

Mark and Onesimus: A Tale of Two Runaways

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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Well, for our little series, we come tonight to the last two unlikely heroes. As you no doubt know, the book is still available. And you can pick one up if you want to read a more thorough and detailed account of the twelve unlikely heroes that make up that book. Tonight we're going to finish with two: one a very familiar name, the name of Mark; and the other a rather unfamiliar name, the name of Onesimus. They have lives that intersect. They were both runaways. Yet in spite of what they did in fleeing, the Lord rescued them both and transformed them from tragic figures to triumphant figures.

As He does with every sinner that He saves, God pursued Mark and God pursued Onesimus. And when He caught them, He turned their flaws into strength, and their failures into immense success.

I want to begin with Mark and then we'll move to Onesimus, and I'll show you how their lives intersect as we tell the story tonight. Most of the time, of course, we do an exposition of passages of Scripture and this is a little bit different, but I love telling the stories that come as a result of putting many Scriptures together, and that's what we're going to be doing tonight.

The man that we know as Mark is really John Mark. John is his Jewish name, and Mark is his Gentile name. He is John Mark. We aren't introduced to him in the gospels. In fact, we aren't introduced to him until the twelfth chapter of the book of Acts. And it is the year 45, or around the year 45 in the first century A.D., and King Herod Agrippa is persecuting the church. He is persecuting the church because he wants to curry favor with the powerful Jewish religious elites. He is a sort of alien king in the land of Israel who is there because Rome has allowed him to be there and have a measure of power. And it serves him well to gain favor with the Jews, the elite Jews who essentially run the religious, the religious direction of the country, have the great religious influence and therefore dominate the people. He is a wicked ruler. He is a demigod and so he targets the church for persecution and he begins at the very top. His first target is the brother of the apostle John, a man named James. He targets him first by authorizing his public execution. And he pulls it off, executing James for all to see.

When Herod saw that this action pleased the Jewish people whose favor he was after, he decided to take another step and arrest Peter. And so he arrests Peter and has him thrown into prison for the same intention that he had for James.

And you remember the story of Peter, then, being arrested and taken into prison and having a miraculous escape--the miraculous escape of Peter from prison is familiar to all of us. And again, you might want to look at the twelfth chapter of the book of Acts because this is where we're going to pick up the story.

Peter is arrested; he is placed in prison. He is in a cell, but not free to move around in the cell. He is chained in the cell and he is watched around the clock by a squadron of Roman soldiers who are making sure that no one comes in and releases him and that he, by some means, or some external aid is able to escape. To make sure that he is not lost to them, he sleeps, does Peter, between two guards. All of this to say, he is secure as it is possible to make him secure. All those elements are, however, useless if God wants Peter free--and God does. And so by a command of heaven, and we pick up the story, this is Acts 12 and verse 7, "Behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him and a light shone in the prison. And the angel struck Peter on the side and raised him up saying, 'Arise quickly,' and his chains fell off his hands. And then the angel said to him, 'Gird yourself [that is wrap up your robe in the sash] and tie on your sandals.'" And so he did. "And he said to him, 'Put on your garment, your outer cloak and follow me.' So he went out and followed him and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him." And so ends verse 10.

Now Peter finds himself standing in the street alone. The angel is gone. And the vision is beginning to fade away and he realizes that he is, in fact, free. The reality of what was happening begins to dawn on him. He finds himself standing in the street. What's he going to do?

The first thought that comes to his mind is to make his way through a most familiar home in the city of Jerusalem where some well-known believers lived. They are known to him; for obvious reasons, he set out to go to their home. It had been a home where he had been on other occasions.

At that very moment, there was a group of believers gathered in that home for one purpose and that was to pray for Peter's release. They're having a prayer meeting that the Lord would get him out of prison, and he shows up and knocks on the front gate.

Well, we know the story. No one believed it could be him. This is not exactly the great prayer of faith. This is praying without faith. The one they're praying to be released is in fact released, banging on the door and no one believes it can possibly be him. The divinely released apostle then is waiting outside until someone in the house finally realizes that their prayers have been answered. Verse 16 says, "Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished." And I don't think they really thought it was him until they actually saw him--the knocking stopped the praying and forced them to come to the door. You might conclude that it was easier to get out of

prison than to get into that house.

