

THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST

SPREADING THE SOUL-SAVING MESSAGE OF JESUS

PHILEMON

Introduction by narrator accompanied by a cappella singing:

THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST. Spreading the soul-saving message of Jesus. And now, Kevin Pendergrass.

Welcome to the Gospel of Christ. In this lesson we are going to be looking at the Book of Philemon. Philemon owned a slave by the name of Onesimus. In this letter, which is very brief, Paul is dealing with the relationship that Philemon and Onesimus once had, as well as the relationship that he wants them to have in the future. There are many important lessons that we can learn from this book. Paul is writing to Philemon as the owner of Onesimus the slave. When we think about slavery today, it is not the same type of slavery that we read about in the Bible, especially in this instance. When we think of slavery, we think of the last couple hundred years or so when slaves were treated terribly. They were beaten, and slave owners could do anything they wanted to the slaves. In the Bible, however, the owner/slave relationship was more of an employer/employee relationship. Most owners treated their slaves like family members. This especially would be true if someone was a faithful Christian like Philemon. These people would treat their slaves very well. Paul is writing to Philemon because of something that had happened. Philemon was the slave owner. Onesimus had left Philemon. He had run away. At that time, Onesimus was not a member of the church. Onesimus was not a Christian. Paul was writing to Philemon to encourage him to take Onesimus back. Onesimus had found the truth, had been converted to Christ, and was now a faithful Christian. Paul was writing Philemon to let him know about these events. Even though Onesimus had run away, Paul tells Philemon that he wants him to receive Onesimus back because he is a Christian. Onesimus could be profitable to Philemon. And it would help Onesimus, too. That is the lesson we can learn. These are some of the things about which Paul was writing to Philemon. Even though this is a one-chapter book, there are so many good lessons that we can learn. In this lesson, we will be examining lessons that we can learn from the Book of Philemon.

The first lesson is the importance of prayer. Look at Philemon 1:4-5, where we read, "I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints." Paul was a man of prayer. One of the lessons we can learn from the Book of Philemon is that Paul always made mention of faithful Christians in his prayers. Paul was a man who prayed for people. And, he wanted people to pray for him. We need to be people of prayer. I've talked to several people, and they have said that one of the hardest things for them to do is to remember to pray during the day. They said that it was easy to get into a rhythm in which they prayed before meals or at nighttime. But they did not feel like their prayers had much meaning. We need to be people of true prayer—prayer in which we really open our hearts to God as we talk to Him. There are many things for which we need to pray. One of those is to pray for other Christians, just as Paul did. In James 5:16 we read that when we are spiritually sick and have sin in our lives, we are to confess our trespasses one to another so that we can pray and help one another. Someone might be involved in a sin, and it might be that we can go to the Bible and help that person. We can pray for them. From Romans 1:9 we learn that we always need to make mention of Christians everywhere as we strive to have boldness. We also need to pray for our enemies. Sometimes this is difficult. I once had a

person ask me, “Does the Bible teach that we are authorized to pray for non-Christians?” The answer is yes. In Matthew 5:44 Jesus said that we are to pray even for our enemies. If someone persecutes us, we are to pray for that person. The more we pray for such people, the less we will see them as our enemies. Instead, we will see them as lost soul. If we take time to pray for them, it will help not only them, but it also will help us, too. We also are to pray during times of triumph. Paul never ceases to amaze me. He was a man who, regardless of the trials or persecutions he endured, always took time to seek God first and to worship God. In Acts 16:25 Paul and Silas were in prison. They had been beaten and thrown into prison. But do you know what they were doing? They were singing songs to God and praying. They were worshiping God—even in times of trial. When many people might say, “I’ve been put in jail. I’m not longer going to pray. I’m through with God because if God truly loved me He wouldn’t have allowed this to happen.” That was not Paul’s mindset. Paul said, “I’m going to rejoice in this because it will make me stronger. I’m going to pray to God.” What do you think he was praying for? I believe he was praying to express his thanks to God. Paul was a man who was thankful for things that came his way. I’ve seen times when a faithful Christian passed away. Let’s say that the person died on Saturday. But the family showed up at church on Sunday. Someone might ask them, “Why are you here? I thought you might be at home.” If we are faithful, we should want to worship God and pray to Him. It is in times of trouble that we really need to pray. We should not turn away from God, but should cling to Him. We need to pray in times of trial and tribulation.

We also need to be people who pray for all to be saved. The Lord wants all to be saved (2 Pet. 3:9). We should, too. We should not have the mindset that says, “I do not want this person to be saved. I hope he does not want to be saved.” That is a terrible attitude. In Romans 10:1 Paul said, “I wish that all of Israel could be saved.” We know, of course, that will not be the case, because only a few will enter the kingdom of Heaven. However, Paul wanted all to be saved. That ought to be our prayer. We need to be praying before we go out during the day that we will be able to talk to someone about the Gospel in the hope that they will be saved. We need to pray for opportunities such as those.

