

The Fugitive Returns

*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin,
so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Cor 5:21*

I wonder what went through the mind of Onesimus, a runaway slave, as he travelled on the way back to his master from Rome to the Greek city of Colosse. ‘Will he receive me gracefully? Or will he punish me as it usually happens when fugitive slaves are caught?’ His only hope was a short letter tucked away somewhere in his cloak.

Onesimus had fled from his master, Philemon, after he had possibly stolen money from him. He ended up in Rome where he met the apostle Paul and became a Christian. Paul knew that Onesimus had to go back to his master to settle his wrongdoings. So Paul gave him a letter appealing to Philemon to receive him back.

Paul wrote, ‘So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account’ (Philemon 1:17, 18).

Paul gives Philemon a double reason why he should forgive and welcome his servant. He appeals for forgiveness and promises to pay himself for any wrongdoings. ‘Charge that to my account,’ Paul tells him.

Furthermore, Paul pleads with Philemon to receive his servant ‘as you would receive me’. In other words, ‘treat this dear friend of mine in the same way that you would take care of me.’

As we travel along life’s road that leads us back to our Maker, we too ought to think about that momentous appointment. We too are fugitives, we have run away from God by our sinful thoughts and actions. Will God welcome us, or will he reject and punish us for our many sins?

It all depends on whether or not we carry in our heart a special letter, the gospel message written in the Holy Scriptures:

‘To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin’ (Romans 4:5-8).

Here is God’s double promise to us who believe in Jesus: God looks at our moral record and cancels all our debts, he does not count our sins against us any longer. Moreover God credits righteousness to our account, even though we did not work for it. He ‘counts righteousness apart from works.’

Elsewhere the Scriptures tell us how God could be so generous and gracious to us, undeserving sinners. The sins he forgives us were taken care of by his Son. ‘The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all’ (Isaiah 53:6). Jesus pays our debt, saying to his Father, ‘Charge that to my account.’

Moreover, God is well pleased with his Son for he has always obeyed his will. Jesus is perfectly righteous and God credits his righteousness to our account. We are made righteous ‘in him’ (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus intercedes for us who are united to him by faith, and in effects appeals to the Father, ‘Receive them as you would receive me.’

The Bible does not tell us the outcome of the meeting between Onesimus and Philemon, but we can be certain that if we believe in the Lord Jesus, God embraces us with the same love that the Father has for his beloved Son.