

# Living Word Small Group Study Guide

September 20-26, 2020

Sermon Series: Phaith of Phil

Week Two: "The Depth 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, You who created us and called us to Yourself, pour out Your Holy Spirit on us today so that we may be wise stewards of the precious gifts You have given us for ministry. We pray in the name and spirit of Christ, 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:**

There are times when faith requires a deep sacrifice. Phil is asked to free Onesimus for the sake of ministry. This is both a cultural cost and a financial cost to Phil. In what ways is God asking you to go deep in faith at great cost to yourself?

**Sunday Scripture Reading:** Philemon 8-18 (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.*

What does Paul say he would do if he were bold? (8)

On what basis does Paul appeal to Philemon instead? (9a)

How does Paul describe himself to Philemon? (9b)

How does Paul describe Onesimus to Philemon? (10)

What does Paul say has changed about Onesimus? (11)

How does Paul describe Onesimus in verse 12? (12)

What is Paul going to do to Onesimus? (12)

What would Paul have liked to do with Onesimus? (13)

Why has Paul not forced the issue with Philemon? (14)

Why does Paul think Onesimus' separation from Philemon may have happened? (15)

What is Paul asking Philemon to do for Onesimus? (16-17)

What is Paul willing to do on Onesimus' behalf? (18)

### **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 might wonder why Paul feels like he could actually order Philemon to do something.

We probably wonder about the specific circumstances that have led Paul to view Onesimus as a son – why did Onesimus seek Paul out in the first place?

We might wonder why Paul thinks Onesimus was “useless” to Philemon in the past.

We probably wonder why Paul feels so compelled to send Onesimus back to Philemon when Paul seems to want to keep Onesimus with him.

We probably wonder what kind of sacrifices Paul is actually asking Philemon to make in asking him to receive Onesimus back as a Christian brother, and not as a slave.

We might also wonder what kind of treatment Onesimus would have expected upon his return to Philemon.

Finally, we might wonder why Paul is so willing to pay the price for any debt Onesimus might owe Philemon.

### **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: 2 Thessalonians 3:6; 2 Corinthians 8:8; Ephesians 5:4; 1 Timothy 1:2; 1 Corinthians 4:14; Galatians 4:19; Romans 8:28

Last week, we looked closely at the introduction and thanksgiving of Paul's letter to Philemon. There, we saw how Philemon's faith was expressed through both his generous care for others, and also in his willingness to share his faith openly with others. Through his words of praise, Paul has set the stage for the incredibly bold request that he makes now, in verses 8 through 18 of the letter. That request, essentially, consists of personal intercession on behalf of a runaway slave who would have absolutely no rights upon returning to his master, according to Roman law. What we will see is that the favor Paul asks

is for Philemon to receive back the slave Onesimus – not only forgiving him, but recognizing him as a Christian brother upon his return.

Paul begins, in verses 8 through 12, by addressing his own personal dilemma with regard to the situation. Paul acknowledges first that his own apostolic authority in Christ would give him the right to actually *command* Philemon to do what he is asking. Now, anyone who has read Paul's other letters knows that Paul was rarely timid in addressing his audience – see 2 Thessalonians 3:6 for one example of Paul giving his audience an explicit command. This does not stem from Paul's ego, as if he were on some sort of power trip. Rather, Paul has an absolute confidence that stems from his self-understanding of his calling as apostle to the Gentiles, and his relationship with Christ, that permits him to state the demands of the Christian life. But here, in Philemon, rather than give a commanding order, Paul decides to take a more humble approach. As with his encouragement of giving in his letter to the Corinthians (see 2 Corinthians 8:8), Paul makes his appeal on the basis of love.

Paul wants Philemon to do “the right thing,” “what you ought to do,” or “what is required” depending on which translation you are using. The phrase implies a standard, or norm, of ethical behavior, and it is vital to note that what Paul is asking actually violates the *cultural* norm of the day. According to Roman law and custom, “what is required” would have been extreme punishment of the runaway slave, up to and including execution. But Paul is asking Philemon to do what he ought to do, specifically, *according to a Christian ethic that differs from the cultural norm of the day*. Paul uses the very same Greek term that he uses in Ephesians 5:4 in telling them that what is required of them is to avoid obscene language, silly talk, and vulgar language! Paul wants Philemon to dive deep into the expression of his Christian faith, and accept the redefinition of “the right thing” that his faith demands.

Paul finally gets to the core of his request beginning in verse 10 – it is an appeal concerning Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave whom Paul refers to as “my child, who became my child while I was in chains.” We first need to recognize that Paul has used this same language of “my child” in referring to his protege Timothy (1 Timothy 1:2), and to refer to the congregations he founded in Corinth and Galatia (1 Corinthians 4:14, Galatians 4:19)! There was a Rabbinic saying in the Judaism of Paul's day – “If one teaches the son of his neighbor the law, the Scripture reckons this the same as though he had begotten him.” For Paul, to lead someone to Jesus Christ is as great a thing as to bring them into the world in the first place! When Paul refers to Onesimus as “his child,” and how “I became his father during my time in prison,” he is reflecting this common Jewish understanding of the significance of teaching someone the faith. It is not merely exaggerated language – Paul really does look upon Onesimus as his own child.

