

BUTS OF THE BIBLE

**Biblical Characters and
the Crossroads of Life,
New Testament**

Study Booklet 2



Sample

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This study booklet for the *Buts of the Bible* small-group study is published by the Biblical Counseling Foundation, Inc., a non-profit, non-stock corporation founded in 1974 and incorporated in the Commonwealth of Virginia, USA, in 1977. A *Leader's Guide* is also available as a companion to this study booklet.

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Biblical Counseling Foundation
42550 Aegean St.
Indio, CA 92203 USA

760.347.4608 telephone

orders@bcfministries.org email for material orders
admin@bcfministries.org email for other communications

For information about other materials available through BCF,
please visit: www.bcfministries.org

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Sample

BUTS OF THE BIBLE (NEW TESTAMENT) OVERVIEW

OVERVIEW OF THE *BUTS OF THE BIBLE* SERIES

Welcome to the *Buts of the Bible* small-group study, published by the Biblical Counseling Foundation. Since 1974, BCF has been producing biblically-based discipleship and counseling materials and training. Like BCF's other materials, the *Buts of the Bible* study is designed to provide churches, missions, and individuals with in-depth life application of God's Word.

Buts of the Bible is BCF's series of character studies. Here we focus on individuals from both the Old and New Testaments, looking at their circumstances, struggles, temptations, spiritual defeats, and victories. This study does not examine every detail about a biblical character. Instead, the emphasis is on major events, decisions, or crossroads in their lives. From this, we will draw practical application for our own lives.

Whether they are regarded as better-known or lesser-known figures, these biblical characters were still human and remarkably similar to us. We are separated by thousands of years, and the context of their situations may be different. Yet we often face the same struggles, temptations, and similar decisions. That's what makes this study so powerful. The biblical lessons they learned (or didn't learn) are relevant and applicable to our lives today.

There are three studies in this series: two sets of "buts" for the Old Testament and one set of "buts" for the New Testament. Each booklet contains nine lessons. For *Booklet 2 (New Testament)*, a group could complete the study in nine weeks, depending on the amount of time available. More information on possible study formats that could be used is provided at the beginning of Lesson 1.

The lessons are a fill-in-the-blank format, with descriptive background information, Scriptures to look up, and questions to answer. While this study was designed for small groups like home Bible studies, Sunday School classes, or discipleship groups, you can easily go through it on your own as well.

WHY IS IT CALLED *BUTS OF THE BIBLE*?

When we read through an account in the Bible, we can often overlook a small word like “but.” However, in many cases, this little word can be an indication that something big is happening. For the biblical characters we will study, the word translated “but” (or similar phrase) often marks a turning point or a choice the character made. This word can be revealing in our own lives as well. Let’s look at a few examples of how we use the word “but” today. We might use it:

- As a statement of resolve: “Charlie lost a leg, but he never complained.”
- To express a choice: “I know I would save money if I didn’t report my tips, but I have to be honest.”
- To justify our behavior: “But Johnny did it to me first.”
- To procrastinate: “It’s getting late, but I can play one more game before I start studying.”
- To make excuses: “I know it was due, but you didn’t give me enough time!”
- As a warning: “This pill will help you, but only take one a day.”

The word “but” helps us to see change of direction or contrast in circumstance, in character, or in action. To illustrate, let’s look at one contrast in *Ephesians 2*.

“And you were dead in your trespasses and sins” (verse 1) “... But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ ...” (verses 4-5)

The “but” in *verse 4* highlights the stark contrast between our helpless state and God’s character of love and mercy. We will observe many more of these types of “buts” in this series, and you will be amazed at how much can be learned in looking at these pivotal moments. How did the biblical characters respond to what God commanded? What does this show us about God Himself and our relationship with Him today? What set these characters apart from the people around them? The answers to these questions will supply practical applications for the situations we face in our own lives.

Note on translation of the word “but”: In the Old Testament, the Hebrew language did not use a specific word for “but.” However, the idea is conveyed and translated for us in English (or whichever language you are using). In the New Testament, the Greek words *alla* and *de* are often translated “but,” though other versions might translate them as “nevertheless,” “however,” “on the contrary,” “rather,” “yet,” “now,” or “and.” No matter how it is translated, the contrast is still conveyed. It is the idea the “but” represents that we will focus on. The dilemmas encountered and the choices these biblical characters made can be understood in the same way.

