

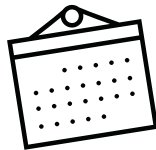
Master and Slave?

Philemon 1:1-25

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1. INTRODUCTION TO THIS SUNDAY



This Sunday belongs to a series of two passages from Paul's letters. We will read Paul's letter to Philemon, in which he writes about the slave Onesimus. And we will read from his letter to the Christians in Philippi, in which he mainly speaks about joy and friendliness. This Sunday about Philemon can also be used on its own, to discuss the subject of slavery with the children.

This Sunday, we will focus on Philemon 1:1-25: Paul asks Philemon to welcome the slave Onesimus back with open arms, and not to punish him.

With the **4-8 year-olds**, we will focus on being brothers and sisters when you believe in Jesus Christ. With the **8-12 year-olds**, we will focus on the invitation to do the right thing, because you believe in Jesus Christ.

2. CONTEXT OF THE BIBLE PASSAGE



Tip

The topic of slavery might be particularly relevant to some children due to their family history, or because of what they hear about it in school or on the news. If it is, take your time discussing it, or visit a slavery monument together.

The letter to Philemon is one of the shortest letters in the New Testament. The letter is about only one topic: Paul asks Philemon to give the slave Onesimus a warm welcome and not to punish him. Philemon is a friend of Paul's. Onesimus was Philemon's slave, but he has run away from him. Paul has protected Onesimus, and Onesimus has become a Christian.

Paul probably wrote the letter to Philemon around 55 AD. Slavery was very common in those days. In some cities in the Roman Empire, up to a third of the population may have consisted of slaves!

Slaves had next to no rights. If they didn't do their job well or tried to run away, they were severely punished: they were beaten or mistreated in other ways. Their master could even have them killed! This makes what Paul asks very special: Philemon shouldn't punish his runaway slave, but receive him as a brother.

Paul does not primarily focus on releasing slaves. In 1 Corinthians 7:17-24 Paul tells his readers to stay as they

were (circumcised or uncircumcised, married or unmarried, slave or free) when they became believers. Still, something does change when you believe in Jesus. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul writes that there is no difference between a free person and a slave, through Christ (Galatians 3:28). In 1 Corinthians 7:21-22, we read, "Were you a slave when God called you? Well, never mind; but if you have a chance to become free, use it. For a slave who has been called by the Lord is the Lord's free person; in the same way a free person who has been called by Christ is his slave."

3. EXPLANATION OF THE BIBLE PASSAGE



Paul writes his letter from prison (Philemon 1:1-3). He is in prison for telling people about Jesus. We don't know where he was imprisoned.

Paul hopes he will be released soon (Philemon 1:22). When Paul was in prison, Onesimus looked after him. And now, Paul asks Philemon not to punish his runaway slave, but to receive him as a brother.

The letter is not just addressed to Philemon, but to the entire congregation meeting in Philemon's house. The entire congregation will hear what Paul expects of Philemon. This makes it particularly hard for Philemon not to do what Paul asks of him!

Paul has a special reason for his question to Philemon: the slave Onesimus has become a Christian. For Paul, that means he has become like a son. And to Philemon, he is a brother now: someone you can trust completely. In the letter to the Galatians, Paul writes that in Christ, there is no difference between slaves and free (Galatians 3:26-28). "It is through faith that all of you are God's children in union with Christ Jesus," Paul writes. And "So there is no difference between (...) slaves and free people, between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus."

Paul tries to convince Philemon to accept Onesimus as a brother in other ways as well. He says nice things about Philemon: that he is always faithful to Jesus and keeps showing he loves other Christians (verses 4-7, where Paul thanks God for Philemon). Then Philemon will no doubt do the right thing concerning his "new" brother Onesimus (verse 16). And Paul reminds Philemon of the fact that he, Philemon, also became a believer in Christ through Paul, just like Onesimus (verse 19). Philemon owes a lot to Paul. Paul could demand Philemon does what he asks. But he doesn't. He wants Philemon to do this voluntarily (verse 8-9). Paul uses rhetoric here, the art of persuasion: by emphasizing his role in Philemon's conversion, he hopes Philemon will now do what he asks of him.

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4. FROM THE BIBLE

4-8 years

For the younger children we focus on Philemon 1:16.

He is a dear brother in Christ. How much he means to me!

8-12 years

For the older children we focus on Philemon 1:20.

"So, my brother, please do me this favor for the Lord's sake; as a brother in Christ, cheer me up!"

5. WHAT WILL YOU NEED?

4-12 years

During the Church Service

- a rubber band (around 10 inches) or a rope with the ends tied together
- the handout with the instructions

4-8 years

Doing: Garland of Brothers and Sisters

For each child:

- the handout
- a pair of scissors or a pin prick pen

And also:

- felt tip pens and coloring pencils
- pieces of fabric
- colored paper
- glue
- split pins

Doing: Follow your Heart

For each child:

- the handout
- a pencil
- an eraser

Doing: What Belongs Together?

For each child:

- the handout

And also:

- coloring pencils or felt tip pens

8-12 years

To Start Off

For each child:

- the handout
- an envelope
- a pair of scissors

Bible Passage

- a Bible

Doing: Connected

For each child:

- the handout
- a pair of scissors

Doing: To Be Continued

For each pair:

- the handout
- a pen

And also:

- felt tip pens and coloring pencils

Doing: A Little Nudge

- an empty soda can
- two coffee mugs of such a size that half of the can will stick out of them



Master and Slave?

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During the Church Service

6. CHILDREN'S MOMENT IN THE SERVICE



Free or Captive?

Today, we are reading the letter to Philemon. In this letter, Paul asks his friend Philemon to extend a warm welcome to his runaway slave Onesimus and not to punish him.

What do you need?

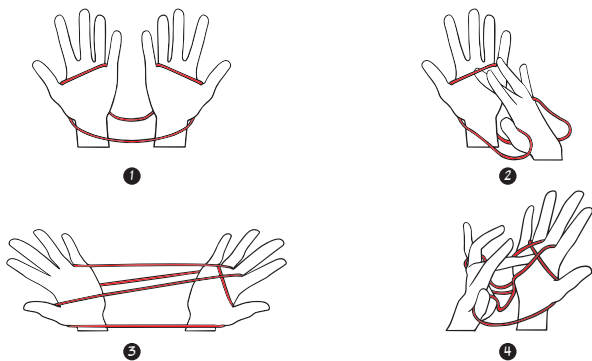
- a rubber band (around 10 inches) or a rope with the ends tied together
- the handout with the instructions

Beforehand:

- Practice the trick with the rope using the instructions on the handout.

