

Bible Study Discussion Guide

Philemon

Paul's letter to Philemon addresses the issue of a 'runaway' slave called Onesimus. Onesimus, who became a follower of Christ in Rome, had become a close companion and co-worker to Paul while he was in prison there. Paul appeals to Philemon in the letter to accept Onesimus back into his household as a Christian brother, and to forgive his past wrongdoings.

The Knowing God Bible study discussion guides are provided to facilitate small group Bible study. We encourage everyone in the group to read or listen to the Bible text about ten times over the course of the study. We recommend providing a copy of these notes to each member of the group and selecting an individual to lead each week's study.

The letter to Philemon takes approximately 3 minutes to read.

This discussion guides provides questions for two sessions.

Principles for use:

1. Encourage everyone in the group to read Philemon many times.
2. Trust God to help you understand and apply his Word.
3. Focus on what the book reveals about God/Jesus.
4. Focus on what it clearly reveals about how God wants us to live.
5. Don't get bogged down on minor, uncertain or controversial issues.

For further copies, visit the Bibleworld website and follow the link to Bible Study Resources. The notes can either be printed off or if you prefer to remain paperless, you can view the questions online.

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I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.

Philemon 1:6

Introduction: This short letter was addressed to Philemon, Apphia and Archippus, all of whom were members of the church at Colosse. Philemon was converted through Paul's ministry (v 19) and Apphia is understood to be the wife of Philemon, and Archippus a family member. This letter is one of the most private books of the New Testament in which Paul pleads for the life of one runaway slave.

Slavery in the Roman world: Slavery was very common in the Roman world with at least 50% of the population being slaves. A master could have anything from 2 to 200 slaves or a very wealthy person may have had 20,000 slaves. Unlike the Old Testament law, Roman law gave no protection to slaves. Masters were able to crucify their slaves if they ran away from home or for other reasons. If a runaway slave was not killed, he or she could have branded on their forehead 'CF' for 'Cave Furem' – 'Beware the thief' or 'FF' for 'fugitilus' or 'Fugitive'.

Occasion of Writing: Philemon's slave, Onesimus, had run away from his master. Onesimus had ended up in Rome where he heard the preaching of Paul and became a convert of Christ. Onesimus became a dear son and fellow worker of Paul's. However Paul recognised that it was illegal and unethical for him to harbour a runaway slave, and he realised that it was important for Onesimus to be returned to Philemon. This return was difficult for Paul, for Philemon and for Onesimus. Paul had to write with great tact and diplomacy, pleading for a fair outcome for Onesimus. Paul requested forgiveness, acknowledging that Onesimus has done wrong in the past, but testifying to a changed character. Paul offered to take personal responsibility for any debts of Onesimus. Onesimus's name means 'useful' and the slave who was 'useless' has now become useful not only to Paul and Philemon, but also to God. Paul begs Philemon to accept Onesimus back as a brother as well as a slave.

Outcome of Paul's letter: We are not told in this letter what happened to Onesimus. Ignatius was a church father who wrote in the 2nd century A.D. about a man called Onesimus. He describes Onesimus as a leader of the Ephesian church and said he was a 'man of inexpressible love' and 'an excellent bishop'. If Onesimus did later fulfil such a role, it could explain why this little letter made it into our Bibles.

Session One: Treating Others with Respect

What particularly stood out to you as you read this letter?

What do we learn in this letter about the character of Paul, Onesimus and Philemon? What words would you use to describe each one?

Imagine yourself as one of the characters in this letter. Would you prefer to have been Paul, Onesimus or Philemon? Explain to the group the reasons for your choice.

One of the great themes of the Bible is the command to care for the poor and marginalised (including widows, orphans, foreigners, and prisoners). As a slave, Onesimus was one the disadvantaged people in society. However Paul, an educated Jew, called the Gentile slave Onesimus, his son, and treated him with real respect as a brother in Christ. What might have helped Paul empathise with Onesimus?

Paul urges Philemon to adopt a different mind-set toward Onesimus (slave to fellow brother). What advantage is there in changing the way we think about people? How might this affect the way we approach our relationships with others? In what way does Paul's treatment of Onesimus reflect Christ's treatment of us as believers?

Who are the disadvantaged people in society today that tend to get overlooked or mistreated or distrusted? Can you identify a person you know who has treated with real respect the disadvantaged people in society?

Session Two: Being a Peacemaker

In this situation Paul acted as a peacemaker between Onesimus and Philemon. What did Paul do well in this situation?

The letter is addressed not just to Philemon but to other people, including the church that meets at Philemon's home. How might the church have been able to help both Philemon and Onesimus in this reconciliation process?

Do you tend to be a conflict avoider or a peacemaker? Have you ever been involved in seeking to bring peace or restore relationships between other people? What have you learnt from doing so?

Jesus taught: Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Matthew 5:9. In life we often encounter people with strongly divisive views about race, religion and politics. How might we be peacemakers when we encounter this type of divisiveness?

We also encounter conflict within families, friendships, churches, clubs and work places. How might we be peacemakers in these situations?

Is there a situation you know of today where you could help to bring peace and reconciliation?