And though it only occurs as a footnote, it is at this point that we're introduced to John Mark. The biblical narrative describes the house in simple words, verse 12, "It was the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark."

This is a Christian woman who has a son named John Mark. This is the first place in Scripture that Mark's name is mentioned. And again, his Jewish name is John and his Gentile name is Mark, and that becomes the name most closely associated with him. We don't have any more information about John Mark at that point, other than that was his house and his mother's name was Mary.

In fact, the reason that he is even identified is not for his sake, but to distinguish his mother from all the other Marys in the Scripture, the most common name. And that is a form of the name Miriam and many Jewish women were named after Miriam, and you will remember her story in our series. She is a widowed mother and her son is there caring for her, and she is identified as his mother in order to sort her out from the rest of the Marys.

Now what we learned from this simple statement is very basic. First we learn this: John Mark was raised in a Christian home. John Mark was raised by a devout Christian mother whose house had become the meeting place for believers in Jerusalem, perhaps like Timothy who was instructed in the faith by his mother Eunice, according to 2 Timothy 1:5. John Mark had been instructed in the faith by his mother, Mary.

Second, we learned that Peter had a connection with that family. Peter had a connection with that house and therefore with that mother, Mary, and with that son, John Mark. After miraculously being released from prison, Peter goes to Mary's, the mother of John Mark's house, where the church had gathered. So we can say from a very early time in the story of John Mark, he was acquainted with Peter and Peter was acquainted with him. That is an acquaintance that will prove to be very valuable in the future years of his life. That's how we introduce John Mark to our thought tonight.

Now, around the time of Peter's release from prison--the scene we were just talking about--Paul and Barnabas begin to show up. You do remember that it is Peter and John who dominate the first twelve chapters of the book of Acts, and when you come to chapter 13 the story shifts away from Peter and John to Paul and his journeys and ministries occupy the remainder of the book of Acts. So we're right at that point of transition. So Peter is released from prison, and Paul and Barnabas come to Jerusalem.

They're coming from a city in Syria--the very Syria you read about in the news today--the city of Antioch. It is, in fact, at that time the third largest city in the Roman Empire. It is a massive and important city. It was there in the city of Antioch that Paul and Barnabas co-pastored with a few other

men the first church beyond the Jerusalem church, the first church established in the Gentile world. After taking a collection, money, from the church at Antioch, Paul and Barnabas came south to Jerusalem with the money to try to help the struggling Jerusalem church. The Jerusalem church had problems dealing with people because, remember, it was born on the Day of Pentecost when there were hundreds of thousands of pilgrims in the city. And you remember that there were thousands of them saved in the first few weeks--three thousand on the Day of Pentecost, five thousand on another day--and the numbers kept mounting daily; the Lord was adding to the church. There are tens of thousands of believers now who have come to Christ in Jerusalem who have come from other countries and haven't gone back because there's only one church. And so they stay.

And one of the things that Paul does throughout his ministry is take collections to provide for these believers. And if you ask, "Why couldn't they provide for themselves?" You have to understand that the Jews in the city of Jerusalem despised the church and sought to persecute the church. And Herod was persecuting the church and the Romans hated the church because it was a representation of the one they had executed, the Lord Jesus Christ. For them to integrate into society was a very difficult challenge and so they needed to be cared for. So Paul and Barnabas come down with a collection.

Now you can add another component. According to the eleventh chapter of acts, there was a famine in the land. And that even made it a more difficult situation. So here come Paul and Barnabas with a gift of love from, you would say, the second church to the first church. Once their delivery was complete, Paul and Barnabas were going to go back to Antioch. They decided, however, they wouldn't go back alone. They wanted to take on extra travelers with them. And this is what it says in Acts 12:25: "Barnabas and Saul"...using his old name..."returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their ministry [of delivering the money] and they took with them John, whose surname was Mark." They took John Mark.

So when Paul and Barnabas came down, they must have come to the house of Mary and John Mark. That must have been the sort of major conflux of believers, and even for Paul and Barnabas. And there they met this young man, John Mark, and were impressed with him. But there was more than that. Colossians 4:10 says this: "John Mark was the cousin of Barnabas." So Barnabas has an even closer connection with John Mark and suggests that he travel with them. Barnabas must have trusted him, recognized his experience with the church in Jerusalem, his personal knowledge of Peter, and believed in his giftedness and his personal and spiritual integrity. So he convinced Paul that John Mark would be useful to them--let's take him back for the ministry among the Gentiles in Antioch.

