



The Book of Philemon: What Happens When the Gospel Changes Everything?

Philemon 1:1-25

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I don't know when or how it happened, but at least a year ago I found myself desiring to study this little letter called Philemon in order to better understand it. It might have been due to my personal confusion about the book. If you stopped me on the street and gave me a pop quiz, "Who are the characters in the book of Philemon and what exactly is going on?" I probably would not have passed the test.

Pastor David texted me today and said, "I'm really glad you're preaching on Philemon. I love that letter, but I've never preached a sermon on it." I asked a friend of mine who's a New Testament professor who also preaches quite regularly, "Have you ever preached through Philemon?" He said, "No," and laughed when he said it. This week I also asked another Christian, whom I won't name, "Tell me what you know about Philemon." He responded, "I don't know if I could tell you anything about that book."

Philemon is Paul's shortest letter, and I believe it has lessons for us that are all out of proportion to its size. So please turn to this letter which might lead to a moment of panic: "I don't know if I can find it!" It's only one page long—or in the case of our pew Bibles, a half page long—and it's only 25 verses. You'll find it right before the book of Hebrews. By the way, Paul's letters in our Bible are not arranged chronologically or alphabetically, but by size from the largest to the smallest. That's why Philemon is last.

I just want to walk through this book together, making a couple points of application along the way. We'll begin with the greeting. Greetings are easy for us to pass over, just like we rarely pay attention in our letters where it says, "Dear Jim, how are you?" We want to get on to the meat of the letter. But Paul imbeds in his greetings important clues to what he'll say next, so this is an important part of his letter. Let's read together the first three verses:

Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved fellow worker² and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is like going to a play and looking ahead of time at the cast of characters. Who are the people involved in this letter? The first person is the apostle Paul. Obviously, he's the one writing the letter, and he's writing to these people. What does Paul say about himself here? He says he's "*a prisoner for Christ Jesus.*" My first thought was maybe he means that metaphorically. Sometimes he talks about being a slave of Christ.

But he means it literally. He's in prison, probably in Rome. There's some dispute, but most scholars think he's in Rome, under house arrest, which means he's constrained inside and has no freedom to leave the building. Paul writes three letters under house arrest in Rome: Ephesians, Colossians and this personal letter to Philemon. He was writing them from about 1,100 miles away. Colossae is in the middle of Asia Minor, which is modern-day Turkey. Colossae is about 120 miles east of Ephesus.

Paul mentions that he has someone with him—Timothy—and also includes him as one who is greeting Philemon. Paul describes Timothy as "our brother." The one thing you need when you're in prison is friendship and companionship. You need someone to bring you meals and fellowship with you. But there's something more going on here. If you look down to verse 19, Paul says, "I'm writing this sentence with my own hand," which tells us he didn't write the rest of the letter. He was dictating it—probably to Timothy. Timothy is Paul's younger friend, his protégé, co-pastor and son in the Lord. He is also functioning here as Paul's secretary.

So together Paul and Timothy are sending this letter—to whom? It's written to a man named Philemon. What do we know about him? We know that Paul loves him. As it says in verse one, he's their "*beloved fellow worker.*" He calls him a fellow worker, a partner in the gospel. What else do we know about Philemon? We think he was probably converted through the ministry of the apostle Paul in Ephesus. On his second missionary journey, Paul was in Ephesus for a couple years. We know Philemon now lives in the town of Colossae, where Paul sent his letter called Colossians. We don't know as much as we might want to know about Philemon, but we do know one more thing: he was very wealthy. How do we know that? We'll learn later that he was a slave owner. Poor people didn't own slaves. So Philemon was a wealthy, godly, gospel-centered fellow worker who was loved by Paul and who lived in Colossae.

In verse two we see that Paul mentions two other people: "*Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier.*" And finally, he mentions "*the church in your house.*" So who are Apphia and Archippus? We don't know for sure. It's reasonable to think Apphia might be Philemon's wife; and Archippus may be their son. Then they met in a house church. There were no church buildings in the first century like we're used to today. Everyone met underground, in

houses. The members gathered there to hear the Word preached by elders. They practiced the Lord's Supper and baptism and church discipline—all in houses such as Philemon's.

Notice here that Paul has a label for each person he mentions, including himself. Who is he? He doesn't come out and say, "I'm the apostle Paul." He says, "I'm a prisoner." He emphasizes his lowly state. But for everyone else, he calls them brother or sister, or a fellow soldier or a fellow worker in the Lord. Paul sees these people as his family, as his partners in the gospel.

