

# A RECONCILING GOSPEL

## + SESSION OUTLINE

1. Reconciliation is born out of love (Philem. 8-14).
2. Reconciliation is achieved through Christ (Philem. 15-17; 2 Cor. 5:18-19).
3. Reconciliation is realized by God's grace (Philem. 18-22).

Background Passages: Philemon; 2 Corinthians 5

## + WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

Paul pleaded for Philemon to be reconciled with Onesimus, modeling the reconciliation Christ has extended to us.

## + HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

When Paul appealed to Philemon on behalf of the runaway slave Onesimus, he placed himself in the middle of their broken relationship. To make peace, Paul volunteered to pay Onesimus's debt. Through this action, Paul modeled Jesus Christ, who is the peacemaker between God and sinful humanity. By paying our debt, Jesus reconciled us to God and to each other.

## + HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because we have been given limitless grace through Jesus Christ, we live as agents of reconciliation who reflect the heart of our crucified Savior to others.

# GROUP TIME

**Group content** found in the Daily Discipleship Guide is included in the shaded areas throughout the session.



## SCRIPTURE HANDOUT

Scan this QR code for a reproducible handout of this session's Scripture passages.

## INTRODUCTION

**ASK:** As participants arrive, ask: **When have you had to reconcile with someone, whether it was his or her fault or yours, and was it easy or difficult?** (Wait for a volunteer to respond first; share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

**TRANSITION:** Christians are called to the ministry of reconciliation because they have been reconciled to God. When Christians participate in that ministry, they are participating in the same ministry that God pursues.

**SUMMARIZE:** Help your group understand the **setting** for this session.

- As we've studied how the church has grown in caring for each other, despite their differences, we see that Christ is the reconciling factor. The passages today will focus on how God reconciled us to Christ and calls us now to the ministry of reconciliation. In a world with so much brokenness, so many ex-friends, and so many wounded hearts, we have a call from God to get our hands dirty (not sinful) bringing people together for the sake of Christ's kingdom. Anybody can be part of what pulls this world apart, but every Christian is called to be part of God's grace in putting it back together.



**Listen to session-by-session training every week on**

*Ministry Grid, Apple Podcasts, or Spotify:*

*[ministrygrid.com/gospelproject](http://ministrygrid.com/gospelproject) | [gospelproject.com/leader-training](http://gospelproject.com/leader-training).*

# POINT 1

## RECONCILIATION IS BORN OUT OF LOVE (PHILEM. 8-14).

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Philemon 8-14** from his or her Bible.

**8** Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, **9** yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—**10** I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus whose father I became in my imprisonment. **11** (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) **12** I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. **13** I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, **14** but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.

**EXPLAIN:** Philemon had a slave named Onesimus. Onesimus had run away to Rome and apparently stole something from Philemon on the way out. By God's providence, Onesimus met Paul, heard the gospel, and was saved. Paul, then, wrote a letter to Philemon, asking him in Christ to receive Onesimus back as a beloved brother (v. 16). Paul promised to repay any debts Onesimus owed. It was a radical thing to ask, the kind of request only the gospel makes possible. Discuss **verses 8-10** while explaining the following (Daily Discipleship Guide [DDG] p. 126):

Paul sought to gently appeal to Philemon concerning a fellow brother in Christ because of his love.

- When Paul wrote to Philemon about the release of Onesimus from slavery, he began not with justice or mercy but with love. Paul could have commanded Philemon to do what was right—Paul had that kind of apostolic authority. Instead, however, he opted to appeal to love. It was an interesting choice, one that, if we think about it incorrectly, could lead us to think Paul wasn't bold enough. But boldness was not something Paul lacked. So when it came to delicate matters such as slavery and reconciliation, he went straight to the heart, gently appealing to Philemon.
- Paul based his appeal to reconciliation on the love of Christ. We would do well to follow him in that regard. Jesus showed the world what reconciliation looked like. We were all slaves to sin, and Jesus came on the grounds of love to make His appeal for freedom. But it cost Him. He could have commanded it a different way, but the law of God stood, and for His people to become righteous, they needed a righteousness not their own. So Jesus became subject to death so that He could free us who are dead in sin. The basis for the ministry of reconciliation starts and ends with Jesus Christ.

### THE BOOK OF PHILEMON

Paul, from prison in Rome, sent a letter to the city of Colossae, to Philemon, either a leader in the Colossian church or at least the owner of the house in which the church met.