May God use His timeless Word to help you walk more closely with Him.

LESSON 7

“NO LONGER AS A SLAVE BUT ... A BELOVED BROTHER” – A LESSON ON RESTORATION – (ONESIMUS)

Slavery has been part of our world for thousands of years. And though we regard the Roman Empire as an advanced civilization at the time, slavery was a major part of their society and economy. It is estimated that in the Roman empire, half of the population was enslaved. Slaves weren't only for manual labor; they were also doctors, teachers, scribes, managers of households and estates. No matter what position they served in, they were almost always considered as lower classes with no rights — bought and sold only as property.

Yet the Lord brought about radical teaching and transformation with regard to slavery and even people groups that were once considered enemies. Much of the early church consisted of slaves and lower (not wealthy) classes of people. There were, however, wealthy slave owners who were also believers, which was the case with Philemon. As a result, Peter and Paul both addressed the issues of slavery and equality in the early church.

We are going to look at one particular character and situation that Paul addressed very specifically: the relationship between Philemon and his slave Onesimus.

THE BOOK OF PHILEMON

Paul's letter to *Philemon* is only one chapter in length. On the surface, it looks like it is about restoring a relationship back to the way things were. But restoration is only returning something back to its original condition. In his letter, Paul urged radical change for his reader. He exhorted Philemon to change his view from a physical master-slave relationship to one that was now deeply spiritual.

LESSON 7

NO LONGER AS A SLAVE BUT ... A BELOVED BROTHER

Let's look at what happened by first reading *verses 1-7*.

From *verse 1*, what do we know about Philemon?

1. _____

Apphia, from *verse 2*, is likely Philemon's wife. What else do we know about them (look particularly at the end of *verse 2*)?

2. _____

What do we know about Philemon's character from *verses 5 and 7*?

3. _____

Paul spoke fondly of Philemon and even with admiration. His house was used to host the body of believers there. His love and faith were demonstrated toward the saints. The Lord used him and his family to refresh the believers.

From *verse 7*, how had Philemon's ministry to the saints affected Paul?

4. _____

Read *verses 8-10*.

Paul knew Philemon as a strong believer in Christ who was being used greatly to minister to the church. He knew Philemon loved the Lord. And so Paul had confidence that Philemon would do the right thing with the difficulty they faced at the moment.

Onesimus, a slave of Philemon's, had run away. As with most cultures that allowed slavery, slaves were considered as less than human. They were property, with which owners could do anything they saw fit. This meant that a runaway slave could have been put to death.

But something happened. Onesimus ran to Rome and had an unexpected meeting with an imprisoned apostle Paul.

What happened to Onesimus in his time with Paul according to *verse 10*?

5. _____

NO LONGER AS A SLAVE BUT ... A BELOVED BROTHER

Paul would often refer to those to whom he ministered as his “children.” In this case he referred to Onesimus as his “begotten,” meaning he had helped him be born again.

Read *verses 11-14*.

We find the first “but” in this passage. It shows us a change in the life of Onesimus.

From *verse 11*, how did Paul characterize the relationship of Onesimus to Philemon in the past?

6.

Now, after the “but,” what was he to both Paul *and* Philemon?

7.

Onesimus had been saved by the Lord and demonstrated tremendous growth. He grew so dramatically that he began to minister to Paul. Although he was deserving of a harsh punishment, as a new believer, he had an advocate in Paul, who saw him as valuable — useful in ministry.

What desire did Paul communicate to Philemon in *verse 13*?

8.

Paul says in *verse 14* that he could have kept Onesimus with him, but did not want to do that without Philemon’s permission. So Paul sent him back, encouraging and expecting a change in the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus.

A NEW VIEW

Imagine the fear that Onesimus may have had in returning. He faced the potential of severe punishment. But Paul sent him with this letter encouraging Philemon to change the way he viewed Onesimus.

From *verse 12*, how did Paul want Philemon to view Onesimus?

9.

In other words, he implored him to “treat Onesimus as you would treat something valuable to me.”

Read *verses 15-16*. In *verse 16*, we find a double “but.” It shows us the change in relationship that Paul desired. Philemon should welcome Onesimus back in two ways.

He should no longer be regarded as what?

10.

But instead, he should be regarded as a what?

11.