Now evidently John Mark was not a preacher. We say that because the preachers in Antioch are listed in chapter 13, verse 1, and John Mark's name does not appear. There you have the pastors and teachers in Antioch; his name is not included. So they take Mark, according to 13:5, as their assistant, to do whatever they needed done. He's sort of their major domo; he's their Jack of all trades. He's going to do whatever it is they need and assist them as they set out to go back to

Antioch and preach the gospel there and wherever else they may go.

Now they launch a ministry, once they get back, into Asia Minor. They go west into Asia Minor and the ministry is the beginning of the great Pauline journeys. It faces tremendous difficulty. When they reach their first destination, which is an island called Paphos (P-a-p-h-o-s), they run into a sorcerer, a sorcerer by the name of Elymas. He is a vicious opponent of Paul and of the gospel. Paul calls him out and calls him a man of deceit, a child of the devil and the enemy of all righteousness. So he's pretty well identified as an agent of darkness. God then allows His power to be released and hits Elymas and makes him blind; makes him blind, verse 11 tells us. So the journey begins with this confrontation with an agent of hell, and it's a challenging interruption and threat, a frightening one. The power of God stops Elymas from the damage he might otherwise have done.

As the journey then goes on, you will remember the story in the book of Acts, the missionaries have difficulty in travel. Travel was extremely difficult, difficult because you were walking all the time, difficult because you had to eat, and because you had to find places to sleep and inns were notoriously horrible places. There was also stiff resistance continuing from the enemy and those who oppose the gospel.

At the same time, in Galatians 4 we read that the apostle Paul contracts a very serious illness. Some have suggested it may well have been malaria, and that happened shortly after he left Paphos. And this complicates the arduous nature of the...the physical nature of the journey and adds to the challenges of the opposition that they would face all the way along.

Well, you know what happened. John Mark just couldn't take it. It took the heart out of John Mark. And in Acts 13:13 he has had it. And so he decides that he will abandon the mission; he is done. This is too much for him. We read, "Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos, came to Perga in Pamphylia, but John Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem." He goes AWOL, plain and simple. He's overwhelmed by the opposition. He's overwhelmed by the physical challenges. He is fearful of the outcome. He has a kind of a panic attack and he finds a way to retrace his steps and get all the way back to Mama in Jerusalem, all the way back to his mother's house. He leaves not for Antioch, not for the church where he had gone to serve, but for his mother and her home in Jerusalem.

There is no excuse for Mark's cowardice. And that fact is certainly confirmed in the rest of the story in Acts 15--no excuse for his cowardice. It was sheer fear and a lack of trust in the power and the purpose of God.

Several years then pass and Paul and Barnabas finish up that journey and decide after coming back to Antioch to go on another journey. It's around fifty-five years later from the original connection with John Mark. As they begin to discuss their second journey in Acts 15, this is what we read, starting in

verse 36: "After some days Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let's return [let's take a second journey] and let's visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they.'" Let's go back and strengthen the churches, in other words. "Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also." He still believes in his young cousin. "But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work." Paul saw him as a deserter. Barnabas saw him as a useful man and was willing to give him another opportunity. "There occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another."

That's really sad. These two great missionaries, these two great leaders--the apostle Paul and Barnabas, the son of consolation; the son of comfort, a perfect group split--separated from one another. "And Barnabas," it says, "took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, and Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord."

Now what it says in that passage that I want you to notice is that John Mark was a deserter. He was a deserter. He deserted. Paul reminds Barnabas, he was a weak-hearted soldier, he fled in the middle of battle, he had no stomach for the conflict.

Barnabas, on the other hand, with family affection driving him, wants to give him another opportunity. Paul is coldly objective, refuses to allow it, and the disagreement is so set that they can't even work together. A severe breach, the once inseparable companions split with each other and go on separate journeys--Barnabas with John Mark and Paul with a man named Silas. This is a sad moment in the church.

