



*Becoming Fully Devoted Followers
by Studying the Followers Before Us*

WEEK 50
PHILEMON
DECEMBER 10-14, 2007

DAY	<i>THROUGH THE BIBLE</i>	ABBREVIATED STUDY
Monday	1 Thessalonians 4-6, Psalm 96	Philemon 1-7, Psalm 96
Tuesday	1 Timothy, Psalm 97	Philemon 8-14, Psalm 97
Wednesday	2 Timothy, Psalm 98	Philemon 15-16, Psalm 98
Thursday	Titus & Philemon, Psalm 99	Philemon 17-25, Psalm 99
Friday	Hebrews 1-6, Psalm 100	Philemon 1-25, Psalm 100

READ

Philemon 1-7

Psalm 96

REFLECT

The epistle of Paul to Philemon is the shortest of Paul's letters – only 25 verses long – and was probably written between 60-62 AD while Paul was a prisoner in Rome. Paul writes to Philemon and two others, Apphia and Archippus. Apphia was probably Philemon's wife, and Archippus his son, brother or friend.

Philemon was a wealthy Gentile slave-owner who lived in Colossae. The name Philemon means "affectionate" or "one who is kind." It is difficult to reconcile that name with a slave-owner, but during that time as many as one third of the urban population were slaves and were considered household servants. Philemon came to Christ through Paul's influence (v.19), and opened his home as a meeting place for other Christians.

Verses 1-3 are typical of the greetings in all of Paul's letters, beginning with, "I, Paul," stating his relationship with God, and ending in praise and thanksgiving for the recipient. Wouldn't it be cool if we all greeted each other in such a way? I am reminded of a Presbytery meeting I attended several years ago, where the Moderator asked some missionaries from Glenkirk Presbyterian Church to give a report on a recent trip to Africa. I don't remember the name of the missionary, but she told of a village where everyone they met introduced himself or herself by saying, "Hello, my name is _____, and Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior." They linked their names with Jesus, as if He was their title or degree. Like Paul, they made clear in the first sentence who they are.

In Verses 4-7, we learn that Paul has heard about Philemon's faith and hospitality to other believers, even 1,200 miles away! Paul thanks God for his friend Philemon's love and faith, which "brims over" so that people recognize Christ in all things.

RESPOND

How do you evangelize? Do you tell people about Jesus through your words or your actions, or a little of both? Do you thank God for your brothers and sisters in Christ, and do you pray that this faith we have in common will show in all things? I hope this week you will take a moment to greet and thank the people who have inspired you in the same way Paul greeted and thanked Philemon.

PRAY

Oh Lord, we want nothing more than to be Your prisoner and slave. Command us, Lord. Tell us how You would have us serve. We pray that people will recognize Christ in all that we say and do. Thank You, God, for friends and family, and a church where we can meet and glorify You. Amen.

- C.B.

READ

Philemon 8-14

Psalms 97

REFLECT

Philemon must have been smiling after reading such an uplifting greeting. Yet I wonder if he thought, “Uh Oh,” when he read the next sentence: “. . . I have a favor to ask of you.” Paul goes on to say he could command this favor from Philemon if he thought it necessary, but that he’d rather make it a personal request.

And what is this request? Nothing less than to receive and forgive his slave, Onesimus. Presumably Onesimus, which means “useful,” had run away from Philemon at some point in the past. In those days, a runaway slave’s name would have been registered with the authorities and placed on a “wanted” list. Any citizen who found a runaway could take custody of the slave, and would then contact the owner to arrange a return of the “property.”

The text doesn’t tell us how Onesimus came to be with Paul. Perhaps he was a fellow prisoner in the Roman jail, or maybe he sought Paul out, knowing he was Philemon’s friend and hoping for reconciliation. We only know that Onesimus has made himself most useful to Paul, who refers to the slave as his “child” and states that sending him away felt like “cutting off my right arm.”

Paul chose to appeal to Philemon on the basis of Christ’s love for all people, rather than on the basis of power. Paul’s words elevated Onesimus from slave to son, but it was still Philemon’s choice to receive the slave as property, or as a man.

