

LESSON 1

A Story of Forgiveness

Scripture Focus

Philemon

Key Verse

“And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you” (Eph. 4:32)

Overview

Onesimus, a runaway slave and possible thief, was “found” by the apostle Paul and Jesus Christ. Paul sent Onesimus back to his master, Philemon, along with this letter. The letter urged Philemon to welcome Onesimus as a much-loved brother in Christ.

Topic

Forgiving one another

Theme

The forgiveness God has extended to us serves as the reason and the measure for our forgiving others.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will forgive others because he has been forgiven.

Outline

- I. Introduction (Philemon 1–3)
- II. Paul’s Prayers for Philemon (Philemon 4–7)
 - A. Prayers of thanks (vv. 4, 5)
 - B. Prayers of request (vv. 6, 7)
- III. Paul’s Appeal for Onesimus (Philemon 8–20)
 - A. Basis of the appeal (vv. 8, 9)
 - B. Occasion of the appeal (vv. 10–16)
 - C. Heart of the appeal (vv. 17–20)
- IV. Concluding remarks (Philemon 21–25)

Materials

- RBP transparencies 1–3
- Lesson 1 case study from resource CD
- Ephesians 4:32 verse card from resource CD

Getting Started

Rating Hard Tasks

Read the following tasks to your learners and have them rank each one on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 5 being extremely difficult) according to how hard they think the task is to complete.

Make macaroni and cheese
 Climb Mount Everest
 Paint a room
 Put together a swing set
 Grant forgiveness

Ask: Why is granting forgiveness difficult sometimes? What might make granting forgiveness easier? (Questions 1, 2)

Searching the Scriptures

I. Introduction (Philemon 1–3)

MAP: Display transparency 2. Note the locations on the map transparency as you mention them.

Paul began his letter calling himself a “prisoner of Jesus Christ” because he wrote while under house arrest in Rome, awaiting his hearing before Caesar. He accurately described his imprisonment as being “of Jesus Christ,” since his incarceration had resulted from preaching the gospel of Christ and not from breaking human laws.

READ: Philemon 1. **ASK:** How does Paul’s calling himself a prisoner instead of an apostle set up the tone of his letter? Why would the tone of Paul’s letter be important? (Questions 3, 4)

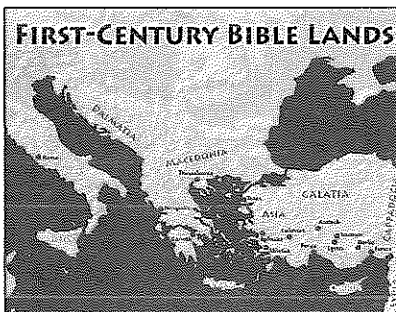
Timothy, a young man from the area of Derbe and Lystra, had joined Paul on Paul’s second missionary journey (Acts 16:1–3). He served faithfully, both as a companion and as a messenger of Paul until the end of Paul’s life.

Paul addressed this letter to Philemon, a man whom he loved as a brother in the family of God and a fellow in the service of Jesus Christ. Paul further mentioned Apphia and Archippus as addressees of his letter. Apphia probably was the wife of Philemon, and Archippus, the son of Philemon and Apphia.

Paul encouraged Archippus to fulfill the ministry he had received in the Lord (Col. 4:17). Archippus may have served as pastor of the church that met in Philemon’s home (Philemon 2).

Paul designated him a fellow soldier (v. 2), for Paul saw Archippus fighting the same spiritual enemies that he was fighting. Certainly these enemies included the evil spirit powers (Eph. 6:11, 12). Possibly the Jewish legalists, who insisted that Christians must keep the law of Moses, were also in Paul’s mind. Paul had chronic problems with the legalists in Asia Minor, and Archippus was ministering in that general area.

ASK: What similarities exist between the spiritual battles of Paul’s day and our day? (Question 5)



Philemon is one of Paul’s four letters called “prison epistles” because he wrote them while waiting for Caesar to hear his case. Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians comprise the other three.

It is significant that Paul included the church as an intended recipient of this letter (v. 2). The letter urged Philemon to forgive his runaway slave, Onesimus, who had become a believer. It also informed the church to receive Onesimus and offer him all the blessings of church fellowship. If the church met in Philemon's house and was to receive Onesimus as an active member, then Philemon should publicly receive Onesimus with full forgiveness. If Philemon forgave as he should, the entire church would know his personal victory over vengeance.

