

USELESS OR USEFUL

"I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds: which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me." Philemon 1:10-11.

In this brief, simple, tender, beautiful, significant and charming Epistle to Philemon three persons stand out prominently -- Paul, Philemon and Onesimus. In the story which lies behind it, this letter tells how Christ comes into a man's life, not merely to settle his doubts, answer his questions and solve his problems, but also how Christ softens the misunderstandings, dissolves the bitterness, makes right and sweetens the relationships between men. Christ enriches all of the relationships of life. When He enters the heart, the whole outlook of life and work and service is lifted above the narrow horizons of personal pleasure and of the accepted standards, and it becomes centered in Christ.

All that we know about Philemon, to whom this letter was addressed, is what is revealed in the epistle itself. It is reasonable to assume that he was a native and resident of Colosse. Evidently he was introduced to Christ by Paul during the ministry of the Apostle in Ephesus. The ties of love which bound them together ever after were a constant source of joy and comfort to Paul.

This devoted friend of Paul became a prominent and active member and leader in the church at Colosse. Philemon was in comfortable circumstances, at least, and perhaps a man of wealth, because his house was large enough to provide ample room for holding the church services there. How commendable that through the centuries true Christians have counted it a joy to open their homes for the proclamation of the gospel of Christ! Doubtless Philemon gave self and substance cheerfully and generously in the service of Christ.

The arresting thing is that Paul speaks of Philemon's love and faith as operating in two directions -- "toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saint." The ultimate expression of his faith was in his love for the Lord and, consequently, for those who believed in Him. The test of any believer's love for Christ is his love for Christians. You may boast of your faith in the Lord, but, if you spend your time in criticizing Christians, you are denying your faith in the Lord.

Like every well-to-do citizen, Philemon owned one or more slaves. One of Philemon's slaves, whose name was mentioned in this letter, was Onesimus.

It is difficult for us to realize what slavery was really like in the ancient Roman Empire. In The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Gibbon estimated that half the population, or sixty million people were slaves. Other historians said that the proportion was even higher, probably two out of three.

It follows, then, that in the ancient Roman Empire life was appallingly cheap. In some parts of it you could buy a human being for seventy-five cents. Such a situation could lead only to a terribly callous disregard of human life.

About the time that Paul wrote this letter to Philemon, Pedanius Secundus, a rich Roman, was assassinated by one of his four hundred slaves. During the trial, which was reported by the historian Tacitus, the counsel for the prosecution, Cassius, argued for the execution of all the four hundred slaves. He won the case, and all four hundred were led out to death as a public spectacle. With their lives they paid for the crime of one man.

In the Roman Empire a slave did not have any rights. In fact, the Roman law declared that a slave was a chattel, like a beast or a wagon. If a slave committed a crime, such as stealing, or if he ran away, he was subject to a terrible penalty. If caught he might be given double labor, or have branded on his forehead the letters "C. F.," which stood for Cave furem, "Beware of the thief!" Or else he might be thrown to lions in the arena, according to his master's whim. But notice this one fact, according to Roman law, there was but one hope for a fugitive slave, and that was to find a friend of his master, who would intercede for the slave to be forgiven and reinstated.

Whether Onesimus was a good or a bad slave, it is not for me to say, but he had his visions and dreamed his dreams, as you and I have done. Aware that he was handicapped greatly by being a slave, he decided that he was going to make a break for liberty. From Paul's language I would conclude that one night Onesimus slipped out of the slaves' quarters and went into his master's quarters, where he appropriated unto himself some of his master's gold and then ran away. In so doing he deprived Philemon of the services which were legally his due.

Fearing punishment for having stolen something of real value from his master, and driven by a guilty conscience and the desire to hide himself, Onesimus fled to the great city of Rome, where the criminals and the worst characters of the land went, within the confines of which he hoped to get lost in the crowd, and be beyond the reach of anyone who knew him. He knew that for the double crime of robbing his master and asserting his freedom he could be tortured, crucified or thrown to the lampreys. There, amid the multitudes of the large and wicked city, that great cesspool of crime and iniquity, Onesimus felt secure from the law. Little did he think that his flight to Rome would result in his return to Colosse.

To the very place where he had fled to hide himself, Onesimus was pursued by the divine love. God sought him out. So it is in every life. There is no use in trying to run away from God, for the very things that people do to get away from Him usually play their part in bringing them into contact with God.

The developments in this case remind me of one of the interesting comments which Robinson Crusoe made with reference to his shipwreck and his stay on the lonely island, namely, "What a checkerboard of life is Divine Providence." God, in His own time and way, brought this fugitive slave, who was haunted with the constant fear and dread of detection and arrest, into the presence of Paul, who was a prisoner in Rome. When Onesimus stepped out of the debauchery of the resorts of the wide-open metropolis into the presence of Paul, he saw the foulness of such a life and the beauty of the Christian life.

From Paul Onesimus heard the gospel of Christ, which he had probably heard frequently in the house of his master, and learned the way of salvation. Onesimus received Christ as his Saviour and was gloriously saved. The heavy load of sin was lifted from his heart and he became a new creature in Christ. Oh, the marvel of God's grace that can save and change human lives, as he did in this case!

