

Paul's Letter to Philemon

A Guide to Teaching this Short Letter to Church Audiences

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## **Introduction**

Thank you for choosing this curriculum to use in your church. This curriculum is free to use in church small groups or Sunday School on the condition you contact me via email so I can pray for your group.

On the following page, you will find my translation of Philemon with traditional verse breaks. You do not have to use my translation; however, many of the discussion questions use quotations from my translation that may be inadvertently complicated to understand if using another translation.

Following the translation is the general material in outline form. When I taught this material, I broke it up into five weeks, but based on your group dynamics, you may move slower or faster. I have intentionally avoided breaking the topics up into weeks to allow you the freedom to go through the material in a natural way for your group. Each of these topics begins with an introduction that you could either read to your group or use as background information to introduce to your group in your own way.

This particular curriculum is contextual, not expository; so much of the content will be outside of Philemon in order to understand as much of the background information that we can since it is so obscure. It is my belief that looking at Philemon in this way opens students up to understand its message more fully.

Finally, in the discussion segments, I have sometimes included answers. By no means am I suggesting these are the only correct answers, but there are answers that as a facilitator you should make sure are said at some point, as they help set the stage for material that will come later. The method I use is I open it up for discussion and if any points have not been said, then I will chime in once all have finished speaking. If this works for you, great—if not, do what works for you.

Blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Daniel J. Harrison". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'D'.

Translation of Philemon<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy the brother. To Philemon our dearly loved and coworker, <sup>2</sup>to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church that meets in your home. <sup>3</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>4</sup>I always thank my God as I make mention of you in my prayers, <sup>5</sup>because I hear of your love for all the saints and faith that you have in the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup>I pray that your participation in the faith may become effective through knowing every good thing given to us in Christ. <sup>7</sup>For I have derived much joy and encouragement from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

<sup>8</sup>So, although I have sufficient freedom in Christ to command you what you ought to do, <sup>9</sup>I instead appeal to you out of love. I, Paul, an elderly man, and now even a prisoner for Christ Jesus, <sup>10</sup>appeal to you for my son whom I fathered while in chains. *I am speaking of Onesimus.*<sup>2</sup> <sup>11</sup>Formerly he was of no use to you but now he has become useful to both you and to me. <sup>12</sup>He, the one whom I am referring back to you, is my very heart. <sup>13</sup>I wanted to keep him with me so that he could minister to me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, <sup>14</sup>but without your consent, I wanted to do nothing so that your virtue might not be by force but by choice. <sup>15</sup>For perhaps he was separated from you for such a time as this so that you might have him back forever,<sup>3</sup> <sup>16</sup>no longer as a slave, but better than a slave—a dearly loved brother. He is especially so to me, but how much more now to you both in the flesh and in the Lord.

<sup>17</sup>If, then, you consider me a fellow partner, welcome him as you would welcome me, <sup>18</sup>and if in anything he has wronged you or owes you anything, account it to me—<sup>19</sup>I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand—I will pay it back. I could also mention to you that you owe me your very self. <sup>20</sup>Yes brother, I do wish to receive benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. <sup>21</sup>Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than what I ask. <sup>22</sup>And also in the meantime, prepare for me a guest room, for I am hoping that through your prayers, I will be graciously gifted to you.

<sup>23</sup>Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings, <sup>24</sup>and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my coworkers. <sup>25</sup>The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with all of your spirits.

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<sup>1</sup> I used the Nestle-Aland Greek text, Mounce’s lexicon, and the HCSB translation to verify accuracy.

<sup>2</sup> In the Greek, Paul does not finally say Onesimus’ name until after describing the subject of his appeal as his son and as one he fathered. Most English translations put Onesimus’ name between the two statements, and that works in the English; however, I have supplied an “I am speaking of” that honors what I believe to be Paul’s strategic refrain from using Onesimus’ name for as long as possible.

<sup>3</sup> This verse contains the only two OT allusions. “For such a time as this” deals with providence going back to the Book of Esther. “Have him back forever” in regards to slavery is repeated throughout the *Torah* as a sign of a slave’s lifelong pledge to their master after their initial temporary “contract” was fulfilled—and while contract may not be the best word to use, it is the closest thing English has.