READ: Colossians 1:12–14. **ASK:** What do these verses say about the cost to God the Father and God the Son of providing forgiveness for us? (Question 6)

II. Paul's Prayers for Philemon (Philemon 4–7)

Although Paul was restricted as a prisoner, he maintained a constant prayer life, mentioning Christians throughout the world by name and commending them to the grace of God.

A. Prayers of thanks (vv. 4, 5)

Paul was thankful for Philemon because he had heard good reports about him. Possibly Epaphras, who was with Paul in Rome (Philemon 23) and who had taken news from Colosse to Paul (Col. 1:3–8; 4:12), had told Paul about Philemon. These “beloved brothers” in the Lord eagerly desired to share with one another the events of their lives and service for Christ. Having no phones or e-mail and little mail, personal messengers shuttled from church to the apostle and back bearing tidings.

The reports told Paul of Philemon's “love and faith . . . toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints” (Philemon 5). Philemon had faith toward the Lord Jesus and love toward all the saints. “Saints” in the Bible are all those set apart by faith in Christ, not a special class of super-Christians and certainly not merely dead Christians. Paul specified “all saints,” meaning all those with whom Philemon came into contact.

TRANSPARENCY: Display transparency 3 with the right half covered. **ASK:** How would faith and love play vital roles in Philemon's forgiveness of Onesimus, or in any believer's forgiveness of another believer? (Question 7) Record learners' answers on the transparency.

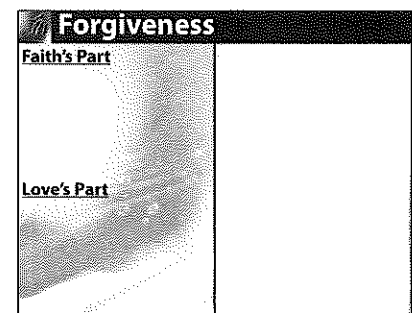
Philemon had shown love to all the saints, and Paul wrote, hoping that Philemon would include Onesimus as an object of his love.

TESTIMONY: Ask one or two learners to share a situation they have faced where faith and love were key in handling the matter. (Question 8)

Church buildings did not exist during the early centuries of Christianity. Instead believers usually met in homes. The word “church” means a called-out group, and always refers to people in the New Testament, never to a building.

Other examples of Paul's praying for believers in the prison epistles are Ephesians 3:14–19, Philippians 1:3–11, and Colossians 1:3–17.

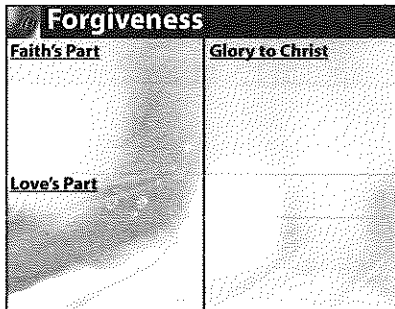
The structural form of verse 5 is a chiasmus or crisscross; that is, the first quality, love, ties to the last object, the saints. Likewise the middle quality, faith, ties to the middle object, the Lord Jesus.



B. Prayers of request (vv. 6, 7)

In this section Paul explained the request he was making to God on behalf of Philemon. Verse 6 holds the honor of being the most difficult statement in the book. The word “communication” is one key to understanding. This is the same word translated “fellowship” and often means a sharing of common doctrines and spiritual realities, but sometimes it means a sharing of material possessions or giving money to others. Philemon’s faith in Christ produced his “fellowship of the faith.”

Paul’s thought is that Philemon’s faith in God had led him to accept the needy and to be generous toward them. It would be a tragedy if those who received his fellowship perceived it as mere human kindness. Therefore, Paul prayed that people might come to acknowledge that the character qualities, “every good thing,” which moved Philemon to generosity were from Christ. Then they would give glory unto Him. (“In Christ Jesus” is literally, “unto Christ Jesus,” meaning unto His honor or glory.) Paul prayed that Philemon’s practical love would bring glory to Christ.



TRANSPARENCY: Display transparency 3. **ASK:** How will those to whom we show love and kindness discern that Christ deserves the glory for our actions toward them? (Question 9) Record learners’ answers on the transparency.