The details of the journey of the apostle Paul are given in Acts 16 through 18. I think Paul's attitude was legitimate. I think his confidence in this young man had been betrayed, and I think he was not willing to take the risk of it happening all over again. What mattered most was that Mark demonstrated a lack of courage, a lack of trust in God, a lack of strength, or fortitude. He buckled; he abandoned his post. He forsook the mission, and his defection is indefensible, indefensible.

And so, Paul wouldn't let him go and he went with Barnabas. I think John Mark, no doubt, suffered a sense of shame. I think he lived with a sense of disgrace. I think he lived with the pain of having fractured Paul and Barnabas. Although I'm sure in traveling with his cousin Barnabas, Barnabas did everything he could, since he was the son of consolation, to comfort him and encourage him, and try to restore him and tell him that maybe there would be a better day yet in the future.

Many months later, Paul and Barnabas meet again in Jerusalem. That's chapter 15. And they give a glowing report of their work. Mark's still in humiliation from Paul's perspective. They come back to give their report. Would Mark ever be restored to the most influential and demanding of apostles, the apostle Paul? After leaving with Barnabas in Acts 15:39, Mark disappears from the annals of church history. This is before the two trips. I maybe didn't make that clear. They are together in Jerusalem;

they split, they separate. Paul goes off with Silas, and we follow him in chapter 16 to 18, as I said. And Mark disappears. In fact, he disappears from the history of the book of Acts for ten years, ten years. But ten years later his name shows up. Let me tell you the circumstances.

Ten years later Paul is under house arrest in Rome. That's the way his missionary life went. Ten years later he is in house arrest in Rome. And he is writing what have become known as the Prison Epistles. And he is writing one of them, namely the epistle to the believers in a town called Colossae, a town called Colossae. He writes a letter to the believers in Colossae. And at the end of that letter, Colossians 4 (you might want to look at it), at the end of that letter, he lists the names of those who are with him during his imprisonment. And included in that list of names is none other than Mark. And it isn't that his name is merely included as being there, but he is commended.

Listen to verses 10 and 11, Colossians 4:10 and 11. "Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, greets you," he says to the saints at the church at Colossae, "with Mark, the cousin of Barnabas (about whom you received instructions; if he comes to you, welcome him; and Jesus who is called Justus; these are my only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are of the circumcision [who are Jewish], they have proven to be a comfort to me."

Well, in ten years, something has changed in Paul's attitude toward Mark. A decade earlier, he saw him as an unreliable coward, a liability, somebody he didn't want around. Now Mark is being extolled by the apostle as a man who is to be welcomed, who is to be warmly embraced, who has proven to be a comfort to the apostle Paul. And he tells the Corinthian believers to receive this man who has brought him comfort and joy.

At the same time that he writes the letter to the Colossians, a church, he writes a letter to a man, a man by the name of Philemon--a man who was part of the church at Colossae. And in his letter to Philemon, he names Mark as one of his fellow laborers, Philemon verse 24. Mark is now on the team. He's one of the hard workers in gospel ministry. So the one time defector is now an honored part of Paul's ministry operation.

This is good news about restoration, isn't it? About forgiveness, about usefulness. Half a dozen years after that--now we're up to A.D. 67, let's say--Paul is imprisoned a second time in Rome, and this is the last time. He will be executed. He knows martyrdom is inevitable, and he writes his last letter from Rome during his second imprisonment--a final inspired epistle. And he opens his heart; he's eager to go; he's run the race, finished the course, kept the faith, ready to receive his heavenly reward. But he makes this wonderful final farewell, 2 Timothy 4:9 to 11, and he has a request. This is the end of the line for him. And so he tells Timothy, starting in verse 9 of 2 Timothy 4, "Be diligent to come to me quickly; for Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world." That must have been an immense heartache. He having loved this present world has left for the sights and sounds of Thessalonica. "Crescens has gone to Galatia [ostensibly for ministry], Titus has gone to Dalmatia.

Only Luke is with me.” And then he says this: “Get Mark, please, Timothy, and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry.” This is one of the great stories of restoration and recovery in ministry. Paul once again has been hurt and wounded by the desertion of one of his companions, a man named Demas who abandoned him for the sake of worldly comfort and worldly lust and desires. Crescens and Titus are not deserters, but they have left to fulfill ministry responsibilities and only Luke is with him there in Rome, and he was with Paul a lot. He was his personal physician and personal historian, I might add. And so Paul asks Timothy, “Please, when you come, pick up Mark, pick up Mark.”

