Bible Class **Notes** Sunday, 27

September 2026

Philemon

Philemon, ESV

Every letter in the New Testament was written because something was happening to someone that needed to be addressed. Philemon is no exception. The class moves in three steps: the back story that produced the letter, the letter itself, and the way the book becomes a living picture of Jesus. After that the hour steps back from Philemon and asks how any book of Scripture is meant to be read in connection with the rest.

The Back Story

Philemon was, most likely, a wealthy slave owner in Colossae. Onesimus was his slave. Before the letter was written Philemon was a Christian and Onesimus was not. What set the story in motion was flight. Onesimus ran away, and he may have stolen or caused damage on the way out. This we do not know, but running away was the equivalent of theft of personal property. Onesimus deprived his owner, Philemon, of his personal propery and the service Onesimus provided to the household. In that culture a runaway slave placed himself at the mercy of a master who had wide legal freedom to deal with the slave as he pleased.

Onesimus ended up in Rome and encountered Paul while he was in prison. The result was conversion of Onesimus. Whether he went looking for Paul or somehow ran across him is not told, but the meeting and the new birth are. Imprisonment does not stop Paul's work. He writes, and he sends Onesimus back with an appeal for the way Philemon should receive him. The letter assumes that Paul at least knew of Philemon, and almost certainly knew him well enough to speak as he does.

A Letter to More Than One Man

"Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house." Philemon 1–2

The book bears Philemon's name, but it was not written to him alone. The recipients are four: Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the church that met in Philemon's house. The probable

household picture is husband, wife, and son, with the congregation gathered under that roof. The slave owner has a decision to make, but the letter still goes to all of them, because the right treatment of Onesimus would have to come from the whole circle. The church already knew the man. He had lived in that house as a slave. If Paul had written only to Philemon, the matter could have stayed private. Once the church is named, Philemon is on the hook in public, and everyone is called to handle the return in the same spirit. It is a church issue because Philemon is part of the church.

Paul then does what he so often does before a hard request. He thanks God for Philemon, reports the love and faith he has heard of, and says the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through him. He may not have founded the Colossian church or known every face there, but he knows this man is good, and he says so. Even with Corinth he begins with grace before the wound. Galatia is the rare letter that does not get that courtesy. The praise is not flattery for its own sake. It is a way of saying, You have handled things well before. I expect you to handle this well again.

The Appeal

"Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you, I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus." Philemon 8–9

Paul has the authority of an apostle and refuses to lead with it. He comes instead as an old prisoner asking for love's sake, which is both tender and shrewd.

"I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me. I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart." Philemon 10–12

Onesimus had been useless because he had run away and deprived Philemon of his service. He is useful now because he belongs to Christ and because he is carrying the letter at the least. "My very heart" means that to punish the returning slave is to strike Paul. Paul would have kept him to minister in the imprisonment, but he would not do it without Philemon's consent. Goodness compelled is not the goodness he wants. He is asking, without saying the sentence in so many words, for consent and for a changed reception, and perhaps even for Onesimus to be sent back to the prison for the work.

"For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me." Philemon 15–17

Paul is not announcing that the civil problem of a runaway slave has vanished. He is saying the man will not be merely a slave. In the flesh the old relationship remains. In the Lord they are brothers. Receive him as you would receive me.

"If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self." Philemon 18–19

If anything was stolen or broken, Paul will cover it, and he writes the pledge in his own hand so the weight of it cannot be missed. Then he reminds Philemon that the debt runs the other way as well. Whatever Onesimus owes is small compared to what Philemon owes Paul in the gospel. There is no realistic way for Philemon to cash the offer. That is part of the point.

"Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say." Philemon 20–21

Verse 7 had already said that Philemon refreshes the hearts of the saints. Verse 20 asks him to do for Paul what he already does for everyone else. Confidence of obedience is the written form of "thank you in advance." The room for a polite "no" has been steadily closed. Paul also asks that a guest room be made ready, because he hopes to come when the imprisonment ends.

What the Letter Shows of Jesus

Paul becomes, in this short book, a living image of Christ. "Receive him as you would receive me" is the sentence the Son speaks to the Father over every believer. The offer to charge the debt to Paul's account is the cross in miniature: the debt paid in full by someone other than the one who ran. More than once Paul prefers a loving appeal to forced compliance. Jesus could compel. He appeals. Onesimus goes home still a slave in civil terms unless Philemon frees him, and he

goes home a brother. In Christ people move from slavery to family, and from uselessness to use. That is what Jesus does for us, and it is what living in Jesus looks like when it has to be applied to a hard relationship.

