

Walking With the Father Through Philemon

Over the years, I've found my life changing and my faith deepening as I meet with our heavenly Father in His word. This has been especially true as I've been writing these devotionals and having to live what I write.

I long for you to be able to say the same as you read through this letter.

As I've gotten to know Paul, James, Peter, Jude, and John through their letters, I'm overwhelmed by how they were changed by knowing and walking with their Lord. How much they must have longed for us to know Him as they did.

As John wrote in 1 John 2:3-6, he wants us to walk as Jesus did and believed that it was absolutely possible to do so. So how did Jesus walk? That's one secret our Father shares with us.

Blessings on your time as we take another walk with the Father,

Margie Martin

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Paul wrote to his friend Philemon at the same time he wrote to the Colossians, Ephesians, and Philippians during his first confinement in Rome. The same messenger would have hand-carried and delivered all of these letters. Philemon probably lived in or around the city of Colossae.

Paul's deep friendship with both Philemon and the runaway slave Onesimus is obvious throughout this short letter. We can assume that the same relationship began to develop between the once slave owner, Philemon, and his former slave. You'll be finding out more about Onesimus as you read through this letter.



New Testament World

As you spend time in this letter, please take the time to talk with our Father about what He's showing you so you're not just gathering information. As you pray, you can use the space on each page to journal your thoughts or write Him a note.

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Philemon 1-3

“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother . . .”

We know that Paul—who had sent Christians to jail and to their deaths (Acts 8:3)—had been a prisoner himself at least four times after he met Jesus: in Philippi with Silas, in Jerusalem, and twice in Rome. During his first confinement in Rome, he was under house arrest for two years and then released. The second time he seems to have been arrested without notice and so didn't even have time to collect his reading materials (parchments) or a warm cloak. (2 Timothy 4:13)

This letter to his friend Philemon was written during Paul's first Roman imprisonment. Paul had his friends around him and really had a fair amount of freedom, but he still was under arrest and couldn't travel, preach, or take new territory for Christ. I'm sure this limitation was hard for him to accept and adjust to—it certainly would be for any of us! This limitation was probably something like when he was a new Christian but had to run for his life because he was aggravating the Jews; he was winning arguments but wasn't winning any hearts. (Acts 9:23-25)

Have you ever felt like this: taken out of the mainstream of action, not listened to, people angry with you, hostility directed toward you?

What struck me about this greeting is Paul's perspective of his own situation. He didn't see himself as a prisoner of Nero or Rome; he didn't talk about spiritual warfare; he didn't rail against those who opposed him, fall in to a deep funk, or have a pity party; rather he saw himself as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. He had learned how to make lemonade out of lemons, so to speak. In the conflict with his Jewish brothers in Acts 9, he went back home to Tarsus and used the time to study the Scriptures to discover Christ. In the instance in this section, he used the time while in prison to write the letters to the Ephesians, the Philippians, the Colossians, and to his dear friend Philemon on behalf of Onesimus.

I have a sense that I'm entering one of those times when I'll be set aside for a period of time to accomplish something. And because of this passage, I'm starting to look forward to what God has in store for me over the next few months.

So how are you reacting to your “prisons”? Are you taking advantage of the opportunity to be quiet and learn so you'll be ready for the next great adventure? Perhaps you'll learn how to love and give in a new way as Paul did when he wrote these letters that we so depend on.

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Philemon 4-7

"I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints."

Faith and love—two of the foundational pillars of our walk with Jesus. In this short section Paul unfolds what those words look like in the life of one of his friends. Ready?

Faith:

- Paul isn't talking about faith in terms of quantity ("I need more faith") or quality ("I need strong faith"). Rather, he's referring to the *source* of our faith, Jesus Christ: who He is, what He's about, what He's doing, and what He promises to do. He's the source and object of our faith.
- This faith in Jesus is to be so complete that it overflows into our conversations with both believers and nonbelievers.
- This faith starts in how we choose to think about God, life, our circumstances, our relationships, and ourselves.
- The result of this overflow is a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. Wow!