The name “Onesimus” was a very common slave name, because the name itself means “useful” or “beneficial.” This gives Paul the opportunity for a play on words in verse 11 – while Onesimus may have been “useless” before, now the one named “useful” will indeed BE “useful”! In fact, Onesimus will be useful not only to his legal owner, Philemon, but also to Paul. The difference, for Paul, is 100 percent in the change in Onesimus due to his newfound Christian faith. As a Christian, Onesimus has become someone of higher character, someone who Paul has seen embodying Christian servant ministry, someone who Philemon should receive back into his own service.

Of course, legally, Paul must return the runaway slave. But in verse 12, Paul says returning Onesimus is like “sending you my own heart.” As his “child,” Paul has deep personal feelings and commitments to Onesimus. Paul wants Philemon to recognize that when Onesimus arrives back at Philemon's house, it

will be as if Paul himself has arrived. Still, the decision to return Onesimus has been a difficult one. Paul gave serious thought to keeping Onesimus with him, even though he is legally obligated to return the slave to his owner. Paul says the reason for this is “so that he might serve me in your place during my time in prison because of the gospel.” In other words, Paul is saying, “Surely, Philemon, you would have served me while I’m in prison if you were here – but you’re not here, and your slave, Onesimus, has been doing exactly what you would have done if you were here. What more could you expect from your slave?”

Still, we see in verse 14 that Paul refuses to act without Philemon’s consent. Again, this is a significant statement. As a Christian, Philemon must welcome back the person who has made a mistake. As much as this may be true for anyone, Onesimus’ new identity as a brother in Christ makes it even more so. It is going to be quite difficult for Philemon to regard a runaway slave as a Christian brother, but that is exactly what Paul clearly expects Philemon to do. Is Philemon’s faith deep enough to take such an extraordinary step? It is a question of forgiveness. Often, we regard the person who has acted against us with suspicion, and we convince ourselves never to trust them again. We might believe God can forgive them, but to do so ourselves would be too difficult. Paul suggests that, perhaps, the entire reason Onesimus ran away in the first place was to provide Philemon the opportunity to extend this Christian grace. In Romans 8:28, Paul had written, “In all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.” Paul suggests that God’s providence could be at work even in this awkward, and potentially volatile, situation.

Finally, Paul reminds Philemon that they are partners in ministry. The two of them already enjoy a Christian relationship. Paul expects the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus to move to this same level. Welcome Onesimus as if you are welcoming me, Paul says. Further demonstrating the lengths to which Christian love extends, Paul offers to cover any debts Onesimus may owe to Philemon. We need here to recognize that in the ancient world, these words, written in a letter from Paul to Philemon and signed in his own hand, would have created a legal obligation on Paul to fulfill the promise. How could Paul possibly expect to fulfill such an obligation from prison? There are two possibilities. Perhaps, Paul knows Philemon will rise to his own Christian character and never consider making the claim. Or, perhaps Paul was not without financial resources even while in prison, holding onto some of the love offerings that have been given to him during his ministry. In any event, Paul continues to demonstrate the depth of Christian service that he now expects to see from his Christian friend, Philemon.

### **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 do you think you would have reacted to this letter, if you were in Philemon’s shoes?

Where have you seen a difference between what our culture would say is “the right thing to do” and what your Christian faith would say is “the right thing to do”?

Have you ever had a part in bringing someone to Christian faith? How would you describe your relationship with them? Do you consider them as if they were “your own child”?

How do you expect becoming a Christian to affect someone's character? What more is expected of someone who claims the name of "Christian"?

How do you think Philemon's forgiveness would affect a future relationship with Onesimus? Would it be possible for him to treat Onesimus as a Christian brother without forgiving him? Are there people for whom your failure to forgive is preventing the fullness of a Christian relationship?

Where have you seen God's providence at work in situations that you previously thought of only in negative terms?

To what lengths would you go to help restore a broken relationship between two Christian friends? Would you ever consider taking on their debts? Why or why not?

How deeply has your own faith been challenged? How did you respond?

**Suggested Closing Prayer:**

*Holy God, help us to trust in the power of Your love. Help us to know the power of forgiveness, and to become the kind of people whose faith responds even to the deepest challenges. When we are called upon to bury our pride, to make sacrifices, to defy cultural norms, or to restore broken relationships, we pray for the power of Your Holy Spirit to give us the strength to do so. We pray for the roots of our faith to grow deep, to help us withstand even the strongest storms. We pray in the holy name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*