And so, Mark was with him in his first imprisonment in Rome. And was such a comfort and such a joy to him that he wanted him back in his second and final imprisonment at the end of his glorious life. He wanted to see Mark again. The apostle, who had once refused him as a traveling companion, chooses him now to be with him as his companion in his final days on earth. He isn't just another one that Paul is willing to be with. He is the one above all with whom Paul wants to spend his final days.

What changed Mark? What happened to him? What transformed him from being a spiritual coward and a deserter to being the most loved and cherished of Paul's co-laborers?

I'll tell you what changed him. It wasn't a what; it was a who. Mark had a friendship with another very powerful person, another prominent apostolic preacher by the name of Peter, Peter. We already told you Peter knew Mark. He knew Mark's house; he knew Mark's mother; and he knew John Mark. And I will tell you this, if anyone could teach you lessons about desertion and restoration, it would be Peter, wouldn't it? I mean, he is the one who had the most monumental defection. It was Peter himself who was restored after denying the Lord many times on three separate occasions. And it turns out that it was Peter who took Mark under his wing and disciplined him in the faith.

You say, “How do you know that?” I didn't just pull that out of the air. That comes from Peter's own pen. Peter writes in 1 Peter 5:13, “That she who is in Babylon.” Babylon is a euphemism for Rome, because Rome is so much like Babylon was. “She who is in Babylon, elect together with you” [that is the church at Rome], “greet you and so does Mark my”...What?...“son.” First Peter 5:13; Mark was not Peter's physical son, but he had become his son in the faith. In the silent years when we don't know anything about Mark, he was being disciplined by Peter. No doubt...no doubt Mark had come to Christ by hearing Peter preach, because Peter is the preacher through the early chapters of Acts. No doubt his salvation had come under the preaching of Peter and he had heard Peter teach many times in his own house. And after his meltdown in Acts 13, when he abandons ministry and flees back to his mother, he only finds that Peter is still around. And God uses Peter to restore him to usefulness.

And there's more. The testimony of church history confirms that Peter came to Rome in the early 60s and ministered there for at least a year. It is likely that he arrived after Paul's first imprisonment, before Paul's second imprisonment, and was executed by Nero around the year 65, which would be

two years before Paul's second imprisonment and execution. While Peter was there in the capital city preaching the gospel, shepherding the Roman church, he wrote two epistles to the churches of Asia Minor, 1 Peter and 2 Peter. And it is in 1 Peter that he says, "Mark, my son, greets you." So Mark was not only discipled by Peter in his home in Jerusalem, but taken by Peter for his ministry in Rome, a ministry of preaching and teaching that led to Peter's death. What an astonishing privilege for this young man to be personally cared for and nurtured and discipled by the two greatest names among the apostles, Peter and Paul. What an astonishing and immense privilege to be the companion of both in the most difficult, challenging ministries and even to be cherished as an intimate friend in the final hours of the life of these two great apostles.

He was useful to the two greatest preachers ever. And you might think that that was the great honor that Mark was given, but that isn't it. There is a greater honor that he was given. He was given the privilege by the Lord to write the gospel of Mark, to write the gospel of Mark. And if you study the background of the gospel of Mark, you know that church historians have said the influences for the content of the gospel of Mark come from Peter. So while Peter was nurturing Mark, Mark was drawing out of Peter all the history of the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit enabled him to write it down without error. There is testimony from early church writers of the connection between Mark and Peter and of Mark's authorship of that very gospel.

You know, the Lord is in the business, isn't He, of picking up people who are rejects and restoring them to ministry. How incredibly wonderful is that? How useful is Mark? I find him useful almost every day of my life because there's rarely a day that goes by that I don't read something that he wrote about the Lord Jesus Christ. I can't imagine that anyone could be exalted more highly than to be given the privilege of writing one of the four biographies of the Lord Himself. And I can't really imagine a more unlikely choice than one who was a ministry defector and looked like nothing but a mama's boy.