LESSON 7

NO LONGER AS A SLAVE BUT ... A BELOVED BROTHER

Imagine how revolutionary this was at the time. Paul was saying to Philemon that this person — this slave — is currently viewed only as property. You can do whatever you want with him. Completely change your view and treat him like your equal since he is now your brother in Christ.

Paul and Peter both addressed the issue of equality and brotherhood in the church. In Lesson 3, we studied the growing pains that the church had been experiencing. New believers came from all walks of life — sinners of various sorts, outcasts, atheists, and agnostics. The leaders in the church urged believers to not view one another as their cultures did. Women and slaves should no longer be regarded as lower-class citizens. Gentiles should not be considered as unclean.

Hold your place in *Philemon* and turn to *Galatians 3* and read *verses 26 through 28*. Here we can see that Paul was applying to the Philemon/Onesimus relationship the same biblical principles he was conveying in his letters to local churches.

Paul uses the word “all” three times. What does he teach the believers about one another?

12. Verse 26

Verse 27

Verse 28

From the *Galatians 3* passage, what does it seem the problem was that Paul was trying to address?

13.

Paul was very consistent about this in his letters to the churches. For example, read *1 Corinthians 12:12-14*.

How does Paul describe the church?

14.

The central theme is that the body of Christ has many members (to include slave and free), but that they are working together under one Spirit. Paul was teaching the church (just as he was teaching Philemon) to look at people the way God looks at them. They are all children of God, all recipients of His grace, all equal heirs of His promises. The cultural prejudices and external measurements are not applicable in God’s Kingdom. *Colossians 3:11* emphasizes the same point. You can read it in your own study time.

The importance of looking beyond appearances or cultural prejudices was true in the Old Testament as well. Turn to and read *1 Samuel 16:7*.

God told the prophet Samuel that man tends to look at the outward appearance but the Lord looks at the heart. And so we should not judge by external appearances either.

How does this truth affect the way we should treat others?

15.

NO LONGER AS A SLAVE BUT ... A BELOVED BROTHER

Returning to Philemon, Paul made three points about Onesimus:

- He is dear to me. Treat him like you would treat something valuable to me (*verse 12*).
- He is now your brother in Christ (*verse 16*).

Here is the third point. Read *Philemon verse 17*.

How was it expected that Philemon would view Paul?

16.

Paul essentially exhorted, “Now regard Onesimus in the same way.” Then he went even further. You are partners, associates, and companions in the work of the gospel.

In Lessons 4 and 5, we studied about outcasts and Samaritans. Jesus reached out to both groups and challenged preconceived notions that people had about them. Likewise, we can look at someone’s status today (their wealth, their job, their background, their age, etc), and be tempted to treat them differently. Where we have some sort of advantage, we can often think that we are better than those people for various reasons.

For Philemon, there was a distinct master-servant relationship. In a situation like that, there would be an obvious temptation to think of himself as superior. But Paul exhorted him to no longer view the relationship that way, but instead as brothers and co-ministers of the gospel.

As a final appeal, Paul dealt with the issue of harm, fraud and restitution. Read *verses 18-19*. What was Paul’s appeal to Philemon concerning any debt?

17.

We don’t know what might have happened. But there is the possibility that Onesimus caused damage or financial loss to Philemon. Some people speculate that he might have stolen something when he fled. Paul was trying to clear anything that Philemon could possibly hold against Onesimus. And to the best of his ability, he was giving Onesimus a fresh start, a clean beginning.

Notice he didn’t command him to pretend that Onesimus had done nothing wrong. There could have been some serious expenses incurred here. The Law in *Exodus 22* gives very specific instruction about restitution. God commanded the Israelites to make things right if they caused damage. There needed to be a full restoration of what was lost or killed. Paul applied this principle here. But instead of having Onesimus work it off, Paul did something amazing and asked Philemon to charge the penalty to him.

While he was settling accounts, Paul mentioned the benefits that Philemon had received from him as well (*verse 19*). Essentially, he was saying, “Consider what a large debt I forgave you of and follow my example in forgiving Onesimus.”

Paul was confident that Philemon would consider and follow the things that Paul had written about in his letter.

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THE SPIRITUAL SIMILARITIES

This situation might be hard for us to understand, since slavery is not a common practice today. Most likely, no one you know is a slave or owns a slave. But there is a tremendous spiritual parallel in our lives.

