**Reflections 7-13 September – The cost of following Jesus**

**Bible study on Philemon 1-21**

**Begin with an opening prayer**

Dear Lord, we come to you from busy lives,  
with our burdens and concerns;  
help us to place these worries in your care.  
May we centre our hearts and minds on you,  
so we can worship you as you deserve.  
**Amen.**

**Read the passage**

*Consider different ways to read the text. For example, hearing it in more than one version of the Bible.*

Philemon 1-21

1Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker— 2also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home:

3Grace and peace to you[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=philemon%201-21&version=NIV#fen-NIV-29942a)] from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

4I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, 5because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. 6I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. 7Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord’s people.

8Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, 9yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— 10that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus,[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=philemon%201-21&version=NIV#fen-NIV-29949b)] who became my son while I was in chains. 11Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

12I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. 13I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. 14But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favour you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. 15Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— 16no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

17So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 18If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. 19I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. 20I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. 21Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

**Explore and respond to the text**

*Start by reading the Bible notes below. You may want to read them more than once, or pause after each paragraph to reflect on what you have read.*

**Bible notes**Philemon is Paul’s shortest, most personal letter. It is addressed to Philemon, a slave-owning Christian whose slave Onesimus ran away, possibly as a result of some offence, and has found his way to Paul, who is in prison. Onesimus has also now become a Christian and is close to Paul who describes him as ‘my child’ (v.10). Paul would like to continue their companionship, but has decided to send him back to his owner for his agreement.

The puzzle surrounds what Paul is asking Philemon to do. Paul’s style is diplomatic – Martin Luther described it as ‘holy flattery’. Onesimus was not of great use previously (v.11), but his conversion has changed everything. Paul would like to have Onesimus back by his side. This depends on whether Philemon is willing to accept Paul’s offer to recompense him for any offence from Onesimus (v.16) – Paul exerts pressure by highlighting that Philemon is in debt to him even for his life (v.19), as the one who brought him to Christ. But Paul also invites Philemon to recognise Onesimus as a ‘brother’ in the Lord. Some scholars see a hint here that Philemon should set Onesimus free, now that they are both Christians, for how can a Christian who says ‘Jesus is Lord’ also say to a human master ‘You are my lord’? If Paul implies this (cf 1 Corinthians 7:21-24), then there are challenging implications for Philemon – if he owns other slaves who may be, or become, Christians – and for other slave-owning Christians.

The letter depends on an understanding of humanity renewed in Christ, so that secondary characteristics such as slavery are washed away in baptism and we become one in Christ (Galatians 3:28). The bonds of the new family lead to obligations to care for each other and offer each other hospitality, in a new community that is markedly different from a society divided between slave and free. Both slave and owner need to navigate new relationships, respecting each other as siblings in Christ. We do not know how this story ended, but perhaps the survival of the letter suggests that Philemon understood and accepted Paul’s request and could be proud of their ongoing relationship.

**Reflection**

*Spend a few moments thinking about what stands out for you from the Bible reading. This idea may help.*

When have you interceded on behalf of someone else? Paul was in prison, but out of love he intercedes on behalf of Onesimus. Where you see injustice, do you find ways of acting in love, for example by writing to your MP, collecting for a food bank or raising money for charity? Stepping out in this way means risking standing out from the crowd. If Philemon did take Onesimus back, if he freed him from slavery, this would have had lasting effects on his status in the community. How does the cost of following Jesus affect us in our daily lives?

**Questions for reflection**

*You may wish to use these questions and the picture to help you think about or discuss issues arising from this week’s Bible passage.*

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**Questions**

* What activities in your life require preparation and counting the cost?
* What are the costs of following Jesus? And what are the rewards?
* What loving actions is God prompting you to do, this week?

**Prayer**

Lord, help us to act with love and kindness to everyone.  
Give us strength to be bold to stand up for others.  
Shine your light through our lives, especially when  
we need to act differently to the people around us.  
Help us to encourage one another to live out our faith each day.  
**Amen.**