

# Rewarding the Runaway

## Sabbath

**Do** Do this week's activity on page 39.

*Have you ever thought about running away from home? What would it be like? Where would you go? What could you do? Onesimus was in that position. He had run away from his master and was a poor, hungry fugitive when he met Paul. (See Philemon 1-22; The Acts of the Apostles, pp. 456-460.)*

## Sunday

**Read** Read "Rewarding the Runaway."

**Draw** Draw a running shoe and write the power text on it. Put it somewhere you will see it during the week.

**Learn** Begin to learn the power text.

**Pray** Pray for insights into the messages of this story.

# SIX

## POWER POINT

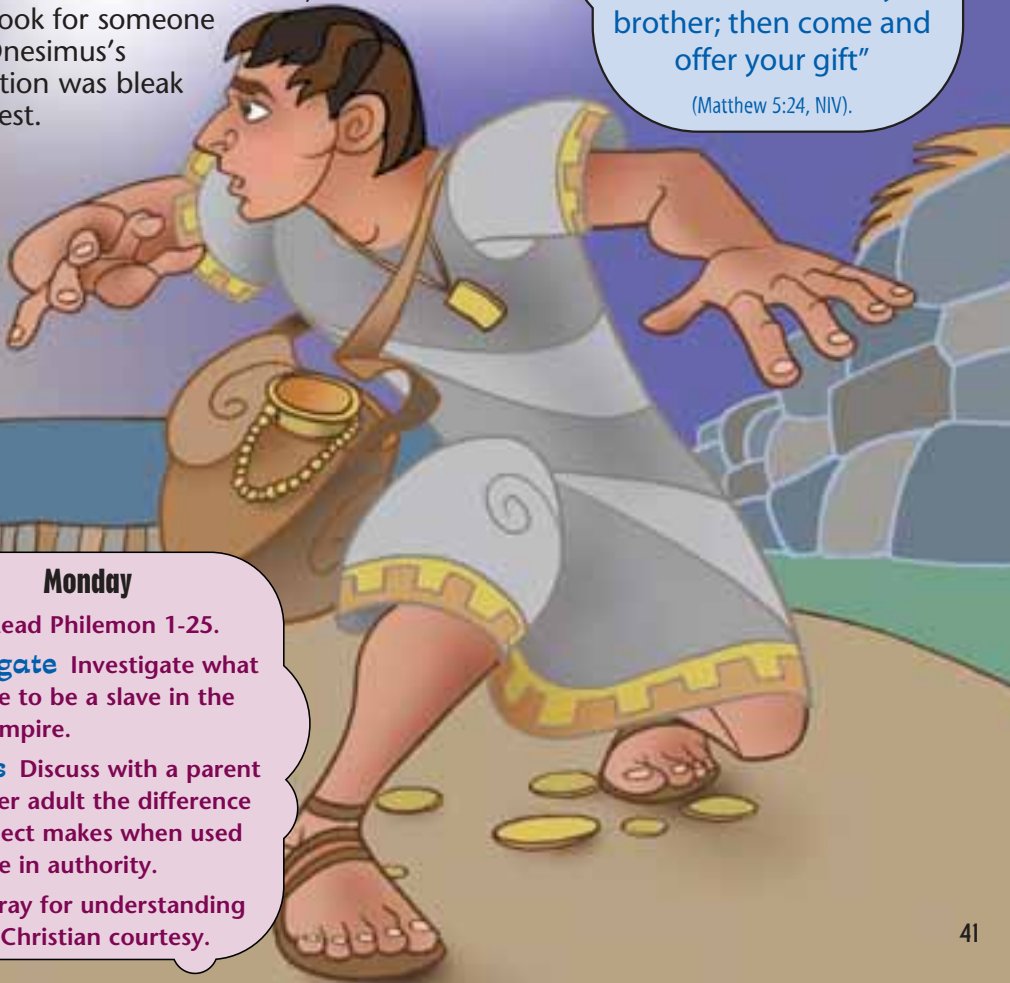
We serve God  
when we reflect  
His unselfish love  
to others.

## POWER TEXT

"Leave your gift there  
in front of the altar. First go  
and be reconciled to your  
brother; then come and  
offer your gift"

(Matthew 5:24, NIV).

Onesimus was in trouble. Not only was he a slave during the Roman Empire; he was a runaway slave. Worse than that, he was a runaway slave who had stolen from his master. Onesimus was regarded as a piece of property, and his owner could do with him as he pleased. Torture and even murder were not out of the question. The mistreatment of Roman slaves by their masters is well documented, and the outlook for someone in Onesimus's position was bleak at best.



