

*(for Formations Background, see pages 3-4)*

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION**  
**FOR THE SEPTEMBER 5, 2010 BIBLE STUDY LESSON**

**Focal passage: Philemon 1-21**

1:1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker,

1:2 to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

1:3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

1:4 When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God

1:5 because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus.

1:6 I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ.

1:7 I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

1:8 For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty,

1:9 yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love--and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

1:10 I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment.

1:11 Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me.

1:12 I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you.

1:13 I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel;

1:14 but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced.

1:15 Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever,

1:16 no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother--especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

1:17 So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

1:18 If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.

1:19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self.

1:20 Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ.

1:21 Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

**Background information on the focal passage:**

The epistle to Philemon is one of the shortest books of the New Testament, consisting of only one chapter and 25 verses (21 of which are the focal passage for this week's lesson). When citing Philemon it is not necessary to use a chapter number (i. e., Philemon 1:1). The epistle is traditionally ascribed to the apostle Paul, but unlike the other Pauline epistles it deals with no great issue confronting the church. It is the only personal letter in the Pauline corpus and it has led many to speculate why it was included. Generally it is counted as one of Paul's "prison epistles" and written around the same time as Ephesians, Colossians and Philipppians. Since the book of Acts describes two separate imprisonments of Paul (one in Ephesus, the other in Rome), it's hard to be certain which city was Paul's residence when writing.

The letter is an appeal to Philemon, an otherwise-unknown individual. From the salutation and the mention of Archippus, it is generally believed that the epistle was written to a man who lived in the city of Colossae (the destination for the letter to the Colossians – Archippus is mentioned in that epistle [Col. 4:17] with an indication that he was the leader of the Christian community there). The epistle's first 9 verses express Paul's appreciation for Philemon's work in the church and noting that Paul is encouraged by hearing the good reports. However Paul also has a favor to ask. It seems that a runaway slave named Onesimus has arrived and become a Christian ("whose father I have become..."), perhaps due to Paul's witness to his faith in Christ. From the context of the letter it is impossible to say whether Onesimus deliberately ran to Paul or whether it was an accidental encounter, but in either case Onesimus became a useful helper for the apostle.

The problem for Paul was that Onesimus was a *runaway* slave. The Roman Empire looked unfavorably upon slaves that ran away from their masters; the memory of Spartacus, less than 100 years earlier, was still strong. Harboring a fugitive slave was illegal (as it was in the United States after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793) and Paul, already in prison, didn't need to be facing additional charges. At the same time Onesimus had become a Christian, which changed his relationships with others including his master in Colossae. Paul knew that by sending Onesimus back he was risking subjecting him to punishments that could even result in death – Roman writers such as Pliny and Juvenal describe the treatment of runaway slaves including crucifixion). Accordingly Paul writes to Philemon delicately broaching the subject of Onesimus' future.

Paul notes that Onesimus has been "useful" to him – this is a paronomasia (a play on words). In Greek the name *Onesimus* means "useful", so Paul in effect is saying that in the past the one who hasn't lived up to his name ("useless to you") has become "useful" both to Paul and to Philemon. Indeed Paul suggests that Onesimus' running away might have a favorable outcome beyond Philemon's (or Paul's or Onesimus') imagining. Paul notes that when Onesimus returns he will be more than just a slave – because of their shared faith they will be brothers and Philemon should receive Onesimus as if he were receiving Paul. Paul adds that if in the escape Onesimus cost Philemon anything (money stolen to finance his escape, for instance), then it should be charged to Paul's "account" (with tongue in cheek Paul notes that Philemon owes Paul his "own self", referring presumably to Paul's role in Philemon becoming a believer).

Over the years many have wondered why Paul didn't take the opportunity afforded by Onesimus' arrival to denounce the institution of slavery entirely, based on the understanding that he expresses elsewhere ("...there is no longer slave or free..." Gal. 3:28, "...there is no longer...slave and free..." Col. 3:11). Indeed the book of Philemon was used by both sides in the days prior to the Civil War as support for their position. The pro-slavery side said that since Paul didn't condemn slavery in Philemon or elsewhere and in fact used the metaphor of slavery approvingly to refer to the relationship that he had with Christ, therefore slavery must be right. The abolitionists, on the other hand, pointed to passages such as the ones cited above and Paul's words to Philemon about receiving Onesimus as a brother to argue that no Christian could keep slaves. Paul's concern isn't for the institution of slavery, however. This was a specific incident in which Paul sought to be an agent of reconciliation between two estranged individuals. It is also an object lesson for how Christians should act toward erring fellow believers. It is a reminder that, as Jesus said, if we don't forgive, then we can't be forgiven (as expressed in the Model Prayer).

**(FORMATIONS) BACKGROUND INFORMATION**  
**FOR THE SEPTEMBER 5, 2010 BIBLE STUDY LESSON**

**Focal passage: 2 Kings 2:1-14**

<sup>2</sup> Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal.

<sup>2</sup> Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel.

<sup>3</sup> The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he said, "Yes, I know; keep silent."

<sup>4</sup> Elijah said to him, "Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho.