## 1. Structure

### a. Introductory Commentary

- i. Paul was a well-educated man and the complexity to his letters certainly speaks to that. Peter even remarked that his letters were sometimes hard to understand (2 Pet. 3:16). But as it true with many intellectuals, Paul thinks and writes systematically. There is a structure to the way he writes, and whether his letters are as short as Philemon or as long as his letters to the Corinthians, he follows the same pattern in every letter. Because of this, each section, while isolated by its structure, is still heavily connected to the others. Therefore, there is considerable importance to the introductions that we often times skim over, as they lay the foundation for the rest of the letter, not just in themes he brings up, but also in how he designates himself and other individuals.

### b. Structure of Paul’s Letters

#### i. Opening

1. Indicates who the letter is written by
2. Indicates what authority they have to write
3. Indicates who the letter is written for, with priority given to the first

#### ii. Prayer of Thanks

1. Briefly summarizes the basis for the prayers

#### iii. Body

1. Each letter has a specific purpose
  - a. Some deal with justification, others sanctification, some are rebuke, and others are encouragement
2. Section is marked by its use of imperative commands or requests
3. There are textual hints or clues given in the opening and prayer sections as to the main point of the body
4. A brief definition or explanation of the gospel is presented

#### iv. Closing Benediction

1. Concluding statement
2. Typically lists Paul’s social network with their own designations

### c. Read Philemon

### d. Structure of Philemon

#### i. Opening 1-3

1. Paul designates himself as a prisoner, which he does nowhere else
  - a. We know from the rest of the NT that Paul is an apostle who formerly persecuted the Church but was converted
  - b. There is no Biblical evidence suggesting Paul ever visited
2. Timothy is given the special designation as *the* brother

- a. We know from the rest of the NT that Timothy was chosen by Paul specifically and was his closest ministry partner
3. Philemon and Apphia are mentioned nowhere else in Scripture.
  - a. Some believe Apphia was Philemon’s wife
  - b. From the letter we know that Philemon...
    - i. Owned at least one slave, most likely many
    - ii. His house was large enough to host a home church
    - iii. His house was large enough to have a guest room
    - iv. Philemon was in all likelihood very wealthy
    - v. Philemon was indebted to Paul in some way
4. Archippus
  - a. Listed as a fellow soldier in Philemon
    - i. Phil. 2:25-30 is the only other use and describes what could be attributed also to Archippus
  - b. Called upon in Col. 4:15-17
    - i. Roman Catholic tradition holds that Archippus was one of the 70 disciples sent in pairs by Jesus
  - c. Listed as a fellow soldier in Philemon
    - i. Phil. 2:25-30 describes the only other individual Paul designates as a fellow-soldier
- ii. Prayer of Thanks 4-7
  1. Love for the saints and faith in Jesus Christ → emphasis on both
  2. What is the result of Philemon’s faith in Christ?
    - a. *That he know every good thing in us for the glory of Christ*
  3. How does Philemon’s faith become effective?
    - a. *Participating in it; doing the faith, not just thinking it*
  4. What is the result of Philemon’s love for the saints?
    - a. *The saints’ hearts have been refreshed*
  5. What picture does this give us for how we ought to live?
- iii. Body 8-22
  1. Introduction of the appeal
  2. Onesimus
    - a. He was separated from Philemon for some reason that we are not given explicitly
    - b. My speculation is that the separation has to do with Onesimus being useless since his restoration of usefulness is emphasized by Paul