We might ask so far, "Is this letter sort of like a group text, with certain people who are supposed to read it?" In one sense it is. Everyone is supposed to listen in. But at this point it narrows down to just Paul and Philemon. It's one on one, man to man. All the verbs after this are singular, with a singular form of "you." Paul is addressing Philemon in particular, but he wants the church—or if it's the family, he wants the family—listening in on what he's about to say to Philemon. What is the first thing Paul wants to express to Philemon? He's moving toward a request—he has something big to ask, something potentially awkward or sensitive—but that's not where he starts. He starts with gratitude.

Here's a fascinating thing about Paul's letters. You will look in vain for him to ever say "thank you" to anyone. Not one place does he ever say thank you to a person, even if they're one of his best friends or a partner in the gospel. But he's always saying, "I thank God for you." That's a very gospel-centered, God-centered approach. I don't think Paul would say you should never say thank you. But his practice was always to say, "I thank God for you."

You'll see this modeled in verse four: "*I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers.*" Every time Philemon's name comes to mind when Paul is praying, his first thought is, "Thank You, Lord. Thank You for this brother." And why? Why is he thanking God for Philemon? He's going to give us two reasons in verse five: "Because I hear of your love and of your faith." Faith in whom? The Lord Jesus Christ. Love for whom? For all the saints. That's why Paul has gratitude in his heart. This man exemplifies the Christian life. He has love for all the believers and he has faith in the Lord Jesus. Whenever Paul tells somebody that he's thanking God for them, he doesn't ever just end it there and move on. He always follows it with intercession. "God, I thank you for this brother, and here's what I want to pray, that You would do to him, that You would do through him." And that's exactly what he does in verse six.

Now, if you look at the wording of verse six, it's tricky to understand. I read this verse over and over again several times this past year and could not quite figure out what it meant. It's a key verse, I think, in the letter, but it's a little tricky. So let's try to take it step by step. Paul

says, *“I pray that the sharing of your faith...”* We’ll just stop there. When you hear that phrase, “sharing your faith,” what do you think of? Evangelism. That’s the first thing I think of. In our English-American idiom, as evangelicals, we think sharing your faith means telling other people about Jesus.

That’s not what’s going on here. Obviously, that’s a great thing and that’s included. But Paul is using the word *koinonia* here. If you’ve ever heard a Greek word in church, you’ve probably heard the word *koinonia*. One translation includes the idea of sharing, which is important. It also has to do with fellowship, partnership and mutual participation. Glance down real quickly at verse 17, where Paul says, “If you consider me your partner...”—that’s from the same root word as *koinonia*. So Paul is probably referring here to Philemon’s partnership in the faith, his partnership in the gospel.

Let’s keep reading: *“I pray that the sharing of your faith,”* through your participation in the gospel and in the faith, *“may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.”* What Paul is praying for Philemon is that his gospel partnership might produce in him the know-how, that it might become effective, to put into practice all the good things God wills for him to do, all the good things God wills for him to be, and to recognize all the good things in Christ with which God has blessed him. In short, he’s praying that Philemon’s gospel *koinonia* would produce a life that would be fully pleasing to the Lord. Paul is going step by step here, building toward the big “ask.”

Before he gets there, he’s going to tell him, in verse seven, why he’s so thankful for him and why he prays like this for him: *“For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.”* People have been gossiping about Philemon in a good way. There have been good reports coming in to Paul about this brother Philemon—what he’s like, his love, his encouragement, his faith. And Paul says, “I like you. I get a lot of joy from you. I am comforted when I think about you and your ministry. And the saints? Their hearts are refreshed in Christ through your ministry. So that’s why I thank God for you. That’s why I pray for you.”

So Paul has offered gospel greetings in the beginning. He’s expressed gospel gratitude for Philemon. He’s celebrated the gospel *koinonia* and prayed that it would become even more effective and go even deeper. He’s passed along this gospel encouragement to his brother and friend. Now we come to the point of the letter: what he’s asking of Philemon. That’s found in verses 8-20, so let’s read these verses—almost to the end of the letter—and then I’ll unpack quite

a bit of it for you. He starts with the word “Accordingly...”—that is to say, “In light of all that...”—which connects it to all that comes before it.

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. 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 [or slave], 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. 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.

Now, there’s a lot going on here. But one thing to note right from the beginning is that a new character is introduced. We’ve looked at all these other characters, but the new character is a man named Onesimus. Who is this guy? We know from verse 16 that he was a bondservant or a slave. We know from verse 15 that he used to be with Philemon, but he’s departed from him. When? We don’t know. It may have been a year or longer. We don’t know if Philemon sent him somehow to Paul to be a partner, or—perhaps more likely—if he fled and abandoned Philemon, seeking freedom, trying to blend in in Rome.