Let's start!

- Tell the children that the story is about a runaway slave. Explain that in Paul's days, slavery was normal. A slave had next to no rights. If they tried to run away, they were severely punished. Their masters were free to do what they wanted with slaves. Paul disapproves of that. For Paul, the question is who is free and who is captive: A slave is captive, but a slave who believes in Jesus is really free, because Christians are freed from sin. And at the same time: someone who is free and believes in Jesus is really a slave. Because he enters the service of Christ.
- Tell the children that the question whether you are captive or free, is like a trick with a rope.
- Step by step, show the trick.
- Have one of the children stick their hand through the hole.
- What can the children see is happening? It looked like the child's hand was caught in the rope, but the hand came free by doing the same thing again.
- Tell the children that they will hear more about Paul, Philemon and Onesimus during the children's service.



During the Children's Service

7. TO START OFF



4-8 years

Connecting letter

Paul writes a letter to Philemon, in which he says that Philemon and he are connected through faith with each other and with other Christians. The children are connected to each other shoulder to shoulder and pass on a piece of the letter of Paul to each other.

What do you need?

- A note with two short pieces from the letter of Paul on it: 'This is a letter from Paul to his friend Philemon' and 'As a christian you are connected to me aren't you? Then please do what I ask you.'
- an envelope

Beforehand

- Put the note in the envelope
- Seal the envelope
- You could write on the envelope: *from Paul, for Philemon*

Let's start!

- The children stand in a row, shoulder to shoulder, next to each other. Hands on their back.
- One child gets the envelope and keeps it behind his back.
- One child stands in front of the group, with it's back to the other children.
- The child with the envelope will pass on the envelope on your sign.
- The child that gets the envelope, gives the envelope back to the next child and so on. When the last child in the row has the envelope, the envelope goes back again.
- As soon as the child in front of the group turns around, the children stop passing on the envelope and the child in front of the group must guess who has the envelope.
- When the child in front of the row guesses good, the child with the envelope stands in front of the group and the other child stands in the row. When the child in front guesses wrong, he or she can guess one more time which child has the envelope.
- Let one of the children open the envelope. Tell the children that you read a piece a piece from the letter that Paul writes to Philemon. The children hear in the Biblestory what Paul meant when he says to Philemon: 'Please do what I ask from you.'



Tip

- When it's difficult for the children to discover where the envelope is, let the children in the row stand a bit further away from each other.

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8-12 years

The Doing-the-Right-Thing-List

Paul invites Philemon to do the right thing. The children get an envelope with ten good things they could do. Which two things do they hope to do in the week to come?

What do you need?

For each child:

- the handout
- an envelope
- a pair of scissors

Beforehand:

- Put a handout with ten suggestions to do good things into the envelope.

Let's start!

- Hand out the envelopes.
- Tell the children that each envelope contains an invitation to do good things.
- The children open the envelope and read the ten proposals.
- The children cut the ten proposals into strips.
- The children sort the strips from difficult to easy.

- Briefly discuss the children's choices.

- Which two good things do the children hope to do in the week to come?



Tip

If you have a large group, do this assignment in groups of two or three.

8. PRAYER AT THE START OF THE CHILDREN'S SERVICE



Good God,
You have made us,
All people on the earth.
Everyone is a child of You.
Will You help us to be reminded of that?
To be good to each other, like friends are?
Amen.



Tip

Sit down in a circle for this prayer. You could light a candle.

9. BIBLE STORY

4-8 years

Philemon 1:1-25

Tell the story to the children. While you talk or after reading the story, look at the picture together. Ask the children to look carefully and say what they see. You could also use the older children's Fact File for more information.



Tip

Onesimus is pronounced: Ownessimmus.
And Philemon: Filleemon.



Philemon Gets a Letter

Philemon is sitting in the courtyard of his house with Apphia.

In about an hour's time, the church service will begin. Then this place will be packed full of people who want to hear about Jesus, and who'll then eat with them. But for now, the place is nice and quiet.

An old servant enters the courtyard. He has something in his hand, a rolled up piece of paper.

"Sorry to disturb you, master. But a letter has just arrived for you. I thought you might want to read it."

Philemon puts down his chunk of bread. "A letter?" he says in surprise. "For me?"

"For you, master. And for the people who'll be here soon."

Philemon takes the letter and opens the scroll.

"Ah!" he says. "This is a letter from our friend Paul."

Oh no, Apphia! Bad news, Paul is in prison!”
Apphia covers her mouth with her hand.
“It must be because he tells people about Jesus!” she says.
“Let’s hear what he has to say!”

*“Dear Philemon and Apphia,
May God, our Father, and Jesus, our Lord, take good care
of you and give you peace.
I am in prison right now because of my work for Jesus.
But I have hope. And that is because of you, Philemon. I
think it’s wonderful that you really live for Jesus. You do so
much for other people who believe in Jesus.
Philemon, I want to ask you something. It’s about Onesimus,
one of your slaves.”*

“Onesimus?” Apphia says. She crinkles her forehead. “Isn’t
that the boy who ran off a while ago?”

Philemon nods. “That’s right. All of a sudden, he had
disappeared. Nobody knew where he had gone. I don’t
understand how Paul can know him.”

“Read on, let’s find out!” Apphia says.

Philemon reads:

*“I know that Onesimus secretly ran off. It just so happens
that I got to meet him.*

*And I’ll tell you something really special: Onesimus has
become a Christian, and we have become good friends. I
love that boy as if he were my own son. He has helped me
so much when I ended up in prison.*

*I’d love to keep him here with me, so he could look after me.
But he has told me he is your slave and that he ran away.
And I don’t think it’s right to keep him here without you
knowing about it.*

So I am sending him to you, with this letter.

*You have had to do without Onesimus for a while. But in the
time he was gone, he has become a Christian. And so now
he is returning. Not as a slave, but as a brother: someone
who believes in Jesus, just like you do.*

*Philemon, let me ask you something: Please don’t be angry
at Onesimus. Be a friend to him, like you’ve been a friend
to me.*

*If Onesimus owes you money, let me know. I’ll pay you back
myself.*

*May God take good care of you and everyone with you.
Greetings from Paul”*

Philemon lowers the letter. Only then does he see the
young man standing in the shade of the olive tree. He walks
towards him.

