

# Philemon 1:11-14

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/phlm/phlm-1/philemon-111-14/>

*Paul requests that Philemon return Onesimus back to Rome, where he can continue serving the gospel and ministering to Paul in his imprisonment. Paul does not wish to take advantage of Philemon. For this reason, he sent Onesimus back so that Philemon could decide what to do and have the opportunity to choose for himself what is good.*

As Paul stated his request for Onesimus, he made a play on words with Onesimus's name: *I appeal to you for my child Onesimus... who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful to both you and me* (Philemon 1:10-11). Onesimus's name means *useful*.

*Formerly*, or until now, Onesimus was *useless* to Philemon because *he* had run away. *He* was not working for Philemon. And his flight likely caused problems in Philemon's business. And in a larger sense, Onesimus was also *useless* to Philemon in so far that he was an unbeliever only working for Philemon's earthly riches. *But now* as a brother in Christ, Onesimus could seek Philemon's eternal good.

Onesimus became very *useful* to Paul and his ministry during his *imprisonment*. Paul does not go into detail as to how Onesimus was *useful* or what roles he served. But perhaps Onesimus brought other slaves or runaway slaves to Paul where he could teach them about the hope and love of Jesus. Or perhaps Onesimus served Paul as he had served Philemon. With its message of eternal hope and everlasting rewards, *the gospel* spread fastest among the poor and the outcasts. The early church was heavily comprised of servants and slaves. So much so that both Paul and Peter address *the gospel's* implications for believers who were slaves (Colossians 3:22, Titus 2:9-10, 1 Peter 2:18-20.) It is possible that Onesimus was instrumental and highly effective in helping Paul communicate *the gospel* among Rome's lower classes.

But even though Onesimus had become *useful* to Paul in his *imprisonment*, Paul knew it was not right or lawful to keep a friend's runaway slave behind his back. Paul *wished to keep* Onesimus with him *so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel*. Paul would have preferred to *keep* Onesimus by his side so *he* could continue helping Paul share the *gospel*. *But* doing so would have been a deception of his friend and deprive Philemon the opportunity to freely participate in these blessings.

Just as Paul did not use his apostolic authority to command Philemon, neither did Paul use deceit to compel Philemon by hiding Onesimus from him. Paul opted for *consent* over *compulsion*. Paul told Philemon, *but without your consent I did not want to do anything*. Paul did not wish that Philemon's *goodness* to effectively *be done by compulsion* and behind his back. "For love's sake" (Philemon 1:9), Paul *wished* for Philemon to choose what was good of *his own free will*. Love is only possible when it is freely chosen. We have very ugly terms for coerced relationships. Only freely chosen relationships can be rooted in love.

So, Paul made the difficult but loving choice to *have Onesimus sent back to Philemon in person*. In doing so, Paul told Philemon *that* he was *sending my very heart*. Given that this letter is in the Bible, we know that Onesimus delivered the letter *in person*. The fact that Onesimus would have done so demonstrates a major change of heart and attitude. Onesimus could have been signing his own death warrant.

The phrase, *sending my very heart*, reveals Paul's affection for Onesimus and the pain and difficulty he felt about *sending* his beloved child to answer for the crime he committed. Unless Paul was somehow told by God how Onesimus would be received, there was no way to know for sure how Philemon would respond. Thus, Paul made this difficult choice acting on the three Christian virtues of "faith, hope, and love" (1 Corinthians 13:13).

We have already seen how Paul was acting "for love's sake" (Philemon 1:9) when he sent Onesimus to Philemon.

Paul hoped that Philemon would choose what was best and return Onesimus to Rome where he could continue to *minister to him in his imprisonment for the gospel*. At the very least, Paul hoped that Philemon would not exact his legal retribution upon Onesimus by punishing him or having him put to death for running away. In sending Onesimus to Philemon, Onesimus' life and Paul's *heart* were in Philemon's hands. Paul had a hopeful expectation that Philemon would of his *own free will and goodness, consent and do* what was best.

In *sending* Onesimus to Philemon, Paul had faith in Jesus that even if Philemon made a terrible decision, that Christ would work this for the good of both Paul and Onesimus (Romans 8:28). The fact that Onesimus willingly followed Paul's admonition to return to Philemon speaks of a major change of heart and attitude.

### **Biblical Text**

**11 who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me. 12 I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, 13 whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; 14 but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will.**