

Coach House Church BEACONS

FREE TO RETURN

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Oliver Hardy, of Laurel and Hardy fame, had many great catch phrases. One of the best known of these was "That's another fine mess you've gotten us into" usually delivered towards Stan as they sat there covered in dust, water or paint, after one of their schemes had gone horribly wrong. Of course this was part of the reason their films were so funny, the routines they acted out were extreme to say the least, but we can recognise in those routines certain things that we ourselves might have done. After all there are some accidents that can seem very funny after the event, if, maybe, not at the time. Then there are other things we do that are not at all funny, especially when we are deliberately in the wrong. Sometimes this is "Another fine mess we've gotten ourselves into"

The bible is full of people who manage to get themselves into a fine mess. One such person was a young man called Onesimus. His story appears in one of the shorter books of the Bible called Philemon. This book is actually a letter from the Apostle Paul, and the recipient, Philemon, was an old friend of Paul's who lived in the town of Colosse where Paul had started a church some years before. At the time of writing Paul was in prison in Rome, which was quite a long way from Colosse. Now the reason that Paul was writing to Philemon was because the young man, Onesimus, who is the main subject of the letter, had arrived in Rome and made himself known to Paul. Onesimus was a slave and there were strict rules about slaves in Roman times. Slaves belonged to somebody and in this case Onesimus belonged to Philemon. Now for some reason, and we don't know exactly why Onesimus had run away from Philemon's household. This was a dangerous undertaking as the law allowed for runaway slaves to be killed without question. Paul was faced with a difficult choice as to what to do. If we look at this from a modern perspective we could easily jump to some wrong conclusions here. Slavery is totally unacceptable in our modern society, and if this happened today we would clearly be looking to support Onesimus and keep him away from

his rightful owner. Paul though, acted in accordance with the norms of the day he lived in, and in doing so gave us some useful teaching.

Paul has decided to send Onesimus back to his owner, and the letter he writes was to be carried to Philemon by Onesimus himself. Now we must take into account that Paul knew Philemon well and knew that he was a faithful Christian brother.

He opens his letter by commending Philemon, he says "Your love has given me much joy and comfort, my brother, for your kindness has often refreshed the hearts of God's people"

As it stood Paul's status within the church would have given him the authority to instruct Philemon as to what to do about Onesimus, but Paul takes a different approach. He asks Philemon for a favour. He says "I appeal to you to show kindness to my child, Onesimus. I became his father in the faith while here in prison" Perhaps Onesimus went to seek Paul out in Rome knowing that Paul was a good man and wouldn't jump to any conclusions or seek to have him arrested straight away. It appears that through Paul's kindness Onesimus had come to know Jesus. In Paul's opinion this now made Onesimus useful, in fact so useful that Paul was reluctant to let him go. He says "I wanted to keep him here with me while I am in these chains for preaching the good news, and he would have helped me on your behalf. But I didn't want to do anything without your consent. I wanted you to help because you were willing and not because you were forced"

Paul often used the image of a slave in his teaching, in fact he describes himself as a slave of Christ in the opening of his letter to the Romans. Paul recognised that our way of life is a master over us and we are slaves whether we know it or not. That way of life is driven by sin. The need to keep up with others drives us to greed, lies and worship of ourselves. The only way a slave could be free, in most cases, was to die, so Paul reasons that in order to cease being slaves we must die. Well at least the sin must die, and that had already happened. Jesus did die, and, in doing so, carried away all our sin. But Paul was not casting off slavery all together. In his letter to the Romans he writes "Previously you let yourself be slaves to impurity and lawlessness, which led ever deeper into sin. Now you must give yourselves to be slaves to righteous living so that you will become holy"

Thinking about the current COVID crisis it is clear to see that we are all slaves to the government or authorities under whom we live. There are mixed feelings about the current restrictions, some feel them to be overly onerous and an

intrusion into our lives, others appreciate the protection it offers to those who are vulnerable. Whatever our thoughts we must remember that Paul taught that "slaves must obey their masters" and also to "respect those placed in authority over us".

It was the application of that thought that encouraged Paul to send Onesimus back to his rightful owner, but not without encouraging Philemon to treat Onesimus as the brother that he now was. Paul also offered to pay whatever it had cost Philemon, personally.

There are two pictures in this story. All of humanity belongs to God and we have all run away from Him at some time. When we meet Jesus he sends us back to the Father, with that same promise that He will pay whatever it costs. In fact He has already paid this cost by dying on the cross.

There is also the picture of a Christian who has run away from Jesus. Probably as the result of sin, maybe through our own will or through listening to bad teaching, but in any case "its another fine mess we have gotten ourselves into" Here we should put ourselves into Paul's shoes and make sure that such a person is sent back. Correct teaching will always return people to their rightful owner, God himself.

60 years later a Christian named Ignatius wrote a letter to the church in Ephesus. In it he mentions someone called Onesimus who was at that time the bishop of Asia. Of course this might not be the same Onesimus, but it is would not be unusual at that time for someone who had known Paul personally to be elevated to such a position. It would be nice to think that Paul's actions, Philemon's gracious nature and Onesimus's faith had directly led to many souls being saved in Colosse and Asia.

What is certain though is that, if we accept our place as a slave for Christ then many blessings will follow.



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