RESPOND

These verses remind me of a friend who is always doing favors for other people. She always says “Yes” when asked to run errands for her mother-in-law (who isn’t particularly grateful). She helps her children financially and emotionally. She offers her shoulder to cry on and her advice when asked. She seems to do all these things because she *wants to*, not because she *has to*.

One day I asked her how she was able to give so much, so effortlessly. She replied, “I just ask myself, ‘what is it really going to cost me?’ And most times the answer is, ‘nothing.’” Once she recognizes this, she embraces and even enjoys the task at hand.

Have you ever applied pressure to someone you have asked for a favor? Have you ever done someone a favor out of guilt or from obligation? Next time you ask for or do a favor for someone else, remember Christ’s love and Paul’s words to Philemon.

PRAY

Heavenly Father, thank You for the examples of grace and generosity you have given us through Paul’s letter to Philemon and through the actions of our friends. May we be inspired by these examples to enhance our lives and to glorify You. Amen.

- C.B.

READ

Philemon 15-16

Psalms 98

REFLECT

These next few verses are the crux of the letter from Paul to Philemon, and are echoed throughout the New Testament: All believers – master and slave, teacher and disciple, father and son – are spiritual equals, having the same status in a partnership with Christ.

This was a radical concept that placed Philemon in a precarious position. Should he embrace Onesimus as a “brother,” without punishment? What would the neighbors say? How would that affect the other slaves?

It’s not clear whether Paul was asking for Onesimus’ manumission, or his reinstatement as servant, but it is clear that the owner-slave relationship was no longer possible.

It must have been humbling for Philemon to realize that his slave had been serving Paul’s needs in prison so effectively that he was considered a “stand-in” for Philemon. Paul says he wanted to keep Onesimus with him “in the worst way,” but is letting him go so that he can help Philemon even more. Onesimus had lived up to his name; now would Philemon live up to his?

What strikes me about these verses is Paul’s complete confidence in both Philemon and Onesimus. Paul trusts that Philemon will forgive and accept Onesimus, and that Onesimus will minister side-by-side with Philemon.

Perhaps it is Paul’s confidence in God’s call to these two believers that is the truly amazing thing.

RESPOND

God calls each of us, with our different gifts and opportunities, to minister to and with and for each other. This sense of partnership, so revolutionary during Philemon’s time, enables us to view our neighbor as important and valuable. To put aside our social and economic differences and share equally in the everlasting life and faith that is ours through Christ Jesus.

As you go about your business today, ask yourself, “Who is my neighbor?” Is it the family living next door, the CEO in the downtown office building, or the homeless man rummaging through the trash bin? How will you minister to and with these people?

PRAY

Gracious and loving God, You placed a piece of Yourself in each of us so that we might recognize each other. Help us to look for and see that spirit in our friends and neighbors. Thank You for having the confidence to call us to Your service. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

- C.B.

READ

Philemon 17-25

Psalm 99

REFLECT

In verses 17-20, Paul drives home what he has been hinting at since verse 10. Each sentence is a specific request, but written in such a clever way that ensures Philemon will comply:

1. Welcome Onesimus back just as you would welcome me;
2. Charge his debts to my account;
3. Lift up both of our hearts and faith in the Lord; and
4. Get a room ready for me.

How could Philemon say “No” to any of these requests? Refusing to welcome Onesimus would be like refusing to welcome Paul. Paul guarantees Onesimus’ debts, and he reminds Philemon of Philemon’s effective ministry to other believers, including Paul. And then, almost as an afterthought, Paul says, “And by the way, get a room ready for me, because I expect your prayers for my release to be answered soon.”

The letter ends in Paul’s usual manner, with a final greeting, a list of his fellow prisoners and a benediction. Finally, Paul reminds Philemon that they all share the same Master, Jesus Christ.

