

30 April 2017

The Story of Squint and the Slave
Colossians 4:1-9, but really just Philemon

Paul closes most of his letters with some parting words of encouragement, and then generally adds personal greetings. We read some of both now, from Colossians 4:1-9:

4¹ Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven. 2 Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving. 3 At the same time pray for us as well that God will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison, 4 so that I may reveal it clearly, as I should. 5 Conduct yourselves wisely towards outsiders, making the most of the time. 6 Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone. 7 Tychicus will tell you all the news about me; he is a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow-servant in the Lord. 8 I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts; 9 he is coming with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you about everything here.

Today I want to tell you a Bible story. Okay, a story that comes *from* the Bible but isn't exactly *in* the Bible. I'll explain that later.

In the days of Emperor Augustus, the height of the Roman empire, there was a family in Asia Minor that fell into debt. Crops failed, rents were due, money wasn't to be had. So this poor family did what most families at that time did: they sold one of their children into slavery.

Now that sounds awful, and I guess it is, but it might not be quite as bad as it sounds. Being a slave in the Roman empire wasn't like being a slave in the American south before the Civil War. For one thing, it wasn't based on race, and for another there were a lot of them. One of every three people in the Empire was a slave. Moreover, in the Empire, slavery wasn't always permanent. Slaves had the right to save their money and buy back their freedom, and several famous Roman statesmen and generals had once been slaves. Even those who remained slaves could often reach positions of importance. One of the most popular playwrights of the time, named Terence, was a slave. A slave in an important household was a much more powerful person than a free farmer.

Anyway, this family sold their son into slavery. His name was Onesimus. Now you could say that Onesimus landed on his feet in this arrangement. He was purchased by a kind master, who treated his slaves well, and his standard of living went up considerably. He'd never slept in his own bed, on clean linens, before he became a slave. And until that time, he'd never really had enough to eat. But now he was clean and fed and cared for, which was all good. But a slave is a slave. He still belonged to someone else, and Onesimus still hated it. He still had to do whatever he was told or face a beating, and if he ever ran away, his master had the right to have him executed. Sometimes when his master sent him to the nearest town – called Colossae – on an errand, he would see the the bodies of runaway slaves hanging on crosses along the road, just as a reminder.

One day the master came back from town with some visitors. One of them was a short, bandy-legged, nearsighted fellow who talked too much and too loudly. Onesimus didn't care for this loud fellow, whom he privately began calling "Squint," but everyone else seemed to hang on his every word. The master called for food and drink, and Onesimus was in and out serving the visitors, and he heard enough to know that they were talking about religious things, but Onesimus didn't care. What did he have to do with the gods, anyway? He was a slave. Even when he saw the master kneel on the floor while Squint and the others put their hands on his head, Onesimus just shrugged.

Things changed a little at home after that. The master had always been a decent man, but now he was even more kind-hearted and generous. A group of people began meeting at the master's house on the first day of every week just to sing and pray and talk. Most of those people were poor people. Some were even slaves. And because the master was wealthy, they came to *his* large house to meet, and the master paid for everything. Onesimus even heard him give money to one of these people, who had fallen into debt, which was nice of him, but it only made Onesimus angry. Nobody had helped *his* family.

Then, a few years later, Onesimus's master entrusted him with a letter to Ephesus, and while there Onesimus came upon a boat headed for Rome. He had been saving to buy his freedom, but it wasn't going very quickly. Here was his chance to have freedom at once, for the price of a ticket. He shoved his letter under a rock and went on board. Surely at Rome, the greatest city in the universe, he could disappear. But it didn't go so smoothly. His savings were soon used up, and he rediscovered hunger. So he stole some bread, was caught, and before you knew it was in a Roman jail. Onesimus wept with fury: was this all that life could offer him? Slavery or prison?