“Onesimus, my boy...!”

8-12 years

Philemon 1:1-25

Paul’s Letter to Philemon

From Paul, a prisoner for the sake of Christ Jesus, and from
our brother Timothy—

To our friend and fellow worker Philemon, and the church
that meets in your house, and our sister Apphia, and our
fellow soldier Archippus:

May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you
grace and peace.

Philemon’s Love and Faith

Brother Philemon, every time I pray, I mention you and give
thanks to my God. For I hear of your love for all of God’s
people and the faith you have in the Lord Jesus. My prayer
is that our fellowship with you as believers will bring about
a deeper understanding of every blessing which we have
in our life in union with Christ. Your love, dear brother, has
brought me great joy and much encouragement! You have
cheered the hearts of all of God’s people.

A Request for Onesimus

For this reason I could be bold enough, as your brother in
Christ, to order you to do what should be done. But because
I love you, I make a request instead. I do this even though
I am Paul, the ambassador of Christ Jesus, and at present
also a prisoner for his sake. So I make a request to you on
behalf of Onesimus, who is my own son in Christ; for while
in prison I have become his spiritual father. At one time he
was of no use to you, but now he is useful both to you and
to me.

I am sending him back to you now, and with him goes my
heart. I would like to keep him here with me, while I am in
prison for the gospel’s sake, so that he could help me in
your place. However, I do not want to force you to help me;
rather, I would like for you to do it of your own free will. So I
will not do anything unless you agree.

It may be that Onesimus was away from you for a short time
so that you might have him back for all time. And now he
is not just a slave, but much more than a slave: he is a dear
brother in Christ. How much he means to me! And how
much more he will mean to you, both as a slave and as a
brother in the Lord!

So, if you think of me as your partner, welcome him back
just as you would welcome me. If he has done you any
wrong or owes you anything, charge it to my account. Here,
I will write this with my own hand: I, Paul, will pay you back. (I
should not have to remind you, of course, that you owe your
very self to me.) So, my brother, please do me this favor for
the Lord’s sake; as a brother in Christ, cheer me up!

I am sure, as I write this, that you will do what I ask—in fact
I know that you will do even more. At the same time, get a
room ready for me, because I hope that God will answer the
prayers of all of you and give me back to you.

Final Greetings

Epaphras, who is in prison with me for the sake of Christ
Jesus, sends you his greetings, and so do my co-workers
Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

Master and Slave?

Philemon 1:1-25

10. FACT FILE



Slavery

In New Testament times, there was a lot of slavery. Slaves were seen as a possession of someone else and had to work hard for their masters. Masters could set their slaves free. That often happened if slaves had worked for their masters for a long time. If a slave was set free, he or she did not get the same rights as someone who hadn't been born as a slave. A freed slave still had a lot of obligations, especially to their master.

Onesimus

The name Onesimus means: useful. It is a name often given to slaves. Onesimus had run away from Philemon. Runaway slaves were severely punished. But Paul asks Philemon not to punish Onesimus. Philemon has to be as nice to his slave as he is to Paul. That's quite extraordinary!

Writing Letters

Paul wrote a lot of letters. The letters were usually penned down by someone else (a secretary), with Paul saying what had to be in the letter. In some letters, Paul also wrote a few words: you could tell by his handwriting. Paul did so to show how important he considered the letter to be, and to show the letter really was his. In the letter to Philemon, Paul himself also writes a few words, because he really wants Philemon not to punish his slave Onesimus.

11. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



Below, there are two kinds of questions you can discuss: "knowledge questions" and "thinking questions". You can look up the answers to the knowledge questions, for example in the story. But the thinking questions can keep your group thinking. There are no wrong answers in those!

4-8 years

- Who is Philemon? How does he know Onesimus?
- Why does Paul think Philemon wants to punish Onesimus?
- Paul tells Philemon he should not be angry with Onesimus. Onesimus is a brother, because he believes in Jesus. Do you have a brother or sister? And does your brother or sister also believe in God? Do you ever talk about God together?
- Can you be friends with anyone? Why yes or no?

6-8 years

- What do you love best about having brothers and sisters?

8-12 years

- Paul writes a letter to Philemon. How can you tell that Philemon is a good friend of Paul's?

- Paul wants to ask Philemon something. Do you know what?
- How do you think Philemon feels about Paul's question?
- Do you know why Philemon might want to punish Onesimus?
- Paul gives Philemon several reasons not to punish Onesimus, but to be good to him. Can you name some of those reasons?
- Have you ever stood up for someone? Tell us a little more about that.

10-12 years

- Paul does not say that Philemon should set Onesimus free, but leaves the choice to him. Why does he do that? What do you think about that?
- Did you hear on school or somewhere else about the slave trade of the past centuries and about the apologies that were provided for it? Suppose, Paul would write a letter to us right now, what would he say about how we treat each other?

12. DOING



4-8 years

Garland of Brothers and Sisters

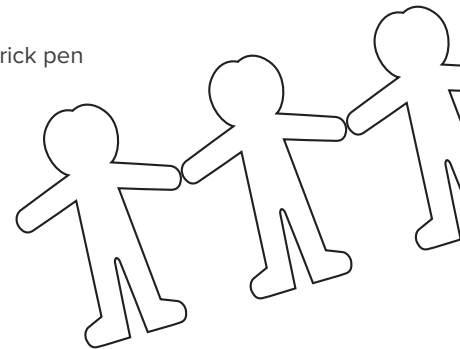
You are brothers and sisters because you believe in Jesus. The children make this festive garland of brothers and sisters that will cheer up any home.

What do you need?

- For each child:
- the handout
 - a pair of scissors or a pin prick pen

And also:

- felt tip pens and coloring pencils
- pieces of fabric
- colored paper
- glue
- split pins



Let's start!

- The children get the handout.
- The children decorate the figure as they see fit.
- The children cut out the figure.
- The children use the pin prick pen to punch a hole through the dots on the arms.
- The children's worker attaches the figures to each other by carefully inserting split pins.



Tip

To show you are brothers and sisters through faith, hang a cross or a heart in the middle of the garland.

