

# Onesimus: received as a brother

What can we responsibly say about Onesimus?

Onesimus is the person at the center of Paul's appeal to Philemon and is also named in Colossians. Paul asks for his welcome as a beloved brother. The letters do not establish that he was a fugitive or narrate the final outcome.

## Begin with the appeal

Paul describes Onesimus in deeply personal terms, explains that he has become useful, and says he is sending him back. He offers to take responsibility for any wrong or debt. These statements do not narrate the earlier separation, establish a theft, or identify how Onesimus reached Paul. The familiar runaway-slave storyline is a reconstruction, not an episode directly recounted in Philemon.

Biblical references: Philemon 1:10-19

Sources: letters

## Brotherhood within an unequal world

The appeal asks Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul and to recognize him beyond the category of slave, as a beloved brother. This challenges the relationship through kinship in Christ. It does not directly proclaim abolition or report a legal manumission. Reading responsibly acknowledges the violence of slavery and refuses to turn the letter's incomplete social resolution into approval of exploitation.

Biblical references: Philemon 1:15-21

Sources: letters

## A connected but incomplete record

Colossians names Onesimus beside Tychicus and describes him as belonging to the recipients' community. Overlapping names connect these letters without proving a single dispatch, equal courier roles, a route, or a prison city. The practical challenge is clear even where the reconstruction remains open: welcome must involve costly recognition of another person's dignity, rather than affectionate language that leaves harmful treatment untouched.

Biblical references: Colossians 4:7-9 · Philemon 1:17-21

Sources: letters

## Sources

- [letters] Romans through Philemon; passage references are supplied in each section. <https://ebible.org/web/>

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