**ASK:** (DDG p. 126)

From Day 3 in the DDG: **What can we learn about confronting conflict from Paul's method?** (always start with love; sometimes we need to appeal to the person rather than make demands; gentleness in speech goes far; model Jesus)

**HIGHLIGHT:** Discuss **verses 11-14** with the following (DDG p. 126):

Paul's goal was reconciliation between brothers in Christ that they might be useful for the Lord's ministry.

- Onesimus, now in Christ, was useful in a new way. Paul referred to him as a brother in Christ. He was useful to Paul in ministry, and he would be useful to Philemon in that new way as well. Onesimus was living proof of the grace of God and an opportunity for Philemon to live out reconciliation.
- When Paul sent Onesimus back, he sent his heart with him. Such intimate language is surprising to be used for a slave, but Paul didn't consider Onesimus a slave. Paul appealed to Philemon based on Onesimus's new status in Christ and his usefulness in advancing the gospel. Paul was in prison, but he wrote letters to churches and pastored while in chains. Men like Onesimus carried letters and ran errands for him.
- Paul wanted to keep Onesimus but saw a problem with doing that apart from Philemon's blessing. Paul assumed Philemon would want to help Paul, and Onesimus—once freed—could be Philemon's representative. Paul used his status as a friend, apostle, and preacher of the gospel to make an appeal for Onesimus's freedom. It was an argument that Philemon would have a hard time disagreeing with.

**DISCUSS:** (DDG p. 126)

**Why is reconciliation between believers important for the Lord's ministry to grow?** (every believer is needed for the advancement of the gospel; unity in the body is a great witness to others; when the body is reconciled, more work can be done together)

**TRANSITION:** Though imprisoned, Paul made his appeal for Onesimus's freedom from slavery and that he might be reconciled with Philemon. A man in chains made a case for a man once in chains. That is the kind of thing only Christ can bring about.

# POINT 2

## RECONCILIATION IS ACHIEVED THROUGH CHRIST (PHILEM. 15-17; 2 COR. 5:18-19).

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Philemon 15-17** from his or her Bible.

**15** For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, **16** no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. **17** So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.

**INSTRUCT:** Ask the group to find in these verses Paul's contrasts with how Philemon should relate to Onesimus now compared to how he once did. (once separated, now back permanently; once a slave, now a brother; once only in the flesh, now in the Lord; once a servant, now a partner)

**EXPLAIN:** Refer to **Philemon 15-17** as you explain the following (DDG p. 126):

As we become believers, we are reconciled to God and to each other, welcoming each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

- The way God works is often mysterious to us. Things happen that we would never expect, and the result is far more glorious than we could have imagined. This is the argument Paul made to Philemon in verse 15. Philemon lost Onesimus, but that temporary loss resulted in a permanent gain. Onesimus left a slave and came back a brother.
- Paul knew that God works out our stories better than we ever could. For His children, the purpose of glory far surpasses the frustration of any setbacks or even the suffering of any loss. God is in control, and He is directing our steps and planning our paths. We can trust Him with our lives, and that frees us to love others deeply and fully.
- Paul didn't know when writing his letter what kind of reception Onesimus would receive. Neither did Onesimus. They both needed to be prepared for Philemon to receive Onesimus back as a slave. But Paul made it clear that though that could happen in function, that would no longer happen in status in Christ's kingdom. Onesimus was a brother in Christ, and Philemon must accept him as such.

**ASK:** (DDG p. 126)

**Though we are to treat everyone with love and respect, how is the special bond we have with other believers displayed?** (we acknowledge we are one family, God's family, and find joy in it; we take care of our family, encouraging, reconciling, and loving each other; we see each other as brothers and sisters; we serve the family as Jesus serves us)

### BONDSERVANT

A bondservant in Bible times was not the same as a slave in American history. Ancient slavery was not the same as chattel slavery. It was not racially based. Often, people became slaves as prisoners of war or because of a debt owed or they sold themselves into it, among other reasons. As Christians, however, we know that any type of slavery does not hold up the image of God in humanity and should be abolished.

### VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Can you see how great God's love is for us? Who was the offended party? He was. Who took the first steps toward reconciliation? He did."<sup>1</sup>

—Chrysostom  
(c. 347–407)

**READ:** Ask a volunteer to read aloud **2 Corinthians 5:18-19** from his or her Bible.

**18** All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; **19** that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

**FOCUS:** Call attention to **PACK ITEM 14: RECONCILIATION**. Then say, “Paul did not come up with his idea of reconciliation on the spot. Paul carried it with him as a Christian principle to live by.” Invite a volunteer to read the key doctrine “Christ as Reconciliation” in the DDG (p. 126). Then discuss **2 Corinthians 5:18-19** as it relates to the doctrine:

**Key Doctrine #61: Christ as Reconciliation:** Ever since the fall of the first man and woman in the garden of Eden, God and human beings have been estranged. Sin resulted not only in an estranged relationship with God but also in enmity between God and humanity. Sin is an infinite offense against an infinite God. Thankfully, God loves His enemies and has sent Christ to be the reconciler between us and God. Through Christ’s death, God provides the means whereby that broken relationship is restored and renewed (Rom. 6:23; 2 Cor. 5:18-19).

