

ABIDE: A BIBLE READING CHALLENGE

JOURNEY THROUGH THE NEW TESTAMENT

BECOMING BROTHERS

PHILEMON

The Gospel, as I hope you have found to be true in your life, changes everything.

Believing the Gospel of Christ is what brings your dead spirit to life. It was dead, hopeless, lifeless, unable to move, and unable to be satisfied in any way, and then by trusting the Gospel, God, by the Holy Spirit, makes you alive in Him. That's a massive change! It's the kind of change that causes a series of chain reactions in your life. Take your outlook on life, now. Your work has purpose. Serving God through Christ gives validation to everything.

Take a look at your worship life now. You don't have to guess how to speak to God, or praise God, or simply hope in yourself that everything will work out in the end. In Christ, the Gospel changes the way we worship.

Take a look at your relationships now. The Gospel changes the way you raise your children and the way you treat other members of your family. It changes the way we see the lost. And as we see in this letter, it changes the way we see other brothers and sisters in Christ, and people in general.

The backdrop of how this letter even came about is extremely interesting. It seems that Paul wrote this letter while he was a prisoner in the city of Rome for the first time, and that Philemon was a friend Paul had won to Christ in Colossae several months back. What is even more interesting is how personal the letter is as you read it. Paul wrote to Timothy, and Paul wrote to Titus, but neither of these letters were written like this letter. Here, it was addressed to one person, and unlike Paul's other letters, it was written to just one person, and that person was Philemon. There was no instruction to share with the church; simply personal instruction to share with Philemon. Usually, it's never okay to read someone's personal mail, but in the case of Philemon, the Holy Spirit has given us a pass.

You see, Philemon had a slave named Onesimus, who decided that he didn't want to be Philemon's slave anymore, and it seems to help finance this little escape plan, Onesimus stole some property and found himself in Rome. It appears though, that while Onesimus was enjoying his freedom, he met someone in Rome who explained that he was really in bondage. By God's providence, Onesimus found the ministry of Paul, became a believer, and then began helping Paul in various things.

We wonder how long it took before the subject finally came up. Did it happen right away, in finding out that there was a mutual relationship between the two of them? Did it take weeks? Months? There's no way to tell. We just know that the conversation eventually did happen, and when it did, it was decided— Onesimus would go back home and face Philemon.

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But the reason you and I are reading this letter is because Paul did not send Onesimus back to Philemon empty-handed. And as we stop and consider the content that Paul provides his friend, it absolutely deals a deathblow to the subject of slavery, what Christian forgiveness is all about, and how to move forward in a relationship when we have been wounded. This is where the power of the Gospel begins to shine ever more brightly as we see the change that is able to take a physical slave and make him a spiritual brother.

This letter is a Gospel Masterpiece.

How to Think about Philemon

The Praise of Philemon (Verses 4-7): Evidently, Philemon was a godly man with a godly family. This was a man who raised his children well, who had done well financially, and then used that wealth to help others. In fact, it seems that from verse 2, that the church of which Philemon was a member, met in his very own home, and that everyone that met this man was blessed by him.

The Plea for Onesimus (Verses 8-18): In these verses Paul speaks to Philemon about Onesimus and how God had brought them together. Paul goes on to explain that he was able to witness to and lead him to faith in Christ, and further, that Onesimus had been a help to him, and had proved very valuable in his service to Paul. However, Paul also told Philemon that the right thing to do would be to send Onesimus back home. With that being the case, Paul also knew that as a slave, and now, as a thief, Onesimus could be charged with some very severe punishment for this crime, and so Paul asks Philemon to forgive Onesimus and accept him for the brother that he now is.

The Promise of Paul (Verses 19- 25): At the climax of the letter, Paul is not only trying to restore a relationship with an appeal, but attempting to restore this relationship by physical restitution. Paul tells Philemon that if there is anything that was damaged or taken that he still would like to hold Onesimus responsible for, then Paul would take on that debt so that Philemon and Onesimus could have a fresh start for the Gospel's sake.

What to Look for in Philemon

Key Doctrines—

Forgiveness: Forgiveness is all over this little letter. Christ had forgiven Paul of his sins and saved him. Christ had forgiven Philemon of his sins and saved him. Christ had forgiven Onesimus of his sins and saved him. Now, here is an opportunity to be like Christ. Paul reaches out to Philemon and asks that he simply do the same work that Christ had done for him.

Equality: The world loves to place divisions around people groups. Race, class, status, popularity, influence, education— but the gospel is the wrecking ball that demolishes the wall of separation. The Gospel provides a bond of equality because of our union with Christ, that cannot be found in any other place or system.

What to Gain from Philemon

There are two sides to this tale. There is the side that needs to extend forgiveness. Then, there is the side that needs to reconcile to right a wrong. Let's look at both of those things.

It's Never Wrong to Be Like Christ— You can be a church-going, Bible believing, saint-refreshing Christian and still let an offense get to you. For some reason it's hard to swallow our own advice and live by our own beliefs. Well, not for some reason,

but for a sin reason. Sin really does blind us to our need to extend forgiveness to others and it seems that Paul was trying to safeguard Philemon against this. Paul wrote to Philemon to help him to think through the process. Paul reminded him of his spiritual growth— how he had grown in Christ, and how he had come to Christ. Why? Because when you're wronged, it's easy to stop thinking clearly— it's easy to stop thinking Biblically. We can assume by the preservation of this letter, that God touched Philemon's heart by these words. Maybe he was angered when he looked at Onesimus' face, but then tears started streaming down his face as he read each word. And then, with three words, this relationship took on a whole new dynamic. What were those three words? It's the same words that Christ meets us with every time we come to Him in our need, "I forgive you..."

Philemon learned a lesson that we all need to learn— that it's never wrong to be like Christ.

It's Never Wrong to Make it Right— Sometimes, when we're wrong, we would like to just not mention it. We would like for everything to just blow over and save a little bit of our pride and pretend like nothing happened. That isn't right. We know it's not right, and so did Paul. That's why eventually Paul had a hard conversation with Onesimus, "You know you're going to have to go back home and face Philemon, don't you?" Maybe Onesimus protested. Maybe he told Paul about the temper that no one gets to see. Perhaps Onesimus tried to remind Paul how much he had helped and what a great asset he could still be to Paul's ministry? It didn't matter. The right thing to do was to go back home and ask Philemon for forgiveness.

This is an important lesson for us. We like to come up with reasons on why someone deserved a wrong we had done to them. When trying to find some sort of moral high ground over the person we've wronged to explain away why we haven't done anything about it. Onesimus was a slave! What greater moral high ground could there be? Would you be able to top that?

No, there is no wiggle room here. We need to learn what Onesimus had to learn— that it's never wrong to make it right.



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