And then he looked up and saw in the same cell, chained to the wall nearby – Squint. The religious guy. There was some bitter consolation in that, anyway, and Onesimus began to call out insults. "Hey, your god's pretty hot stuff! Really takes care of you, doesn't he?" Squint ignored him and spent his time talking with visitors – he had more visitors than all the other prisoners put together – and writing letters. "Why don't you write one to your god? I don't think he's been listening to you lately!" Squint just looked up and said, "When you're ready to stop mocking life and start living it, come talk to me." Then went back to his letter.

"What do you mean?" Then Squint put down his pen and told Onesimus a strange story, an impossible story, about a God who made everything, and then became a man, about a man who was also God, but who died on a cross – on a cross, like a . . . a slave, about a death that doesn't last forever. And even though he knew it was impossible, Onesimus began to cry and found himself kneeling in the prison filth while Squint reached out as far as his chains allowed and put his hands on Onesimus's head. From that day, Onesimus became Squint's personal attendant – it turns out his real name was Paul – caring for him, sending visitors away when he needed rest, and protecting him from others. At first, Onesimus didn't tell who he was, but he got more and more uncomfortable, and at last he confessed. He told Paul where he had seen him first and what he had done. Paul didn't care. "You're a new man now, Onesimus. Could you hand me that scroll?"

Then Onesimus was set free. It was one of the Emperor's festival amnesties – set a few random prisoners free to celebrate. Onesimus was released; Paul wasn't. "But I don't want to go! I want to stay with you!" "Don't be stupid, Onesimus. You can do more for me free." "Like what?" Paul just smiled. "Go with Tychicus to take this letter to the church at Colossae." Onesimus swallowed. "But that church . . . meets at my old master's house." Paul nodded. "Now that you're free, you have some unfinished business there anyway. Faith, Onesimus. Faith. And, for good measure, I'll write a separate letter to your master about you."

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That's all we know, really. The letter that Paul wrote to the church at Colossae is in our Bible, called Colossians. Just after a note reminding masters to treat their slaves well, Paul says he's sending the letter with Tychicus and with *Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you*. And he adds a separate letter, also in the New Testament, specifically to Onesimus's master. The master's name was Philemon.

You've probably never heard a sermon from the book of Philemon. It's only 21 verses, and it's all about the peculiar three-sided relationship between Paul and the wealthy Christian Philemon and his runaway slave Onesimus. There's no doctrine in it. There isn't even a good passage for a church scripture reading, which is why I went with Colossians. There isn't even any moral teaching. In fact, the one moral teaching that you might expect to find here doesn't show up either. What a good place for Paul to write that slavery is wrong! But he doesn't try to change society; he just asks Philemon to receive Onesimus back with grace. So there's nothing earthshaking about this book; the main question that is asked about Philemon is, "Why is it in the Bible?"

The thing is, what we usually want from the Bible is a book of instructions. Something to tell us clearly what to do. Or, failing that, something that gives us the definitive list of all the statements we're supposed to accept in order to be Christians. And so we love the few places in the Bible that actually do that: like the Book of Romans, where Paul summarizes his theology in logical form, with quotable verses to use as proof. But the truth is that the Bible isn't usually like that. Faith in the Bible is messy and complicated and ambiguous and contextual. Biblical faith isn't about laws, it's about stories. It's not about doctrine, but biography. It's not about what is certifiable truth, but about what is, right now, in this tangled narrative that we call life.

I don't know why Philemon got into the Bible, but I thank God it did, because it's not about the sort of faith that you study and learn by heart and quote at people; it's about the faith that you put together on the fly, trying to figure out how best to be a follower of Christ in this unique context. This is what faith is.

One more thing I like about Philemon: like life, it's unfinished. We can read in it how Paul encouraged Philemon to receive his unfaithful slave as a brother, but we don't know what happened. Did he have Onesimus crucified? Beaten? Did he take him back as a slave? Or did he set him free? We don't know for sure. But a hundred years later, one of the early church fathers spoke reverently of a great and wise man who had once served as the bishop of Ephesus. That bishop's name was Onesimus.