

To choose an obscure character from an obscure Pauline letter and place him in the center of a novel requires a uniquely imaginative mind and also a scholarly mind well versed in New Testament times, places, and people. In this charming story Estill Jones displays such a mind alongside the subtle touch of humor that distinguished his life. It is a thoroughly enjoyable tale into which the author wove many heroes of the first-century church, making them come alive to the reader while showing their relationship to each other. Dr. Jones beautifully painted a picture of these people and of the time and culture into which the first Christian churches were born.

—*Mary Etta Sanders, former teacher, and Drayton Sanders, physician*

Estill Jones became my mentor and senior minister in 1972 at Dogwood Hills Baptist Church in East Point, Ga. Having served as a seminary professor with a focus on New Testament Greek, his passion and expertise with Greek surfaced frequently in his preaching and teaching. This was especially true when a group of Baptist friends started meeting with monks at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit to translate the Greek New Testament into English and engage in spirited conversation. When I learned about Estill's retelling of Onesimus' story, I remembered that Philemon was one of the New Testament books we translated. I can still sense Estill's excitement in talking about the many nuances of the story more than 40 years ago. In *Onesimus: A Slave's Pathway to True Freedom*, Estill brings his knowledge of New Testament Greek, his steadfast faith, and keen imagination to create a wonderful narrative of Onesimus' life. In the process he weaves the development of the early church and some of the key players in the Jesus movement into the story. I can picture Estill's delight in telling the story that is now part of his legacy. May God bless you as you read the story told in a fresh and insightful way and perhaps experience a new sense of freedom in Christ for yourself.

—*T. Lee Stephens, former Episcopal priest*

Never have I been more aware of the mountain of knowledge an author of historical fiction must have to write such an engaging story as this. Estill Jones wrote with the depth and attention to detail of a serious biblical scholar, the imagination and creativity of a lecturer and preacher, the understanding of human nature that came from being a counselor and chaplain, and the sensitivity of someone who devoted himself to his wife and children. His easy use of more current vocabulary, without drawing attention to it, draws the reader into a very old story about the meaning of freedom that has relevance even now.

—*Susan G. Broome, former archivist*

Estill and Violet Jones first became friends to my wife Sue and me in the 1980s when he took the job as seminary pastor at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. I discovered he was an astute New Testament scholar; a thoughtful and compassionate preacher; and caring nurturer of students, faculty, and staff. His gifts and extensive experience as a pastor, seminary professor, and devoted church person in retirement are evident in this delightful novel drawn from the biblical book of Philemon. Dr. Jones wove a geographical, cultural, and ethical understanding into this story of redemption of a Roman slave, Onesimus, in the first century. It is delightful to read and enormously informative as one imagines the travels, culture, and issues of the churches founded by the Apostle Paul. Each reader will have a new understanding of the power of the gospel in human reconciliation.

—*Larry L. McSwain, former professor and associate theology dean*

I suspect many people wonder about the stories that provide the background to the Apostle Paul's epistles. In his book, Estill Jones offers an imaginative behind-the-scenes look at the cast of characters in the shortest of those letters: Philemon. Using his vast knowledge of scripture, culture and tradition, he weaves a story describing the persistence of Paul, the ultimate graciousness of Archippus, and the faith of Onesimus. It's a story of freedom freely told by one who was not afraid to take the risk of creating conversations and emotions that exceed the limits of the biblical text. This is a story for all who have wondered how Onesimus became a slave, how he escaped from slavery, and how he was received when he returned to face Archippus. Dr. Jones offers us his imaginative answers. To paraphrase a portion of Paul's letter: "I have received much joy and encouragement from your thoughtfulness and creativity [love]; may the hearts of the saint be refreshed through you, my brother" (Philemon 7).

—*Michael Catlett, former pastor*

The first time I ever heard about Estill Jones came through his nickname as a professor. The students dubbed him fondly "Pistol Pete." A positive and energetic reputation gathered around that nickname. I knew immediately I wanted to meet him. You can meet his creativity and sense of drama in the saga of Onesimus, an inspiring story of a slave's pathway to freedom. Important scholarly opinions hide behind this energetic drama, but you will be taken by the narrative and adventure of this scintillating story.

—*Peter Rhea Jones, former pastor and professor*

Estill Jones' first and only novel totally reflects who and what he was. It is a creative way to exegete and expand the biblical book of Philemon, enabling the reader to become well acquainted with a slave named Onesimus. Calling on his fertile imagination and his immense knowledge of the New Testament, Jones shares vivid insight into the social, economic, political, and religious cultures during the time when fledgling fellowships of believers were evolving into what became the Christian church. He makes living persons out of long-dead Jesus followers, and causes Onesimus to become a household name to many for whom he had only been a nodding acquaintance. While taking certain liberties with the account itself, it is clearly obvious the writer was intimately acquainted with the appropriate texts.