The charts below show some spiritual similarities between our lives and the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus. (You do not need to look up the verses during your group time.) Before Onesimus' conversion:

PHILEMON & ONESIMUS	SPIRITUAL SIMILARITIES: OUR LIVES TO THE LORD	SCRIPTURE PASSAGE
<i>Onesimus rebelled and wandered away</i>	<i>We rebelled and strayed from the Lord</i>	<i>Isaiah 53:6</i>
<i>Onesimus was useless and even a liability</i>	<i>We were once helpless and useless</i>	<i>Romans 3:10-12; 5:6-10</i>

But then, after Onesimus' conversion:

PHILEMON & ONESIMUS	SPIRITUAL SIMILARITIES: OUR LIVES TO THE LORD	SCRIPTURE PASSAGE
<i>Onesimus was reconciled to Philemon</i>	<i>We were reconciled to God</i>	<i>Romans 5:10</i>
<i>Paul interceded for Onesimus</i>	<i>Christ intercedes on our behalf</i>	<i>Romans 8:34</i>
<i>Paul asked Philemon not to hold on to trespasses</i>	<i>God no longer counts (keeps record of) our trespasses against Him</i>	<i>Romans 4:8; 2 Corinthians 5:19</i>
<i>Paul asked Philemon to consider Onesimus like Paul's own heart.</i>	<i>We have Christ's own character put upon us, and are now considered righteous, holy, and blameless.</i>	<i>1 Corinthians 1:30; Colossians 1:21-22</i>
<i>Paul took the debt of Onesimus upon himself</i>	<i>Similarly, our sin couldn't just be ignored. God is a perfect judge so a price had to be paid.</i> <i>Look up 2 Corinthians 5:21. What did He do with our sin?</i> _____ _____	<i>2 Corinthians 5:21</i>

POINTS ON RECONCILIATION

Not only did Christ establish a new relationship for us with God the Father, but He also made a path to renewed relationships with others. We can find important lessons in the book of *Philemon* for reconciliation in our relationships.

NO LONGER AS A SLAVE BUT ... A BELOVED BROTHER

Point Number 1: Reconciliation is necessary.

Paul didn't tell Philemon and Onesimus to part ways or just avoid one another (which is a tendency we have if we have been wronged). Nor did he ask Philemon to ignore unresolved sins.

Just as we have been reconciled to God (*Romans 5:10, Colossians 1:22*), Jesus commanded us to be reconciled to one another (*Matthew 5:24, Luke 12:58*).

Read *Matthew 5, verses 23-24*.

Jesus commanded reconciliation here. But there was something else happening.

What did Jesus say to leave (temporarily) in order to be reconciled?

18.

Note that the context of this passage is that you are aware that your brother could be holding something against **you**. You may not know that for sure, but even if he does not, you are to go. It is possible that your brother has nothing against you at all. But this simple act can go a long way toward promoting reconciliation between you and your brother. In other words, "the one who knows, goes."

The purpose of being reconciled is not to place blame on your brother, tempting though that may be. We always go to our brother only after taking the log out of our own eye first (*Matthew 7:5*), because we cannot even see clearly to take the speck out of our brother's eye until we do that.

So in this situation, you are to go there with no expectations that your brother will acknowledge or confess anything from his side. There may be a time for that, but you are not to take the part of the Holy Spirit (see *John 16:7-11*) in trying to convict someone else of a wrong they may have done to you. God reminds us in *1 Corinthians 13:4-5* that love "does not take into account a wrong suffered."

So from our side, we are always ready to be reconciled. We cannot pretend to be right with God without trying to resolve interpersonal strife.

Point Number 2: Reconciliation is an active process.

We are not just to let time pass and then hope things will eventually smooth over. We must actively address any issues and pursue reconciliation. From *Matthew 5:23-24*, we saw that we are to **go** to the person with whom we have a strained relationship. We are to take the initiative. And just as Paul sent Onesimus back, God sends us back to restore peace with those who hold something against us.

Paul appealed to Philemon to forgive Onesimus in very tangible ways. The demonstration of forgiveness was strongly urged in this relationship.

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Remember from Lesson 3 that we looked at putting on forgiveness in place of anger and bitterness. We are commanded to forgive others as Christ did (*Ephesians 4:32*). From *Colossians 2:13-14*, we saw that there may be a long list of offenses someone committed against us, but we can willingly eliminate the penalty and no longer hold it against the person.

