

Cheap Repository.

SUNDAY READING.

ONESIMUS:

OR THE
RUN-AWAY SERVANT CONVERTED;
A TRUE STORY.

Shewing what a wonderful improvement in his condition ONESIMUS,
experienced after he became a CHRISTIAN.

To which is added

An affectionate Address

To all those unhappy Persons, both Men and Women, who, like ONESIMUS,
have left their Home, and have got into a bad Way of living,
and who have also a Mind to hear how they may get out.



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ONESIMUS, &c.

ONESIMUS was a servant (or slave) in the house of one Philemon. This Philemon seems to have been remarkable for being a good Christian, but the Apostle Paul very particularly mentions his "love and faith towards the Lord Jesus, and towards all saints." It is plain then that Onesimus must have had great advantages by living in the house of such a master; and one would think that he must have been a good Christian also. No, he was far otherwise. He was quite insensible of his advantages. Although there is said to have been "a church," that is, a collection of worshipping Christians in Philemon's house, yet Onesimus seems to have been not at all the better for it. He received, no doubt, the instructions, he attended regularly the family prayers, he also beheld daily the bright example of Philemon, and yet his heart continued to be hardened. I should think it probable that Onesimus was very blind and ignorant respecting religion, and also very careless about it, so that all the spiritual instructions he received, would go in at one ear, as the saying is, and out at the other.

In the mean time temptations of various kinds would probably come upon him, and thus he would advance from bad to worse, for one sin commonly leads on to another, at length his heart being dreadfully hardened, he would be ready for almost any wickedness. It seems by St. Paul's account, that

he became an unfaithful servant, and actually robbed his master, and that he then run away (perhaps taking his booty with him) to the great city of Rome, where it would be easy for Onesimus to conceal himself, just as it is easy for a man who has played the villain somewhere at a distance in this country, to lie hid in London now.

If the present story were to stop here, where then, it might be said, is the use of having all these family prayers and this "church in the house?" Why the very servants you instruct will still cheat you just as much as if they were not instructed, and it is as well therefore to leave them to go on their own way, without trying to make them religious.— I will not stop to reply to this observation here, because, as we go on with the story, the answer will be plain enough.

What I have next to remark of Onesimus, is, that when he got to Rome, he went to hear the Apostle Paul preach. We are not told the reason of his first attending on the Apostle. It is not improbable, however, that some qualm of conscience might put him upon this visit. Methinks I see him for a few days, or weeks, rioting in vice, spending freely the handful of plunder which he had carried off, and as his pockets grow low, becoming low in spirits also. At length his last shilling is gone. Alas! he has no Christian master to support him, no friend to pity him—and now having first doubted possibly whether to plunge into some new crime in order to relieve his growing distresses, he bethinks himself of what he had once so carelessly heard in Philemon's house, and says within his heart "well, there can be no comfort, no hope, no chance of deli-

verance for me now, but from the gospel." I think it is also possible that he might have occasionally overheard the name of Paul mentioned while he was waiting at Philemon's table, and when pricked in his conscience at Rome, Paul therefore is the man to whom he would naturally fly for relief.

Let no master then despair of being an instrument of good to his servants, even though for a time he should see no fruit of his labours. I am persuaded there has been many a footman, or stable boy, or other servant, both male and female, who has continued thoughtless and profane during the whole time of residence in a religious master's house, and who nevertheless has been struck to the heart afterwards, and has profited materially in the end, by some hint which appeared to have no effect at the time of receiving it.

But we are next to speak of a new scene which presents itself. Onesimus is converted to Christianity under Paul's ministry. The sinner is convicted of his sin. Through God's mercy the runaway is arrested in his mad and wicked course. The poor guilty wretch of course confesses to Paul, his guilt, and through the infinite grace of God in Christ he obtains pardon, and the hope of eternal life.

Here then is a striking proof of the rich provision of mercy which there is in the gospel. A runaway slave and a thief may become a partaker of it; God can grant even to the vilest and most miserable sinner repentance unto life; and it is proper therefore, that all should pray to God for a heart to repent, and that no one should despair.

It is plain from many signs that the repentance of Onesimus was sincere. In the first place, I think

we may take Paul's word that it was so, for Paul would not have spoken so decidedly as he did, if he had not first enquired into the case. No; I will warrant you Paul examined Onesimus very closely, for Paul's charity did not consist in believing in a good-natured way that every one was a Christian who said that he was so: on the contrary, Paul's charity led him to be careful and jealous lest he should comfort his flock with a false hope, or should flatter the person of any one. It made him therefore exceedingly particular in examining the state of men's souls: and hence it comes to pass that the words of Paul have so much weight whenever he pronounces any one to be a Christian.