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6-8 years

Follow your Heart

Paul asks Philemon not to punish his slave, but to treat him in a friendly manner, like a brother. The children color the drawing, do the graph art puzzle and discover what you need to be a true friend.

What do you need?

- the handout
- a pencil
- an eraser

Let's start!

- The children color the drawing of Paul, Philemon and Onesimus in the middle of the handout.
- There is a big dot on the handout. The graph starts here. The children follow the instructions and discover what you need to be a friend.



8-12 years

Connected

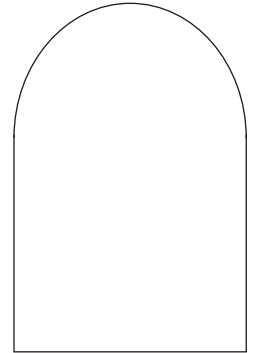
Paul loves Onesimus. He hopes Philemon will also give a warm welcome to his slave. If it's not for Paul's sake, then for Jesus'. Because for him, everybody is connected.

What do you need?

- the handout
- a pair of scissors

Before the children's service:

- Copy the handout on two colors of thick paper. Cut the handouts in half so each child has two halves of a heart in a different color.



Let's start!

- The children get two halves of a heart in a different color.
- The children cut out the half hearts.
- The children make incisions along the dotted lines.
- The children place one heart over the other, so you see a heart shape.
- The children lace the strips together (over, under, over, under).
- The children carefully cut off the parts of strip that stick out along the heart.
- The children affix the ends of the strips using glue.
- The heart is ready.

8-12 years

To Be Continued

We don't know how Philemon responded when Onesimus came back to him. Did he welcome Onesimus back with open arms as Paul asked, or did he do something else? In pairs, the children come up with possible endings to this story. They pretend to be Philemon and write a letter in response to Paul's in which they say how Onesimus continued. The beginning of the letter has already been written.

4-8 years

What Belongs Together?

Paul says we are brothers and sisters because we belong to Jesus. On the handout, the children find sets of three pictures that belong together.

What do you need?

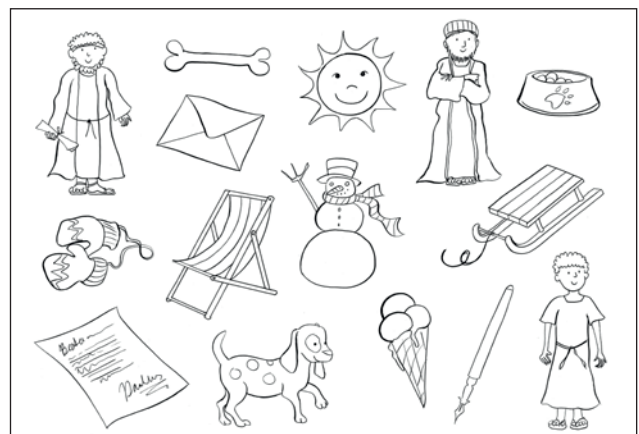
- the handout

And also:

- coloring pencils or felt tip pens

Let's start!

- The children get the handout.
- The children look at the pictures on the handout.
- The children find sets of three pictures that belong together.
- They give the pictures that belong together the same color.



Master and Slave?

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What do you need?

- For each pair:
- the handout
 - a pen



And also:

- felt tip pens and coloring pencils

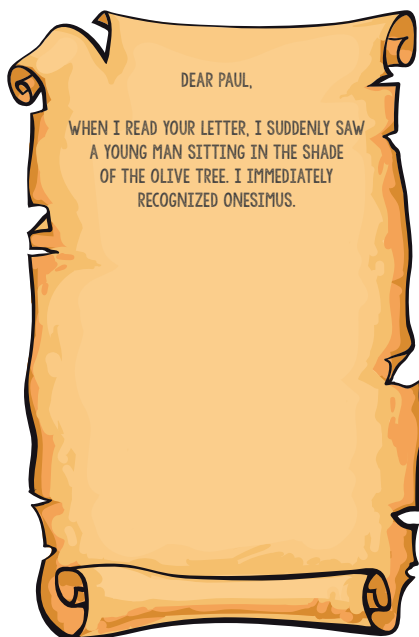
Let's start!

- The children get the handout with the beginning of the letter.
- Each pair imagines they are Philemon and decide how Philemon treats Onesimus.
- They finish the letter to Paul and sign it as "Philemon".
- When the children are ready, they read out the letters to each other.



Tip

Instead of pens, you could also use a nib and real ink.



8-12 years

A Little Nudge

Paul asks Philemon to do the right thing. He does not want Philemon to punish his runaway slave, as was customary in those days. Paul tries to change Philemon's mind. You will do something you didn't think was possible. Sometimes, you'll need a little nudge for that. Just like in the following experiment.

What do you need?

- an empty soda can
- two coffee mugs of such a size that half of the can will stick out of them

Let's start!

- Place one mug behind the other.
- Place the empty can in one of the mugs.
- Now calmly blow air between the can and the mug.
- Can you make the tin jump into the empty mug?
- If necessary, adjust the distance between the two mugs.
- Which of the children can move the can from one mug to the other?

13. BLESSING

In the Bible, there is a blessing for all people. It is a wish that we often hear at the end of a church service. And we say this blessing to each other:



"May the Lord bless you and take care of you; May the Lord be kind and gracious to you; May the Lord look on you with favor and give you peace."

Numbers 6:24-26



Tips

- Stand in a circle and hold hands.
- Let three children say one sentence each, or say the entire blessing together.