- Jesus atoned for our sins and reconciled us to Himself. Our sins made a separation between us and God (Isa. 59:2), but He never stopped loving us. The only way to pay the just penalty for sin and restore us to God was through Christ’s death on the cross.
- The reconciliation God made in Christ at the cross now spreads out to His people. We are not only reconciled to God, but we have also been given the ministry of reconciliation. We now do for others what Christ did for us: we make our enemies our friends, and not only friends but family. That is not a one-time thing. It is ongoing. Because Christ covered our sins, we can seek others’ forgiveness and restoration. Love covers a multitude of sins (1 Pet. 4:8).

**DISCUSS:** (DDG p. 127)

**How does the ministry of reconciliation play itself out inside the church?** (the gospel calls us to bear with one another and to love one another for Christ’s sake; we are to be ministers of reconciliation, not counting trespasses against one another; we are to learn to resolve conflict and forgive each other that we can do more work for the Lord)

**TRANSITION:** The ministry of reconciliation begins with God’s reconciliation and spreads out among His people. Its foundation is love, and its engine is grace.



# POINT 3

## RECONCILIATION IS REALIZED BY GOD'S GRACE (PHILEM. 18-22).

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Philemon 18-22** from his or her Bible.

**18** If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. **19** I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. **20** Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. **21** Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. **22** At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

**EXPLAIN:** Notice the active role Paul takes in reconciling Philemon and Onesimus. Discuss **verses 18-19a** and the following (DDG p. 127):

Like Paul, we are to go above and beyond to help believers be reconciled, even at a cost to ourselves.

- Paul put his money where his mouth is in verse 18. If Onesimus wronged Philemon in any way (and he likely had when he ran away), Paul told Philemon to charge it to his account. This was significantly more involved than any mere mediator would ever get. Paul stuck his neck out. He took responsibility for Onesimus at a potentially great cost to himself.
- Where did Paul get such a notion? From Jesus, of course. Paul followed what Christ did on the cross, where Jesus, in essence, could have easily said to the Father, "If they have wronged You in any way, or owe You anything, charge that to My account." Jesus was charged; our sin went on His account. He paid the full price for sins He didn't commit. He bore the brunt of the penalty for transgressions that were not His. He bore the cost of it down to the last proverbial penny.
- Paul highlighted that he wrote the letter with his own hand. The words are his, and so are the pen strokes. He is legitimizing his offer to pay Onesimus's debt, reassuring Philemon of his sincere intent, knowing how important reconciliation in the body is.
- Ministers of reconciliation do not simply stay out of the fray while trying to get others to make peace. They get seriously involved, finding ways to lessen the cost of reconciling on each side, taking upon themselves responsibility that is not their own because a restored relationship is that important.

**ASK:** (DDG p. 127)

**What are some examples of how we can help believers or ourselves be reconciled with others?** (being marriage mentors; being involved in recovery ministries; being a mediator when needed; teaching others about conflict resolution; helping familial relationships be reconciled)

**HIGHLIGHT:** Use **verses 19b-22** and the points below to highlight the following (DDG p. 127):

Because of His grace, we all owe a debt to Christ and those who have helped us grow in Christ.

- Paul mentioned that Philemon owed something to him. Philemon had come to Christ under Paul's guidance. Philemon, like Onesimus, owed his Christian life to the grace of God in Paul's life and preaching.
- Jesus used Paul to bring Philemon to Himself. That counts for something. Paul was speaking as a father in the faith, and we all need those. Men and women who have walked with Jesus for longer than we have can speak into our lives on difficult issues. They are one means of God's grace to us.
- Though we owe a debt, in a sense, that debt is paid through Christ and His works because of His love, mercy, and grace.
- Holding out hope that he would be released and restored to fellowship, Paul anticipated coming to Philemon for a visit. He asked Philemon to prepare him a room. Paul had been praying for Philemon, and Philemon had been praying for Paul. They were friends, and as friends do, they longed to see each other.