But the sincerity of Onesimus's repentance is still further proved by a circumstance which is distinctly mentioned; I mean by his readiness to take Paul's advice when he bids him go back again to his injured master. Now a false penitent would differ from Onesimus in this particular. A false penitent would make a thousand objections to such a measure. "What," he would say, "must I go back to my master whom I have wronged? I dare not shew my face before him, nor before my fellow servants. I shall sink into the earth when I see them. Besides, where is the necessity for returning, I am willing to repent, indeed, but may I not repent at Rome? Surely I may be allowed to remain here in my present obscurity, for the disgrace of seeing my master and all my old friends again is more than I can bear, but I will bear any thing else; I will live hard and work honestly, and I will be very sorry for my sin, and I will continue to attend Paul's preaching. Surely this will suffice."——

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“But go back again in the first place to your master,” says Paul. “Go and own to him what you have done; away with all pride and evil shame which is about you. Submit to the disgrace you have brought on yourself, and try to repair the evil you have done as well as you can, by working hard for Philemon in the time to come; endeavour to earn for him as much money as you have stolen from him, and be not afraid of Philemon’s wrath for I will give you a letter to him. This is the proof I require of your sincerity.”

How wise and judicious was this advice of Paul to Onesimus! “Whom,” says he in the letter, “I have sent again,” that is, whom I have sent back again “in order that he may confess his whole fault to you and return into your service.” The confession of the sin against Philemon was better in this case than any general confession of faith, or than any plausible tale of Onesimus’s conversion; and so it may be observed in other cases, that a readiness to go back at all hazards, and to acknowledge our crime to the person we have offended, and to repair it as well as we are able, is the first proof of sincerity that should be required; whereas an unwillingness to return implies much remaining pride of heart, a very sinful sort of shame, a disregard to strict honesty, and a fear of consequences that is inconsistent with that faith and trust in God which accompany true repentance.

Onesimus, as I have said, consented to return; and let us not suppose that he is now to be pitied on that account, or that any great miseries were in consequence about to fall upon his head. No, let us congratulate him rather on his right resolution, for I will warrant you that after the first affecting

scene was over he would be much the happier for it, and let us remember also that we are to consider him now as a Christian, who has got among Christian people, and that he departs bearing in his hand that letter of St. Paul to Philemon which I have spoken of, and which forms one of the short books or epistles of the New Testament. How kind, how affectionate, how condescending does every part of this epistle appear when it is carefully examined! It is a specimen of the Christian spirit, and we shall therefore now turn from Onesimus's character to the contemplation of that of Paul, which we have here a fine opportunity of considering.

Paul was now grown extremely old, and he had suffered much in the cause of the gospel. He was at this very time a prisoner, and it was while in prison and in bonds that he had preached so effectually to Onesimus. It is likewise remarkable that not only Onesimus the slave, but that Philemon the master also, to whom the letter was addressed, had been converted through Paul's ministry. Thus therefore this venerable saint was able to write with the authority that belonged to him both as an apostle, as an old man, and as Philemon's father in Christ, as the father in like manner of Onesimus, and as a chief sufferer, who was soon also to prove a noble martyr, in the cause of their common Saviour.

What then is the ground which he may be supposed to take in order to persuade Philemon to spare the poor converted slave that is sent back to him? The ground he takes is this: He forbears, he says, from that exercise of his authority, which such a one as he might use; he hints, in a most affecting manner, how Philemon himself had owed

the life of his very soul to the apostle, and he then entreats Philemon, for love's sake, to comply with the earnest request that is made to him, briefly intimating also the worldly profit which Philemon would derive from having now a christian servant instead of an unbelieving one. But let us quote the apostle's own words—"Wherefore," says he, "though I might be bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient, yet for love's sake, I rather beseech thee, being such a one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ; I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds, which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but is now profitable to thee and to me, whom I have sent again, thou therefore receive him that is mine own bowels." And then he adds, "Thou therefore receive him not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, especially to me, but how much more unto thee both in the flesh and in the Lord."

What an astonishing difference does Christianity make in men! What a kind of spirit do we here trace! How strange also must all this love and condescension seem to some people! a man of the world, whose servant had robbed him and run away, would never believe Christianity could convert the man, and would disdain to receive such a kind letter as I have described. I am persuaded also my readers will agree, that a worldly correspondent, though naturally ever so humane, would be very far from writing such a kind of letter as this; and certainly an unrepenting and worldly minded slave would ill deserve to have it written. But how affectionately does the apostle still proceed, "If," says Paul, "thou

count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself. If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account. I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it. Albeit, I do not say to thee, how thou owest to me thine ownself besides."