- c. Paul is returning him to Philemon to have back forever
  - d. Paul wants Philemon to welcome back Onesimus as if he were Paul, and as a dearly loved brother
  - e. Both in the flesh and in the Lord is a coupling not found anywhere else in Paul’s letters
  - f. Onesimus’ return to Philemon was inconvenient for Paul because Onesimus’ service to Paul on Philemon behalf was beneficial to Paul
  - g. Onesimus was in all likelihood a runaway slave
  - h. Onesimus was converted to the faith by Paul
  - i. From Colossians 4, we know Onesimus was accompanied by Tychicus in the delivery of Paul’s letter to the Colossians
3. Finally the appeal
- a. Is this a traditional command? What is the condition?
  - b. Inclusio: 4 and 22 with 13 as center
  - c. Inclusio 8-9 and 21 with 14 as center
  - d. What are some of the things Paul says to shift Philemon’s perspective on the conflict between himself and Onesimus?
- iv. Closing Benediction 23-25
- 1. Philemon: Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke
  - 2. Col. 4:10-14: Aristarchus, Mark, Justus (men of the circumcision), Epaphras (one of you), Luke, and Demas
    - a. This gives evidence that Philemon and Colossians were written close together for all the same people to be present
    - b. Since Rome was the writing place (1,200 miles away), it is very likely that both letters were sent simultaneously
- e. In light of the main point of the letter, what ways is Paul’s designation as a prisoner significant?
2. Colossians
- a. Introductory Commentary
    - i. There is strong evidence that Philemon’s home church was in Colossae, so the letter to the Colossians is also written to Philemon and the other individuals mentioned at the introduction to the letter to Philemon—scholars almost universally affirm this. For those of you unfamiliar, The Bible Project is a fantastic resource to use for whole-book overviews organized by a team of animators, led by Dr. Tim Mackie, professor at Western Seminary, who I studied under during seminary. I use The Bible Project often to help me see the 10,000-foot view as I trek through the Bible at sea level. I would encourage you to do so as well; they have one for every book! Due to its context, reading Colossians is vital to understand Philemon.

- b. Watch the Bible Project video on Colossians
  - c. Read Colossians
  - d. Questions
    - i. What did Christ’s death and resurrection accomplish for us?  
*Reconciliation*
    - ii. How was Paul able to find joy in his suffering? *He was participating with the Messiah*
    - iii. What were some of the pressures the Christians in Colossae faced? *Pressure to worship all the gods, and pressure to strictly observe Torah*
    - iv. Are there any parallels between the pressures the Colossians faced and the pressures we face?
    - v. Paul calls the Colossians to live according to their new humanity. What is our new humanity? *That there would be neither Greek, nor Jew, nor slave, etc.* Do you see any parallels in Philemon to this call to live in the new humanity? *Seeing Onesimus as more than just a slave, but a dearly loved brother...or in other words, the main point of the letter!*
    - vi. What are some areas of life that still need to be touched by the loving and liberating rule of Jesus?
      - i. What and how does Paul instruct the Colossians about slavery?
  - e. Read Philemon *compare/contrast Paul’s handling of slavery in both letters*
3. Slavery
- a. Relevance of the slavery issue
    - vii. Huge part of our country’s history
    - viii. There are still social rifts that attract high levels of media coverage
    - ix. Black Lives Matter
    - x. Charlottesville
    - xi. Bible does not overthrow slavery, even though we may wish it did
    - xii. It is important to understand Biblical slavery in its proper context
  - b. OT Summary
    - i. When Hagar got pregnant by Abraham, she became disobedient to Sarah who then got angry and mistreated her to the point of running away, but the Angel of the Lord met with Hagar and instructed her to return to her master. Joseph was sold into slavery, yet through a series of events was promoted to high leadership positions in Egypt based on his gifts and skills, which ultimately resulted in great relief for Israel during the great famine. For the most part, slaves owned by Hebrews were temporary laborers who were to be wholly restored upon completion. If a slave sought to remain, he would pierce his ear as a sign of lifelong commitment. The slavery ethic is vast; however, to summarize, slaves were to be treated as members of the household, all the while being owned. Masters were instructed to protect the innocence of their female slaves. Moreover, slaves who flee from foreign lands and seek

refuge in Israel must receive refuge; giving sanctuary for the foreign runaway slave was obligatory for the Hebrew.

