

It is a fact that past behavior is a good predictor of future actions. This is why banks trust credit scores. Employers check resumes and references. Hungry customers read Yelp reviews before choosing a restaurant. These records tell a story: what happened before will likely happen again.

When Onesimus packed his things (and some of Philemon's things), this was likely the reason he gave himself. Maybe he thought Philemon was harsh and unfair. "Philemon is selfish," he might have reasoned, "He will never change. If he took advantage of me once, he'll do it again."

Now, Onesimus is back. He stands before Philemon. What must be going through Philemon's mind? No doubt, when Philemon first read the name "Onesimus" in Paul's letter, he recalled everything Onesimus had done wrong. Even before Onesimus ran away, he wasn't a good servant. Paul doesn't deny this. He writes, "Formerly he was useless to you..." (Philemon 11). This is a play on words because the name Onesimus means "useful." But he hadn't lived up to his name. He had been the opposite of useful.

From Philemon's perspective, Onesimus's past failures were a clear indication of what to expect in the future. He probably thought, "Onesimus ran when he should have stayed. He's selfish. If he ran once, he'll run again."

Philemon's assumptions about Onesimus would have been negative. Why wouldn't they be? Past behavior is a strong predictor of future performance. Right?

But deep down, don't we all hope that isn't true? Our entire society is built on the hope of change. We work hard and invest wisely because we believe we can change our financial situation. We go to doctors and therapists because we believe we can change our health. We go to school, vote, and pray because we believe change is possible. The ability to change and improve is how we cope with the world and ourselves. It's why we push forward in hard times.

Aren't you glad you aren't who you used to be? I know you're not where you want to be. Maybe you're facing a setback. But aren't you glad you've grown? Because if we aren't what we used to be, maybe there's hope we can be something different in the future.

Paul had become Onesimus's spiritual father. How? By a divine coincidence, Onesimus found himself in Paul's company. What are the odds? Very good, if God is involved. Paul shared the life-changing truth of the Gospel, and Onesimus embraced it.

*"I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment"*  
(Philemon 10).

Radical life change is why Jesus left the perfection of heaven to subject Himself to the consequences of our sin. As C.S. Lewis put it, "God became man to turn creatures into

sons: not simply to produce better men of the old kind but to produce a new kind of man. It is not like teaching a horse to jump better and better but like turning a horse into a winged creature."

The only way real, radical, life change occurs is through God's work. After the rich young ruler walked away saddened by Jesus' call to leave his wealth, Jesus remarked:

*"Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God"* (Matthew 19:23-24).

The disciples were stunned. They weren't rich, but they had some wealth. If a rich person getting into heaven was like a camel being squeezed through a sewing needle, then a middle-class person might be only slightly better off. This is why they asked, "Who then can be saved?" (Matthew 19:25). That is a very good question.

Jesus provides the answer:

*"With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible"* (Matthew 19:26).

God has a long-established history of changing people. He can turn:

- *Servants into Kings.*
- *Fishermen into Followers.*
- *Murderers into Ministers.*

The Christian faith is unique in this truth. The lost can be found. The wicked can be made righteous. Orphans can become children. Sinners can become saints. The dead can be raised because God became a man.

Yes, it's true that past actions are often a good indicator of future performance. But if it's true for us, isn't it also true for God? Yes! God's past actions are a reliable indicator of His future faithfulness.

*"For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed"*  
(Malachi 3:6).

So, let me ask you three questions:

- *Do you believe God can change you?*
- *Do you believe God can change others?*
- *Is it possible that God might use you to help change someone else?*

If God is sovereign and loving, then everything He allows must ultimately lead to a greater good (Romans 8:28). Does this include the relationship conflicts we endure? Is it

possible that “their” reckless actions were permitted by God for a greater purpose? Is it possible that that greater purpose involves God working through you to demonstrate grace and mercy? This is what Paul suggests might have been at work in Onesimus’s story:

*“For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord” (Philemon 15-16).*

The Apostle Paul, who experienced a radical transformation himself, challenges Philemon to look beyond Onesimus’s past and see the future that God can create.

The question is, can we?

## Part 2: “Potential” over “Past”

a study of Philemon

# RUNAWAY grace

God’s Plan for Broken Relationships



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