

The Book of Philemon – Part 1 – Summary & Study Guide

Summary

This teaching examines the **Apostle Paul's Epistle to Philemon**, a brief yet profound New Testament letter centred on the themes of **forgiveness and reconciliation**. The text includes the original scriptural greetings and an accompanying educational commentary that highlights Paul's strategic and **gentle approach** in addressing a sensitive social conflict. Paul writes to Philemon regarding **Onesimus**, a runaway slave who transformed into a devoted Christian brother after encountering Paul in prison. Rather than asserting his apostolic authority, Paul appeals to Philemon's **shared faith and love** to encourage him to welcome Onesimus back as an equal. The commentary emphasizes that true Christian obedience requires **radical forgiveness**, even when faced with significant personal injury or legal rights. Ultimately, the teaching presents this short book as a vital lesson on how **spiritual transformation** should redefine human relationships and eliminate social hierarchies.

Study Guide

This study guide is designed to deepen your understanding of the Epistle to Philemon, focusing on the historical context, the transformation of key individuals, and the absolute necessity of forgiveness in the life of a believer.

Definitions of Key Words

- **Apostle:** A man specifically called by God to deliver a message verbatim; a special calling involving the delivery of God's word with authority.
- **Fellowship (Koinonia):** In this context, a noun with an active sense of partnership in the ministry of faith.
- **Grace:** A divine influence that has appeared to bring deliverance/salvation and instructs believers to deny ungodliness and worldly desires while living righteously.
- **Onesimus:** The runaway slave of Philemon whose name means "useful." Formerly "useless" to Philemon, he became "useful" to both Paul and Philemon after his conversion.
- **Prisoner of Christ Jesus:** A term Paul uses to describe his life as being absolutely committed to and "tied up" in Christ, rather than just referring to his physical incarceration.

- **Saints:** "Holy ones" or those who are actively dying to sin.

Expansion of Key Points

1. Paul's Unique Approach and Greeting

Unlike many of his other epistles where he establishes his apostolic credentials to provide credibility (e.g., **Colossians**), Paul omits his title of "Apostle" in the opening of Philemon. This is because he shares a deep, personal, and experiential affinity with Philemon, who already respects Paul's authority. Paul identifies himself and Timothy as the senders, addressing Philemon, Apphia (likely Philemon's wife), Archippus, and the church meeting in Philemon's home (**Philemon 1:1-2**). He uses his personal relationship as leverage to subtly and gently build a case for the difficult request he is about to make.

2. The Transformation of Onesimus

The central character of this narrative is Onesimus, a slave who belonged to Philemon. Onesimus had escaped and gone on the run, eventually crossing paths with Paul while both were in prison (**Philemon 1:10**). Under Paul's ministry, Onesimus converted to Christ, undergoing a "phenomenal change" from being "useless" to "useful" (**Philemon 1:11**). Paul now sends him back, not as a slave, but as a "dear brother" (**Philemon 1:16**).

3. The Litmus Test: Forgiveness

The core theme of the book is Paul's demand that Philemon forgive Onesimus for whatever wrongs or debts were incurred during his escape (**Philemon 1:18**). The teaching emphasizes that forgiveness is not optional; it is a command from God and a requirement for those in Christ. True forgiveness is tested when someone does something genuinely bad that "warrants" unforgiveness, yet the believer chooses to forgive regardless. Without forgiveness, the source argues, a believer is "nothing".

4. The Cost and Reality of the Christian Life

The teaching warns against "mega-church" beliefs that suggest life becomes "rosy" or that one goes straight to heaven regardless of obedience. Instead, it points to the life of Paul as the standard for the "God of peace" being with a believer (**2 Corinthians 11:23-33**). Paul's life was marked by:

- Imprisonments and beatings.
- Shipwrecks and dangers from robbers, countrymen, and false brethren.
- Hunger, thirst, cold, and daily pressure for the churches.

- Escaping Damascus in a basket (**Acts 9:23-25**; **2 Corinthians 11:32-33**).

5. The Function of Grace

Grace is not an automatic quality; it is instructional (**Titus 2:11-12**). It teaches the believer to:

- Deny ungodliness and worldly desires.
- Live sensibly, righteously, and godly in the present age.