While Mark was with Paul in Rome, during the apostle's first imprisonment, there was another man who showed up there. This other man had a name--Onesimus, Onesimus. Onesimus, by the way, was a runaway slave. Mark was a runaway missionary. Onesimus was a runaway slave. Let me tell you how his story unfolds.

He is owned by Philemon, the man associated with the church of Colossae. Paul is in his first imprisonment, and Paul writes the letter to Colossae, and he writes the letter to Philemon. Why does he write to Philemon? Because of Onesimus.

Onesimus belonged to Philemon; he was a slave. He would be what you call an urban slave who lived in the house with the family, intimately connected to the family. Because Philemon was a believer, because Philemon was a leader in the Colossian church, we can be certain that he was a fair master and a gracious master. And that's how Paul speaks of him when he writes the little book of

Philemon, one chapter long. But Onesimus, in spite of the fact that he was cared for by Philemon, wanted his freedom. So he becomes a fugitive, a runaway slave. And where does he go? He goes where runaway slaves go, to get lost in the crowd. He goes to Rome. He runs to Rome hoping to get lost among the masses. The imperial capital by most estimates would have 800 to 900 thousand people. And there were no tracking devices to find people in that day. So he could get lost, but he couldn't hide from the One who was seeking his soul, not at all.

Through circumstances that we don't know about, God brought Onesimus to Paul. I don't know what the circumstances were. I think Onesimus had heard about Paul from the people in the church at Colossae. I think Onesimus had heard Philemon talk about Paul, this great apostle, who was preaching throughout the Gentile world. He may have actually heard Paul preach, but he certainly heard what Paul said, reiterated to him by Philemon. And Philemon's family were believers, his wife and son are identified by name as believers. So maybe when he was in Rome and began to look at the chaos of his own life, maybe he sought out the believers, and he would have perhaps known of some Roman believers because he was a slave in the house of such a prominent believer. Whatever the circumstances, he finds his way certainly by the power of the Spirit of God to Paul and he is saved. Onesimus is saved.

His name, interestingly enough, means useful. And he quickly became useful to Paul. Philemon 12 and 16, those two verses Paul describes how useful he is, what a great student he is, eager student. Verses 11 and 13, he serves Paul in his imprisonment. He cares for Paul. So here's this runaway slave who has come to Christ, and he's serving Paul, serving Paul.

Remember, Mark is there too. So Onesimus and Mark are together—useful, serving Paul. One a runaway missionary; the other a runaway slave. But because he was a runaway, he had committed a felony. Guilty of a serious crime, and in the eyes of the Roman justice system, that crime needed to be paid for, or rectified. He defrauded his master of his services; he may well have stolen money when he left. Paul knows he has to go back. And so he writes the letter to Philemon to tell Philemon to take him back, to accept him back. That's what that whole letter is about.

In the letter it is very clear that Paul could keep him because he's so useful, but he wants to do what's right. He wants Philemon to forgive him, embrace him, and restore him. The apostle dispatches a man named Tychicus to deliver the letter to the Colossian church, to deliver the letter to Philemon, and sends with Tychicus Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother who is now one of you. So together Tychicus and this fugitive slave head for Colossae on the vital mission of delivering these two inspired letters.

In Philemon Paul says, "This is a huge sacrifice for me, to send Onesimus back." He knew that he could be punished by death; Roman law did allow that. He could be branded with a *fugitivus* on his forehead for life. He could be severely beaten justifiably. Slaves were treated very harshly; extremely

harsh treatment was permitted on slaves for this prevailing reason, there was fear in the Roman world of a slave uprising. And in order to mitigate against that, they made the punishments for runaway slaves very severe, very severe.

Philemon was a true believer, a beloved friend and fellow believer. He would have been a familiar part of the family. And so here's the appeal, let me just read it to you in Philemon. "Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you--being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ--I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains [that is, he led him to the gospel and to salvation], who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and me. I'm sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, whom I wish to keep with me." It's like sending my heart, that's how much I love this man.

You know, Paul had an immense capacity to love the people that served with him, including Mark, wanting him there at the very end of his life and including this runaway slave. He ministers "to me in my chains for the gospel. But without your consent, I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary. For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever." In other words, maybe he ran away, surely he did in the providence in God to be saved, that he might be sent back to you, "no longer a slave but more than a slave--a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me. If he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account"--"put that on my account."