**DISCUSS:** (DDG p. 127)

**How does knowing Christ paid our debt help us see the importance of reconciliation?** (reminds us that Christ didn't die for nothing and desires His family to be reconciled; reminds me of the importance of reconciliation as a believer; reminds me that reconciliation is central to love and grace)

**TRANSITION:** Paul ended his letter to Philemon with a final appeal to love. Christ loved Philemon and gave Himself for him. Now, by grace, Jesus gives the strength to reconcile with those separated from Him.



# MY RESPONSE

**SAY:** When Paul appealed to Philemon on behalf of the runaway slave Onesimus, he placed himself in the middle of their broken relationship. To make peace, Paul volunteered to pay Onesimus's debt. Through this action, Paul modeled Jesus Christ, who is the peacemaker between God and sinful humanity. By paying our debt, Jesus reconciled us to God and to each other. Because we have been given limitless grace through Jesus Christ, we live as agents of reconciliation who reflect the heart of our crucified Savior to others.

## HEAD:

Reconciliation is the Christian doctrine that teaches us about both our need to be set right with God and God's action to set us right with Him. Our sin causes a separation between us and God. He is holy and cannot and will not dwell with the sinful. But God loves us deeply and desires to bring us back to Himself. So, in Christ, God did the work to atone for our sins and bring us back into right standing with Him.

**How does the doctrine of reconciliation change the way you think about God's grace?**

## HEART:

The ending of any relationship is devastating. When Adam and Eve sinned, they broke their fellowship with God. When we consider God's heart toward us and what He did to reconcile us to Himself, we should feel overwhelmed by His love. He did not have to act in such a way. We do not deserve it. We didn't even want it before He came to us in grace. But God did not give up, and He made a way to restore us.

**How does the doctrine of reconciliation grow your love for God?**

## HANDS:

Now that we have been reconciled to God in Christ, we are to model Him in becoming ministers of reconciliation. We are to work tirelessly and selflessly, often at great personal cost, to help others come back to God and one another. What a difference it would make if the world saw the church acting in such a way on a consistent basis!

**How can you become a minister of reconciliation in your community today?**

**PRAY:** Father, we thank You for Your reconciling work in Christ and ask that You teach us and help us to become ministers of reconciliation. Amen.

### VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Christians should do the things that may rejoice the hearts of one another, both people and minister reciprocally, and ministers of their brethren. From the world they expect trouble; and where may they look for comfort and joy but in one another?"<sup>2</sup>

—Matthew Henry  
(1662–1714)

## **POINT 2: RECONCILIATION IS ACHIEVED THROUGH CHRIST**

(PHILEM. 15-17; 2 COR. 5:18-19).

### **+ ILLUSTRATION**

In Genesis 50, Joseph stood before his brothers as the second-in-command in the greatest nation in the world at that time, Egypt. He was there because of the greatest tragedy and injustice of his life. Years before, his brothers sold him into slavery. They meant evil for him. But by the end of the story, Joseph welcomed his brothers into his land and provided for them during a great famine. Joseph chose the path of reconciliation. In one of the most amazing verses in the Bible, Joseph comforted his brothers with these words, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (v. 20). Joseph chose reconciliation because he saw that though evil was the intention, goodness was God’s gift, and he could not hold his brothers’ evil against them. Not when God had been so gracious.

## **POINT 3: RECONCILIATION IS REALIZED BY GOD’S GRACE**

(PHILEM. 18-22).

### **+ COMMENTARY**

“You will do even more than I ask. What was the uppermost thought in the apostle’s mind when he penned these words? Did he contemplate the emancipation of Onesimus? If so, the restraint which he imposes on himself is significant. Indeed, throughout this letter the idea would seem to be present in his mind, though the word never passes his lips. This reserve is eminently characteristic of the Gospel. Slavery is never directly attacked as such, but principles are inculcated which must prove fatal to it.”<sup>3</sup>

#### **References**

1. Gerald Lewis Bray, ed., 1-2 Corinthians, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 251.
2. Matthew Henry, Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 2379.
3. Joseph Barber Lightfoot, Colossians and Philemon, Crossway Classic Commentaries (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997), 141.