Study Questions

- Why does Paul refer to himself as a "prisoner of Christ Jesus" rather than an "Apostle" in his opening to Philemon?
- Describe the "path crossing of all path crossings" involving Onesimus and Paul. Where did it happen and what was the result?
- According to the source, what is the "litmus test" for a believer when they realize their previous biblical understanding was wrong?
- How does the source define the "lie" commonly taught in many modern churches regarding death and heaven?
- Based on **2 Corinthians 11**, what did the "God of peace" being with Paul actually look like in his daily reality?
- How does Paul subtly build his argument to prepare Philemon for the request to forgive Onesimus in verses 4–6?
- What is the specific purpose of Scripture according to **2 Timothy 3:16-17**?

Answer Key

- **Paul's Greeting:** He omits "Apostle" because Philemon already knew his credentials experientially. He uses their close personal relationship and his own status as a "prisoner" to appeal to Philemon on the basis of love rather than raw authority.
- **Onesimus' Conversion:** They met in jail while Onesimus was on the run. Paul preached the gospel to him, and Onesimus converted, becoming "useful" to the ministry.
- **The Litmus Test:** The test is whether a person will drop their old, incorrect beliefs to follow what the text of Scripture actually says, which is often very difficult.

- **The "Lie":** The teaching that you don't really die but get swept straight to heaven without a resurrection or judgment, regardless of your obedience to the Lord's words.
- **Paul's Reality:** It involved extreme physical suffering, constant danger (from nature and people), sleepless nights, beatings, shipwrecks, hunger, and intense concern for the churches. It was not an "easy" or "abundant" life in a material sense.
- **Building the Case:** Paul calls Philemon a "beloved brother" and "fellow worker," tells him he is always in his prayers, praises his faith toward Jesus, and acknowledges his love for the saints.
- **Purpose of Scripture:** For teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness so the man of God may be adequate and equipped for every good work.

Complete List of Biblical References in the Source

- **Philemon 1:1-25 (The full text):**
- **Philemon 1:1:**
- **Philemon 1:2:**
- **Philemon 1:4:**
- **Philemon 1:5:**
- **Philemon 1:6:**
- **Philemon 1:10:**
- **Philemon 1:11:**
- **Philemon 1:16:**
- **Philemon 1:18:**
- **Philemon 1:25:**
- **Acts 7:58:**
- **Acts 8:1-3:**
- **Acts 9:1:**
- **Acts 11:25:**
- **Acts 16:1-3:**
- **Acts 19:22:**
- **Acts 20:4:**
- **Luke 23:33-35:**
- **Colossians (General):**

- **Colossians 4:17:**
- **Philippians (General):**
- **Philippians 2:**
- **Philippians 4:17:**
- **Ephesians (General):**
- **Job (General):**
- **2 Timothy 3:16-17:**
- **Titus 2:11-12:**
- **2 Corinthians 11:18-33:**
- **1 Thessalonians 3:2:**
- **1 Corinthians 4:17:**
- **1 Corinthians 16:10:**
- **Hebrews 1 & 2:**
- **Hebrews 13:23:**
- **Galatians (General):**

Exhortations

- **Seek Life-Change:** Do not approach the Scriptures as mere literature. The objective of studying Philemon should be a practical impact that brings about a change in your actions and a higher level of forgiveness in your life.
- **Prioritize Obedience:** Saying "I love Jesus" is easy, but true love for Christ implies and entails doing what He commanded. Obedience is the standard Jesus demands.
- **Examine Your Forgiveness:** Reflect on whether you hold grudges or if your forgiveness is conditional. Remember that we worship a forgiving God who forgave us so that we might enter His kingdom.
- **Prepare for Hardship:** Understand that living righteously seldom makes life "easier." Be prepared for the possibility that "all hell is likely to break loose" when you stand for Christ, yet strive for the contentment Paul modeled.
- **Dirty Your Pages:** Engage deeply with the text. Take the book apart, study it in detail, and allow the apostolic teaching to reproof and correct your walk.