How did Philemon respond to this? Well, church history would indicate to us that he responded the way you would expect him to respond, with forgiveness and love, and full restoration.

A footnote about that. Around A.D. 110 an early Christian leader, well-known to all church historians, named Ignatius the Bishop of Antioch, wrote a letter, and in 110 he wrote this letter to Ephesus. In that letter he addressed the pastor of the church at Ephesus, multiple times, time after time in that letter. And he says the man whom he's addressing, the pastor of the church at Ephesus, is a man named Onesimus, Onesimus. Could it be the same Onesimus as Philemon's runaway and reconciled slave? There are very many reasons to think it is, in fact. The timing of it would be identical to what would be expected, because in 110 Onesimus, if he was a young man in his twenties when he ran away, would be in his seventies. And at the age of 70, he would be certainly identified as an elder, appropriate for a bishop or a pastor of significance in the early church.

But another writer, F.F. Bruce, writes this, "Why then should one connect the Onesimus who was the bishop of Ephesus about 110 with the Onesimus in the book of Philemon? Because Ignatius in his letter to the church at Ephesus shows himself familiar with the epistle to Philemon. It is one of the rare places in patristic literature [the literature of the early fathers] where the language of our epistle is

clearly echoed. Not only so, but the part of Ignatius' letter to Ephesus where the language of Philemon is echoed is the part in which the bishop is mentioned in the first six chapters fourteen times." So Ignatius writes a letter that echoes the content of Philemon and uses the name Onesimus fourteen times. So, Onesimus, the runaway slave, is forgiven, embraced, restored, becomes a part of the church at Colossae, and years later is elevated to be the bishop in the church at Ephesus.

Going further than that, New Testament scholars like F.F. Bruce have suggested that it is Onesimus who was instrumental in collecting and preserving letters written by Paul. That's a significant responsibility. Church scholars tell us there's good evidence that he, Onesimus, gathered the letters of Paul into one place. The servant to Paul until Paul's death, and a servant to Christ until his own death. History tells us he was martyred, Onesimus was, during the reign of Emperor Trajan, and the reason they killed him was because he refused to deny Christ.

He faithfully served his heavenly Master to the end, as did Mark. And they knew each other. How wonderful. In conclusion, God is in the business, isn't He, of changing defectors into useful servants of His. For Mark, the restored deserter, for Onesimus, the forgiven fugitive, the story of their lives points to the fact that God uses the most unlikely people for heroic purposes in the advance of His kingdom. Good news for all of us, right? You have no idea what God may be planning for your life and what is already unfolding if you're faithful to Him. That's why Paul said this, "I was before a blasphemer, injurious, a persecutor of the church, but God showed me mercy; and now I am what I am by the grace of God. And His grace was abundant to me." And so I say what I've been saying all along, God has to use the weak and the failing and the frail and the deserters, because that's the only kind of people there are. And He continues to use us for His kingdom purposes. What privilege to be useful to Him.

Father, we thank You for our time tonight that we've had to look at these lives. So much more could be, should be, said; but it's enough to know that as we go through the Word of God from the very early chapters in the Old Testament, clear through to the end of the apostolic era in the New, we see that You have lifted up and advanced the truth through unlikely people like us, with all our weakness and all our failings and all our failures. Lord, we understand that it is not by might or by power but by My Spirit, says the Lord, that the truth advances. We know You're looking for vessels of honor fit for your use. You're looking for people who are useful because they are repentant, because they are faithful, because they are diligent. But all of us have come to usefulness from uselessness. We have come to the place where we can be useful to You when we were Your enemies, once, when we were hostile to You, and when we were nothing but discards, and You have saved us and sanctified us and rendered us fit for Your use. What privilege is ours. And whatever that might be, we won't write a gospel. We might never be the pastor of a great church; we might never be the collator of divinely inspired letters, but whatever it is that You've gifted us to do, whatever it is that You've called us to do, we want to be most useful, most useful. May we get out of our own way with our selfishness and our sinfulness and by faithfulness and love toward You and obedience render ourselves in that most

useful place where You can do “exceeding abundantly above all we can ask or think according to the power that works in us, even that power that raised Jesus from the dead.” That’s our prayer. Do it for Your glory, we pray, in Christ’s name. Amen. Amen.

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