III. Paul’s Appeal for Onesimus (Philemon 8–20)

Paul possessed the authority of an apostle of Jesus Christ. He could have simply ordered Philemon to receive Onesimus and warned him of the consequences of disobedience. However, Paul chose to appeal to him instead.

A. Basis of the appeal (vv. 8, 9)

READ: Philemon 8, 9. **ASK:** What do you think Philemon would be thinking as he reached this point in the letter? (Question 10)

Paul appealed to Philemon on the basis of love. This love could have been Philemon’s love for Paul and Timothy specifically, or his love for believers in general. Ultimately, of course, Philemon’s love was the love of God working through him as a believer (Gal. 5:22).

READ: Philemon 9. **ASK:** How would Paul’s mention of his imprisonment impact Philemon? (Question 11)

Paul had cautiously and tactfully laid the groundwork for asking Philemon to receive back his runaway slave. However, to this point Paul had not mentioned Onesimus by name, or even the specific request for which he was writing. Certainly Philemon would have been intrigued when he read Paul’s words in verses 8 and 9.

B. Occasion of the appeal (vv. 10–16)

Paul delayed using Onesimus' name as long as possible, finally mentioning it a third of the way through his letter. Only after calling him "my son" and again recalling the prison situation in which he had begotten Onesimus does he name the runaway slave.

Before Onesimus was saved ("in time past") he was "unprofitable" (Philemon 11). His service in Philemon's household may have been average or even better, but the quality of his service was overshadowed by his colossal failure in running away.

Now that Onesimus had been saved, he was profitable to both Paul and Philemon. Interestingly, Onesimus' name means "useful." He failed to live up to that name before he became a Christian, but as a Christian he was truly "Onesimus," the useful, profitable one.

Onesimus probably had been serving Paul since the time of his conversion and would have been a great help if Paul had retained him in Rome. He may have reported to Paul the evidences of Philemon's faith and love that he had seen while an unsaved slave in the household.

READ: Philemon 11. ASK: How could Onesimus become useful to Philemon? (Question 12)

The culture of that day believed that a slave was his master's property. Paul, in the spirit of 1 Corinthians 7:21–23, returned Philemon's property. But the tender affection of Paul for his son in the faith is evident. As Onesimus came to Colosse, it was as though Paul's own heart traveled with him. We would say Paul sent his love with Onesimus.

Paul wanted Philemon to know that sending Onesimus back was not a simple decision. Paul would have liked to have retained him in Rome. Because Paul was very limited due to his house arrest, Onesimus could have served him in many helpful ways. Paul described this potential ministry, not as bond service to which the servant is obligated, but as a service that is beneficial to the one served. (The word for minister here is related to our word "deacon," meaning "servant.")

Suppose Paul had kept Onesimus as a servant to himself. Then Paul would have considered Onesimus as serving "in thy [Philemon's] stead" (Philemon 13), since the runaway belonged to Philemon.

READ: Philemon 13. ASK: What great salvation truth is illustrated by "in thy stead" in this situation? (Question 13)

If Onesimus had stayed in Rome serving Paul, his service would have been at Philemon's expense ("thy benefit," v. 14) because Philemon would have lost the service of Onesimus in his own household. Paul would not keep the slave without consultation with and the approval of Philemon ("without thy mind"). Paul knew if he were to keep Onesimus without first discussing the matter with Philemon, it might appear that Philemon was unwilling. Paul decided to avoid all appearance of coercion (vv. 15, 16).

Giving someone the gospel and leading him to new birth by faith in Christ is spiritual fathering (1 Cor. 4:14, 15; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; Titus 1:4). As a father naturally loves and cares for his children, so the believer should love and care for those whom he leads to a saving knowledge of Christ.

Onesimus had “departed [only] for a season,” for he was returning (v. 15)—and what a glorious return it was. He returned “not now as a servant, but above a servant,” as a brother in Christ to both Paul and Philemon (v.16). Philemon should be smitten with a double love for Onesimus—“in the flesh, and in the Lord.” “In the flesh” refers to normal, earthly experiences and relationships.

Paul knew that God’s providential workings bring good to His children (Rom. 8:28). He thought that perhaps God had allowed Onesimus to run away in order to bring him to Himself. Therefore, Paul spoke of the flight in the passive voice as though Onesimus had fulfilled God’s plan in leaving (Philemon 15). Of course, Onesimus would still have been accountable to God for committing such a sinful deed. Since God had not given Paul a special revelation concerning Onesimus’ flight, Paul was not dogmatic. He said that “perhaps” Onesimus departed through the purpose of God.