Also, we are to be thankful for the food we have. In 1 Timothy 4:4-5 we are told that we are to be thankful for the food we have. Whenever we sit down (especially in America), we are so blessed not to have to worry about whether or not we will have food on our table. So many of us have more than enough. We need to be thankful for that. Just as Paul prayed about Philemon, we, too, need to be people of prayer. We need to tell people that we have been praying for them. This is not to boast, but to let them know that we are thinking about them. We might say, “I know you are going through some tough times, and I want you to know that I’m praying for you.” We must be people of prayer. I believe that 1 Thessalonians 5:17 really sums it up when it says, “Pray without ceasing.” Does that mean that when I’m driving a car, I must have my eyes closed and be praying? Does it mean that I have to pray 24 hours a day, seven days a week? Of course not. But it does mean that we are to have the mindset of always being able to engage in prayer. We need to be people who continually pray. We must not pray once—and then think, “That prayer will get me through until next month.” We need to be people who continually pray, just as Paul did. This is one lesson we can learn from the Book of Philemon.

Another lesson is forgiveness. Paul told Philemon, “I know that Onesimus did you wrong. What he did was bad. But you are a Christian, and he is now a Christian. He has changed, and you need to forgive him and receive him back.” Look at Philemon 1:10-14, where we read about this.

“I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me. I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.”

Paul tells Philemon that he wants him to take Onesimus back because he **wants** to do so. He did not want to **force** something on Philemon. He wanted him to do it because he could see that Onesimus was a changed person, and because Philemon needed to forgive him and take him back. Paul wanted Philemon to do this of his own accord (voluntarily) because Onesimus was now a Christian. Forgiveness was based upon Onesimus' conversion and repentance. Onesimus could not have been forgiven until he came to Christ, repented, was baptized, and changed his life. How are we today to forgive? Forgiveness can be very difficult. When someone has done you wrong, and then he repents and asks for forgiveness, it sometimes is difficult to forgive such a person. But we need to have the mindset and attitude that if a person is willing to repent, and does repent, then we will forgive the individual—not only because we have to, but also because we are happy to do so. But how are we to forgive? Ephesians 4:32 tells us: “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.” We are to forgive in the same way that God, in Christ, forgave us. In Colossians 3:13 the same principle is set forth. We must forgive in the same way that God, in Christ, forgave us. That poses a question. If someone has sinned against us, and that person has not repented, can we forgive him? The answer is found in Luke 17:3-4—“Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and **if he repents**, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him.” Can we forgive a person if he has not repented? Absolutely not! Why? It is because Luke 17:3-4 teaches such a thing. Also, we know that God cannot forgive us unless we repent. Here is a good example of how we can have a forgiving attitude, yet not forgive someone unless he repents. When Jesus was hanging on the cross He said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” That is a forgiving spirit and attitude. But were those people forgiven? No. How do we know? When we come to Acts 2 we see those people asking, “What must we do?” These were the people who had killed Christ. They asked, “What must we do?” Did Peter say, “You do not have to do anything because you are already forgiven”? No. He said, “Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins.” Just because Jesus had a forgiving spirit did not mean that He forgave them. We need to follow the example of having a forgiving spirit, but we cannot forgive until a person repents. When that person repents, then we must forgive him. Sometimes people go to the other extreme by saying, “I know he repented, but I’m still not going to forgive him.” That is a sinful attitude. It is wrong, and will lead us to Hell if we do not repent. Jesus said that even if someone sinned against us 70 times a day, we are to forgive that person based upon their repentance. We know for a fact that Onesimus repented because he had become a Christian. He changed his life. Philemon, therefore, was to forgive him and accept him back into a working relationship. That is the second lesson we can learn from the Book of Philemon.

I would like to concentrate on this last point from the Book of Philemon because I believe that there is much controversy on this point. Let’s talk about providence. What is providence? Simply put, providence is God’s working within the laws of nature. Look at Philemon 1:15 where Paul discusses the conversion of Onesimus, and says, “Perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever.” Here, Paul is talking about Philemon receiving Onesimus as a brother in Christ. I want to talk about miracles

