

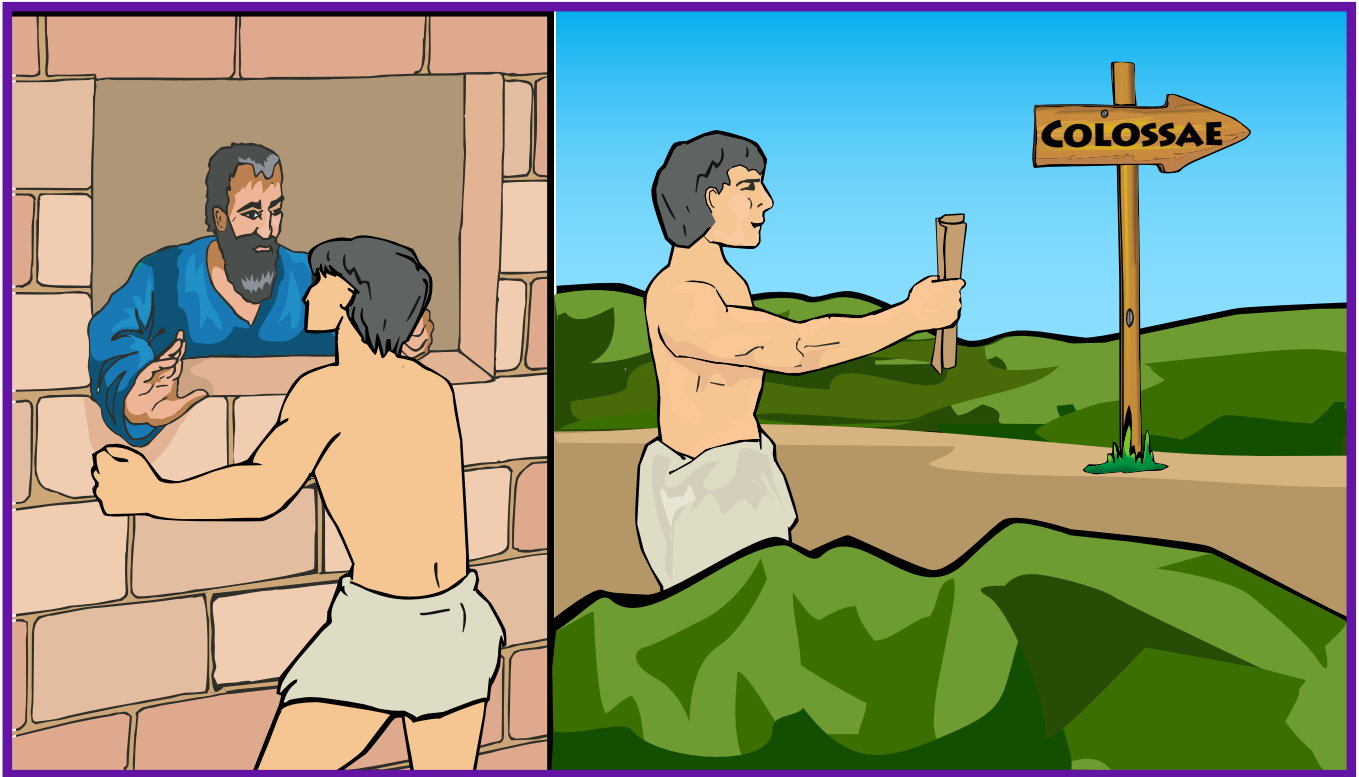
Tour of the Holy Lands - Colossae (Philemon the Slaveholder)



Do you know what slavery is? It means one person has purchased, or bought, another person and now "owns" that person -- as if he or she is a piece of property. Slaves work for their owner without getting paid, and slaves have no rights because they are not considered free. Throughout history, many people have been slaves in countries all over the world until laws were passed to make slavery illegal. In Bible times, however, there was no law against slavery. In the city of Colossae lived a wealthy slave-owner whose name was Philemon (fy-lee'mun). His slaves helped make him rich. It might surprise you to learn that he and his family were members of the Christian church in Colossae; in fact, the church services were held in Philemon's house.

