

# The Letter to Philemon

## Southside church of Christ, Huntsville

Reading Assignment—Philemon

### Preface

A typical study of the New Testament epistles consists of a verse-by-verse expository type analysis. However, these epistles were not intended to be approached in this way. Most of the epistles were written to whole churches and were designed to be read aloud at one time (Co. 4:16). Rather than a detailed exposition of the scriptures, we will be embarking on what is called a thematic study. We will be zooming out, if you will, to look at once at large chunks of writing. This will allow us to discuss ideas such as why the author felt it necessary to even compose the book. Or, perhaps, focus in one epistle on a key word or two that seem to be used frequently. We will still take some time to slow down and discuss details here and there—especially if those details are important to the main theme of the letter. Remember, these letters were meant to be delivered similar to the way we deliver a sermon today. They would have been read aloud for the entire group to hear; any discussion would come later. Most of these books, with only the exception of a few, can be read start to finish in under 20 minutes. We'll start big by looking at an entire book and then zoom in to a closer look at the chapters.

Each lesson will ask about the main theme, main arguments, and minor themes. The theme is the subject of a chunk of text. The theme is both the reason the author is writing and the most important point from the letter. The main theme will often be presented with appeals to the reader or the use of persuasion to convince the reader to accept the point. This persuasion is the main argument(s). Of course, as with most discourse, there are often side points or supporting bits of information thrown in for good measure. These minor points are the minor themes.

Each person will read the text with a unique perspective. The way that each individual reads a text, and decides what subjects to focus on, can be shaped by past experience or even current circumstance. With that understanding, please note that there may not be one and only one right answer about the main theme. Part of the beauty of God's word is the ability to be highly applicable to everyone, regardless of the passage under consideration or the particular reader. The point is, there is no need to try and over work an answer; likewise, there is no pressure to get to the 'right answer.' Please simply answer what comes to your mind as you are reading the passage. That said, it often helps to read the assigned passage, start to finish, at least twice to really formulate an idea about what it means.

### Introduction

Unlike many other epistles, the letter to Philemon was a private letter written to intercede between two brethren. Paul was located in Rome at the time and had never been to Colosse (Co. 2:1). The letter is, in many ways, highly personal as Paul makes some pointed appeals to

Philemon. For example, he implies that Philemon owed his very life to Paul. This is likely an illusion to the fact that Paul converted Philemon.

Onesimus was owned by Philemon as a slave. Onesimus had fled from Philemon for some reason that is not discussed in the text. In reality, it doesn't matter why he deserted his obligation. Paul was trying to intervene in the situation and set the matter right. Paul loved Onesimus because of his faithfulness and used him as a messenger to inform the Colossians about Paul's situation (Co. 4:7-9).

We can use the letter to Philemon to remind us to be tender hearted toward those who do us wrong. Paul stresses that he has confidence Philemon has a forgiving disposition and will not hold a grudge against Onesimus. The letter demonstrates the importance of having sympathy for those who commit sin and ask for forgiveness. Additionally, we are given an example of how to treat those who are under our authority. Paul expects Philemon to respond in a way that has compassion on Onesimus, even though Philemon most likely could have exacted severe consequences for running away. Similarly, we should keep in mind that those Christians under our authority (e.g., employees, spouse, children) deserve to be treated as co-heirs to the kingdom of God.

### **Instructions**

While reading the text, be sure to identify the major and minor themes as well as the major arguments used to support the themes.

Major Theme:

Major Argument:

Minor Themes:

### **Questions**

1. Who is the author of the letter to Philemon?

2. Who delivered the letter to Philemon?

3. Where did the church at Colosse probably meet?

4. After the introduction, what does Paul write about Philemon (1:5-7)?

5. Who converted Onesimus?

6. What does the text imply about continuing in sin after baptism?

7. What plans for the future does Paul make with Philemon?

**True or False**—Be sure to provide scripture for your answer.

T or F—Philemon was not very devoted to other Christians.

T or F—Paul wanted Onesimus to be treated as if he were Paul himself.

T or F—Paul wanted to keep Onesimus with him.

T or F—Even though Onesimus ran away, that was his only sin against Philemon.

T or F—Receiving Onesimus was a matter of indifference, not a matter of right and wrong.