

A New Year of Useful Service

At the dawn of a new year, we often pause – be it ever so briefly – to evaluate and resolve. It's a time of looking in the mirror, in a sense, at our lives. How are things going? What goals should we set for the coming months? What changes should we resolve to make?

That's an excellent practice – especially if the evaluation and resolutions occur before an open Bible!

And as you open your Bible in search of God's will for you in the new year, let me suggest pondering His will in the light of the often-overlooked letter to Philemon – that one-page book of the Bible found just before Hebrews.

Philemon isn't listed as many people's favorite book in the Bible. In fact, it's so short that it's not uncommon for people to forget that it's *in* the Bible!

But those 25 verses are *packed* with wisdom from God!

Ponder the lessons of the life of Onesimus.

Onesimus was a slave in the city of Colossae. That's not as bad as it might sound. Slaves in that day and age were protected by the law. On the whole they were treated humanely.

What was *not* tolerated was a slave who stole or who ran away from his master. Such a slave could be beaten or even killed. A Roman slave must know his place, and all that.

Enter Onesimus. The slave to Philemon, his name means "useful" ... but he was not. No, he was worse than useless; he was a thief and a runaway.

Then God led him to Paul.

Onesimus had known Paul when the Apostle was preaching at Colossae. That was when Philemon – owner of Onesimus – claimed to become the "slave" of a Man killed on a Roman cross.

But the "slave" Philemon didn't release *his* slaves. Nope. If Onesimus wanted freedom, he would have to get it himself. Which he did. And while he was at it, he liberated some traveling money from his soon-to-be-former master.

Then the runaway, far from home, came face-to-face with his master's mentor. And something fascinating happened: *Paul didn't send him back*. Instead, Paul welcomed him. Showed him love. Introduced him to Jesus.

Onesimus changed.

As he came to know Jesus as his *true* Master, Onesimus became Paul's spiritual son. The bitterness, the self-centered heart, the all-consuming drive for freedom ... slowly melted away. He began to become a different person.

Then came that day. He knew something was bothering Paul. A difficult conversation loomed.

Paul told him: You wronged Philemon in leaving him and stealing his money. You must go back ... seek his forgiveness ... repent.

Repent of fleeing slavery? Well, yes. Repent of taking what wasn't yours. Repent of seeking what God had not given. Repent of depriving your master of the privilege of releasing you himself.

Onesimus didn't want to hear the words. Yet Paul was right. So, with a letter from Paul in hand and a faithful pastor named Tychicus at his side (Col. 4:7-9), Onesimus returned to Philemon – and to slavery.

Except now he was free. A slave in the body, yes. But free from sin, from guilt, from misery. Free from the chains that had imprisoned his soul. Free to love and to be loved by God.

Onesimus would never be the same. For the first time in his life, he would live up to his name. He would be *useful*.

For Onesimus had become the slave of Christ – and *in* Christ, he gained a freedom that no man could steal. He would return to Philemon to serve Christ, whose reward is glorious (Col. 3:22-24). Embracing the place where Christ had put him, Onesimus would humbly await the freedom promised by his *true* Master (Titus 2:9-14). And he would have no regrets.

I don't always love what my life holds. My chores, my work – they don't always thrill me. Like most men, I find myself longing for adventure and glory.

But would that gain me true freedom?

No. I've already been given perfect freedom ... *in Christ*. In Him, I am free indeed; and in serving Him, I am promised the greatest glory possible!

What is true freedom? Where is real glory found?

The answer is the same: serve Christ with the gifts and opportunities He gives. For in Christ alone do we become *eternally* useful. In Christ alone is found freedom that cannot be lost and glory that never fades.

In the coming year, may God give us joy in serving Christ wholeheartedly, wherever and however He calls us to serve.

And may our Master in heaven delight in us, His useful servants on earth!