We know from verse ten that when he was with Philemon as his slave, he was an unbeliever, but we know now that he’s a brother in Christ. Paul says, “He’s my child. I became his father.” So somehow—we don’t know exactly how, given the 1,100 miles between Colossae and Rome—Onesimus ends up meeting Paul in Rome. He walks into Paul’s house-arrest situation as an unbeliever and walks out knowing and following the Lord Jesus Christ. Then from verse 13 we know that Paul wishes that Onesimus could stay with him. He really likes this guy. And as a prisoner, Paul is needy. In verse nine he adds the comment that he’s now an old

man. From an earthly perspective he doesn't have much and probably could use the physical and spiritual support, as well as the fellowship.

But here's a key principle in Paul's worldview, something he's assuming: convenience, comfort and earthly desire are not what should drive us. We should be driven by the gospel. The gospel was the engine of his spiritual life. He followed a Savior Who was different from the world. He followed a Savior Who was crucified and Who told His followers, "Pick up your cross every day and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). He followed a Savior Who laid down His own life for His friends. He followed a Savior Who endured pain so His people could have eternal joy, Who suffered shame so His followers could be resurrected in glory. So that desire that we all have of "What's in this for me?"—Paul wanted to nail that desire to the cross, along with all his other fleshly desires.

What would have been the easiest thing for Paul to do in this situation? I think the easiest thing would have been for him to say, "You became a Christian, Onesimus. I really need the help. Even though you may be unreconciled with Philemon, let's just stay together and minister together." That would have been the easiest thing for him to do.

The second easiest thing for him to do would have been to rebuke Philemon, or command him, "You need to take this guy back." Once he determined there should be reconciliation, he could have forced his hand. We all know a parent or a boss who says, "I'm not asking you—I'm telling you." That could have been the tactic Paul could have taken.

It's obvious what he wants Philemon to do. Verse 15 says, "I want you to take him back." In verse 17 Paul commands him, "Receive him." But notice how he goes about this. In verse eight he says that he could go ahead and just command him to do what's required, but in verse nine he says, "Because of love—for love's sake—I'm appealing to you." In verse ten he says it directly: "*I appeal to you for my child Onesimus.*" And then in verse 14 he says, "*I preferred to do nothing without your consent.*" Why? "*In order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.*" He wants this decision, this change, and this reconciliation, to come from Philemon's heart, not from Paul's command. Paul is modeling something crucial for us. He's modeling what it looks like to lead by serving, to lead by moral persuasion, and not to lead with a heavy iron fist. He does that because he's following the way of Christ in seeking to embody the gospel in love.

Here's one thing I haven't told you yet. Who delivered this letter from Rome to Colossae? Who's the courier? How did it get there? You can't FedEx it. You need to have somebody hand deliver this letter. We don't know—we aren't told from the letter of Philemon itself—but we are

told in the book of Colossians. So Paul is in Rome, and he writes to the Ephesians, he writes to the Colossians and he writes to Philemon. He tells us in Colossians 4:7-9, “I’m sending two guys—Tichicus and Onesimus.” So those guys are the deliverers of this letter.

I think that adds something enhances our ability to imagine Philemon hearing this knock on the door of his house—which also functioned as a church. When he opens the door, there is Onesimus, who used to be his slave, who still should be with him, standing there, saying, “I met the apostle Paul. I’m now a believer and he wants you to read this.” In the ancient world, they didn’t read silently like we do today. That’s a more modern invention. So Philemon probably read this aloud with Onesimus standing right there.

I’ve got to say a word quickly here about slavery in biblical times, because it’s almost impossible, I think, for us to hear that word “slavery” as 21st century Americans and not think about our own dishonorable past of chattel slavery in the American South that was brutal and dehumanizing. I’m not trying to whitewash slavery in the ancient world by any means. But biblically, various facets of American slavery were all prohibited by the Bible. Kidnapping was prohibited. Oppression was prohibited. Trading human beings as cargo—all of that was off limits biblically. But the Bible—the Old Testament in particular—often permits or regulates things that are not ideally part of God’s creation, that will not exist in the new heaven and the new earth.

Then there’s this question of what happens when we get into the New Testament. Why didn’t Paul just come out and say, “Slavery is evil. Slavery should be eradicated. Slaves should rebel. We as Christians should work to overthrow slavery”? It sounds from our day, many centuries later, like a great idea. But realistically, back in the first century, it would not have worked. First of all, they did not have a democracy. Nobody had a vote. There was no legislative process wherein someone could work to overthrow slavery. Secondly, if any group tried to overthrow slavery, they would have been swiftly executed.