and providence. A miracle involves God working outside the laws of nature, while providence involves God working within the laws of nature. When I am studying with someone, and I teach them from the Scriptures that miracles no longer exist, it is not unusual for the person to ask, "How can you say that? I've seen miracles." Sometimes people get very angry. But just because we deny that miracles exist today, does not mean that we deny that God works today. The question is not, "Is God working?" Rather, the question is, "**How** is God working today?" Just because miracles are no longer in effect does not mean that God is no longer working. We must ask, "How is God working today?" Today, God works through providence—within the laws of nature. Think about Joseph, which is a beautiful story of providence. Joseph was a man who had dreamed that one day his brothers and parents would bow down to him. He wasn't very bright, because he told his brothers about his dreams. In fact, he did it again when he had a similar dream. His brothers hated him because of this. What did they do? They threw him into a pit, and he eventually was sold into slavery. He was put in jail, and for many years he lived what we would see as a terrible life. However, at the end Joseph was the governor of Egypt. He was second only to pharaoh. When Joseph was talking to his brothers at the end of all this, his brothers were fearful because Joseph had such power. His dreams had come true. But he said to his brothers, "As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive" (Gen. 50:20). Joseph told his brothers that they wanted to do evil against him so they could hurt him. But God's providence provided for Joseph. God did not do things miraculously in this instance, but worked instead within the laws of nature in order to save many people. This is a great example of providence.

Now that we have talked about providence, let's talk about miracles. Miracles do not exist today. No one can perform true miracles. Let's define a miracle. A biblical miracle was undeniable. Nowhere in the Bible do we see someone performing a miracle, and someone denying it. Even Christ's enemies could not deny true miracles. Don't you think that if they could have denied Christ's miracles, they would have done so in order to downplay Christianity? Of course they would have! They would have tried to discredit Christianity any way they could. But even they realized that Christ's miracles were true miracles. They could not deny them. Instead, they tried to attribute Christ's power to some other source (Mt. 12:24). But Christ showed them how that was not correct. They said that Christ had performed miracles through the power of Satan. Christ showed them that was not the case. Christ's miracles were undeniable. Compare that to alleged miracles today. Are miracles today undeniable? Of course not. People deny miracles all the time. When people claim that they can do miracles today, their miracles are nothing like true, biblical miracles, since people deny such miracles all the time.

Another characteristic of a true, biblical miracle is that it was instantaneous. Today you see preachers who claim to be able to perform miracles. They might talk to someone who has back pain. They will say, "I'm going to put my hand on you and say a prayer, and your back will be miraculously healed." Then, three months later (after the individual has gone to the doctor, had tests run, and endured a surgical procedure), his back is healed. The preacher then says, "See, it was a miracle." That is not a biblical miracle. Could that possibly have been God working through providence? Yes, it could have. But it was not a miracle, based on how a miracle is defined in God's Word.

Miracles also were able to be perceived through the five senses (taste, feel, etc.). It was something that was real. Miracles were always outside the laws of nature. It was not possible to explain miracles within the laws of nature. A person might say, "Well, it could be this" or "It could be that." But there was no way it could be anything else but a miracle.

Consider the death of Lazarus. He had been dead four days, and already had begun to stink. What happened? Jesus raised him from the dead. Could that be explained within the laws of nature? Absolutely not! That was a miracle—something done outside the laws of nature. These are some characteristics of true biblical miracles. These show that when people today claim they are able to do miracles, their “miracles” are nothing like a true miracle.

What was the purpose of miracles during biblical times? It was to confirm the Word of God. Mark 16:20 says, “And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs.” People back then did not have the Bible as we do today. If we want to study with a person and show him the truth, what will we do? We will say, “Let’s open our Bibles and see what God’s Word has to say.” People in biblical times could not do that. They had the Old Testament scriptures, but the New Testament was still being written. So what could they do? They were able to perform miracles to show that their statements were genuinely from God. In 1 John 4:1 we are told that there were many false prophets in the world. Christians had to do something to set them apart. That “something” was miracles. Hebrews 2:3-4 teaches that the purpose of miracles was to confirm the truth so that people would know that what was being said was true. John 20:30-31, Acts 2:33, and 1 Corinthians 14:22 all teach this. One of the things that people today say is, “One of the reasons I can’t perform a miracle is because **you** do not have enough faith.” But the **main purpose** of miracles was to instill faith in people! This shows that people today who claim to perform miracles are false teachers. They may think that they are performing a miracle, but in reality they’re not. They are false teachers because they are doing things that are contrary to the Word of God.

In the New Testament, we see that the following people could perform miracles. First there were seventy disciples (Lk. 10) to whom Christ gave the power to perform miracles. Second, Christ Himself could perform miracles. Third, apostles (or those who had been baptized with the Holy Spirit) could perform miracles. Fourth, someone who had been touched by an apostle could perform miracles. How can we know that no one today is performing miracles? If someone today could perform miracles, he would have to fit into one of these four categories. Let’s look at these categories. If we can prove that no one today fits into one of these categories, that means that no one today can perform miracles.

