

Bible Reading Challenge 48: THE CHURCH – GOD’S FAMILY

You may remember that back in Mark chapter 3 (Bible Challenge #38), Jesus’s family went looking for him because they heard about all the crowds he was attracting and thought he was out of his mind. Late in the chapter they caught up with him, and Jesus was told that his mother and brothers had arrived. Looking around the room, he said, “Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.” His followers probably didn’t understand fully what he meant, but now we do: the church, made up of all ages, colors, backgrounds, and languages, is the family of God. What Jesus told Nicodemus about being born again is literally true—anyone saved by Jesus is born into a new life and a new family.

This is amazing news, but many people today, including some Christians, seem to regard the church something they can take or leave alone. Every poll says that church attendance is going down, and even people who attend most Sundays may skip around to different local churches without ever committing to one. Or they’ve joined several churches, but leave as soon as a problem comes up. It’s true that a local body can get so bad the real Christians have to leave, but problems are going to come up in every church, just like they do in every family. It’s hard for most of us to think of the church as a “real” family. But it’s the *only* family that will last through eternity, while earthly relationships fade away.

This week we’ll read more of the letters, two by Paul and one by Peter. Both were written when these great apostles were old men in prison for their faith, and both aware that they didn’t have much time left. What’s uppermost in their minds is the church: Paul is writing to Titus, a young pastor sent to the Island of Crete, and Peter is writing to churches throughout modern-day Turkey. Paul also takes time for some personal business with Philemon, a wealthy Christian in the city of Colossae. It seems Philemon had a slave who had run away, and Paul “just happened” to meet him in prison. This short letter shows how the family relationships of the church are supposed to work, and it’s not always easy.

In fact, it’s so not-easy that all the letter-writers in the New Testament take time to explain carefully how God’s family members are to act toward each other and those outside. Their ways are not going to be the ways of the world, so Christians can also expect to suffer for what they believe. But God uses our suffering to make us stronger and to make us more like Jesus, which is the whole point. One day, He will gather His whole family in heaven, to be with him forever in his marvelous light.

Reading for this Week: Titus 2-3, Philemon, I Peter 1-3

Further references: Mark 3:34-35, John 15:12-15, Hebrews 2:11-12, I Timothy 3:14-15, Galatians 6:10

Key Verse: Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. I Peter 2:10

Questions to Think and Talk About:

1. Choose someone to read Philemon and I Peter 1-3 out loud (or take turns) and stop and notice all the family terms you come across. These could be relationship words (*son, sister, etc.*) or legal words (*heir*) or other family-related words, such as *house*.
2. How does Peter describe the church in 2:9? Compare this with Ex. 19:5-6—how many terms are similar or the same? How many ways can you think of that God’s chosen people of today differ from His chosen people of Moses’ time?
3. Find all the benefits of being God’s family in I Peter 1:3-9. How does this make you feel?
4. How does Paul use gentleness instead of command to persuade Philemon? What does this tell you about dealing with people in the church?
5. How does Peter’s advice to servants in 2:18-25 apply to all of us?

Activities:

- I Peter 2:4-6, Eph. 2:20-22, and Hebrews 3:4-6 all compare the church to a house. Look up these scriptures and draw a stone house based on the combined description: who is the cornerstone? What is the foundation?
- Find all the groups of people found in Titus and I Peter (such as older men, wives, servants, etc.), and list the quality or qualities each group is supposed to have.