### Monday

**Read** Read Philemon 1-25.

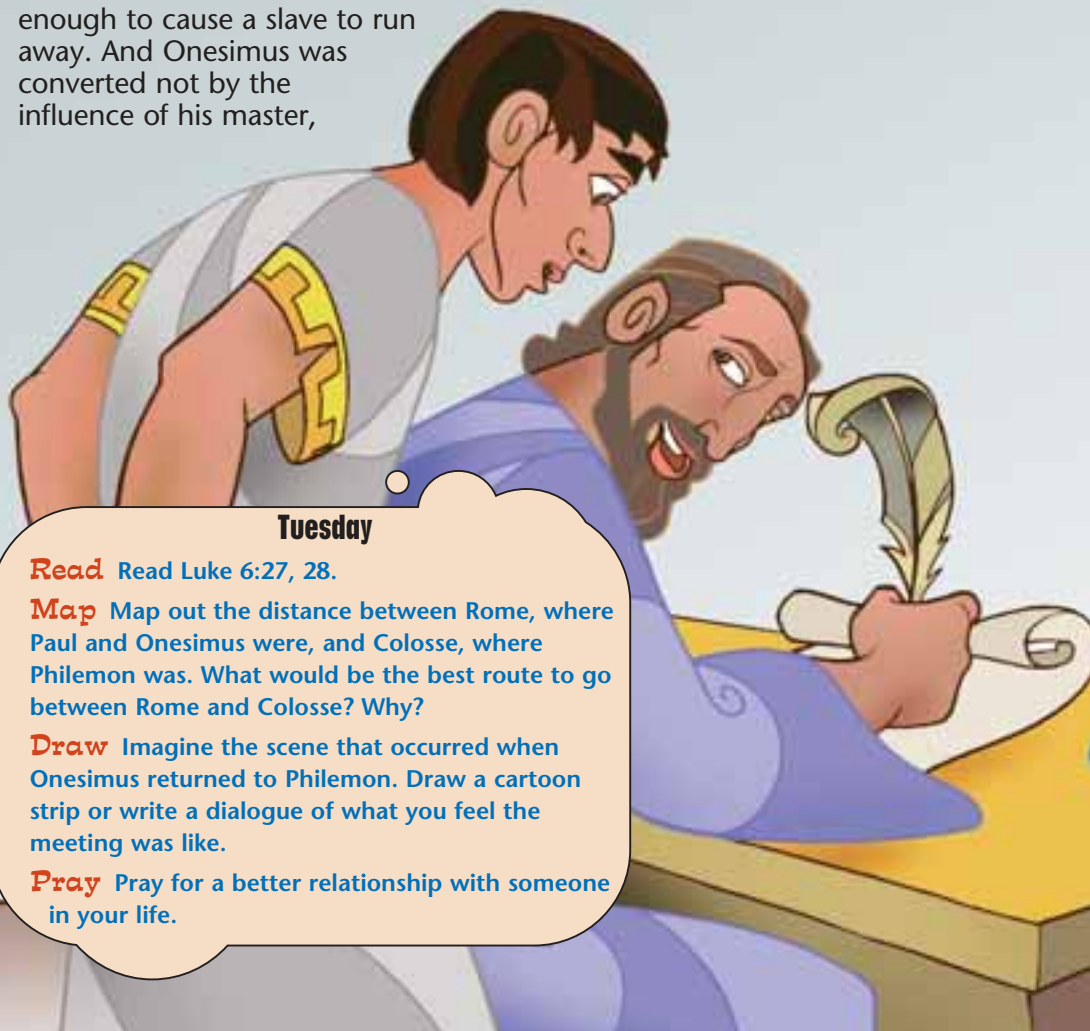
**Investigate** Investigate what it was like to be a slave in the Roman Empire.

**Discuss** Discuss with a parent or another adult the difference that respect makes when used by people in authority.

**Pray** Pray for understanding of true Christian courtesy.

No doubt he had come to Rome to get as far away as he could from his master in Colosse. Six hundred miles across the Mediterranean Sea was probably far enough, he must have thought. Rome was a big city, and it would be easy to lose himself in the hubbub. And likely it had taken all he had stolen from his master to get there.

Without money or friends, and more than a little scared, Onesimus met Paul. Paul was in Rome under house arrest. It was there that Onesimus was converted to Christianity. And therein lay his one hope: his master, Philemon, was a Christian who knew Paul. It's interesting to note that although he served a Christian master, apparently conditions in Philemon's household were bad enough to cause a slave to run away. And Onesimus was converted not by the influence of his master,



### Tuesday

**Read** Read Luke 6:27, 28.

**Map** Map out the distance between Rome, where Paul and Onesimus were, and Colosse, where Philemon was. What would be the best route to go between Rome and Colosse? Why?

