

[Answers to tough questions in Philemon](#)

1. Who was Onesimus, and why did Paul write a letter to Philemon about him?

Onesimus was a slave owned by Philemon, a prominent member of the church at Colosse. Through happy and divine coincidence, Onesimus met Paul after he ran away from Philemon. At the time, Onesimus was a double lawbreaker, on the run as a thief and an escaped slave. Shortly after meeting Paul, Onesimus became a Christian.

Although Onesimus was providing useful service to Paul, the apostle decided to send him back to Philemon. With him, he sent both Tychicus as a escort and a personal cover letter as an explanation to Philemon. The wealthy Colossian owed Paul much, for Paul was the messenger who had brought him the gospel. Paul didn't hesitate to mention that debt to awaken Philemon's awareness of the importance of welcoming and forgiving his vagabond slave.

Paul's letter to Philemon provides an insightful glimpse into the NT's handling of slavery. Rather than a direct attack on this terrible practice, Christianity disarmed the institution from within by radically changing the relationship between slaves and masters.

2. How did Paul intervene with Philemon on Onesimus's behalf?

Paul reintroduced the slave Onesimus to the master Philemon as his own son in the faith (verse 10). Paul had led the slave to Christ while in prison at Rome. Since Onesimus was a common slave name that meant "useful." Paul offered a play on words as a tribute to Onesimus's new life in Christ. Paul's description (verse 11) basically means. "Useful—formerly was useless, but now really is useful." Onesimus had been radically transformed by God's grace.

Although Paul did not challenge Onesimus's existing legal standing with Philemon as a slave (verse 16), he did challenge Philemon to a new relationship with Onesimus. Paul did not call for the slave's freedom (1 Cor 7:20-22) but called for the master to receive his slave as a fellow-believer in Christ (see Eph 6:9; Col 4:1; 1 Tim 6:2). Paul was not trying to abolish slavery but rather to make the relationship within this institution just and kind. The master and the slave were to enjoy spiritual oneness and fellowship as they worshiped and ministered together.

Paul also recognized that Philemon's forgiveness would involve a cost. The original theft as well as the loss due to Onesimus's absence were justifiable concerns that Paul was willing to address. If Philemon felt the need for restitution, Paul declared that he would pay Onesimus's debt. He also gently hinted, however, that Philemon might consider what he owed Paul as he was reckoning his losses.