

Paul's Prison Epistles

Study Guide

LESSON
FOUR

PAUL AND PHILEMON



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STUDY GUIDE

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How to use this lesson and study guide

- **Before you watch the lesson**
 - **Preparation** — Complete any recommended readings.
 - **Schedule breaks** — Review the outline and the time codes to determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions in the outline.
- **While you are watching the lesson**
 - **Notes** — Use the Notes section to follow the lesson and to take additional notes. Many of the main ideas are already summarized in the notes, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.
 - **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.
- **After you watch the lesson**
 - **Review Questions** — Questions on the basic content of the lesson. Answer review questions in the space provided. Review questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
 - **Application Questions** — Questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

Preparation

- Read the book of Philemon.

Outline

- I. Introduction (0:27)
- II. Background (1:56)
 - A. People (2:59)
 - 1. Philemon (3:31)
 - 2. Onesimus (6:23)
 - 3. Witnesses (9:12)
 - B. Problem (11:53)
 - C. Mediation (17:37)
 - 1. Onesimus' Petition (18:05)
 - 2. Paul's Agreement (20:56)
- III. Structure and Content (26:52)
 - A. Salutation (28:50)
 - B. Thanksgiving (29:59)
 - C. Petition (32:48)
 - 1. Paul as Advocate (33:45)
 - 2. Onesimus as Petitioner (37:16)
 - 3. Philemon as Master (40:55)
 - 4. God as Ruler (43:25)
 - 5. Petition (45:32)
 - 6. Confidence (53:01)
 - D. Final Greetings (54:53)
- IV. Modern Application (55:54)
 - A. Accountability (57:26)
 - B. Compassion (1:2:59)
 - 1. Kindness (1:4:34)
 - 2. Intercession (1:6:39)
 - C. Reconciliation (1:8:32)
- V. Conclusion (1:13:39)

Notes

I. Introduction

II. Background

A. People

1. Philemon

Philemon — Paul's partner in gospel ministry, and the host of the local church.

Philemon seems to have had a significant history with Paul that formed a strong bond between the men.

Philemon owed Paul a great debt.

We don't know how Paul and Philemon became friends. But they knew each other very well.

2. Onesimus

Onesimus — Philemon's slave and a member of Philemon's household; not initially a believer.

Paul referred to Onesimus as his son because he had brought him to faith in Christ, and because he had developed a fatherly love for him.

3. Witnesses

Paul mentioned a number of other Colossians in his letter to Philemon:

- Apphia
- Archippus
- Epaphras

Paul expected them to serve as familiar witnesses in his appeal to Philemon on Onesimus' behalf.

Epaphras had a keen interest in making sure that Philemon would respond properly to Paul's letter.

B. Problem

“Onesimus” is derived from a Greek word meaning “useful” or “profitable.” But Onesimus had been a useless or unprofitable slave.

Onesimus may have caused a significant loss for Philemon.

Under Roman law, a master had the right to punish slaves severely, even with heavy beatings. Onesimus fled in fear.

God had a positive reason for allowing the situation.

The law permitted slaves to leave their masters temporarily to find an advocate or mediator.

If Onesimus fled in order to ask Paul to be his advocate and mediator with Philemon, he was not a fugitive.

C. Mediation

1. Onesimus' Petition

Some scholars conclude that Onesimus was seeking to start a new life far from Philemon, and encountered Paul only accidentally.

Scripture provides some details suggesting that Onesimus sought out Paul as his advocate.

- Onesimus knew where Paul was — the church at Colosse had sponsored Epaphras' mission to care for Paul in prison.
- Onesimus pursued a meeting with Paul.
- Onesimus pursued Paul's advocacy.

Paul wrote to Philemon only after Onesimus had endeared himself to Paul:

- Paul converted Onesimus to Christianity.
- Onesimus ministered to Paul in prison.

2. Paul's Agreement

Philemon had the right to punish Onesimus. So, Paul defended Onesimus on the basis of mercy.

Godly authority figures carry out appropriate punishments because it is the right thing to do.

Onesimus initially stayed with Paul to convince the apostle of his good intent. During this time:

- Paul preached the gospel to Onesimus.
- The Holy Spirit brought Onesimus to faith in Christ.

Onesimus might have remained with Paul without becoming a fugitive.

- Morally, this would not have been the best solution.
- The Christian values of charity and reconciliation demanded his return to Philemon.

III. Structure and Content

Philemon is Paul's only canonical letter that does not focus on teaching. In Philemon, Paul wrote as an advocate rather than as a teacher.

Philemon is Paul's most personal letter, expressing his deep concern both for Onesimus and Philemon, and making requests based on their friendship.

A. Salutation (1-3)

Paul is the primary author of the letter. The letter also came from Timothy.

Philemon is the letter's primary recipient and several others were to bear witness to the letter.

B. Thanksgiving (4-7)

Paul thanked the Lord for the ways Philemon had blessed his fellow believers in Colosse.

God loves and forgives all believers. Paul encouraged the Colossians to:

- Reflect the same love toward one another
- Patiently bear with one another when wronged
- Forgiving grievances rather than demand recompense

C. Petition (8-21)

1. Paul as Advocate

Paul had the authority to order Philemon to do the right thing. Instead, he wrote to Philemon in ways that elicited Philemon's sympathy and concern.