As a slave, Onesimus was a splendid illustration of the spiritual condition of all who are unsaved. Every person who has not been saved by the Lord Jesus Christ is a servant of sin and a slave of Satan. Onesimus was a slave to Philemon and Satan. The labor and energy of his body belonged to Philemon, and, at the same time, his body, soul and spirit belonged to Satan. Onesimus was unprofitable to Philemon, just as every unsaved person is unprofitable to God.

As soon as this hitherto useless and unprofitable slave became a new man in Christ, he was deeply grateful for his salvation. He expressed his gratitude through his loving service to the Lord and to Paul, the latter of whom would have been delighted to have kept him as a friend and fellow-worker in the service of Christ. As much as he wanted and needed Onesimus, Paul was unwilling to encourage him to sin by disregarding his obligation to return to his owner. Thoroughly convinced of the salvation, sincerity, integrity and dependability of Onesimus, Paul persuaded him to go back to Philemon and to the lot from which he had fled.

It was Paul's duty to send Onesimus back to Philemon, and he did it. Naturally when Paul told Onesimus that he should return to Philemon and make things right with him, he shrank from the undertaking. He dreaded even to think of what might happen upon his return. To overcome the reluctance of Onesimus, and to appease the anger of Philemon on getting this deserter into his power again, Paul wrote a letter of intercession and sent it to Philemon by Onesimus, in which he appealed for a reconciliation between them.

This letter is a splendid source for knowledge of human relations. From it you can learn more about how to win friends and influence people than you can learn from an entire shelf of books like those written by Dale Carnegie.

Paul approached the matter which occasioned this letter very tactfully. He indicated that he was about to make a request, but did not say bluntly, at first, what it was. He asserted his right to command, but declined to exercise that prerogative. Instead, he preferred to follow the Christian principle of beseeching on the ground of grace. Love always shrinks from commanding.

With exquisite tact and notable courtesy, Paul greeted Philemon and his family; complimented him on his reputation for hospitality; spoke of himself as the prisoner of the Lord; reminded him that he had a special place in his prayers; and then made reference to Onesimus. He wrote: "Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is useful to you and to me." Paul reminded Philemon that probably one of the reasons why his slave had been absent from him for a while was in order that he might have him back "forever", meaning not only for the span of the earthly life, but also for an unbroken reunion in heaven. So let us think of our loved ones and friends who have been taken from us. They have been removed from us for a season, but through God's grace we shall meet them again and be with them forever in heaven.

We miss the chief point of the story if we fail to see that what Paul did so nobly for Onesimus is like what Christ did to make us free. Just as Onesimus sinned against his master, so all of us have sinned against God. Just as he was over-whelmingly in debt to Philemon, so our trespasses have placed us in debt to God. Paul asked Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would receive the Apostle, that is, as a brother in the Lord.

Filled with and controlled by the Holy Spirit, Paul assured Philemon that, as far as possible, Onesimus was willing to make restitution, but he expressed his personal willingness to assume all responsibility for any indebtedness which he may have incurred. He cheerfully took upon himself the task of reimbursing Philemon for any loss which he had suffered on account of the fraud which had been perpetrated by his slave. He promised to reimburse Philemon in full for whatever indebtedness Onesimus could not repay, saying: "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account;.... I will repay it." The placing of the debt of Onesimus to the account of Paul is a perfect illustration of the substitutionary work of Christ of Whom it was said: "The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all."

It is marvelous what the grace of God can do for a person. Whereas Onesimus had been unprofitable and useless to Philemon before he was saved, he had become both profitable and useful. From this incident and letter there emerges a lesson on the profitableness of personality when the individual has been saved and is dedicated to the Lord and others. Regardless of how dark his past was, Onesimus is here presented by Paul as a man who was glorifying God by using his redeemed personality in profitable service for others. With master strokes of his pen Paul frames him in this picture as an illustration and shining example of one whose whole life was thereafter dedicated to the task of being useful.

From this passage of Scripture we learn that one is really and eternally profitable and useful only after Christ has been accepted as Saviour and enthroned as the Lord of the life. After Onesimus was saved, he was anxious to be useful in the service of his Lord. He saw where he could invest his life in a helpful ministry to the aging and weary apostle, and did it cheerfully.

There is no tragedy comparable to the tragedy of a wasted life. It is bad to waste money, or time, or talent, or anything that is worthwhile, but the greatest waste of all is that of the life. Life is wasted when its powers and influences are hoarded and not used. Life is wasted when its priceless treasures are invested in the things that are wrong. Someone has said:

"God has His best things for the few,
Who dare to stand the test;
God has His second best for those
Who will not have His best."

The greatest thing that one can do in this life is to discover and to do the will of God. Conformity to His will is the pathway of blessedness. Someone once asked John Greenleaf Whittier how to make the most of life, and he replied: "Live up to the best there is in you." We should seek to invest our lives in the place and manner which offers the greatest opportunity for calling out the best there is in us. The crowning glory of one's life is to invest it in the service of the Lord for the benefit of others. When a Christian yields himself fully to the Lord, He always blesses and makes him useful. Is your life useless or useful?