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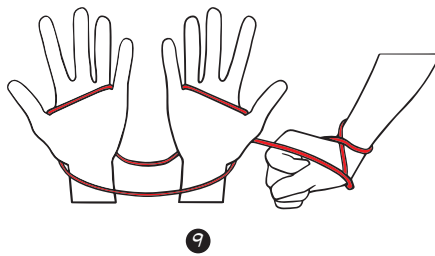
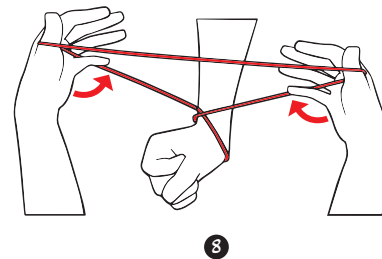
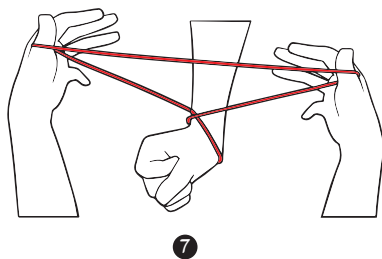
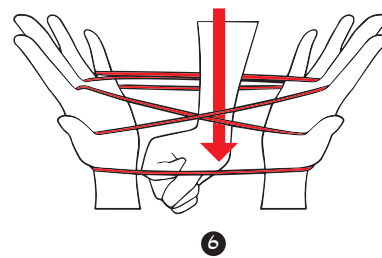
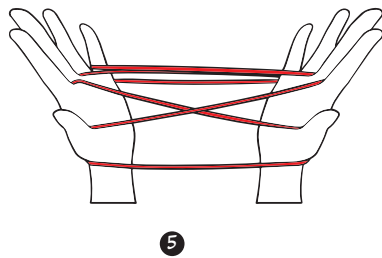
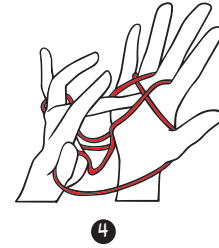
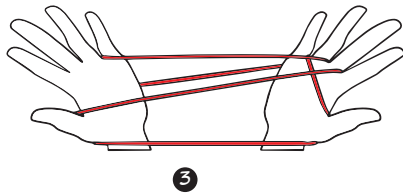
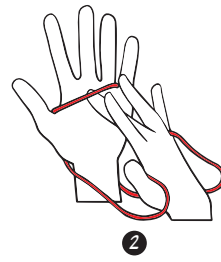
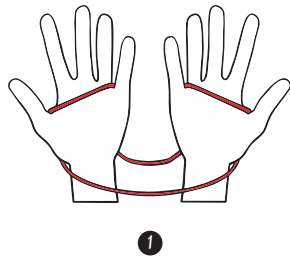
Handout 4-8 years: NBG/Linda Bikker

Design: Frivista

DTP: Villa Grafica

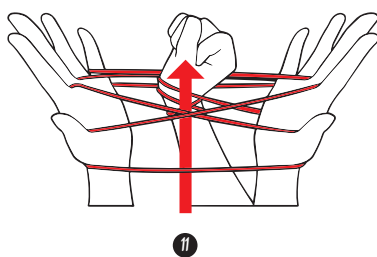
Master and Slave?

Philemon 1:1-25



Repeat the steps 1-5

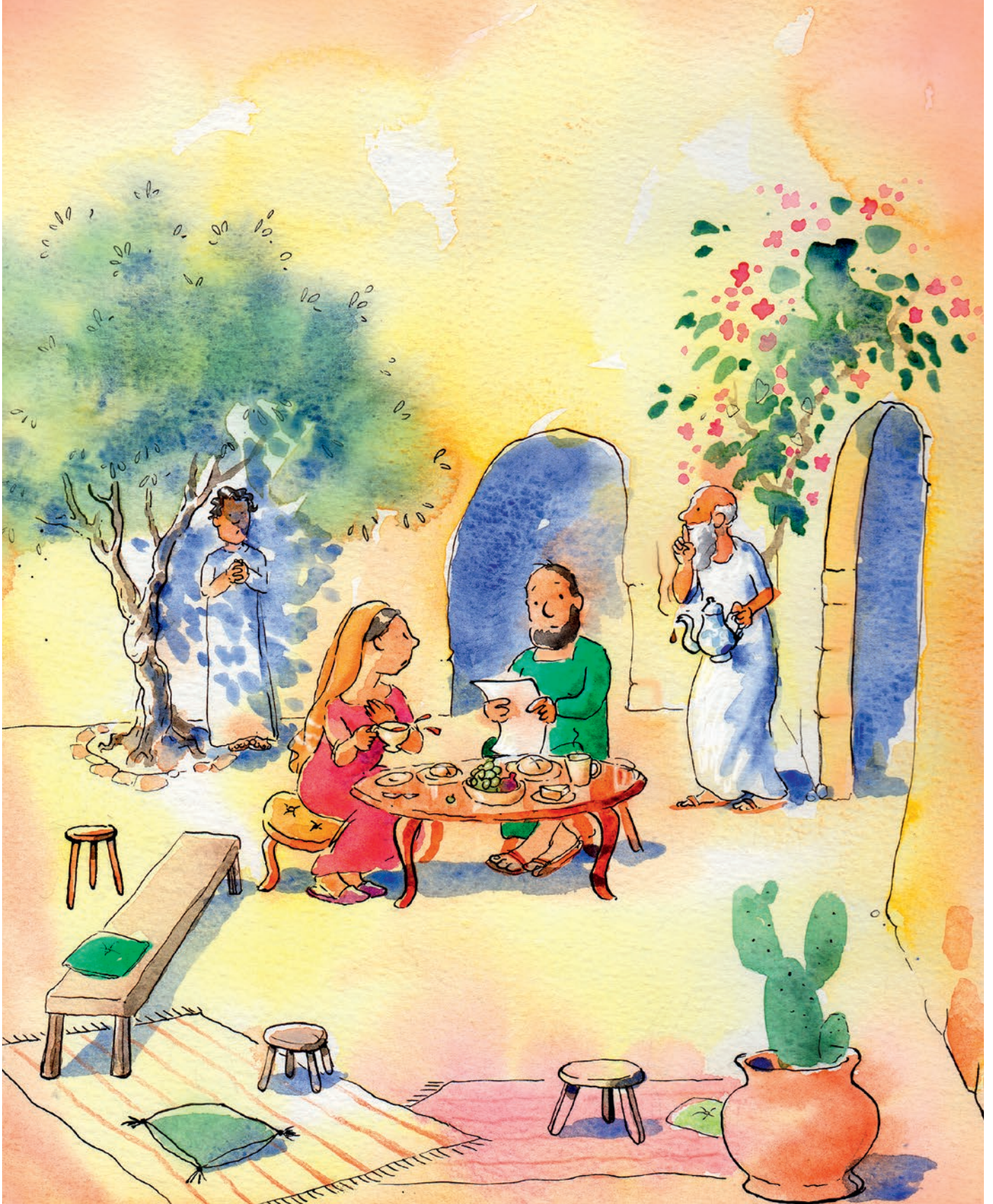
10



Repeat step 7 and the 'captured' hand is free again!

