

Philemon; Onesimus

Memory Verse: *Keep on loving each other as brothers* (Heb. 13:1 NIV).

Background Helps:

Read through the information about Onesimus and Philemon in your resource book, *In Paul's Shadow: Friends and Foes of the Great Apostle* (see chapters 19 and 21). From the information found there and in Paul's brief letter to Philemon, the following story can be reconstructed: (1) Paul had previously led Philemon to Christ (v. 19); (2) Onesimus was Philemon's slave (v. 16); (3) Onesimus apparently stole from his master and fled to Rome (v. 18); (4) in Rome Onesimus met Paul, who was in prison (v. 9), and was led to Christ by the apostle (v. 10); (5) Paul now writes this letter to Philemon, sending it by the hand of Onesimus (or perhaps by Tychicus, Col. 4:17-19), appealing to Philemon to accept Onesimus back, "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother," and promising to pay off Onesimus's debt (vv. 16-18). Paul even seems to hint that Philemon consider granting Onesimus his freedom (v. 21). (Also, note the pun on the name of Onesimus, which means "useful," in vv. 10-11.)

Lesson Helps:

A possible lesson aim: My aim is to teach my students about the interrelationships between Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus, so that their own interrelationships with other Christians will be transformed by their faith in Christ.

Once again, it will be wise to introduce some drama into this lesson, perhaps a monologue by either Philemon or Onesimus relating the story (see above) or an interview of one or the other or both of these characters. Another option: the teacher could impersonate Paul, reflecting on the story of Philemon and Onesimus, while he is writing this letter to Philemon from prison.

After the story is dramatized, investigate together some of the key verses to highlight the reconciliation and transformed relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, brought about by their common faith in Jesus Christ. How should our faith in Christ transform our relationships to fellow-Christians? What difference should it make in our relationships that we are brothers and sisters in Christ? Look through this brief letter noticing all the evidences of such "family" ties between the believers. Include the memory verse. Challenge your students to cultivate such relationships with their fellow-Christians. Challenge them to become reconciled with any believer who may have done them wrong.

Assignment:

-  Read about Lesser Lights (2) (personalities around Paul).
-  Memorize 1 Peter 4:10.