There is a harder position to resolve than simply asking God to "forgive my wrong" and being done. Onesimus has to go back. He can't simply pray that God forgive him for running away. The person who has wronged a brother or sister must to go to that person, plead for forgiveness, and ask what can be done. The other party is not required to accept the apology, but the one who did the harm has done what is required. The sacrifices of the old covenant made provision not only for forgiveness but for restitution. That principle has not gone away.

How Scripture Connects

A request for this class has been that the study of a book of the Bible not be left standing alone. Before the recent letters are joined to the rest of the Bible, the method itself has to be named. The smallest unit of a text is a word, and a word is not mastered by a dictionary entry alone. A lexicon may list fifteen uses. Without context the word is almost useless. Definition and setting have to work together. Some words, like "propitiation," will never yield their full sense from context by itself; the reader will come away thinking only of forgiveness and miss the note of appeasing. Even then the context decides which sense is alive on the page.

Verses live inside paragraphs. Paragraphs live inside chapters and sometimes across the chapter break, because those breaks are not inspired and are not always reliable. First Corinthians 11:1 and Philippians 4:1 are only two reminders of that. Chapters then connect inside books. Romans, for example, is built in blocks: the opening three chapters, the next four, the next three, the last five. Until those blocks are seen, the argument is chopped up into fifteen short samples that seem unconnected. Romans is one argument in large movements: everyone is lost, justification by faith, life in the Spirit, Israel, then the practical commands. Those movements run across chapter lines..

Under all of that sits the author's intent toward the first audience. The question "What does this mean for me" cannot be answered until "What did this mean for them" has been answered. A passage cannot mean to us what it never meant to them.

Reading by Units of Thought

The most useful way to understand the Bible is to read it block by block, pericope by pericope. A "pericope" is a group of verses that form a single account or argument. When that unit is finished, one thought has been had: one story, one idea, one complete move. It often looks like a paragraph, and it is not always a paragraph. Small units sit inside larger ones, which sit inside larger ones still.

Genesis 37:1–11 is a complete thought: here is why Joseph was in trouble with his brothers. That unit lives inside chapter 37 as a whole, which is Joseph in trouble and what came of it. Chapters 37 through 40 then form the larger movement of humiliation on the way to exaltation. Romans 1:18–32 is a complete thought: the Gentiles are lost. That unit sits inside 1:18–3:20, where Gentiles, moral people, and Jews are all lost, which sits inside chapters 1 through 4, where lost people are saved in Jesus.

A unit of thought is recognized the way a paragraph is recognized on an unmarked page. Clues help. Transition words matter: “But now” in Romans 3:21 turns the whole argument from universal loss to salvation in Christ. Changes in audience or setting matter: Gentiles in chapter 1, then the moral person addressed in 2:1. Bookended words matter: unrighteousness opens and closes 1:18–32. Stylistic shifts matter: blessing in Romans 5–8, a dense treatment of Israel in 9–11, then the practical commands of 12–16.

Serious reading cannot be done by flipping the book open for a few loose sentences, and it cannot be hired out to a preacher or even to a translation committee. It takes time, attention, and work that will not finish quickly or on the surface.

Connecting Books to the Rest of Scripture

Once a book is read, it should be joined to other books along several lines. Stay first with the same author: a hard sentence in 1 Peter is tested against 2 Peter before it is tested against Romans, because writers have habits. Then stay with genre, and with historical setting, so that a psalm is read against the period that produced it. Watch for echoes, quotations, allusions, and references. An Old Testament sentence quoted in Matthew should be read again in its own place. Then ask how the book serves the whole canon and the salvation story as it unfolds.

First and Second Thessalonians show the method. Acts 17:1–13 records the founding of that church and the persecution that met it at once, which is the air those two letters breathe. They belong with Paul’s earliest letters, among the first books written in the New Testament. The core truth they serve is the coming of the Lord. A difficult saying in Matthew 24 becomes clearer when it is set beside 1 Thessalonians 4.

Romans shows the method again. Acts does not narrate the letter, but the date falls in the period of Acts 20. The letter belongs with the middle Pauline correspondence, and the pressing issue of that moment was Jews and Gentiles in one church. Almost the entire argument touches that question. It is also the great New Testament treatment of the old covenant giving way to the new, and of justification by faith. Salvation is poorly understood where Romans is left unread.

Philemon is a short letter about a runaway who became a brother. It is also a window onto the gospel itself: a debt charged to another’s account, an appeal instead of a command, a slave received as family. The same gospel is the reason the rest of Scripture has to be read as connected speech rather than as isolated verses.