No one today would claim that they would fall into the category of the seventy disciples in Luke 10. Those people have died. No one would claim to be Christ in the flesh. We know from Acts 1 that Christ is now at the right hand of God. No one today is a true apostle, so no one today could be in that category. What about those who have been baptized by the Holy Spirit? Some people today claim that they have been baptized with the Holy Spirit, so let’s show how that cannot be the case. Ephesians 4:5 teaches that today there is “one baptism.” There are not two or three. There is only one baptism. What is that baptism? We know that it is the same baptism found in Matthew 28:19-20. How do we know that? Jesus said that that baptism would last until the end of the age (until He returned). Whatever baptism Matthew 28:19-20 is discussing is the baptism that we still have in existence today—the “one baptism” of Ephesians 4:5. How do we know that this baptism is not Holy Spirit baptism? Matthew 3 gives us the answer when it teaches us that the only One Who could baptize with the Holy Spirit was Jesus Christ. In Matthew 28:19-20 we see that the baptism associated with the Great Commission was not something that Jesus would administer. He was not going to be the One doing the baptizing. His disciples were. Holy Spirit baptism was never a command. In Joel 2 we find a prophecy that was fulfilled in Acts 2 and Acts 10. Today, one cannot be baptized with the Holy Spirit since Joel’s prophecy has already been fulfilled.

In Acts 8:14-17 we see that, in order to have the ability to perform miracles, a person had to have been touched by an apostle. If someone claims to be able to perform miracles today, they either have to claim to be Jesus, or to be around 2,000 years old. But we know that both of those are impossible. Anyone today who wanted to perform miracles would have to be in one of these four categories, but that is impossible. This means that today miracles no longer exist.

The Bible also says that when the written Word of God was completed, miracles would cease to exist. In 1 Corinthians 13:10 we read, "But when that which is perfect has come [the written Word], then that which is in part [miracles] will be done away." We see this in Ephesians 4:11-13, too. Miracles are something that used to happen. We are not denying that. The Bible does not deny that fact. However, miracles had a specific purpose, and only certain people could perform miracles. Today, miracles have ceased. But we do have providence. God is working today, but He is working providentially (that is, within the laws of nature). There are two things we can know for sure. God is working, and miracles no longer exist.

People ask, "How do we **know** when God works providentially?" Can we ever know **for sure**? I believe we can't say with 100% certainty, "I know that in this instance, God worked providentially." But we can have the attitude of Paul, which was, "Perhaps...." These are some lessons that we can take from the Book of Philemon in order to learn more about God's Word, better ourselves, and learn more about miracles and providence.

Have you obeyed the Gospel? Are you a Christian? Maybe you are like Onesimus and have run away from things in your past. But now it is time to put on Christ. It is time to become a Christian. You must hear the Word. You must believe it. You must be willing to repent of your sins and confess that Christ is Lord (Rom. 10:10). Based upon those things, you must have your sins washed away in the watery grave of baptism (Acts 22:16). Follow the example of Onesimus so that all Christians can receive you and forgive you, and so that we all can be in fellowship with one another. If you have not yet obeyed the truth, we pray that you will obey the Gospel of Christ.

Narrator accompanied by a cappella singing:

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STUDY QUESTIONS FOR PHILEMON

1. In the Book of Philemon, who was Onesimus?
2. In the Book of Philemon, who was Philemon?
3. What was Paul's main purpose in writing to Philemon?
4. In Philemon 1:4-5, what compliment did Paul pay Philemon?
5. In Matthew 5:44, for whom did Jesus tell us to pray?
6. What did Paul say in 1 Thessalonians 5:17?
7. In Philemon 1:10-14, Paul essentially made two requests of Philemon (in regard to Onesimus). What was the essence of those two requests?
8. According to the last section of 2 Peter 3:9, what does God want?
9. According to Philemon 1:13, what would Paul himself have **liked** to do in regard to Onesimus?
10. According to Philemon 1:14, why did Paul **not** do what he would have liked to do?
11. When, in Philemon 1:15, Paul said of Onesimus, "Perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose," what important biblical principle (according to the content of this lesson) was Paul discussing?
12. What is the main message of Luke 17:3-4?
13. What is the difference between a miracle and providence?
14. What important principle is contained in Joseph's statements to his brothers, as recorded in Genesis 50:20?
15. This lesson mentions three specific characteristics of miracles. What are they?
16. According to Mark 16:20, what was the purpose of miracles in New Testament times?
17. This lesson mentions four separate categories of people who, during New Testament times, could perform miracles. What were those four categories?
18. Biblically speaking, is it correct to say that if someone today was able to perform miracles, that person would have to fall into one of the four categories mentioned in question #17 above?
19. Does anyone today fall into any of the four categories specifically mentioned in question #17 above?