

## STUDY GUIDE FOR SMALL GROUPS

Summer Shorts

### Philemon

Week of August 9

“Runaway Grace”

Text: Philemon

#### Background

- This shortest of all Paul’s letters was addressed to Philemon (although two other persons are included in the salutation).
- From the letter itself it appears that Onesimus had run away from Philemon's household, perhaps taking some money as he went. This would not be unusual in the ancient world. Many slaves risked the wrath of their owners. In this letter, Paul intercedes with Philemon (who was an outstanding member of the church at Colosse) for his runaway slave Onesimus who had stolen from his master and made his way to Rome or Ephesus. There he had been providentially brought face to face with Paul and had found Christ as his Savior. He became endeared to the apostle by his devoted service.
- Paul was now in a delicate position. Not only was there more than legality at stake, Paul was faced with two estranged Christians, both of whom, under God, owed their salvation to him (v.19). If the gospel both have embraced is the message of reconciliation (Col. 1:18-20; 3:12-17; cf. 2 Cor. 5:17-21), then it must be able to bring together slave and free as it did Jew and Greek, or male and female (Col. 3:11; Gal. 3:28). Paul is faced with a test case. Paul sends him home and implores with Philemon to take him back. He makes himself personally responsible for the debts that Onesimus owes, asking that they be charged to his (Paul’s) account. He wished to save the runaway slave from the severe and cruel punishment he deserved according to Roman law. Paul sent his letter with the slave so that Onesimus would not encounter his outraged master alone.
- Paul is not asking for a willingness to let bygones be bygones from either party. Nor is he offering good advice to Philemon on how to maintain a dignified detachment, untroubled by passion or anger. He knows that there may be some real emotions in both Philemon and Onesimus. Rather Paul seeks the specifically Christian virtue of loving forgiveness, which will demand humility from both parties - Onesimus to seek forgiveness, and Philemon to grant it. Onesimus must abandon fear: Philemon, pride.' And the thing which will induce both parties to do this is a theological fact, namely the fellowship (koinonia) which belongs to the people of Christ. If, then, Christian reconciliation is Paul's aim, the driving force of the whole letter is the prayer of verse 6, which is comprehensible in the light of the letter as a whole. Philemon is to learn in practice that koinonia means an 'interchange' between those who are Christ's.

- This is a very personal letter which reveals not only the concern of the apostle for a converted slave but also a practical demonstration of koinonia in Christ, where “there is neither bond nor free” (Gal. 3:8).
- Christian love and forgiveness are given prominence in the book of Philemon. The power of the gospel in winning a runaway slave and in changing a master’s mind is clearly shown here.
- The Reverend Sir W. Robertson Nicoll, editor of the Expositor’s Bible, once said, “If I were to covet any honor of authorship, it would be this: That some letters of mine might be found in the desks of my friends when their life struggle is ended.” It is a personal letter from Paul to Philemon. Only one chapter—only 25 verses—but containing such strong and beautiful statements so well expressed that it stands out as a gem.
- Notice the humility, courtesy and tactfulness of Paul’s letter. Some people who find it hard to speak to anyone about Christ might find it easier to write about Him. Then, too, text is good for the one who receives it, for the person has a chance to read and reread it and think its contents over. This might be a helpful tool for someone in the group.
- This letter deals with the question of slavery, but Paul does not demand the abolition of slavery. Instead, he shows that slavery can never be a byproduct of Christianity. This beautiful letter from God’s aging servant, bound to serve the gospel, fore-shadows the time when the bonds of Christ’s love will break the bonds of slavery.

## Discussion Questions

### Opening Questions (your choice).

- Describe a time when you were given a second chance at something (a task, a relationship, etc.).
  - Recall a time when you played the role of a reconciler, approaching someone on behalf of another person. What were your hopes? What were your fears? How did you decide what approach to take?
1. How would you describe the mood of Paul in the opening verses? What would you say it means to be a “prisoner for Christ”? What images/feelings/thoughts/ ideas does this conjure up?
  2. What can you tell about how Paul felt about the church in Colossae and Philemon’s leadership? What qualities of Philemon do you respect and why? Are there any qualities that give you pause?
  3. When Paul tells people what he’s praying for when he thinks of them, this often gives us the clue to the inner meaning of the letter. What is Paul praying for Philemon, and what could his prayer have to do with the matter of Onesimus?
  4. How much importance does Paul place on being a partner in ministry? What would being a partner be a key concept? When have you seen that in the church today? When have you not seen it?
  5. This partnership must have its powerful effect. The effect will be in realizing every good thing that is at work in them. Realizing means not only recognizing and knowing but also as it does its work, it produces new things, good things, new ways of living for individuals, households and communities.
  6. Read Philemon 8-14. How does Paul give his own stamp of approval to and identify with Onesimus? Why would that be significant? When have you needed to have someone validate you? Or when would it be important to validate someone else as brothers or sisters in Christ?
  7. How else does Paul seek to persuade Philemon while still showing respect to him?
  8. Paul shows how he and Onesimus have established a loving relationship, similar to the one he has with Philemon. In fact, Paul wants Philemon to see Paul instead of Onesimus standing there. How does this character trait in Paul demonstrate how we are to see one another? What could we learn from this?
  9. Read 15-25. How does Paul draw Philemon’s attention to the larger purposes of God? What are they? What does it matter?
  10. When has an apparent loss or wrong doing led you to recognize God at work in your life in surprising ways?
  11. What is Christlike about what Paul offers to do in vs 17-20?
  12. Some have used this book to support the idea of slavery. Others have said it doesn’t. What do you think? Why?

13. If the gospel is about the lordship of Jesus, over real lives, the real world and over the real decisions, Philemon is a wonderful example of the practice of forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration. How does this book encourage you in your walk with Christ? Challenge you?
14. What guidance does this letter or Paul's character, or Christ's will offer for our prayer life?
15. Is there a difficult situation or a difficult personal relationship that we as a group might we be able to pray for one another?