

Living Word Small Group Study Guide

September 13-19, 2020

Sermon Series: Phaith of Phil

Week One: "The Breadth of Faith"

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week's Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday's sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

Suggested Opening Prayer:

Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.

Almighty God, deliver us, when we draw close to You, from coldness of heart and wanderings of mind, so that, with steadfast thoughts and deepest affection, we might worship You in spirit and in truth. We pray through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Sermon Series Theme:

Philemon is among the shortest books in the Bible, but in it we learn much. In this book, we learn the breadth and depth of faith.

This Week's Sermon Theme:

Paul praises the breadth of Phil's faith for the way he is willing to both care for others generously as well as share faith openly.

Sunday Scripture Reading: Philemon 4-7 (A group member should read the passages aloud).

For Group Discussion:

What does the text actually SAY?

The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.

When does Paul give thanks to God for Philemon? (4)

What two things has Paul heard about Philemon, for which he gives thanks? (5)

What does Paul pray that Philemon will be active in doing? (6a)

Why does Paul want Philemon to be active in doing this? (6b)

What has Philemon's love accomplished for Paul himself? (7a)

What has Philemon done for the saints? (7b)

What questions does the text raise for us?

The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Encourage participants to simply ask any questions they have about the passage. The questions below are only suggestions, representative of the kinds of questions that might be asked. The goal is not necessarily to provide answers, but to ask questions of the text! Open discussion about the questions raised below, or by the class, is encouraged.

We probably wonder about the prior relationship between Paul and Philemon, especially since he is not mentioned elsewhere in the Scriptures.

We might also wonder exactly how, or from whom, Paul has heard about Philemon's faith and love.

We might wonder if Paul is implying that somehow Philemon has become *inactive* in the sharing of his faith.

We could wonder what Paul has in mind in wanting Philemon to understand "every good thing we have in Christ" – what is Philemon missing, exactly?

We probably wonder how Paul has experienced the love of Philemon that has given him joy – what did Philemon do for Paul?

Similarly, we might wonder how, exactly, Philemon has "refreshed the hearts of the saints," and why we haven't read about this anywhere else in Paul's letters.

Commentary on the text:

The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.

See also: Colossians 4:9; Colossians 4:23; Philemon 23; Philemon 1-3; Philippians 1:3-6; Colossians 1:3-8, 1 Thessalonians 1:2-5; Romans 8:1-10; 1 Corinthians 1:4; Colossians 4:12; Galatians 5:6; Philippians 2:1-11

Paul's letter to Philemon is a private, personal letter, unlike many of the letters of Paul that we have in the New Testament that were written to entire churches. While Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus are also personal in that they are addressed to an individual, their content is broader in scope and seems to have been intended by Paul to be applied by Timothy and Titus to the churches in general. The letter to Philemon, in contrast, is truly a private letter. Certainly, Paul must have written many private letters in his career, but this is the only one to have survived. This gives the letter to Philemon a special place in the canon of the New Testament, particularly when we consider that within it we see the apostle Paul literally asking another man for a favor – and a particularly large favor, at that. We will delve more deeply into the content of that favor next week but suffice it to say that what Paul asks of Philemon will go against the grain of Roman culture and expectation. To ask such a favor points to a prior close relationship between Paul and Philemon. Although we do not know the specific context of that relationship, it seems clear that Philemon was part of the church in Colossae, since in Colossians 4:9 and 4:12, Paul calls both Onesimus (the runaway slave the letter focuses on) and Epaphras (who Paul calls his fellow prisoner in Christ in Philemon 23) "one of you." Most likely, Philemon had met Paul, and been converted to Christianity, during Paul's ministry in Ephesus.

The fact that this is a private letter to Philemon may not be entirely clear when we read in Philemon 1-3 the words “to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church that meets in your home,” which sound like the letter is addressed to the entire church that meets in Philemon’s house. However, the grammatical construct of the letter makes clear that the letter itself is intended for Philemon – what is directed toward Apphia, Archippus, and their church, is the word of “grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul offers a word of grace to the leaders of Philemon’s church – words of greeting that Philemon would be expected to pass on to them for Paul.

Verses four through seven of the letter make up a standard part of all of Paul’s letters – the words of thanksgiving. But if we compare the thanksgiving here in Philemon to the words of thanksgiving in Philippians 1:3-6, Colossians 1:3-8, or 1 Thessalonians 1:2-5, we see that the thanksgiving in Philemon is longer than the thanksgiving in Paul’s letters to the churches. Apparently, due to the personal and private nature of this letter, Paul goes more deeply into both his prayer to God and in his words of praise for Philemon. He begins by saying “I *always* thank *my* God as I remember you in my prayers”. Paul often uses the word “always” with words of thanksgiving (See Romans 8:1-10 and 1 Corinthians 1:4, for example), and frequently refers to God with the very personal expression “*my* God” (as in Philippians 1:3). Paul thanks God specifically for what God has been able to accomplish in Philemon’s life – “because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints.” It is probable that Paul has heard about Philemon’s faith either through his co-worker Epaphras, as mentioned previously, or perhaps through Philemon’s escaped slave, Onesimus, who is at the center of the favor Paul will ask of Philemon.