**Draw** Imagine the scene that occurred when Onesimus returned to Philemon. Draw a cartoon strip or write a dialogue of what you feel the meeting was like.

**Pray** Pray for a better relationship with someone in your life.

but by Paul, imprisoned hundreds of miles away in Rome.

Paul appreciated Onesimus. Now that Onesimus had confessed his sins and repented, he had become a special friend to Paul, caring for him and also working with him to share the good news of God's grace and forgiveness with others.

Although Paul hated to part with Onesimus, he counseled Onesimus to return to his master and ask for forgiveness. For Onesimus, this must have been no small challenge. But Paul didn't send Onesimus back empty-handed. He sent along a letter, a promise, and a personal request. We have the letter today as the Bible book of Philemon. In it we can read the promise and the request.

Paul promised personally to repay anything Onesimus owed Philemon. And he asked Philemon to take Onesimus back "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. Welcome him as you would welcome me. . . . Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask" (Philemon 16-21, NIV). Paul didn't come right out and say it, but he dropped a pretty big hint that he would like Philemon to free Onesimus, and maybe even send him back to Paul.

### Wednesday

**Read** Read John 15:12-17.

**Compare** Compare Paul's willingness to pay the debt that Onesimus owed to Philemon with Christ's willingness to pay the price of our sins.

**Write** Write a verse or poem comparing the two.

**Pray** Pray for a better understanding of what Jesus did for you.



Asking Philemon to welcome back and then free a runaway slave who had stolen from him was about like asking a runaway slave to return to his master willingly. Why on earth would Philemon, who was probably more than a little angry about the whole Onesimus affair, do such a thing? Why would anyone completely overlook—even reward—such disobedience?

### Thursday

**Look** Look through the Psalms (or a Bible concordance) for the words *forgive, forgave, forgiven*.

**List** List the texts you find in your Bible study journal.

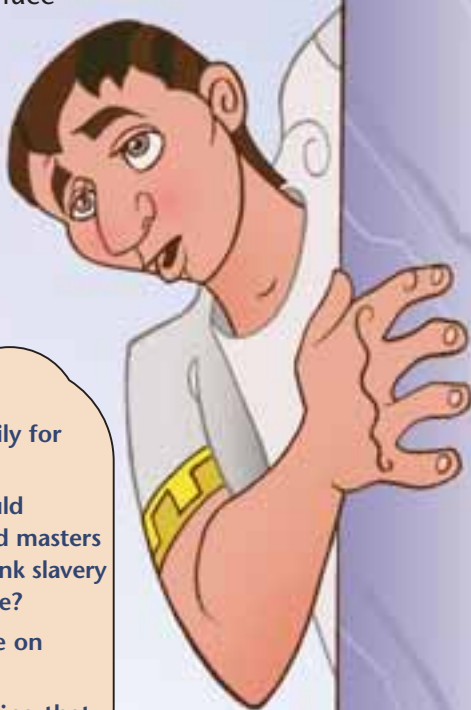
**Create** Create a poster with your favorite texts.

**Pray** Pray for the ability to forgive someone who has offended you.



There's only one answer, and only one hope for Onesimus. Christian love. Paul mentioned this in his letter when he wrote, "I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints" (verse 5). That love must include love for his runaway slave, who was a brother in Christ. Onesimus had certainly done nothing to earn or deserve Philemon's love. Welcoming Onesimus back without punishing him would truly be an act of unconditional love. And free him? It would put Philemon's Christianity on full display and demonstrate to others the love and forgiveness Jesus has shown to all of us. Jesus' forgiveness and death was the ultimate act of unconditional love, and now Philemon was given a chance to show that same love and forgiveness to Onesimus.

We don't know how this story ends. We don't know what happened when Onesimus stood face to face with Philemon. But we can hope that Philemon responded by loving Onesimus as Christ loved him, and we can ask God to give us the same love and forgiveness toward others who wrong us.



### Friday

**Read** Read Ephesians 6:5-9 with your family for worship.

**Discuss** Discuss with your family what would eventually happen in a society if all slaves and masters obeyed Paul's counsel for a while. Do you think slavery would continue to be practiced in that culture?

**Share** Share the poem or verse you wrote on Wednesday.

**Pray** Pray that God will show you something that you can do to improve your society with Christian love.