Paul spoke as a weak, elderly man in need of help.

Paul wanted Philemon to respond to this situation with genuine Christian love.

- Compassion for an elderly man in prison
- Compassion for the newly converted brother in Christ who ministered to him

2. Onesimus as Petitioner

Paul explained the relationship between Onesimus and Paul.

Wordplay in Philemon 11-13:

- Onesimus was “useless” (a-chrestos)
- When he was “without Christ” (a-christos)
- He became very “useful” (chrestos)
- When he received “Christ” (christos) as his Lord

Onesimus was taking Philemon’s place in service to Paul.

Onesimus was returning to Colosse to petition Philemon for mercy:

- Hoping for reconciliation
- Hoping for release

3. **Philemon as Master**

Philemon had authority over Onesimus.

Paul wanted Philemon himself to choose to do the right thing.

Paul thought that a voluntary reconciliation between the two men would make their brotherly relationship in Christ all the stronger.

4. **God as Ruler**

Paul pondered the greater good that God might bring out of Onesimus' sin, if Philemon would only grant his request.

Paul suggested God had orchestrated events to bring Onesimus and Philemon into conflict in order that:

- Onesimus would be forced to seek Paul's advocacy
- Onesimus might be brought to faith in Christ
- Onesimus might be reconciled to Philemon as an equal in the Lord

5. Petition

Paul asked Philemon to forgive Onesimus.

Paul offered himself as Onesimus' substitute in the event that Philemon chose to exact payment or recompense for his slave.

Paul stood in front of Onesimus as his father and protector:

- Shielding him from Philemon
- Providing reasons that Philemon should be merciful for Paul's sake

Christian faith does not require all Christian masters to free their believing slaves.

- Freedom is preferable to slavery (1 Cor. 7:21).
- The relationship of slave and master can be conducted in ways that are both godly and beneficial to all parties
- Handle slavery in a Christ-like fashion.

6. Confidence

Paul believed that Philemon would do as he asked.

Scripture does not record Philemon's response, or tell us what happened to Onesimus.

D. Final Greetings (22-25)

Paul expected to be released from prison rather quickly, and asked Philemon to prepare a room for him.

Epaphras served as a remote witness to the Philemon's resolution of the matter with Onesimus.

IV. Modern Application

Paul's epistle to Philemon shows us how Paul applied his own theology in his own life.

Paul's mediation between Onesimus and Philemon corresponds to his teachings in other epistles like Colossians and Ephesians.

A. Accountability

Paul called on several individuals to encourage Philemon to do the right thing.

The wise thing to do is to expose our lives to the fellowship of the kingdom of light, so that we are prevented from sinning.

The Lord commonly used the potential for shame to motivate his people to do the right thing in the Old Testament.

- Habakkuk 2:16
- Ezekiel 7:18

One way for the church to hold us accountable is for believers to stay in close fellowship.

Paul did not emphasize shame when he spoke to Philemon, because Philemon was not living a shameful life.

We are to hold one another accountable through the mutual submission that all believers must render to one another.

The church can prevent sin and encourage good works by:

- Showing disapproval for sin
- Offering encouragement
- Submitting to the church's wise counsel

B. Compassion

Paul encouraged us to imitate Christ's compassion through Paul's praise, teaching and example in his letter to Philemon.

1. Kindness

Modern Christians must be moved by pity and love for those in the church, and we must respond to their needs so far as we are able.

2. **Intercession**

Intercession can be simple as an expression of opinion, without personal risk, that sways circumstances in favor of another.

Intercession can be as intense as giving up one's life to protect another who is guilty.

Modern Christians are called to intercede for other believers.

C. **Reconciliation**

Reconciliation is:

- Creating unity and love where hostility existed before
- Rooted in forgiveness and mercy
- Maintained through patience and longsuffering

Paul insisted that both Onesimus and Philemon had an obligation to:

- Restore their relationship
- Embrace one another as brothers in Christ without holding grudges

Because we are united to Christ, we are all forgiven and blessed. So, we have no basis for resenting or refusing to be reconciled to any believer.

Reconciliation between believers should be a high priority in the modern church.

V. Conclusion

5. Why did Paul offer thanksgiving in verses 4-7?

6. Describe the six aspects of Paul's petition found in verses 8-21.

11. Summarize three main ways in which Paul's teaching to Philemon applies to the church.

Application Questions

1. What types of problems often require the mediation of an outside party? Have you ever faced a problem that required mediation?
2. With which person in this letter do you most identify: Paul, Philemon or Onesimus? Why?
3. Paul was an advocate for Onesimus and incurred a potential cost by defending him before Philemon. Who has been an advocate for you? For whom should you advocate?
4. What inspired Paul's advocacy for Onesimus?
5. Paul recognized that God is at work even in the midst of conflict and strife. How has this been true in your own experience?
6. Paul appealed to his friend Philemon on the basis of mercy. Why did he adopt this strategy? Which do you find easier to do: appeal for mercy or make demands?
7. How has forgiveness brought reconciliation to your life?
8. Onesimus and Philemon had to assume responsibility in order to restore their relationship. Is there any responsibility you need to assume in order to bring reconciliation to a fractured relationship?
9. What is the most significant insight you have learned from this study?