

I haven't slept well because I am concerned about the reception of the letter I sent to Philemon. I don't know Philemon, and I'm not sure how committed he is to the cause of Christ. Even though Holy Spirit guided me in writing the letter, I am uneasy.

I haven't slept well in the weeks since I sent Tychicus and Onesimus to deliver my letters to Ephesus, Colossae, Laodicea, and to Philemon. I am not worried about the letters getting delivered since Tychicus and Onesimus are trustworthy and the sailing weather is good. I am not worried about the reception of the letters in Ephesus, Colossae, and Laodicea. They are letters of encouragement and instruction, not letters of discipline like I regularly send to Corinth.

Why my angst? Onesimus has become like a son to me. But....I found that he is a runaway slave belonging to Philemon. Though I hate the institution of slavery, it is the right thing to send Onesimus back to Philemon and ask for his forgiveness. Philemon has the power of life and death over his runaway slave. I hope that my letter convinces him to be merciful.

Slavery in the Roman Empire plays an important part in society and in the economy. Besides manual labor and domestic services, slaves might be highly skilled as accountants, doctors, scribes, even. Or farmers. On the opposite end, slaves might work in deadly conditions in the mines, and military.

There are no reliable statistics, but it is possible that 20-30% of the population of the entire Empire are slaves. People come to be slaves through military victories, kidnapping, to pay debts, and by way of birth to slaves. Slaves are considered property. As property, it is impossible for them to have legal rights.

I did not bother to ask why Onesimus ran away from Philemon. He may have been mistreated or he may have been treated well. He may have stolen money and feared getting caught, or stolen money when he left, or been a good and faithful servant. None of those things really matter since he needs to go back to serve his brother in Christ.

Sometimes, I have wondered if I had been so insistent if Philemon had not been a Christian. Would that have given me reason to shield Onesimus instead of returning him? Would I have been so willing to risk the potential wrath of the owner of a runaway slave? Fortunately, I was never placed in that position.

When Onesimus confessed to me that he was a runaway slave, I quickly put together a game plan. I was writing a letter to the Ephesians already, so I decided to write a letter to the church in Colossae, where Onesimus had escaped from, and a letter to Laodicea. With those two letters in hand, it would not seem so strange that another letter was being delivered to Colossae.

Next, Onesimus and I discussed all of the people we knew who had influence in the town, and might know Philemon personally. I would use their names and influence to sway Philemon's response. Timothy and Epaphras were easy choices since they had helped establish the church in Colossae. We added Apphia because of her good spirit, and Archippus who works with us. We also added the names of Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke so that Philemon would know how many influential people were aware of the situation. Tychicus was another good choice since he knew the people in Colossae and had a good reputation.

I chose Tychicus to deliver the letters because he has the same encouraging spirit and ability to persuade that my old friend, Barnabas, has. I also believe that Tychicus can accompany Onesimus and keep him from being so fearful that he will run away again. I advised Tychicus to leave Onesimus in a nearby town, take the letter to the church, and give the letter to Philemon at the church so that everyone would know something was up. Yes, Tychicus was the right choice, since I am in jail and cannot go myself.

I understand that today's English-speaking teenagers and their mothers have created a new verb – to guilt. As in, "I guilted my mother into buying me new shoes," or "I guilted my daughter into cleaning her room." Well, in my letter to Philemon, I try to guilt him into forgiving Onesimus and accepting him as a Christian brother. Frankly, I try everything I can think of to make that happen.

As you follow through my short letter to Philemon, you see that I try every trick in the book. I start by describing myself as a prisoner, which puts me on nearly the same plane as a slave. I call Philemon a fellow-worker, which implies we are equals on the same team, and I remind Philemon that he is an influential Christian that everyone will watch since the church meets in his house.

I let Philemon know that I pray for him because he has a reputation for loving his fellow Christians and has faith in Jesus. I remind him that we are partners, and that he is a source of great encouragement for me and others.

With all that in place, I mention that I could use my authority as an apostle to order him to act as I want, but I much prefer to have in act in love. That I, as an old man and prisoner of Jesus, appeal to him on behalf of Onesimus, who became like a son to me while in jail.

My next statement to Philemon doesn't make a lot of sense in English, but I was using a word play in the Greek language. I say that Onesimus was previously useless to Philemon, but now he is useful to both him and me. In Greek, Onesimus means "useful". In a spiritual sense he was

useless before he became a Christian, but he became useful in the faith once he became a Christian.

That statement will surely give Philemon a little shock, too. How in the world did I know his runaway slave, and how can he possibly be like my son? And, if that statement gives him a shock, the next will, also.

I tell Philemon that I am sending his runaway slave back to him. I emphasize how dear Onesimus is to me, and that he is essentially acting in a support role that Philemon himself, should be doing. I tell Philemon again that I want him to act out of voluntary love, not out of duress.

As I wind down my letter, I use an old trick that my teacher, Gamaliel, taught me in Jerusalem. I put Philemon on the horns of a dilemma. I force him into choosing between two difficult choices that have very different outcomes. I tell Philemon that if he considers me a partner, he will welcome back Onesimus. I tell him that if Onesimus owes him anything, that I will personally pay it back. The unstated dilemma is, of course, if he doesn't welcome back Onesimus then he does not consider me a partner or being trustworthy to pay back a debt.

In my last attempt at guilting him, I tell Philemon that I know he will do even more than I ask. I am placing him in the role of a host. In the culture of the Roman Empire, hosts have an inherent obligation to do more than is expected.

Even though I am in jail in Rome, in the letter I ask Philemon to prepare a guest room to host me. That indicates I might be coming to see him in the near future. I surely hope I get that opportunity.

As I sit here in jail, I pray that Holy Spirit sends me a vision of what is happening in Colossae. I can't wait to hear what Philemon does. In modern times, you analyze every word of every sentence in my letters to the Ephesians and Colossians. Today, I am thinking back through every word in my letter to Philemon, wondering if there is anything else I could have said to reduce the punishment, or to help save the life of my dear Onesimus.