

The Letter to Philemon



GULF SHORES
CHURCH OF CHRIST
Gulf Shores, AL

BIBLE CLASS STUDY GUIDE

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Study Guide for the Letter to the Philemon

GULF SHORES CHURCH OF CHRIST

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This study guide was created by Ray Reynolds for use in Bible classes at the Gulf Shores Church of Christ (Gulf Shores, AL). The material presented in this class series will be gleaned from personal notes, the New King James Study Bible, Dr. Coy Roper, Dr. Steven Guy, Dr. J. Vernon McGee, Mark Copeland, Gleason L. Archer, Irving L. Jenson, Everett Ferguson, and other various sources.

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INTRODUCTION

Author:

Paul, the apostle (**Philemon 1, 19**), formerly Saul of Tarsus (**Acts 8-9**) identifies himself as the author of this letter. The early church unanimously accepted it as from Paul. It was circulated and read along with other letters from Paul. It is lumped with the prison epistles, but unlike the other prison epistles in that it is addressed to a person and not to a congregation. Specifically, it was written to Philemon about Onesimus, a friend of Paul and one of the messengers of the letter to the Colossians (**Colossians 4:7-9**).

Date:

It is generally accepted that Paul wrote it around 60-62 AD in the city of Rome, while in a Roman prison (**Philemon 1, 9-13, 23**). This is why it is lumped with the other prison epistles (Ephesians, Colossians, and Philipians). He also wrote another letter to the Laodiceans (**Colossians 4:16**) but unfortunately it has been lost.

Philemon can be compared to the book of Colossians (**Philemon 1, 10, 13, 23**). Paul was aided by Timothy in both letters (**Philemon 1, Colossians 1:1**). Epaphras (**Colossians 1:7, 4:12-13**), John Mark (**II Timothy 4:11, I Peter 5:13**), Aristarchus (**Acts 19:29, 20:4, 27:2**), Demas (**II Timothy 4:10**), and Luke (**II Timothy 4:11**) join in the salutation in both letters (**Philemon 23-24, Colossians 4:10-14**). We can also note that Archippus is addressed in both letters (**Philemon 2, Colossians 4:17**).

Audience:

The letter is personally addressed to Philemon, Apphia (wife), Archippus (son), and the church in their house. The letter concerns Onesimus, a slave who stole from his master (**Philemon 19**) and escaped to Rome, where he came into contact with Paul. We have no way of knowing how or why Onesimus visited Paul in prison. However, Paul converts him and sends him back to his master. Evidently actions taken before you become a Christian still count and repentance includes recompense for past sins, so long as one is able.

This letter does not denounce Philemon's right to hold slaves, but does command that forgiveness be given to Onesimus. Upon his return he is no longer a slave but a beloved brother (**Philemon 16**). This would have been a hot topic in this day because in the Roman Empire there were about 60 million slaves. Hefty rewards were given for their return. During our own Civil War in America the letter to Philemon was heralded.

Theme:

This letter is about brotherly love and forgiveness. The recipient is a member of the church and a master of slaves. It should be noted that this was not uncommon, but when an opportunity to show grace to a former slave presents itself Paul takes the opportunity to teach. Paul's letter gives us inspired insight into the slavery system and the growing conflicts and prejudices facing the New Testament church.

Key Verses:

Philemon 4, 7, 10-11, 15-17, 20-21

Outline:

- I. *Paul's Prayer (vs. 1-9)*
- II. *Paul's Plea (vs. 10-16)*
- III. *Paul's Pledge (vs. 17-25)*

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Lesson One: Paul's Prayer (vs. 1-9)

¹ Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer, ² to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: ³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, ⁵ hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, ⁶ that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. ⁷ For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother. ⁸ Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, ⁹ yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you--being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

How does Paul refer to himself? Why is that important?

What protégé of Paul does he refer to in the introduction? What do we know about this man?

What do we know about Apphia and Archippus? Why mention these people in the letter?

What compliments are given to Philemon?

What is the prayer of Paul?

What has given Paul great joy and comfort?

How can we know that Philemon and Paul had a close relationship?

Why do you think Paul chose to get entangled in this issue?

What might be the reasoning behind Paul calling himself "aged" in this text?

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Lesson Two: Paul's Plea (vs.10-16)

¹⁰ *I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, ¹¹ who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me. ¹² I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, ¹³ whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. ¹⁴ But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary. ¹⁵ For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, ¹⁶ no longer as a slave but more than a slave--a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.*

Why do you think Paul keeps referring to his chains? How can that help him make a case for Onesimus?

How can we know that Onesimus and Paul had a close relationship?

What is the plea of Paul?

Why is this issue such a concern to Paul?

How can we know that the conversion of Onesimus was sincere?

What is the purpose of Paul referring to Onesimus as profitable in this letter?

How should Philemon receive Onesimus?

What does Paul say about his heart?

What did Paul want to do? Why was he unable to do it?

How would you receive a request like this from a church leader? Is it a suggestion or a command?

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Lesson Three: Paul's Pledge (vs.17-25)

¹⁷ If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me. ¹⁸ But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay--not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides. ²⁰ Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord. ²¹ Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. ²² But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you. ²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, ²⁴ as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers. ²⁵ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

How was Philemon to receive Onesimus? Why?

What is the pledge of the apostle Paul? What is Paul willing to do? Why?

How can we know this is a leap of faith? What accusations could be leveled against Onesimus?

What statement in this section tells us that Paul may have personally converted Philemon?

How can the connection between these converted brothers help them both?

What does Paul say will happen if Philemon receives Onesimus in brotherly love?

Did Paul have any doubts about the reception of Onesimus? Explain.

What more could Philemon do for Onesimus? What more could Philemon do for Paul?

Why does Paul request lodging for a future visit?

What is the purpose of "name dropping" in this particular letter?

What do you think was the outcome of this conflict?