

For Love's Sake Philemon

Living as free people in the greatest nation on earth we can only imagine what it was like for Onesimus and the other slaves living in Roman Empire in the 1st century AD. An excellent resource for learning about slavery in early Rome is Wikipedia, which gives us a very detailed look at slavery in Biblical times. Historians tell us that slaves made up at least 1/3 of the population, and like those of American history, they were legally considered to be property rather than people. The difference is that race was not a determining factor, and slaves were soldiers, field and household workers as well as doctors, musicians, teachers and accountants. And depending upon who their owners were, they could suffer a life of misery or even enjoy relative comfort as compared to the working poor of the day. Many slaves were eventually freed, some by purchasing their freedom with money earned as a slave. Church tradition holds that three of the early popes of the Catholic church were once slaves.

From the letter that bears his name we are not sure what kind of master Philemon was or how he treated his slave Onesimus, but we do know he was a person of means. Not only did he own a slave or slaves, he also owned his own home, something few people of that day had the means to do. Then and now, he would be considered part of the so-called 2%, the despised upper class.

The letter doesn't tell us much about Onesimus, other than he did something illegal, perhaps taking money from his master and ran away to Rome. As providence would have it, while he was there, he met a man confined to a Roman prison named Paul. He may have been a visitor or perhaps even a fellow prisoner, and the Bible tells us that at some point the apostle Paul shared the message of the gospel with him and as a result he gave his life to Christ and became a Christian.

Can you imagine Onesimus telling Paul his story about how he came to be in Rome and his former life as a slave in Colossae, perhaps even confessing that he once stole some money from his former master? Imagine the look on Onesimus face when he discovered his master was someone that Paul had also shared the gospel with and led to Christ.