So Paul takes a different tactic which I think is more subtle and more effective. Rather than just trying to whack away at this wall called slavery, he starts to chip away at the foundation stones underneath. If people get into their hearts and minds the message of Philemon and the biblical gospel—and the ethic of Jesus in the New Testament—and if they truly take those to heart then slavery cannot stand. One of the ways Paul does that is by saying, “No matter who you are, if you’re a Christian—whether you’re a master or a bondservant/slave—you have a Master.” All of us have an ultimate Master Who provides the ultimate example of how to treat people and Who will one day judge us.

So Paul says in Colossians 4:1, “*Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.*” In Ephesians 6:9 he says, “*Masters...stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.*” The word in the New Testament for “master” and “lord” are the same word. I don’t think it’s any coincidence that Paul refers to the Lord Jesus in this letter seven times. “Philemon, you have a Lord Who is watching you, Who is modeling for you what it means to lead.”

Another strategy Paul is using here—subtly, I think—is emphasizing that this is a family letter. Notice how many times he uses the word “brother.” He refers to Timothy as “our brother.” He refers to Onesimus as “our beloved brother.” He calls Apphia “our sister.” This is this radical leveling idea that we are now all in the same family. “Onesimus maybe used to be your slave or bondservant, but now he is your beloved brother. He’s your family member, so you should treat him in that way.”

Here are some comments from a couple scholars on why the condition of slavery could not thrive or survive with what Paul is teaching in his letter. One says that what Paul’s letters do is “bring us into an atmosphere in which the institution of slavery could only wilt and die.” Another scholar said, “The worm was already in the wood for altering social discussions or structures.”

So let’s get back to the letter itself and we’ll work through these last few verses. Again, we don’t know exactly why Onesimus left Philemon and went to Paul. We don’t know if he ran away. We don’t know if he was sent there. We don’t know if he stole from Philemon. It looks like that may be the case, given what Paul’s about to say. But in any event, Paul wants Philemon to view all of this through two lenses:

- View it through the lens of the providence of God
- and because of the providence of God, view it from the long view.

Look at verses 15 and 16. Paul says to Philemon:

For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, 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.

So what would happen to your view of reconciliation—your view of relationships that may be ruptured in your life—if you looked at it from the angle of God’s providence and if you took the eternal view that we’re not just talking about decades, but about billions of years as we’re

brothers and sisters in Christ? Then in verses 17-20 we have, I think, the heart of the letter. Paul says here:

So if you consider me your partner [in koinonia], receive [Onesimus] as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

This is really an amazing thing that Paul is saying. It would still be impressive if he was a really rich guy and was saying, “Any damages that my son, my friend here, has done, you can put that on my tab.” But Paul has nothing. He has no resources. Yet he is willing to take that debt upon himself in order to make things right. We have to remember too, Paul’s natural desire was to stick with Onesimus. He loved this guy. They had a heart bond. In verse 12 Paul says, “I’m sending back to you, Philemon, my very heart.” The Greek word there is *splangchna*. It refers to the visceral organs. We might say he loved this brother, “From the gut.” He says, “It’s almost like I’m sending my heart back with you.” In verse 13 Paul basically says, “If it was up to me, my natural heart desire would have been to keep Onesimus with me.”

But Paul sees a greater opportunity here, not just for what would make him feel good and help him the most, but an opportunity to display the gospel. He sees an opportunity for these brothers to be a living parable, showing reconciliation should look like as it is acted out. I love this about the apostle Paul. I want this to be true in my own life and in my own family. I want this for all of you: to have the perspective in which the gospel influences everything and trumps everything.

Do you remember when Paul was in prison in a different situation—when he was writing to the Philippians—and other prisoners there were jealous of him and didn’t like him? They figured out that the more Jesus was preached, the more Paul would be beaten. Can you imagine that? You have evangelist Christians next to you who say, “Let’s start preaching more, because Paul will be beaten more and that will make us happy.” Paul’s response to that was, “This is awesome! Bring it on! I don’t like getting beaten, but I like Christ being exalted even more.”

It was in that same letter where Paul said, “I can’t figure out whether it’s better to live or to die. Because if I die, I get to see Jesus. But if I live, I get to tell others about Him and help them prepare to meet Him. To live is Christ; to die is gain” (Philippians 1:18b-30). That’s his worldview. It’s gospel. Don’t we want that for ourselves? Don’t we want that perspective, so that

we're not hemmed in by our own little desires? "How is this going to benefit me? What feels most natural and comfortable to me?"

