



Speaker: Rhordan Wicks

INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly fragmented world, growing evidence points to a troubling decline in the quality and depth of human relationships. In Singapore, a 2016/2017 Duke-NUS Centre for Ageing Research and Education (CARE) study found that 34% of Singaporean respondents 60 years and older perceived themselves to be lonely.¹ A 2019 study reported that about a third of those staying in rental flats and 15% staying in their own homes felt lonely.² Marriage rates for both men and women have declined over the past decade, even as general divorce rates have also gone down.³ Meanwhile, the average time adults spend socializing with friends has plunged—from over an hour a day to just 20 minutes.

These statistics reveal a deep spiritual and emotional disconnect. Many relationships today are marked by surface-level interactions, emotional distance, and the absence of meaningful connection. In this climate, the call to pursue Christ-centered relationships shaped by love, grace, and reconciliation has never been more urgent.

In this study series, we will explore the book of *Philemon*. Though brief, this epistle offers profound insight into God's heart for relational healing, restoration, and forgiveness. Philemon, a church leader in Colossae, had been wronged by his slave Onesimus—who had likely stolen from him and fled to Rome. By divine appointment, Onesimus encountered the Apostle Paul in prison, where his life was radically transformed by the Gospel. Now, Paul writes to Philemon, urging him to receive Onesimus not as a slave, but as a beloved brother in Christ.

¹ Duke-NUS Medical School (2021) 'All the lonely people': The impact of loneliness in old age on life and health expectancy

² Liang et al. (2019) 'Loneliness amongst Low-Socioeconomic Status Elderly Singaporeans and its Association with Perceptions of the Neighbourhood Environment.' *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 16(6):967.

³ Singapore Department of Statistics (2025) Press Release: Statistics on Marriages and Divorces, 2024.

DISCUSSION

1. Read Philemon.
 - a. How does Paul describe Onesimus in the letter? See verses 10 to 16.
 - b. What is the transformation that Onesimus undergoes when he became a Christian?
 - c. Describe your own experience of spiritual rebirth. How did your encounter with God reshape your identity, values, and relationships?
AND/OR
 - d. In what areas of your life do you still struggle to fully embrace your identity in Christ? What do you feel has yet to be reshaped, and why?

2. True transformation doesn't stop at personal renewal—it extends into our relationships. Paul didn't allow Onesimus to remain with him. Instead, he challenged him to return and seek reconciliation with the person he had wronged.
 - a. Why do you think Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon?
 - i. What was his intention for Onesimus?
 - ii. What was his intention for Philemon?
 - iii. What does this reveal about how God conceives of human relationships?
 - b. Onesimus travelled over 2,000km to face Philemon, risking rejection, punishment, and even death in the process.
 - i. What have your experiences of reconciliation been?
 - ii. What costs did you incur and what helped you to move forward?
 - iii. Who might God want you to pursue reconciliation with today?

3. Paul's appeal to Philemon was grounded in love. See verses 4, 7, and 9. In this, he models God, who reconciled sinners not through demand, but through invitation in grace.
 - a. What relational wounds do you see in the people around you? And how might you love these people who are hurting?
 - b. Imagine a church community where reconciliation is the norm, not the exception. What would that look like—and what role could you play in making that vision a reality?

WHAT WILL YOU DO

The book of Philemon is a profound and personal illustration of the Gospel's transformative power—not only to redeem individual lives but to heal and restore broken relationships. In a world plagued by disconnection, isolation, and relational breakdown, this epistle reminds us that reconciliation is both possible and essential in Christ.

Onesimus's journey—from a runaway slave to a beloved brother in Christ—embodies the hope that no relationship is beyond the reach of God's grace. His story reminds us that the Gospel is not only vertical (reconciling us to God) but deeply horizontal (reconciling us to one another).

In a world marked by fractured families, wounded friendships, and cultural division, the call to reconcile is countercultural—and deeply Christlike. May we have the humility to admit where

we've caused harm, the courage to seek forgiveness, and the grace to extend it. And as we do, may our restored relationships become living testimonies of the reconciling love of Christ.

MEMORY VERSE

Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. - *Philemon 1:8-11 NIV*

AN E1R1 REFLECTION

(drawn from Psalm 78)

Psalm 78 is a powerful reminder that evangelism is not just about preaching—it's about telling the story of God's faithfulness. Asaph recounts how God led, provided for, and disciplined Israel, not to shame them, but to teach the next generation who God is.

The psalm calls us to be storytellers of grace, recounting what God has done in Scripture and in our own lives. Why? So that others—especially those younger or newer to faith—may set their hope in God.

In a world full of noise and distraction, we are called to speak clearly about God's works. Sharing the gospel isn't always a sermon—it might be a testimony over coffee, a conversation with a child, or a word of hope to someone in doubt.

Who might you invite into God's story this week?