# SCOPE AND SEQUENCE

## **VOL 1: FROM CREATION TO CHAOS**

(Genesis) Fall 2021

- Unit 1:** The Heavens Declare the Glory of God
- Unit 2:** Let Us Make a Name for Ourselves
- Unit 3:** I Will Make Your Name Great

## **VOL 2: FROM CAPTIVITY TO THE WILDERNESS**

(Exodus–Deuteronomy) Winter 2021-22

- Unit 4:** Out of Egypt I Called My Son
- Unit 5:** To Dwell in the House of the Lord
- Unit 6:** Be Holy, Because I Am Holy

## **VOL 3: FROM CONQUEST TO A KINGDOM**

(Joshua–1 Samuel) Spring 2022

- Unit 7:** Lord, Teach Me Your Statutes
- Unit 8:** Fear the Lord and Worship Him
- Unit 9:** There Is No Fear of God Before Their Eyes

## **VOL 4: FROM UNITY TO DIVISION**

(1 Samuel–1 Kings) Summer 2022

- Unit 10:** Because of Your Hardened Heart
- Unit 11:** Create a Clean Heart for Me
- Unit 12:** If You Walk Before Me with a Heart of Integrity

## **VOL 5: FROM REBELLION TO EXILE**

(1 Kings–The Prophets) Fall 2022

- Unit 13:** Your Passions Wage War Within You
- Unit 14:** Seek the Lord, All You Humble of the Earth
- Unit 15:** He Has Made Every Nationality

## **VOL 6: FROM CAPTIVITY TO RESTORATION**

(The Prophets, Ezra, Nehemiah) Winter 2022-23

- Unit 16:** The Lord Keeps His Eye on Those Who Fear Him
- Unit 17:** Take Refuge in the Lord
- Unit 18:** For Look, the Day Is Coming

## **VOL 7: FROM HEAVEN TO EARTH**

(The Gospels) Spring 2023

- Unit 19:** Here Is the Lamb of God
- Unit 20:** God’s Love Was Revealed Among Us in This Way
- Unit 21:** Without Faith It Is Impossible to Please God

## **VOL 8: FROM WONDER TO REJECTION**

(The Gospels) Summer 2023

- Unit 22:** The Works That I Do in My Father’s Name Testify About Me
- Unit 23:** The Kingdom of God Is in Your Midst
- Unit 24:** God’s Glory in the Face of Jesus Christ

## **VOL 9: FROM DEATH TO RESURRECTION**

(The Gospels) Fall 2023

- Unit 25:** Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Who Kills the Prophets
- Unit 26:** The Hour Has Come
- Unit 27:** The King of the Jews

## **VOL 10: FROM MANY PEOPLE TO ONE PEOPLE**

(The Gospels, Acts) Winter 2023-24

- Unit 28:** I Am with You Always
- Unit 29:** You Will Be My Witnesses
- Unit 30:** Every Day the Lord Added to Their Number

## **VOL 11: FROM ONE NATION TO ALL NATIONS**

(Acts and Epistles) Spring 2024

- Unit 31:** Every Knee Will Bow
- Unit 32:** The Power and the Wisdom of God
- Unit 33:** A Prisoner of Christ Jesus

## **VOL 12: FROM THIS WORLD TO THE WORLD TO COME**

(Acts, Epistles, Revelation) Summer 2024

- Unit 34:** Ambassadors for Christ
- Unit 35:** That I May Gain Christ
- Unit 36:** A New Heaven and a New Earth

# Beautifully simple Bible study.



Storyteller is a Bible study series uniquely designed to be inviting, intuitive, and interactive. Each volume examines a key theme or story in a book of the Bible. Every week includes five days of short Scripture reading, a daily thought explaining each passage, a short list of questions for a group Bible study, and space for you to write down your discoveries. And new volumes are being added every year.

**Learn more online or call 800.458.2772.**  
**[lifeway.com/storyteller](https://lifeway.com/storyteller)**

## FROM ONE NATION TO ALL NATIONS

Jesus's ministry on earth began with the Jews, His chosen people, and He reached out to bless Samaritans and Gentiles as well. This same pattern was reflected in His church. At first, they proclaimed the gospel to the Jews in Jerusalem and Judea, and then they expanded their ministry, as the Spirit led them, taking the gospel to Samaritans and Gentiles. As people from other nations heard about Jesus crucified and raised for the sins of the world, they humbled themselves in repentance and faith and were joined to the church, becoming one nation, one people, one kingdom unified in Jesus Christ. And people are still being added today.

### WE'RE HERE TO HELP!

#### WEEKLY HELPS:

*[gospelproject.com/resources](https://gospelproject.com/resources)*

#### WEEKLY PODCAST:

*Look for The Gospel Project for Adults and The Hero of the Story on your favorite podcast app.*

**Lifeway** adults

[gospelproject.com](https://gospelproject.com)

RELIGION/Biblical Studies/Bible Study Guides



© 2023 Lifeway Christian Resources