Love:

- Paul is encouraged by Philemon's love for all the saints: Philemon doesn't show partiality, have favorites, or lean toward those who are like him. As the leader of the church that meets in his home, he is just as comfortable with the poor and needy as he is with the wealthy and healthy—an amazing statement in such a class structured society.
- Love doesn't stop with the one being loved. Others notice and are also blessed. Love begets love, joy, and encouragement.
- Love changes the giver. Philemon was a wealthy man who had control over the lives of many. Instead of being the one in charge who tells others what to do, he chooses to *"refresh the hearts of the saints."*
- Love like this can only come from a life submitted to Jesus Christ. Love like this isn't just words and actions; it's a sense of caring that comes from a heart that's been broken and restored.

This is an amazing section, isn't it? I thought I knew what faith and love were about, but this is a whole new standard for me. How about you? Are you refreshing the hearts of those around you? Would they agree?

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Philemon 8-22

“Perhaps the reason he was separated from you a little while was that you might have him back for good—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother.”

As I’m getting ready to go to church to do childcare for a weekday program, I think of how moms are relieved to leave their two-year-olds with two loving grandmothers but then are so overjoyed to come pick them up 2½ hours later. What a difference a little separation can make.

- I think of the business trips my husband makes and how ready I am for him to come home, even if he’s only been gone a couple of days.
- The more time that passes since my parents died, the more I look forward to seeing them in heaven.
- Last weekend I got to spend some time with a woman I hadn’t seen since I had lived in California; how sweet our time was as we talked, shared, and laughed together.

With God, these separations can have holy purposes. Just think of the holy purpose behind Jesus being separated from His Father while He was on the cross. How wonderful their reconciliation must have been!

Are you separated today from someone you love? No matter what the reason, I bet God wants to make it a holy separation. The waiting is hard and painful at times, but it will end—either here or in heaven, which isn’t that far away. Are you making good use of this waiting time? He has a journey for you as you’re waiting that will make the reconciliation so much sweeter.

So, is this separation going to be hard or holy?

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Philemon 23-25

“Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.”

As we finish Paul’s short letters, let’s track Paul’s friends that he mentions here.

- Timothy* He was with Paul in Rome when Paul wrote this letter. He was last seen in Ephesus leading the church there. He received Paul’s last letter, was known as his son, and was with him in his last days.
- Mark* He was reconciled with Paul. At the end of his life, Paul asks Timothy to bring Mark along since he’s useful for ministry. (2 Tim. 4:11)
- Demas* While Demas was involved in Paul’s life during the first imprisonment in Rome, he wasn’t around by Paul’s second imprisonment. Paul says that because he loved this world, Demas deserted him and went to Thessalonica.
- Luke* Paul’s faithful friend and physician stays with him until the end.
- Onesimus* Paul met him while they were in prison in Rome, and he became like a son to Paul. A slave, he had run away from his master Philemon.

But what does Philemon decide to do about his runaway slave who became a believer and Paul’s friend? In 2 Timothy 1:16-17, Paul lovingly tells Timothy how this new brother in the faith often refreshed him, wasn’t ashamed of his chains, and had searched hard for him in Rome. Paul mentions the *household* of Onesimus in 2 Tim. 1:16-18. At the end of the same letter, Paul sends greetings to the household of Onesimus. So my guess is that Philemon released his slave from his obligations because of Paul’s request, and Onesimus went on to get married and have his own household in Ephesus (where Timothy was living).

How wonderful that must have been for Onesimus to go from being a slave → to meeting Paul and through him, Jesus Christ → to being set free → to having a fruitful and productive life as a husband and free man.

Does your life look like Onesimus’? Do you need to be freed from your slavery by Jesus Christ to live a fruitful and productive life? Or perhaps you’re in Philemon’s place and you need to set someone free as a brother or sister in Christ by seeing this person as Christ does, but it’ll cost you. What are you going to do first?