And now let it be remarked, what a happy influence had Christianity on the whole condition of this poor wretched run-away. He was sinking, no doubt, into the lowest infamy, as well as poverty and woe, when he first waited on Paul; he was living, I dare say, among the dregs of the people of Rome; and if he had remained unconverted, if either he had not gone to Paul, or if having gone to him he had again hardened his heart, and returned to his former wickedness, he would probably have ended his days on the crucifix or gibbet, or at least he would soon have perished through want, unknown and unregarded, for he would have been swept away among the thousands whom the vice and wickedness of every great city are continually sending to an untimely grave. A guilty conscience also would have haunted him in his last hours, and after death he must have stood before an offended God, and at last he must have had his portion in that place where there is weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth.

How happy then, I say, how transporting was the change! The pride of his heart being first subdued through that blessed gospel which was made known to him, he returns to his master. This was a great step. He returns to slavery indeed, but to a slavery no doubt that was extremely mild, and that scarcely deserved the name; for he is immediately received even as a brother into the family from

whence he had fled as a culprit, and the same epistle of Paul which introduced him to Philemon, would now recommend him no doubt to many members of the church at Colossus, with whom he would become united in the bonds of christian love. Nay, if we believe the report of history, his good conduct as a slave, soon afterwards gained him his liberty and he even rose as many have supposed, (though of this there may be a certain degree of doubt) to the situation of minister, or teacher of the infant christian church.

Whatever his condition may have been during the remainder of his duty on earth, (and it is indeed comparatively of little moment) of this at least we are sure, that his everlasting happiness was secured, and that he is now numbered among the company of those "who have washed their garments, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb;" whose offences in this life are pardoned through the merits of Christ, and who are "standing before the throne of God." There the great apostle Paul, and his excellent friend Philemon, and there also the converted slave Onesimus, unite with one voice in that triumphant song. (God grant that each of us may one day join in it) "Unto him that hath loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father, unto him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen."

An Application of the above Story to the Case of those unhappy Men and Women, who, like ONESIMUS, have left their Home, and have got into a bad Way of Life.

THE story, which we have related, may be useful to persons of every class, but there is a very particular application of it which may be made to those, who, in some measure, resemble the run-away and unconverted Onesimus.

I mean now, therefore, to address myself to those who through some false step in life, and perhaps by adding one piece of misconduct to another, have fallen into very distressful and disgraceful circumstances. I address myself more especially to those unhappy women, who, like Onesimus, have run-away from their proper home, where once perhaps they may have heard something of the gospel, though they did not attend to it, and who are now ruined in their character, who are also plunged by their growing necessities into a life of open and allowed sin, and are perishing both as to body and soul, either in our great towns or among the dregs of the people of our metropolis.

I would entreat such persons to consider a little the case of this poor Onesimus, at the time he was plunged, as I have supposed him to have been, in the debaucheries of Rome, and when he must be viewed as a run-away, and even a thief and a vagabond. Methinks he resembled, in a few leading particulars, what some of you may be at present. Now it happened that Onesimus went one day to hear Paul preach. What if you were for once in your lives to do the same? I mean, what if you were to go and hear the preaching of some faithful

and zealous minister of Christ, some follower of Paul the Apostle? I would advise you, if you think of doing it at all, to go on the very next Sabbath. — Onesimus, by hearing Paul preach, was delivered out of all his troubles, for he was effectually converted to Christianity; and who knows whether if you pursue the same means, it may not please God to save you, both body and soul; in the same manner. — Indeed, I can hardly imagine any other way than that which Onesimus actually took by which he could have been recovered; and, depend upon it if ever you escape, and are restored to peace, to happiness, and to society, it must be by the same mighty power of the gospel. Would to God, that some unhappy creature, who reads this tale, and who has imitated Onesimus in his wanderings, might imitate him in his repentance. Would to God that some lost sheep might thus be brought back into the fold of Christ. Would to God, that some prodigal son for instance might be persuaded like the prodigal son in the gospel, to repent and return to his father's house: or that some woman, who is a sinner, while she is reading this tale, might find her eyes begin to stream with tears, like the Magdalen who wept so plentifully at the feet of our Saviour, and might, like her, attain to a comfortable and well grounded hope, that "her sins which are many," are forgiven her.

"But what can we do?" methinks I hear a whole multitude of such persons reply, "We long to be restored to all the comforts you speak of; we are charmed at the very mention of such happiness, but we know not how to get possession of it." I answer, do then in all respects like Onesimus. Take example, as far as your case will allow, from all the

various circumstances which may be supposed to have belonged to his tale. First of all, he attended Paul's preaching, after which, I suppose, he called on the apostle, and told him his story. The apostle, indeed, was a poor man himself, and a prisoner also; so that a little good advice, (which, however, is a very valuable thing) was all that could be got from him; except, indeed, that Paul being acquainted with a number of good Christians, among whom there might be some rich ones also, he was able to give Onesimus a letter of introduction, if he thought proper. The same thing, perhaps, may happen now. If you will call on some minister of the gospel, after having for a while attended his preaching, provided he judges you to be truly penitent, he will be induced, perhaps, if poor himself, to give you a recommendation to some christian friend of his, to some capital housekeeper like Philemon.