There are two Greek words used for forgiveness in the New Testament:

- *Aphiemi* means “to send away” or “to abandon.”
- *Charizomai* means to “show grace.”

Likewise, Paul asked Philemon not to count Onesimus’ trespasses. There were certainly wrongs and debts that Philemon could have held against him. But Paul asked that he no longer take those things into account in their relationship (*Psalms 103:10, Romans 4:8, 2 Corinthians 5:19*).

Point Number 3: Very often, forgiveness and reconciliation will cost you something.

What could forgiving Onesimus cost Philemon?

19. _____

We saw that reconciliation would potentially cost Paul something as well. Read *Romans 5:10*. In the same way, what did our reconciliation with God cost Him?

20. _____

For further study, you can also read *Colossians 1:20, 1 Peter 1:18-19*.

Point Number 4: Regarding reconciliation, we must realize that we were debtors.

Paul pointed out to Philemon that he also owed Paul a great deal. In the same way, God has given and forgiven us more than we can imagine (*Matthew 18:23-33*). When we realize and respond to God’s forgiveness and work, we will love the Lord more deeply (*Luke 7:41-48*). And as recipients of great grace, we will be willing to demonstrate it to others (*Ephesians 4:32*).

Point Number 5: Reconciliation requires viewing others as equal before the Lord and even more important than ourselves (*Philippians 2:3*).

Paul exhorted Philemon to view Onesimus as a brother in Christ. Paul even asked him to view and treat Onesimus with the same value with which he viewed the apostle Paul himself.

WHAT ABOUT THE ISSUE OF SLAVERY?

Paul was sending Onesimus back into potential danger and the prospect of being returned into slavery. Paul didn’t explicitly instruct Philemon to set him free. Some people look at this and say the Bible endorses or condones slavery.

It is important to note that God desires freedom in our lives. Freedom is a biblical concept. We know this because:

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- God set the Israelites free from the oppression of Egypt, the bondage of slavery. They were in misery and suffering (*Exodus 3:7-8*).
- Jesus ransomed us from slavery to sin (*Romans 6:6, 16-20*). He called us into freedom from the Law (*Galatians 5:13*).

Turn to and read *1 Corinthians 7:20-23*.

In *verse 22*, what did Paul say that you were even if you happened to be a slave?

21.

God taught that we can be free even in the midst of oppression. Many people suffer all over the world as victims of wars, tyranny, poverty, etc. In spite of these things, they can still be spiritually free in Christ. Nothing can separate us from God's love (*Romans 8:38-39*) and no one can ever hinder the personal relationship that believers have with Him.

In this same passage (*1 Corinthians 7*), we see specific direction regarding slavery.

In *verse 23*, what was the instruction?

22.

The implication here is that it is undesirable to be under the ownership of another human being. In the second half of *verse 21*, what guidance does Scripture give?

23.

One of the powerful things about God's Word is that it addresses us as individuals. It was not Jesus' purpose to change governmental laws or systems. Yet He was a revolutionary in that He focused on the hearts of individuals, who were free to have a relationship with the God of the universe regardless of the governmental system they found themselves in. This is true freedom, which is readily available no matter how difficult our circumstances may be.

For many in biblical days, slavery was their means of employment. And for most, it was a situation that they could not change. But here Paul emphasized that freedom was preferable. In other words, he instructed, "If you have the opportunity to be free, take it!"

For those who cannot change their situation, Scripture gives instruction (*Ephesians 6:5-9, Colossians 3:22-24, 1 Peter 2:13-20*). Read *Colossians 3:22-24*.

In *Colossians 3:22*, God gave a command to "obey those who are your masters." But *Colossians* gives a change of focus (or commitment). You're not doing this to please men. You're not doing this to earn something for yourself.

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What was to be your motivation in *verses 23* and *24*?

24.

Paul gave more reason in *1 Timothy 6:1*. Turn there, and read the verse.

What is the purpose of slaves respecting their masters?

25.

The Apostle Peter gave similar instruction in *1 Peter 2*. Read *1 Peter 2:18-23*.

He commanded slaves to submit themselves and give respect.

For which types of masters should they do this?

26.