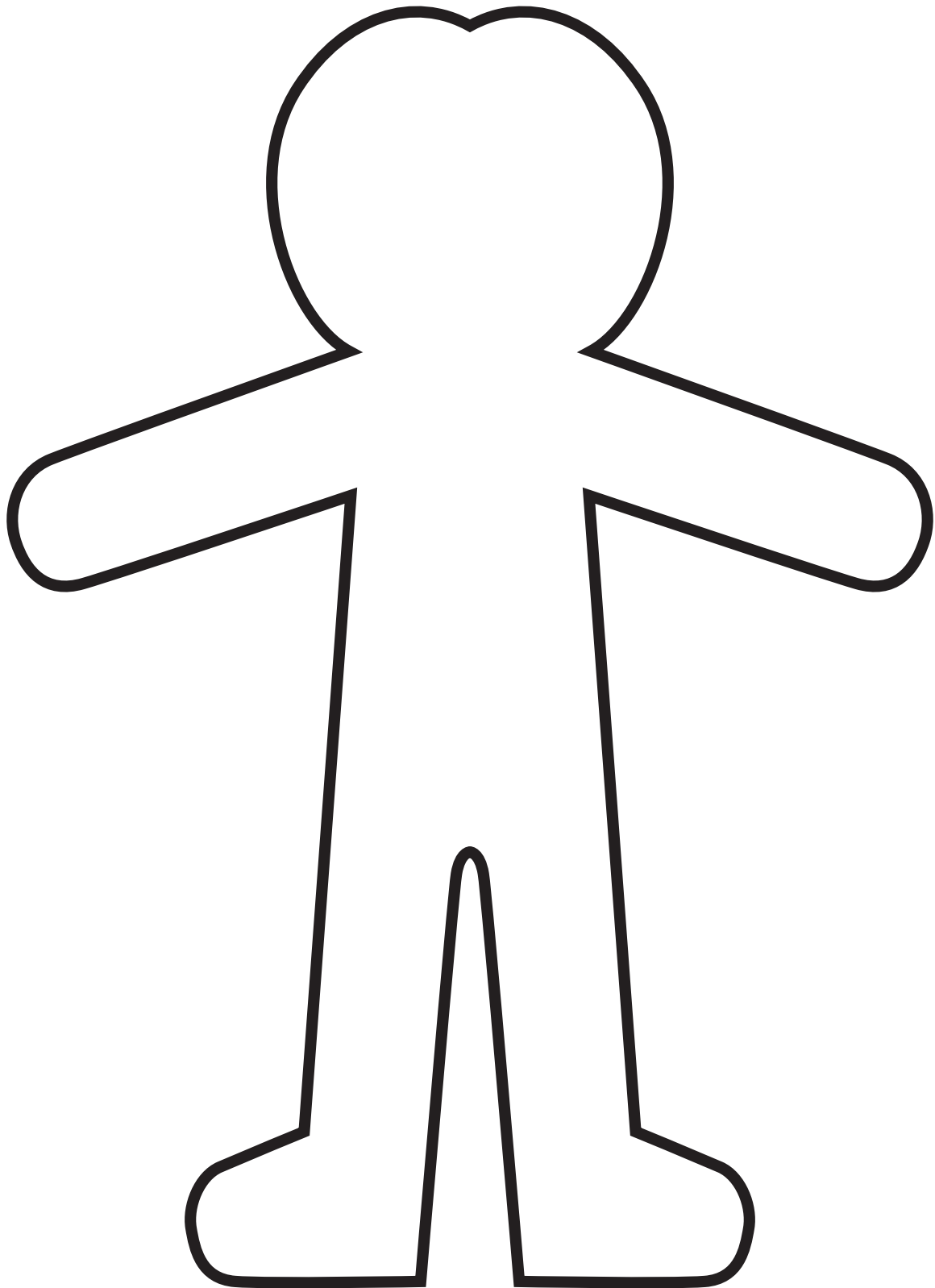
12

He is a dear brother in Christ. How much he means to me!
- Philemon 1:16.



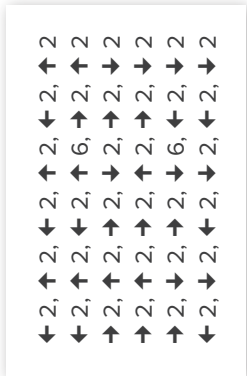
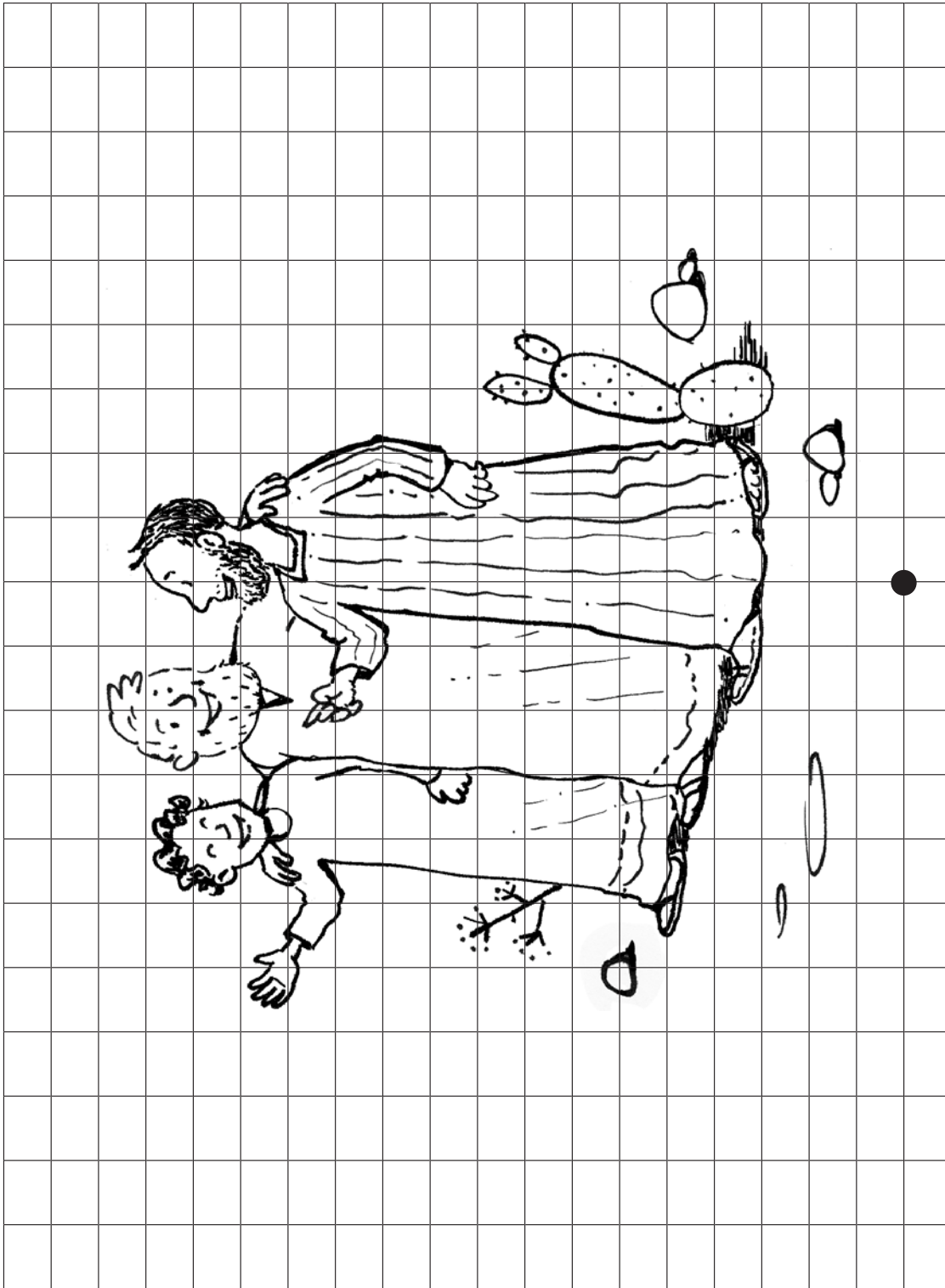
Master and Slave?

