



PHILEMON:
A STORY OF FORGIVENESS
An interactive Bible study for
individuals, families,
and LIFE Groups

“The God of Second Chances”
Philemon 1-25

Welcome to UPC’s weekly series of Bible studies. We pray that this guide will help you **RECALL** what you heard in the Sunday sermon, **REFLECT** on the Scriptures more fully, and **RESPOND** with faith and obedience. Whether you work through these lessons on your own, with a friend, or in your family or LIFE Group, we pray they will help you know “the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3).

SOME FACTS ABOUT PHILEMON

- **What is the book of Philemon?** It’s a letter written around A.D. 60 to a wealthy land-owner named Philemon who lived in the city of Colosse (modern-day Turkey). Converted under Paul’s ministry, Philemon was a leader of the Colossian church and noted for his loving spirit. This letter was not meant for Philemon’s eyes only, but for the congregation that met in his home.
- **Who wrote this letter to Philemon?** The apostle Paul wrote both Philemon and the letter to the Colossians from prison in Rome. He sent both letters to Colosse by a messenger named Tychicus. Another man from Colosse named Onesimus accompanied him. Philemon is Paul’s smallest extant letter.
- **Who was Onesimus?** He was one of Philemon’s slaves. Onesimus had stolen something from his master and run away. No doubt Onesimus had heard of the great apostle

Paul from his master and knew he was in Rome. Something – or Someone – drove Onesimus to search for Paul, who subsequently led him to Christ. During his stay in Rome, Paul and Onesimus had become close friends.

- **What is the message of Philemon?** Paul wrote this letter to ask Philemon to forgive Onesimus. For a slave to run away from his master was a serious offense in that culture, possibly punishable by death. So Paul appealed to Philemon to receive Onesimus back, “no longer as a slave, but . . . as a brother in the Lord” (vs. 16). Philemon is therefore a story of God’s forgiveness of us who have broken his law, as well as a touching call for us to forgive others.

WARM UP

As we study Philemon, we’re going to be thinking about peacemaking and reconciliation. If possible, share about a time when you experienced estrangement from a brother or sister in Christ and subsequent reconciliation. How did the reconciliation come about? Did God use a mediator to bring the two of you together? What steps did you follow to give or receive forgiveness in this situation? How do you feel about the experience today? Did you feel closure?

RECALL THE SUNDAY SERMON

In Sunday’s sermon, we learned that Philemon had to choose: would he forgive his runaway slave Onesimus, or would he hold on to a grudge against him and suffer the consequences of bitterness?

- a) Can you recall any of the Scriptures used in the Sunday sermon to show how important it is to God that we forgive people? What’s at stake in this matter?

b) Paul asked Philemon to receive Onesimus back and view him as a brother in the Lord rather than a slave (vss. 15-16). What is the implication of that for forgiveness?

c) What do you learn about peacemaking from Paul as you listen to him persuade Philemon to forgive Onesimus?

d) What should be our incentives for forgiving people that hurt us?

e) Did you find anything else particularly interesting, encouraging, convicting, or relevant in Sunday's sermon?

REFLECT A BIT FURTHER

a) Sometimes you hear phrases like, "Let bygones be bygones," "Forgive and forget," "Get over it," and the like. How do sayings like that compare and contrast with Biblical forgiveness?

b) In your experience, what makes forgiveness so difficult?

c) Is it possible to forgive someone and not "welcome him" back, as Paul asks Philemon to do in vs. 17?

d) What fresh glimpses of Jesus did you catch as you studied Philemon?

RESPOND TO GOD'S WORD

It is clear that peace within the body of Christ is of highest priority to God. God doesn't give any of us permission to hold a grudge. In Matthew 5, Jesus teaches that if your brother or sister has something against you, YOU need to take the initiative to seek reconciliation. And in Matthew 18, Jesus teaches that if you have something against your brother or sister, YOU need to take the initiative to seek reconciliation!

Is there someone you need to give a second chance to? Someone from whom you need to ask forgiveness? This week, take responsibility for your part in the reconciliation process. Your brother or sister may choose not to reconcile, but you can do your part to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3).

"To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you."
C. S. Lewis