—*Floyd Roebuck, former pastor*

From the first page of this book I hear Estill Jones' voice in all its clarity. I recognize his approach: clear and to the point. His scholarship comes through in his descriptions of events, big and small, that shaped the formation of the Apostle Paul's world and led to the many letters Paul penned to the young churches of his world. In telling the story of Onesimus' struggle to survive, then thrive, Jones brings to life the people and cultures of the first century. He reminds us to not be satisfied with the life that other people choose for us. As we read about Onesimus, we see some of the issues facing Paul and other early Christians, issues we still grapple with today: respect for women, constructive use of power, compassion for humanity, and justice for the downtrodden of society. The story of a runaway slave, Onesimus, is told within the narrative of the early Christian landscape. Both slave and church are finding their way to come of age. This story will appeal to readers of different ages.

—*Joe W. Davis, former elementary school principal*

In an inspiring novel set during the time of St. Paul's ministry and based on the account of Onesimus in the New Testament Book of Philemon, Estill Jones weaves Onesimus' yearning for freedom in with the gospel message preached by Paul. The novel is reminiscent of *The Robe* by Lloyd C. Douglas, although much shorter. Jones' background as a New Testament scholar is evident in this powerful story of the challenges of living the Christian life and starting new churches during early Christian times.

—Merrill Davies, author of four historical novels

Based on Paul's letter to Philemon, *Onesimus: A Slave's Pathway to True Freedom* is a scripturally inspired and yet vividly imagined story of the life of a young boy who is sold into slavery and then experiences the changing powers of redemption—ultimately leading to the true freedom for which he seeks. Readers young and old will find this to be a compelling tale.

—Betty Stanley, former upper elementary teacher

Onesimus is given a history: his parents are killed, and he is sold into slavery. But he yearns for the freedom he once knew. Young adult readers, and even older adults who enjoy novels based on biblical characters, will enjoy traveling with Onesimus on his pathway to freedom.

—Ruth T. Rowell, musician and Christian educator

Estill Jones, an esteemed Baptist ethicist of the 1950s, combined his biblical scholarship and historical expertise to give the reader of *Onesimus: A Slave's Pathway to True Freedom* a believable account of a bitter young slave who runs away from his master, becomes a follower of Jesus, and then returns to his slave owner. Will he be accepted or made to face the traditional punishment meted out to runaway slaves?

—Lynelle Mason, author of eight books, including five novels

In this imaginative retelling of the story of Onesimus and Archippus, based on the Book of Philemon, Estill Jones does a wonderful job of transporting us to the Lycus Valley and sketching some memorable characters whose words and actions give added texture to Paul's letter to Philemon. Ultimately, this book illustrates the transformative power of the Christian faith. It will serve both lay and clergy alike. Lay readers will learn the value of "reading between the lines," and clergy will learn again the importance of good storytelling.

—Bill Ireland, former pastor

A cogent, winsome account of Paul's critical role in setting a slave free for Christian ministry. . . While calling on his thorough grasp of Paul's life and letters, J. Estill Jones also used his gift for creative conjecture about the enslavement, escape, conversion, romance, marriage, and ministry of Onesimus. I knew Dr. Jones was a noted scholar, but now I marvel at his knack for bringing vivid, real-life events alive. Oh Estill, you *can* tell a tale!

—Dan Whitaker, former pastor

I have always been disappointed with St. Paul's reluctance to condemn the institution of slavery, but as I read *Onesimus: A Slave's Pathway to True Freedom*, I became angry and upset with Paul. Estill Jones wanted readers to respond to the characters in scripture as real people. Like a caring pastor and teacher, he wove biblical scholarship and imaginative storytelling to help us feel the hope of the gospel.

—Brett Younger, pastor and author

Philemon and Onesimus take on new life when seen through the eyes of Estill Jones' vivid imagination. It is amazing how much detail he wove into this brief novel. The writing style is such that readers of different ages can follow the story Jones painted. But those readers familiar with the New Testament, Paul, and Paul's writings will better identify and understand the intricate details Jones included. Thank you, Estill, for the book, your scholarship, your imagination, your Christian commitment, and your friendship.

—*Joanne Nimmons, former media specialist, and Billy Nimmons, former pastor*

Drawing on his extensive knowledge of Paul's letters and their historical and cultural background, New Testament professor and pastor Estill Jones used his educated imagination to provide a fascinating story of a little-known character of the New Testament—Onesimus the runaway slave. The book is informative, enjoyable, and stimulating.

—*Joe Baskin, former professor of religion*

Estill Jones used his great knowledge of scripture and his creative writing skills to craft a compelling story of the runaway slave, Onesimus. Each page brings a delightful twist to the narrative as Jones wove familiar biblical characters such as Paul, Timothy, Luke, Aristarchus, and Philemon into the life journey of Onesimus. Estill's writing made the story come to life.

—*Larry Flanagan, former minister of music*

Estill Jones wove the little we know about Onesimus into the vast tapestry of the Pauline letters. The result is a creative and compelling pilgrimage of a young escaped slave. If you enjoy historical fiction, you will love the way Dr. Jones brought to life the work of Paul through Onesimus' story.

