

Sermon Summary: The Lost Preface of Onesimus

1. Philemon is the shortest letter written by Paul (355 words). We don't know what happened to Onesimus, the slave Paul hoped to free for service to the gospel. What would happen if we did?
2. The letter to Philemon probably would not have been included in what became the New Testament if Paul's request for Onesimus' freedom had been denied: "That Philemon reacted generously is almost certain, or the letter would not have been preserved" (Brown, *Intro to the NT*, p. 506).
3. The "Lost Preface" I'm reading is hypothetical; however, it's based almost entirely on textual evidence. For example, Ignatius the "God-Inspired" was a bishop (d. 107 AD) who wrote a letter to a church in Ephesus that names Onesimus (Brown, p. 509). Could this be the same Onesimus Paul freed in Ephesus? Might he be the one, as scholars Goodspeed and Knox argue, who, out of gratitude to Paul **gathered all his letters from various churches, letters that became what is now the core—next to the Gospels—of the New Testament** (Brown, p. 509)? Think about that!
4. For Onesimus the punishment as a slave for running away could be severe—even deadly: "Roman slavery stretched across all orders of society and slaves engaged in all types of activities But make no mistake—the life of most slaves in antiquity was generally horrific Rome spent years fighting thousands of rebellious slaves. Those who did not die fighting for their freedom were crucified. Others were branded on the face as punishment" (Ihssen, *Bk of Faith*, Philippians, p. 31).
5. We have clues elsewhere in the New Testament concerning the likely whereabouts of Paul and Onesimus—Paul in Ephesus, Onesimus in Colossae where Philemon lived.
6. Notice what Paul asks of Philemon: the law required him to send Onesimus back, but only the Gospel would compel him to ask for his **freedom**—that is, for Onesimus to be received into the community of the church as a full/equal member (a "brother," v. 16). Paul wasn't yet challenging the institution of slavery **directly**, but the Gospel **can** have major political/social implications! In what ways is it calling us to freedom today?