Philemon 1:1-25



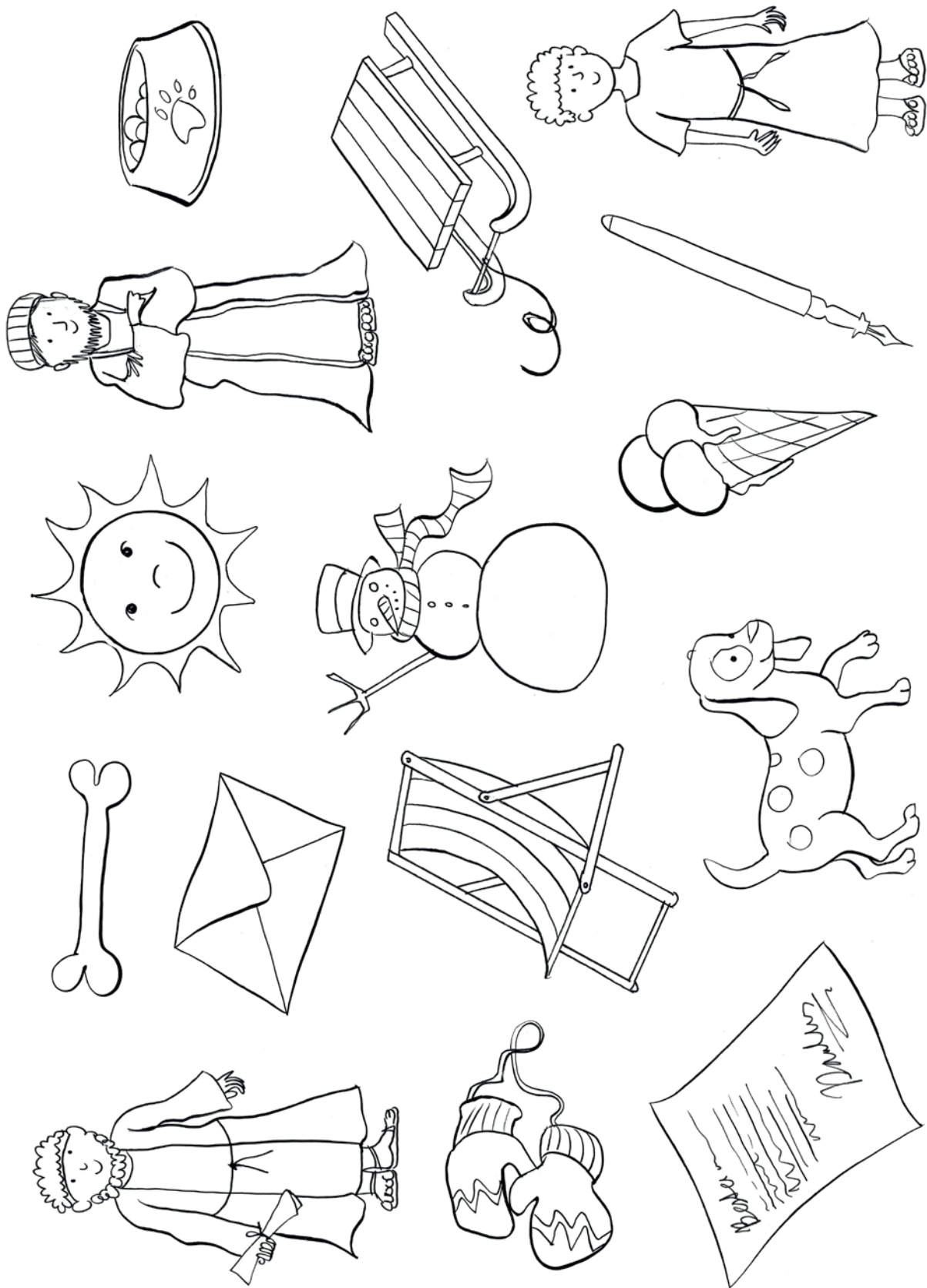
Master and Slave?

Philemon 1:1-25



Master and Slave?

Philemon 1:1-25



Master and Slave?

Philemon 1:1-25



1 DOING A HOUSEHOLD CHORE FOR SOMEONE	6 MAKE YOUR BED
2 GIVE YOUR POCKET MONEY TO CHARITY	7 GIVE A COMPLIMENT
3 MAKE UP WITH SOMEONE YOU'VE ARGUED WITH	8 PRAY FOR SOMEONE
4 SEND A POSTCARD	9 SAY HONESTLY WHAT YOU THINK OF SOMETHING
5 GREET SOMEONE YOU DON'T KNOW	10 READ YOUR BIBLE EVERY DAY



Master and Slave?