—*Jonathan Barlow, pastor*

In this biblical novel, Estill Jones repeats his challenge to the "free in Jesus" to be a positive example to those who are shackled by burdens of sin and therefore without the freedom that comes with the reception of God's love and grace. He challenges those who receive this freedom to be responsible in living both the physical and spiritual life.

—*Jimmy Hatcher, former pastor and director of missions*

Onesimus

A Slave's Pathway to True Freedom

J. Estill Jones

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Foreword

His name meant “Profitable.” However, Archippus did not consider this to be the case with his slave Onesimus. Rather, the young man appeared to keep the entire household in turmoil. “Why did I ever call you Onesimus? You have been anything but profitable to me. I’m tempted to sell you—if I could get a good price.”

As an enthusiastic, lively, healthy teenager and young adult between the ages of 15 and 21, Onesimus sneaked out with young Julius under his care, took a horse without permission, was accused of thievery for taking fruit (as many teenagers, he was obsessed with food!), and finally escaped.

Of course, the story doesn’t end there. In this historical fiction, Dad (aka Dr. Jones, J. Estill, Pistol Pete, Bud, Uncle Estill) considers the life of a young man who never gives up hope of regaining his freedom from slavery, while in the process gaining freedom of the soul, heart and mind, and maturing into a committed Christian leader.

Throughout the story, Onesimus’ path to spiritual freedom is influenced by many individuals, including Paul, characterized by those surrounding him as “fiery, independent, committed.” Onesimus is grateful to be referred to as Paul’s “faithful and beloved brother” and “son in the faith.” Numerous details of the early church are presented, along with various characters whose ministry helped shape it.

In addition to telling the story of Onesimus, Dad wove a number of cultural and historical themes of the day: the unjust nature of slavery, political and legal issues, religious differences, discrimination, philosophy, ethics, crime, economics, love, leadership roles of women, marital relationships, education, career aspirations, and adolescent inquiry. Sound current?

We don’t know when Dad wrote this book. Maybe it was during our own teen years, perhaps in the 1940s after completing his dissertation on *Philemon*, or even more recently. We know that he began each day at the kitchen table, reading his Greek New Testament and writing. Possibly he penned it then. His love of scriptures, normal wit, creative twists and turns, storytelling skill, and

theological insights are all evident as one reads the book. No doubt, Onesimus would have enjoyed the story.

Although we do not know Dad's intended audience, we suspect it will appeal to various ages at every stage of Christian growth. We do know that several months before Dad passed away in 2017, we were discussing "something important," and he brought out *Onesimus of Laodicea*. The manuscript had been typed, probably on his old IBM Selectric typewriter (and with very few errors!). With that, we transferred the story to a Word document, submitted it, and a few days before he died he received notification that the book had been selected for publication. Dad was elated!

We feel sure Dad would want to dedicate the book to our mother, Violet ("VI"), his wife and biggest supporter for 70 years.

The Jones Children
Jack, Jean, and Judson

Who's Who

Alexander: escaped slave; befriended Onesimus in Ephesus

Apollos: Christian orator from Alexandria, Egypt

Apphia: wife of Philemon

Aquila: tentmaker; Christian leader in Ephesus

Archippus: landowner-businessman; purchased Onesimus

Aristarchus: companion of Paul's from Thessalonica

Astrallus: astrologer-seeker type

Barnabas: teacher-companion of Paul's from Antioch of Syria

Claudia: slave girl in the house of Archippus

Demetrius: shopkeeper in Ephesus; employed Onesimus

Ephraim: Paul's student; lectured in Laodicea on freedom

Epictetus: slave; questioned Christian teachers regarding freedom

Ezra: astrologer-seeker type

Gaius: companion of Paul's from Derbe

Hector: supervisor of slave boys and maids at the home of Archippus

Heraclides: friend of Paul; provided lodging and work for Onesimus in Tarsus

Hermes: slave; oversaw Onesimus after purchase by Archippus

John Mark: early teacher-companion of Paul's

Julius: son of Archippus

Justus: kitchen slave at the home of Archippus

Luke: physician; fellow minister with Paul

Lydia: Thyatira merchant of purple dyes and fabrics; Christian leader

Marcus: member of Archippus' household staff; accompanied Onesimus to Ephesus

Onesimus: young man from Lystra; sold into slavery after his parents' murders

Paul: leader of the Christian movement following his conversion

Philemon: friend to Archippus; leader of the Christian movement in Colossae

Poppae: slave in charge of the kitchen at Archippus' home

Porphyra: mother of Onesimus

Prisca: wife of Aquilla

Prochurus: father of Onesimus

Rufus: friend to Aquilla and Prisca; son of Simon, the cross-bearer for Jesus

Timothy: young companion of Paul's

Tychicus: companion of Paul's; leader in the church at Ephesus