It may be easy to overlook here a key theological point that Paul makes here in verse 5 - Paul praises the fact that Philemon’s love and faith are expressed in *two* directions. First, Paul mentions Philemon’s “faith in the Lord Jesus,” but second, Philemon’s “love for all the saints.” The words point to an important spiritual truth concerning the breadth of Christian faith – our faith is always directed first toward Christ, but at the same time, Christian love must always be expressed toward others. In Galatians 5:6, Paul wrote “the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” Paul gives thanks to God because Philemon’s faith in Jesus Christ has lived that out, being expressed through his love of the congregation that meets in his home. Paul’s carefully chosen words drive home the fact that our relationship with Christ is of primary importance. In fact, *authentic* love toward others *depends* upon our relationship with Christ.

In verse six, Paul lets Philemon in on the specific content of his prayers regarding Philemon – the NIV translates this “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.” But the original Greek is difficult to translate, and centers on the words “*koinonia pisteos*,” the “fellowship of your faith.” This may mean that Paul is praying that the bond (the fellowship) that exists between Philemon and Paul will lead Philemon into a deeper understanding of the gospel of Christ. It could also mean that Paul is praying that Philemon’s *own* community of faith – the “*koinonia*” found in his own house church, and the mutual faith-sharing that happens there, will lead him to this deeper faith (as the NIV quoted above emphasizes). But “*koinonia*” can also mean the act of personal sharing, in which case the verse would mean “I pray that your way of generously sharing in *all* you have will lead you deeper into the truth of the gospel” – not *only* the evangelistic “sharing of your faith.” This is the likely intent of Paul’s words, since Christian generosity was clearly a characteristic of Philemon – Paul has already talked about how Philemon loves the saints in his church, and Paul concludes his thanksgiving by referring to how his actions have

“refreshed the hearts of the saints.” Additionally, this interpretation leads directly to Paul’s bold request that we will look at next week – a request for Philemon to go even further in his acts of generosity. Again, the implication is powerful – that being open-handed and generous is the best way to learn more and more about “every good thing we have in Christ.”

This is also important because we need to see that the “full understanding,” or “knowledge” of Christ that Paul desires for Philemon is more than just an intellectual grasp of Christianity. Christian “understanding” or “knowledge” includes much more than intellectual awareness – in fact, the one who knows the most about Christ is not the intellectual scholar, not the saint who spends the day in prayer, but the person who truly lives immersed in a life expressed through loving generosity toward others. Knowledge, for the Christian, includes a true understanding of the gospel, its ethical principles, and what it really means to have the fellowship of *koinonia*. As we have been focusing on all year, it is to have “the mind of Christ” (Philippians 2:1-11).

Finally, we might wish that we had more specifics about what Philemon’s ministries actually entailed. We don’t have that – but what we do have is the conclusion to Paul’s words of thanksgiving in which he notes that many of the saints have had their hearts refreshed by Philemon’s work. The actual Greek word used here is that their hearts have been “given rest” – and it is perhaps no accident that Paul uses the same word that Jesus used in offering rest to the weary (see Matthew 11:28-29). We should also note that Paul, himself, is encouraged and joyful because of the news of Philemon’s successful ministry that has refreshed the hearts of his church! We will see next week that the word “heart” will form the link between Philemon, Paul, and the runaway slave Onesimus. In verse 12 Paul will say that Onesimus is Paul’s “very heart”, and in verse 20, Paul will ask Philemon to “refresh my heart” by responding favorably to his request, just as Philemon has refreshed the hearts of so many members of his own church.

Final Thoughts for Discussion:

The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.

How is the “breadth” of Christian faith being expressed in your life? Is your faith in Christ primary? But is your faith in Christ expressing itself through love of others?

Where do you find “koinonia” – the fellowship of faith? How is the “fellowship of faith” leading you to a deeper understanding of the gospel?

How are you participating in the active sharing of your faith?

Do you agree that through the acts of generosity and sharing we learn more about Jesus than through head knowledge or even pious acts of prayer?

What, in your own spiritual life, has led most fully to a “full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ”?

Would others be able to testify to how your own ministry has refreshed, and given rest to, their hearts?

What could you do this week to refresh, or give rest, to someone else’s heart?

Suggested Closing Prayer:

Holy God, we pray for You to mold us into the faith of Philemon. Help us to put faith in Christ first in our lives, but to always make that faith effective through our acts of love for our community. Show us the people in our paths who are in need of the rest and refreshment that Your Holy Spirit can bring to them through our own ministries. We pray in the holy name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.