

Aim of lesson

To learn from Onesimus the lesson of humility and repentance, and from Philemon the lesson of gracious forgiveness.

Bible background

Philemon.

Outline of lesson

The runaway slave

Tell the class what happened while Paul was in prison in Rome. He met a young runaway slave called Onesimus. Perhaps Onesimus had got into trouble in the big city and been thrown into the same prison. Paul had seen Onesimus before: he had been the slave of a Christian whom Paul had converted in Colosse.

Repentance

We do not know how long Onesimus was with Paul, but during that time Paul talked to him about the gospel, and he believed and was baptised. He was a great help to Paul. Paul was now an old man, and the young Onesimus served him and made his harsh prison life a little easier. However, Paul knew that Onesimus had to go back to his master. He had run away and had stolen some money when he left. Onesimus needed to confess and Philemon to forgive for the situation to be resolved. Onesimus would always be a runaway slave and a thief if he did not go back. He would never know peace and safety. Perhaps he had run away thinking life outside would be wonderful, and after his experiences which had led him to prison in Rome, he knew he had been better off at home and wished he could go back.

A letter to Philemon

Whatever his thoughts, Onesimus agreed to go, and took back a letter that Paul wrote to his master, Philemon. Onesimus did not travel alone; another companion of Paul, Tychicus, went with him, carrying a letter to the church at Colosse (see Colossians 4:7-9).

Read together the letter that Paul wrote and Onesimus took back. Ask the class to imagine, as you read, how Onesimus might have felt going back to a situation where he could be put in prison or even killed for his crimes. What anxiety did he feel when he met his master and waited for him to read the letter!

Thoughts

The class can turn to the worksheet and write what they think Paul, Onesimus and Philemon are thinking. Help them to bring out Paul's love and concern for both Onesimus and Philemon. How terrible Paul would feel if he had sent Onesimus back to his death. It would still have been the right thing for Onesimus to do, and Onesimus knew that was what he deserved by law. However, Paul hoped for better things for both slave and master.

Onesimus' feelings are fairly straightforward, but ask the class to try to convey the change in Philemon's feelings as he read the letter. Encourage them to begin with phrases such as "He deserves to be killed"; "How could I trust someone who has stolen from me" and continue with "He helped Paul, and I owe him everything", "He is now my brother and I must forgive him as God has forgiven me".

Digging deeper

Confess

This section considers how confession and forgiveness works. It also suggests learning by heart the names of the letters Paul wrote to individuals.

Relevance to our lives

Discuss with the class how we too can be runaways. We can run away from God. Ask the class to read the last section on the worksheet unscrambling the jumbled words. When they have finished discuss with them how our situation can be like that of Onesimus, and how it is different. You may find this the opportunity to tell your class that if any of them as they grow up, drift away from God, they should never feel they have run too far away. If they turn and come back to God in humility he will welcome and forgive them.

Prayer

You may like to discuss Paul's prayer in verse 6 and consider what he has in mind, or the class could write what they think Philemon had prayed (see v22) or what Onesimus might have prayed on the return journey.

Other suggestions for activities

- The class could consider the general teaching Paul sends to the church at Colosse about slaves and masters in Colossians 3:22-25 and 4:1.
- The class could write a play covering the life of Onesimus from when he was a slave to when he returns to Philemon.