Philemon 1:1-25

SLAVERY

In New Testament times, there was a lot of slavery. Slaves were owned by someone else and had to work hard for their masters.

Masters could set their slaves free. That often happened if slaves had worked for their masters for a long time. If a slave was set free, he or she did not get the same status as someone who hadn't been born as a slave. A freed slave still had a lot of obligations, especially to their master.



ONESIMUS

The name Onesimus means: useful. It is a name often given to slaves. Onesimus had run away from Philemon. Runaway slaves were severely punished. But Paul asks Philemon not to punish Onesimus. Philemon has to be as nice to his slave as he is to Paul. That's quite extraordinary!



WRITING LETTERS

Paul wrote a lot of letters. The letters were usually penned down by someone else (a secretary), with Paul saying what had to be in the letter.

In some letters, Paul also wrote a few words: you could tell by his handwriting. Paul did so to show how important he considered the letter to be, and to show the letter really was his. In the letter to Philemon, Paul himself also writes a few words, because he really wants Philemon not to punish his slave Onesimus.



A LITTLE NUDGE

Paul asks Philemon to do the right thing. He does not want Philemon to punish his runaway slave, as was customary in those days. Paul tries to change Philemon's mind. You will do something you didn't think was possible. Sometimes, you'll need a little nudge for that.



What do you need?

- an empty soda can
- two coffee mugs of such a size that half of the can will stick out of them

Let's start!

- Place one mug behind the other.
- Place the empty can in one of the mugs.
- Now calmly blow air between the can and the mug.
- Can you make the tin jump into the empty mug?
- If necessary, adjust the distance between the two mugs.
- Can you move the can from one mug to the other?

“So, my brother, please do me this favor for the Lord's sake; as a brother in Christ, cheer me up!”

Philemon 1:20

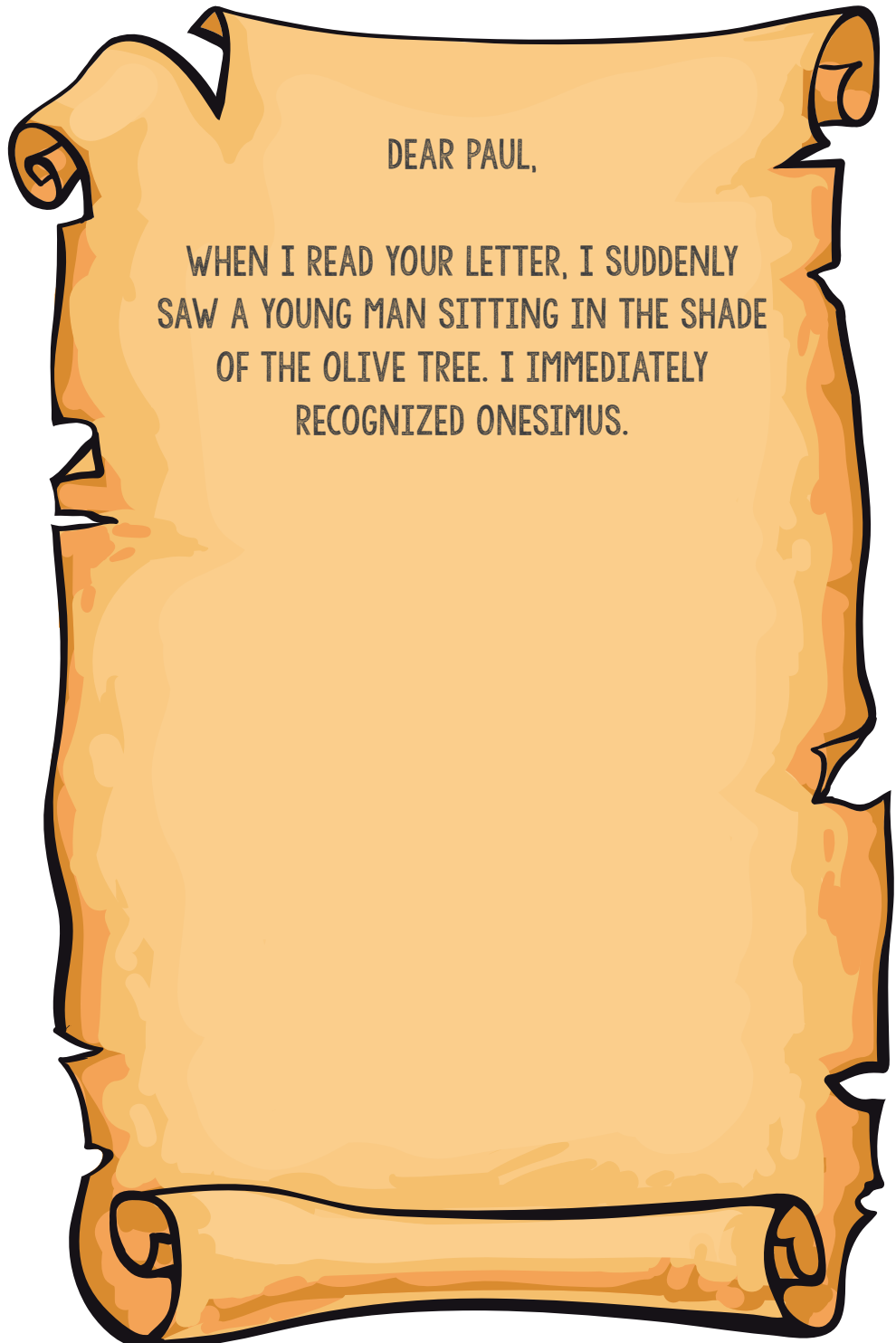
Master and Slave?

Philemon 1:1-25



TO BE CONTINUED

We don't know how Philemon responded when Onesimus came back to him. Did he welcome Onesimus back with open arms as Paul asked, or did he do something else? How do you think the story ended? Imagine you are Philemon and write a response to Paul telling him how Onesimus' story continued.



Master and Slave?

Philemon 1:1-25



CONNECTED

Paul loves Onesimus. He hopes Philemon will also give a warm welcome to his slave. If it's not for Paul's sake, then for Jesus'. Because for Him, everybody is connected.

Two large arched boxes for writing, each containing five vertical lines.