ASK: How should Paul’s “perhaps” affect Philemon’s decision to forgive Onesimus? (Question 14)

Surely God was returning the slave, and Philemon should receive him (v. 15). The word “receive” can be used of receiving a payment. Onesimus’ return was God’s payment to Philemon for his faithfulness to the Lord through the whole difficult affair.

C. Heart of the appeal (vv. 17–20)

Paul arrived at his ultimate purpose for writing his letter in verse 17. He boldly asked Philemon to receive Onesimus. If Philemon considered Paul his partner in Christ, he should receive Onesimus as though he were Paul himself.

Paul also took responsibility for his spiritual son’s debts. Onesimus may have stolen money or other valuables before he fled. He certainly had deprived his master of countless hours of service while he was gone. Paul wrote the promise of payment in his own hand, which would make it binding according to Roman law. However, the indirectness of Paul’s statement about the debt gave Philemon the opportunity to spare Paul from paying.

Before Philemon decided to accept Paul’s offer of payment, he should remember two things. First, in some way he, too, was saved as a result of Paul’s ministry (v. 19). Second, Paul had just done him a great service by returning his runaway slave, and returning him as a beloved brother.

READ: Philemon 20. **ASK:** How could Philemon give Paul great joy and refreshment? (Question 15)

The joy and refreshment Paul anticipated would be in the Lord (v. 20). Paul would consider that Philemon’s obedience was because of the Lord and not merely because of his personal strength. So Paul would rejoice in what the Lord was doing.

IV. Concluding Remarks (Philemon 21–25)

Paul was confident that Philemon would heed his appeal and so obey God. In fact, Paul expected him to do even more than receive Onesimus. This “more” could include dismissing the debt without charging it to Paul and granting Onesimus his freedom from slavery.

As Paul brought the letter to a close, he addressed his personal future. He expressed trust that he would be released from bondage in answer to prayer (v. 22). He anticipated a visit to Colosse and even to Philemon’s home. Perhaps the very mention of a possible visit by Paul was a gentle nudge to Philemon to do as Paul had asked.

The prayers for Paul’s deliverance were not merely the prayers of Philemon but of the believers as a group (“your” is plural, v. 22). So the letter ends with a reminder that the entire church, not only one man, was in Paul’s mind as he wrote. Philemon was on the spot before all the church to walk in the way of righteousness with regard to Onesimus.

Making It Personal

Extending Forgiveness

Ask: Do you need to extend forgiveness to someone? What specific steps should you take? When will you take the first step? (Questions 16–18)

Case Study

Distribute the case study for lesson 1 to the learners. Have a learner read the case study. Use the questions on the case study to lead a discussion.

Review Transparency

Use transparency 1 to review the Mark of the Faithful for this lesson: Forgives others as God forgives.

Memory Verse

Distribute copies of the Ephesians 4:32 verse card from the resource CD. Encourage the learners to memorize the verse.

NEXT LESSON

Encourage your learners to complete lesson 2 before the next class.



LESSON 2

Forgiven!

Materials

- RBP transparencies 1 and 4
- Lesson 2 case study from resource CD
- Ephesians 1:7 verse card from resource CD

Scripture Focus

Matthew 18:21–35; Luke 7:36–50; 17:3–5; 23:34; Acts 7:51–60

Key Verse

“In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace” (Eph. 1:7).

Overview

This lesson is a topical study of God’s forgiveness of human sin and the Christian’s responsibilities regarding forgiveness.

Topic

Forgiveness

Theme

God’s amazing forgiveness is to permeate our thoughts, be proclaimed to others, and practiced.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will gain a deeper understanding of God’s forgiveness of rebellious sinners as well as the responsibility to proclaim the message of forgiveness and practice it.

Outline

- I. The Background for Forgiveness
- II. The Basis of Forgiveness
- III. Reminders of Forgiveness
 - A. Baptism
 - B. The Lord’s Supper
- IV. The Proclamation of Forgiveness
- V. The Practice of Forgiveness
 - A. The pattern
 - B. The command
 - C. The means

Getting Started

You Owe Me!

Ask: Husbands, what is the most insensitive thing you have done to your