So how does the story end? What do you think Philemon did as he read this letter? The honest answer is: we don't know. It just ends. There's no postscript. There's no sequel. There's no "the rest of the story..." But we know how Paul thinks it's going to end. In verse 21 he says, "*Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.*" Paul's not always the most subtle man in the world. Then in verse 22 he says, "Ah, by the way, *prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.*" In other words, "Philemon, I know you're going to do the right thing. I know when you read this, you'll probably think, 'Oh, that's just a start. I'm going to do much more than Paul asks.'" Then Paul drops this: "By the way, I hope to crash at your place one of these days, so...no pressure."

But Paul wants this to be a decision from Philemon's heart, because of the gospel. And somehow through all of this, Paul doesn't come across as fleshly or manipulative. He wants a genuine decision and he goes about it in a brilliant way. I think after reading this letter and how Paul went about writing it, you can't help but want what Paul wants for Philemon and Onesimus. So I think we have confidence that these two brothers did provide us with a living parable of the gospel.

Then we get to the last couple verses of this letter. Like greetings, it can be really tempting to kind of skip over ending, as if you're reading a letter and somebody writes, "P.S. Mary and Jane say hi." That's what it can feel like when Paul mentions a bunch of names of people we don't recognize, so we just skip over them. But let's read these, because they are part of the inspired Word of God, and maybe even they have a couple lessons for us. In verses 23-24 Paul says, "*Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.*"

Now, the Mark and Luke here are the apostles who wrote the Gospels of Mark and Luke. I want to draw your attention to Mark in particular, because he's also called John Mark. If you remember from Acts 15, Paul and Barnabas had what Luke described as a sharp disagreement—a sharp dispute—about John Mark. John Mark had departed from Paul on one of his missionary journeys and thereby let him down. Paul then decided he didn't want John Mark to go with him, which caused a split between himself and Barnabas.

We don't really get the rest of the story in Scripture, but dropped right into this letter, Paul says, "By the way, Mark, my fellow worker, passes along greetings to you." We don't know

how it happened, but these two brothers have reconciled. Even though we don't get to see the whole story, we realize that Paul is practicing what he preaches. He and John Mark are now fellow workers and gospel partners again.

Notice one other name in here: Demas. Do you remember that name at all from your Scripture reading? Paul calls Demas his fellow worker here. But we find out in 2 Timothy 4:10—one of the saddest little sentences, I think, in the New Testament—Paul says, *“Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me.”* Isn't a sad? At the time when he's writing this letter to Philemon, Demas is one of his gospel partners, one of his fellow workers. “Demas says hi.” And a short while later, Demas—in love more with this world than with the gospel of Jesus Christ—deserts Paul: an old, needy man who is in prison.

I think both of these are just little reminders to us. You may have John Marks in your life right now where there is not reconciliation. Your relationship with another believer might not be where you want it to be. Yet God is not done writing that story. Conversely, you may have Demases in your life—friends who seem like they support you—and you may find out down the road that they have deserted you. I think Paul wants us to hear what he said in Romans 12:18: *“If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”* All we can do is seek to walk in integrity before the Lord. We can't control other people. So we will have friendships that fall away and we will have unreconciled relationships for which God will write a happy ending.

So now we come to the very, very end of this little letter—just 300 words or so—and Paul ends it by saying this: *“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.”* The grace of the Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, be with your spirit. May God's grace be with you. So I think the question for all of us is: in what ways today do we need the grace of our Lord? What areas of our lives? What areas of relational difficulty? What areas of attitude? What areas of selfishness? What areas of how we spend our time, talent and treasure? How we treat our brothers and sisters? What areas are incompatible with the gospel of grace? We who have been reconciled to the living Lord—once His enemies, now adopted sons and daughters, living as brothers and sisters—in what ways can we model the reconciling gospel of Jesus Christ with those around us?

I want to pray, but before I do, let's just take a minute or so to silently pray and hear the word of the Lord, not conviction through my preaching, but conviction or encouragement or recalibration through the living Word of God. Let's let the Lord speak to us through His Word and then I'll close in prayer. Whatever situation you are in, I think God wants you to hear, “There's grace for that.”

Lord, we do praise You this morning for Your grace. We thank You that You have given us the Word of God that can correct where we have erred, comfort us in our sin, encourage us to live in light of the gospel and recalibrate our lives around Your amazing grace. I pray, Lord, for any of us here who are living in sin and unreconciled relationships, where we can take the step to live peaceably, that You would help us. I pray that throughout this congregation little pictures of the gospel would be popping up as grace breaks through as a result of seeking to follow You. We pray all this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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