RESPOND

Imagine that this letter from Paul to Philemon was written by Jesus to you. Jesus greets you and your family, praises your ministry, and asks for a “little” favor. He’s careful to assure you that you don’t have to grant the favor, but that it would please Him if you did. Then He asks:

1. Welcome your neighbor as you would Me;
2. Your debts are forgiven on My cross;
3. Your actions refresh My heart and glorify God/Me; and
4. Get ready, I’m coming!

How can you say, “No?”

PRAY

Lord Jesus, this Advent season reminds us of Your first coming as a baby and of Your promise to come again as our King. Help us to be ready for that joyous time. Help us to love and forgive and lift up each other as You have loved and forgiven and lifted us up. Amen.

- C.B.

READ

Philemon 1-25

Psalms 100

REFLECT

There are many interesting features about Paul's epistle to Philemon. While it was not unusual for Paul to include some handwritten phrases in his letters (very often to authenticate them), this letter was not dictated to or written by an amanuenses. Paul's other letters were directed to Churches and their leadership, while this letter is directed to an individual over a seemingly personal matter.

Also interesting are the different characters. We have Paul, an ex-Jewish Pharisee and now itinerate preacher; Philemon, a Gentile land/slave owner who has opened his home to fellow Christians; and Onesimus, a runaway slave and therefore a homeless criminal. Yet the letter shows us how all three were equal and united in their faith in Christ – a revolutionary idea at that time, and an idea we still struggle with today.

Some scholars believe Philemon had no choice but to acquiesce to Paul's requests, so skillful was Paul's manipulation. Others point to Paul's repeated assurance that this was a personal request between friends. What do you think?

Did you know that both sides of the American Civil War used Paul's letter to Philemon to support their completely opposite causes? The North used Paul's words as the basis for abolishing slavery while the South focused on the fact that Paul doesn't require Onesimus' freedom.

Did Philemon free Onesimus? We don't know for sure. It may be that Onesimus was more of an indentured servant than a slave born into

captivity or captured in war. Certainly Paul's guarantee in verses 17-20 points to the possibility of the former. History records an Onesimus who was a Bishop in Ephesus during the reign of Domitian in 95 AD. This Onesimus was later thrown in jail and martyred for his beliefs (some say by stoning, others by beheading). He would have been an old man then, but could very well have been Philemon's former slave.

RESPOND

The Bible has often been used to "prove" two opposing sides of an issue. That is why it is so important for us to read and study and pray over the text ourselves. That is why we must share our understanding of the Bible with each other and trusted leaders, and be open to the truth that God is communicating to us through it.

PRAY

Thank You God, for giving us Your Word in the person of Jesus Christ and in the Bible. Everything we need to know about You can be seen in the words and actions of Jesus, and can be known through the study of Your Bible, especially in the letters of Paul. May we be Your servants as Philemon, Paul and Onesimus were. Amen.

- Christine Boling

Walk Through The Bible Readings
MONTH AT A GLANCE

December 10-14 Week 50

Monday	1 Thess. 4-6	Psalm 96
Tuesday	1 Timothy	Psalm 97
Wednesday	2 Timothy	Psalm 98
Thursday	Titus & Philemon	Psalm 99
Friday	Hebrews 1-6	Psalm 100

December 17-21 Week 51

Monday	Hebrews 7-10	Psalm 101
Tuesday	Hebrews 11-13	Psalm 102
Wednesday	James	Psalm 103
Thursday	1-2 Peter	Psalm 104
Friday	1-2-3 John, Jude	Psalm 105

December 24-28 Week 52

Monday	Revelation 1-5	Psalm 106
Tuesday	Revelation 6-9	Psalm 107
Wednesday	Revelation 10-14	Psalm 108
Thursday	Revelation 15-18	Psalm 109
Friday	Revelation 19-22	Psalm 110

PRAYER JOURNAL

This week I am praying for . . .

. . . God's direction and provision as well as for renewed vision and passion for Chris and Christine Kernaghan serving with Campus Crusade for Christ on the college campuses of the San Francisco area.

. . . a father and his three children who are clients at the Shepherd's Pantry. The mother is ill and has returned to her home in South America. The father has no job and is struggling to provide for his children.

And . . .