- c. NT Summary
  - i. Slaves were members of the household. The slave system was not overthrown by the teachings of Jesus or the apostles, but rather used as a vehicle for God’s grace to both the master and the slave. Masters were to rule over their slaves with justice. Slaves were to submit to their master, good or evil, and slaves who endured unjust suffering from their master found favor in the eyes of God. Slaves were expected to be both profitable and submissive to their master, who in turn were to rule over them with justice and compassion. Read Matthew 8:5-13. Why does Jesus connect this man’s faith with his deep care and concern for his slave?
- d. Compare and Contrast Board for 1<sup>st</sup> Century vs. American slavery
  - i. There were three primary types of slavery: 1) court-mandated slavery for crimes committed, 2) royal slaves (for instance, Plato was a slave of Dionysius tasked with being a tutor); and 3) urban household slaves, which is the type of slavery Paul almost entirely speaks of; this was the most common type of slavery, which is described further below.
  - ii. There are many conflicting historical reports of the nuances of slavery; however, these are the figures that are generally accepted
  - iii. These figures are historical not Biblical; but, there is some overlap
  - iv. Comparisons
    - 1. Slaves were owned
    - 2. # of slaves owned = sign of wealth
    - 3. Slaves were expected to submit to their master
    - 4. Slaves were frequently mistreated
  - v. Contrasts
    - 1. Slavery was not based on race
    - 2. Most slavery was voluntary (the exception is court-mandated punishments for crime)
    - 3. Slavery was temporary
    - 4. Slaves and masters were not segregated
    - 5. Slaves were investments and investible assets
    - 6. Slaves had intrinsic value; equality of dignity
    - 7. Slaves functioned as owned employees
    - 8. Chief way to be freed was manumission through the payment of a ransom
    - 9. Early freedom was not the ideal or positive outcome
    - 10. Slavery was economic way of life; it would have been radical for Paul to suggest a society where slavery did not exist
- e. Conclusion: Urban household slaves in the first century Roman society were investments and investible assets holding intrinsic value, and generally were temporarily and willfully owned employees expected to be profitable and submissive to the master

- f. Discussion Questions
  - i. In what ways do the OT and NT have continuity in their handling of the topic of slavery?
  - ii. In what ways was slavery in American history contrary to Scripture?
  - iii. In what ways are passages dealing with slavery relevant for us today?
  - iv. Verse 15 contains the only OT allusions in the letter. How do these allusions enhance our understanding of Paul’s appeal to Philemon? See the footnotes in my translation.
  - v. Why would Paul risk his life for such an insignificant, useless slave?
  - vi. Read Romans 6:12-23, Ephesians 6:5-9, and 1 Peter. 2:11-20. What does it mean to be a slave of Christ? How should a slave of Christ live?
4. The Gospel According to Paul
  - a. The Gospel can be systematized to a four-prong structure
    - i. Revelation → what God has said or done
    - ii. Response → how we react to that revelation
    - iii. Results → what we get if we respond accordingly
    - iv. Response → how we ought to live in light of the results
  - b. Every single letter of Paul has an explicit Gospel/Christological passage that details part or all of the Gospel message, except Philemon. In this exercise you are going to read each of Paul’s Christological passages, detailing information into each of those four sub-sections of the Gospel. Through mapping it all out, at the conclusion two things will result: 1) you will have a deeper grasp of the Gospel as Paul understood it; and 2) you will find the Gospel in Philemon, hidden in his strategic style, whether he is trying hard to persuade Philemon to welcome Onesimus back.
  - c. Christological Passages in Paul’s Writings (in order of their writing)
    - i. Gal. 2:2-5, 15-16, 19-20
    - ii. 1 Thess. 5:1-11
    - iii. 2 Thess. 2:13-17
    - iv. 1 Cor. 15:1-9\*, 50-58
    - v. 2 Cor. 4:1-5:10, 16-21\*
    - vi. Rom. 5:6-11, 18-21
    - vii. Rom. 8:1-17, 31-39
    - viii. Eph. 1:18-2:22
    - ix. Col. 1:15-23\*
    - x. Col. 2:4-15\*
    - xi. Col. 3:1-17\*
    - xii. Phil. 2:5-11
    - xiii. 1 Tim. 1:12-17
    - xiv. 1 Tim. 2:3-7\*
    - xv. 1 Tim. 3:14-17
    - xvi. Titus 2:11-14
    - xvii. Titus 3:4-8
    - xviii. 2 Tim. 1:8-12

xix. 2 Tim. 2:8-13, 19

5. Reconciliation

a. Reconciliation in Paul

- i. Reread the passages above marked in asterisks
- ii. What does reconciliation mean to Paul?
- iii. What is Paul asking Philemon to do with Onesimus?
- iv. Why would Paul risk his life for a runaway slave he doesn’t know?
- v. How does Paul’s instruction to Philemon fall in line with his practical teaching to the Colossian church on reconciliation?
- vi. What would reconciliation look like in your day-to-day life?
- vii. *Private reflection: who do you need to reconcile with this week?*