But shall I tell you what will be his difficulty? A suspicion will immediately arise about your sincerity, and the removal of this suspicion is the great thing which you must aim at. Onesimus succeeded in removing this suspicion from the mind of Paul; for, if he had not, I am sure Paul would never have written such a letter as he did to Philemon.

Let me, then, close with a little advice as to this point, I mean as to the manner in which you must give proof of your sincerity.

First, when you confess your faults to any one of whom you ask help, do not confess them by halves. I have known some persons acknowledge a few things which they have done wrong, and which, indeed, they could not hide, while they

have been mightily reserved upon other points. They have left out half their story. They have thought, perhaps, to spare themselves hereby, but in fact, it was commonly proved, that what was concealed was afterwards discovered, and they have been rejected, not at all on account of any unwillingness to help them, though hitherto ever so wicked, but on account of its continuing still to be impossible to put any trust in them. Onesimus, I warrant you, confessed his whole sin to Paul, and was not detected afterwards in any little reservations or excuses, or false colourings.

Again, draw nearer and nearer to religion. Read the scriptures. Avoid bad company. Attend diligently on the preaching of the gospel; and endeavor to make acquaintance with those who attend also, and who, however poor, are religious. Onesimus had become one among the little society of the "Saints" which were at Rome," at the time when Paul wrote so confidently of his sincerity.

Again, put away your pride and false shame, very forlorn and wicked people are often very proud, and this pride works in a thousand ways, so as to hinder their deliverance. Onesimus submitted to go back to his old master, notwithstanding all the shame that attended his return; and you must shew something of the same temper, if you expect any one who understands the human heart, so as all Christians do, to put confidence in your sincerity.

Again, put your trust in God. Dare to fulfil your present duty; and do not reason too much about consequences. God has all events, and he has likewise all hearts in his hand: and he can and will make a way for your escape, as he did for that of

Onesimus, if you resolve fully to fear him, and put your trust in him.

Again, determine on the life of industry; for all idleness in you must be dishonesty. Onesimus went and worked even as a slave. I hope you have no objection to go and work any where as a servant, and to accept even the lowest service. I hope too you desire to be a very diligent and profitable servant. "Onesimus," as St. Paul observes, "had been once unprofitable, but was now profitable." He became a most valuable hard-working man when he became a Christian.

But, above all things, take care to be what you wish to appear; take care, I mean, to be a most sincere and true penitent. It is a small matter to seem sincere in the sight of your fellow-creatures, when you are not so in the sight of God. The heart is deceitful. Enter, therefore deeply into this matter. Consider your own weakness in times past, fly from temptation; be often on your knees, also, confessing your sins, and praying to God to strengthen you by his Holy Spirit; pray to him, in short, "to search and to try you, to prove you, and examine your ways, to look well if there be any way of wickedness in you, and to lead you in the way everlasting."

And now, are you still out of spirits, and desponding? Do you still think there is no friend to pity you, no help near you, and that no minister, if you should go to him, will take notice of your case? I will add another hint on this subject. When Onesimus first went to Paul, I dare say he little expected to get such a kind letter as he obtained. Shall I then explain to you what was the cause which made Paul condescend so readily to this

poor, repenting sinner? It was this: — Paul was once a great sinner himself: he could remember a time, when (though he never was a thief or a runaway) yet he was a hinderer of the gospel, and even a persecutor also. But Paul had obtained mercy. — And now it became the happiness of his life to tell of the grace of Jesus Christ. “Unto me,” said he, “who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.” He thought it the greatest honour in the world to be allowed to publish among the vilest Gentiles, the salvation of the blessed Jesus. So it is also now. — The very best men on earth, whether Christian ministers or Christian people, like Paul, owe all to mercy, and they long, therefore, to commend you to the same mercy, and to stretch out their hand for your relief.

Learn, then, to understand the true hindrance to your recovery. It is not that there are no Christians who will help you. It is not there are no means of deliverance for you, for we have shewn you, that “if there is a will there is a way.” It is not that you are driven into sin by an irresistible fate, for God is above fate, and God drives no man into sin. It is, in short, your own fault, and your own fault alone. Escape, then, immediately. Give no sleep to your eyes, nor slumber to your eyelids, till you have taken some step towards your recovery. Remember, in short, that if Onesimus escaped, so may you; and that if you use not the same means, this very story of Onesimus will one day rise up in judgment against you.