



Near and Now

When My Calling Is A Second Chance - Onesimus

By Rev. Wes Kimball

Warm-up Question

How can we live in ways that accompany those around us?

How can accompaniment destabilize system of power and oppression?



Photo by Nathan Dumlao on [Unsplash](#)

Discussion Questions

1. What do you see in this image?
2. What do you feel looking at this image?
3. What stories from your own life does this image bring to mind?
4. What stories of the world does this image bring to mind?

No longer a Slave ... A brother

Read [Philemon](#)

Bible Story Reflection

The story of Onesimus is contained within the book of Philemon, a letter from Paul to Philemon, thanking God for Philemon and telling him about the relationship he built with Onesimus, who was the slave of Philemon. While Onesimus is the central figure of this story, his voice is never heard in this text. Instead, we hear Paul's voice who praises Onesimus and the church he developed out of his home.

Onesimus was enslaved by Philemon, escaped from slavery, and developed a relationship with Paul. After some time, Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon along with this letter from Paul. Paul commends Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother, no longer as a slave. Paul seeks to reconcile Philemon with Onesimus, to forgive any debts and any wrongdoings. Paul saw the developing faith of Onesimus as being crucial to further developing the faith of Philemon, so that Philemon could change, no longer seeing Onesimus as a slave but as a brother in Christ. Paul saw this as a chance for reconciliation for Philemon and Onesimus and as a chance to illustrate the leveling of status through Christ.

While we don't hear the voice of Onesimus, we can imagine his astonishment that after spending time with Paul and deepening their faith together, that Paul would send him back to the man who had enslaved him. We can imagine how he longed for freedom and the immense challenge he faced in deciding to return Philemon and face enslavement again. Whether it was his faith in God or his trust in Paul, eventually Onesimus returned to Paul in the hopes of being greeted as a brother and not as a slave.

As we engage with this challenging text in our own lives, we have to recognize the historical significance of this text for those involved in slavery. By Paul sending Onesimus back, slavers were able to argue that the Bible condoned slavery, while those who finished the story could hear Paul's words replacing slavery with true brotherhood. In the context of the Roman world, to consider your former slave as an equal would have been abhorrent and would destabilize the fabric of daily life. As we think about how our own faith calls us to live, how are we called into spaces and places that cause holy disruption so that we can live as full siblings in Christ?

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think Paul was hoping would happen when Onesimus returned?
2. Tell about a time when your faith called you to do something that you wouldn't have done on your own.
3. If Onesimus had written this letter, what do you think would have been included that Paul didn't put in his letter?
4. What do you think happened when Onesimus returned?
5. How would this book being titled *Onesimus* instead of *Philemon* shift how you read this story?
6. Do you feel like this story is applicable today? Where do you see parallel challenges to that of Onesimus?
7. What do you think God was up to when Paul wrote this letter?
8. Where is God calling you into reconciliation?
9. Where is God calling you into holy disruption?

Activity Suggestions

Write a letter to someone that you need to be reconciled with. You do not need to send them the letter, but be honest with them and yourself as to what happened and why you seek reconciliation.

The image at the top of the study is at a march in Los Angeles after the murder of George Floyd. People of faith are often called to protest injustices in the world. Picture yourself at a march or protest. Why did your faith call you there? What injustice are you being called to protest?

Paul writes at the end of the book, “refresh my heart in Christ.” As you pray the following prayer, hold your hands over the part of your body that is listed and pray over yourself.

Refresh my _____ in Christ. (Eyes, ears, mouth, feet, gut, heart)

Prayer Concerns

Those struggling with injustice, those seeking reconciliation, those being called to holy disruption.

Closing Prayer

You have transformed me, O God, and made me new. Help me to live fully into this newness. In the name of +Jesus, Amen