While this seems disheartening to stay in a place of oppression, this also implied that they had a choice. They had power, and were not just a *thing* — a possession. Though they were equal in the eyes of the Lord, they could choose to place themselves underneath others, even to those who were unreasonable.

Based on *1 Peter 2:21*, what did Christ leave or give us?

27.

In *verses 22-23*, what was the ultimate example that He showed us?

28.

Then, looking back at *verses 19-20*, what in our responses finds favor with God?

29.

Christ did this for us. He was completely innocent and yet He suffered. He endured it. He did not retaliate, but entrusted Himself to God. When we suffer and endure, it is a reflection of Christ. It is a powerful testimony to others of the faith and hope we have in Jesus. This is the purpose of suffering — choosing to serve even in the event of unjust treatment from others.

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Then Peter said something radical. Look again at *verse 21*. To what were you called?

30.

We usually think of a “calling” as being a missionary or a pastor, or to work with children, etc. But God tells us that we are called to follow in His steps, to live as His saints (*1 Corinthians 1:2*), and even to suffer when doing good. It sounds completely opposite from what you hear in some churches today. We are not called to be comfortable; we are called to serve and, if need be, even to suffer. That means that someone being oppressed can still fulfill exactly what God purposes in their lives — to exemplify Christ. And according to *1 Timothy 6:1*, the Lord could use those under the burden of slavery as a testimony, for the furtherance of His Kingdom.

One day, Jesus will return and put an end to suffering. There will be no more death, pain or tears (*Revelation 21:4*). In the meantime, Jesus’ first concern is with our spirit. He taught how to have tremendous peace and joy, even in the middle of hopeless situations. We see this many times throughout the Scriptures: God might not rescue us from our physical situation, but we can still have the spiritual freedom and benefits in this life that He purchased for us.

He uses oppression and difficulty in order to draw us closer to Him, to make us more like Jesus, and to display His love to those around us.

CONCLUSION & APPLICATION

Paul instructed Philemon to have Onesimus back “*no longer as a slave but ... a beloved brother*.” This was revolutionary, because it elevated the slave’s status far beyond society’s view — from a thing to be possessed to a person who should be treated as a beloved brother. In many of his letters, Paul relayed the truth that God shows no partiality, that He makes no distinctions. He gives the same salvation and the same Spirit, equally to male or female, Jew or Gentile, slave or free.

This new way of thinking would dramatically affect Philemon and Onesimus’ master/slave relationship. Philemon was no longer to view Onesimus as a “living tool.” He could not abuse or even look down upon someone who ought to be his equal.

This reconciliation would cost both Philemon and Onesimus a great deal. Onesimus would have to voluntarily return and place himself back under a master, giving up his own freedom. And Philemon would have to forgive any losses. He was now a brother.

In our own lives, reconciliation can be costly. In Lesson 3, we studied our response to being wronged. This meant not responding in anger or retaliating, but, instead, demonstrating kindness and forgiveness. We may believe ourselves to be justified in our anger, but God commands us to cancel the records of those things. He calls us to treat each other as equals.

There may be times that we need to help someone else to be accountable for their actions. Parents, for example, have that responsibility for their children. Employers have that responsibility for their employees. That is a separate issue from how we regard one another, and any actions we take are because of love and concern for them, not because they bother or irritate us.

LESSON 7

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What are some things that keep us from true reconciliation?

31.

God has accomplished reconciliation in our lives. First, He established peace between the believer and Himself (*Romans 5:1, 11; 2 Corinthians 5:18-19*). He has wiped away our sin and our debt (*2 Corinthians 5:19, Colossians 2:14*). He has made all believers equally His children. And so there should be nothing that divides us (*Ephesians 2:13-14*). Because we have had great spiritual debt cancelled out and are all recipients of God's grace, we can be reconciled with one another. We are to see ourselves as forgiven an insurmountable debt. Whatever wrongs we may have suffered from another, they are nothing in comparison to the debts that God has forgiven us (*Matthew 18:21-33*).

What are some things the Lord may have shown you about forgiveness and reconciliation in this Lesson?

32.

From what you learned (or were reminded of), what are some practical applications for your life regarding relationships with others?

33.

May the Lord give us a greater appreciation for His deliverance from spiritual slavery. May He teach us how to be reconciled with one another, and to live as brothers, sisters, and partners in the Gospel.