<sup>5</sup> The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; be silent."

<sup>6</sup> Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on.

<sup>7</sup> Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan.

<sup>8</sup> Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

<sup>9</sup> When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit."

<sup>10</sup> He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not."

<sup>11</sup> As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven.

<sup>12</sup> Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

<sup>13</sup> He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan.

<sup>14</sup> He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over.

**General background information: Elisha**

Less well-known than his predecessor, Elisha, the son of Shaphat from a town located in the ancestral tribal territory of Issachar, is introduced in 1 Kings 19 as Elijah's successor (see last week's lesson), although he isn't mentioned again until the focal passage for this week. His call comes while he is plowing a field; when Elijah comes to him and designates him as Elijah's successor, Elijah sacrifices the animals and holds a feast. Thereafter he disappears from the scene for approximately eight years (the time from Elijah's confrontation with Ahab until Ahab's death). Unlike Elijah, Elisha's career is primarily highlighted by miracles – from the parting of the waters after Elijah's ascension into heaven through miraculous provision, raising the dead and curing disease. His role in the politics of the period are less significant than those of Elijah – he doesn't confront the rulers of Israel the same way that Elijah did. Even in death he is able to work a miracle – a year after his death the body of a man is placed in Elisha's grave and the man is returned to life.

**Background information on the focal passage:**

The books of 1 and 2 Kings are, in the original Hebrew, a single book that stands as a history of the kingdom of Israel after the death of David. It outlines the reign of Solomon and the division of the kingdom into two parts after his death – Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, ruling in Jerusalem over the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, and Jeroboam I ruling over the other tribes (known as "Israel"). These were, in the words of the Chinese proverb, "interesting times". The writer (identified in the Talmud as Jeremiah, but probably written much later than the time of that prophet) uses the overarching theme of prophecy and fulfillment, especially with respect to the judgment of Yahweh against those who violated the divine commandments. The northern kingdom fell short because it failed to acknowledge "the place where God's name dwelled", namely Jerusalem; moreover the kings were rebellious against the Davidic monarchy which God had ordained would never fail. The writer sums up the rule of the kings of both

kingdoms by how faithful they were to God – the kings “did evil in the sight of Yahweh” (with a couple of notable exceptions) and thus God brought calamity upon them.

The period was also politically significant as the two kingdoms (Judah and Israel) engaged in a series of shifting alliances, sometimes siding with each other, sometimes being on opposite sides, and always trying to deal with stronger powers (Egypt on the one hand and whatever power was ascendant in Mesopotamia on the other).

2 Kings opens with transitions – Ahab dies and is replaced by his son Ahaziah, who in his own way was as bad as his father regarding the worship of other deities. After suffering injury from a serious accident he sends messengers to the Philistine city of Ekron to seek the guidance of Baalzebul; Elijah hears of this and intercepts the messengers, telling them to tell Ahaziah that he will die. That pronouncement (and the subsequent events) marks Elijah’s final appearance on the stage; hereafter he will be succeeded by Elisha (which event is the focus of this week’s lesson). The three towns mentioned in the story (Gilgal, Bethel and Jericho) are centers of prophetic activity – there are “schools of the prophets” located in these places (an acknowledgement that Elijah was not the only worshipper of Yahweh, as he complained – see last week’s lesson). Exactly what these schools were is subject for debate, but at the least they represented a quasi-monastic organization, with members living a communal life. If they were anything like the bands of roving prophets mentioned in 1 Samuel then they would have engaged in ecstatic and/or frenzied actions as part of their prophetic activity. These groups don’t seem to be closely associated with Elijah, although they are with Elisha.

Each of the three groups of prophets has a similar message for Elisha – “Do you know that today Yahweh will take your master away from you?” to which Elisha replies, “Yes I know; keep silent”. The threefold repetition is intended to show Elisha’s steadfastness even knowing what is to come. Elijah himself even tries to dissuade Elisha from following him, perhaps as a test to see if Elisha will “go the distance”. In the end the two men reach their destination after Elijah parts the waters of the Jordan as Joshua did when the Israelites entered the Promised Land (and as Moses parted the waters of the sea). Elijah then asks Elisha what he wants (as an inheritance and a reward for his faithfulness) and Elisha asks for a double portion of Elijah’s spirit. This is not a request to be twice the prophet that Elijah was – a “double portion” was a way of asking that he (Elisha) be acknowledged as the “firstborn” (to whom a double share of the inheritance went). Elijah says that if Elisha is able to watch Elijah be taken up into heaven he will receive what he requested. At that point a chariot and horses of fire appears; despite popular misconception, Elijah doesn’t ride the chariot into heaven. Rather he is carried off by a whirlwind. Both the fire and the wind are theophanic symbols (“theophany” meaning “God appearing”). Elisha’s cry about the “chariots of Israel and its horsemen” will be repeated twice more (2 Kings 6:17; 13:14 – the second at the death of Elisha). It is an acknowledgement that the security of the nation doesn’t reside in the armed forces under the king’s command but instead lies in the hands of God. The story concludes with a demonstration that indeed the baton has been passed – Elisha is able to part the waters of the river just as Elijah did.