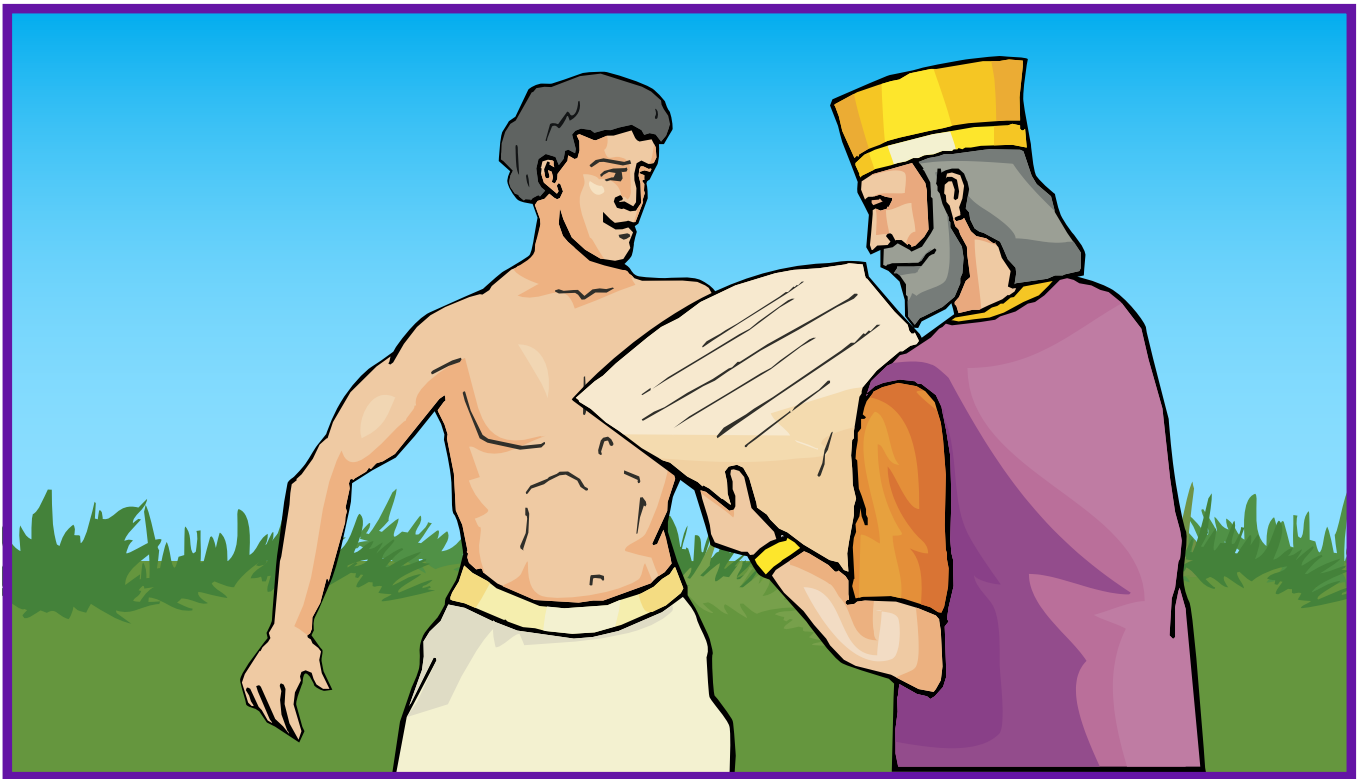


One day, one of his slaves, named Onesimus (oh-nes'i-mus), ran away. He may have done something wrong. After being captured, runaway slaves were often beaten or killed. What do you think happened to Onesimus?



Onesimus fled all the way to Rome, where he became a Christian and began to help Paul. Actually, Paul was not free, either. He was falsely accused of a crime, but allowed to stay in his own rented house. There he received visitors and continued teaching about Jesus Christ.

Paul loved Onesimus as a son. He was such a good helper that Paul wanted to keep him. But he knew that Onesimus belonged to Philemon. Paul decided to write a letter to Philemon and his wife, and all the members of the church. He placed the letter in the hands of the slave, and sent him back. This letter survived through many years and was considered important enough to be included in the New Testament. It forms the shortest book of the Bible, and is found between Titus and Hebrews. What did the letter say?



Paul wanted Philemon to welcome his slave home without punishment and then to send him back to Rome as Paul's helper. But Paul was careful not to tell Philemon what to do. He spoke only of the love he knew Philemon had toward all Christians. That love should naturally include his slave, Onesimus, who was now a new Christian because of Paul. To be a Christian is to be a brother to other believers. Paul said, "Welcome your slave back as you would welcome me."

Without saying it directly, Paul hoped that when Philemon began to love Onesimus, he would set him free. We don't know the end of this story, but we do know that this short personal letter has helped and is still helping to remove slavery from Christian households around the world.