am converted all over." Such is the attitude of all who have obeyed God's will.

—John Kachelman

"Put It On My Account"
(*Philemon 18*)

Paul's words bring to mind the sacrifice of the Christ. Jesus was willing to take all sorrows and sins on Himself. Such an attitude is possible because of . . .

1. A total sacrifice of self and service to others
2. A full understanding of God's grace
3. A devoted affection toward another
4. A desire to reconcile two who are at odds

May we all be as eager as Paul to see unity, peace, and forgiveness dominate the church. In order for these things to occur, we must develop this attitude!