

HEARING THE WORD



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Philemon
Work Book

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Nigel Barge, January 2019

Scripture Quotations taken from

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Philemon

Leaders'guide

Resources

The New Bible Dictionary 3rd edition, published by Inter Varsity Press

The New Bible Commentary 21st C edition. A commentary on every Bible book, IVP

www.blueletterbible.org

Hearing the Word: A Tool for Bible reading



LOOK – What does it *say*?

- 1) The Text
 - a) What questions does it raise -
Who, What, When, Where, Why, How?
 - b) What surprises you?
- 2) The Context?
 - a) the surrounding text
 - b) the Book of the Bible
 - c) the whole Bible
 - d) the place in the Bible Story



LEARN – What does it *mean*?

- 1) What type of writing is it?
- 2) Answer the questions
- 3) Summarise the passage



LISTEN – What is the *message*?

- 1) Which is the main point?
- 2) Which is the key verse?



LIVE – How should we *respond*?

- 1) What does it show about God,
(Father, Son, Holy Spirit) :
 - a) His nature and character?
 - b) His grace*
 - c) Jesus / his salvation**
- 2) What should I do?

* God's undeserved generosity is evident throughout the Bible, and it is perfectly expressed in Jesus.

** The Bible, from 'the fall' onwards, describes God's plan of salvation through his Son. Thus, *all* the Scriptures speak in some way of Jesus (Luke 24:27)

INTRODUCTION

Reading 'Letters' in the Bible

Whatever we read, we adjust to its style, sometimes without noticing. We don't approach a newspaper, a car manual, a cookery book, a poem, a scientific report, a TXT MSG and a Shakespeare play in the same way. We take into account the purpose for which it was written and the way in which the writer uses words.

Since the Bible also has many styles – law, poetry, history, wisdom, prophecy, letters and visions – we need to allow for the style if we are to discern what God is saying. Philemon is a 'Letter'.

The New Testament contains letters written by the Apostles to various parts of the church of their day. The first thirteen of them are from Paul, named after their *destination*, - nine to the church in a locality, four to a person (Timothy, Titus, Philemon). They are printed in order of length, not date of writing. One, perhaps by Paul, is written for Christians from a Jewish background (Hebrews). The others are named after their *author* (James, Peter, John, Jude) with a numeral *in front of* the name to separate a first, second or third letter from the same person. They are part of the Word of God and as such they not only *were* authoritative for the church then, but they *are* authoritative for the church of all time.

Since this part of the Word of God is written *as letters*, in the first instance they must be read as such. So we need to take into account that letters are:

a) *Relational.*

A letter is addressed to a particular person or group of people and its contents apply to them.

So in the Bible, we must remember that in the first instance Paul (or James, Peter, John or Jude) is addressing named churches or individuals. It is only once we have grasped what they are saying to *them* that we may generalise as to what God might be saying to *us*. NB The two will *always* be consistent.

b) *Occasional.*

Letters are one side of a 'conversation' between two people. They refer to matters in which details of situations and people are assumed to be common knowledge. A third party reading a letter needs to 'read between the lines' to work out the other side of the story.

We have to try and understand the situation to which this Bible letter was written, so as to grasp how the writer was addressing *it*. Only then may we ask how God might apply this Word to our own circumstance.

c) *Dated.*

Letters are written at a particular time and place, and within a particular culture. So in the Bible, these first-century letters are expressed within the habits and traditions of that day. In discerning what God might be saying to us, now, we need to separate any instruction that is ‘time-bound’ from principles that are timeless.

d) *To be read as a whole.*

When we open a letter from a friend today, we read the whole thing. We recognise it is a single communication whose contents are thus all related.

So with letters in the Bible; every part must be viewed in the context of the whole letter. Thus, reading a whole Bible letter *right through*, before analysing its parts, is good practice.

PAUL’S LETTER TO PHILEMON

Purpose and occasion

The apostle Paul is a prisoner under house arrest, probably in Rome in Italy (*see* Acts 28:16) awaiting trial. *Philemon* is one of several letters written from prison (also to Ephesus and Colosse in W Turkey, and Philippi in N Greece)

The letter concerns three individuals: Paul, the writer; Onesimus, a runaway slave he had met in Rome; and Philemon, the slave’s owner. Philemon probably lived in Colossae, since that is where Paul is sending Onesimus (v12; Colossians 4:9) a town Paul himself had not visited (Colossians 2:1).

Under contemporary law, a slave owner could wreak almost limitless vengeance on a runaway slave like Onesimus. Frightful penalties also awaited those who harboured runaways. In the Roman Empire, William Barclay says, there were 60 million slaves in a total population of possibly 120 million. Obviously the situation was precarious. Any ‘whiff’ of rebellion was therefore crushed instantly and absolutely. ‘A rebellious slave was promptly eliminated.’

The difference in this case was that first Philemon, then Onesimus, had become Christians through Paul’s ministry (v10,19). Onesimus had probably robbed his master (v18) when he ran away (v15). In the providence of God, he had met Paul in Rome and been converted, perhaps becoming his servant. The name ‘Onesimus’ in Latin means ‘useful’. Paul appears to make a play on the word: ‘... was use~~less~~ to you... but now use~~ful~~ to you - and to me’ (11).

Paul mentions Epaphras, Philemon’s fellow-townsmen (*see* Colossians 4:12). Quite possibly the presence in Rome of someone who knew Onesimus’ background in Colosse put pressure on Paul to deal with the situation and send the slave back home to ‘face the music’.

In this letter, Paul pleads with Philemon to receive Onesimus back as he would receive Paul himself. Paul would dearly have loved Onesimus to stay with him but knows he needs Philemon's permission for this (14). He offers to pay all of Onesimus' debts himself (18).

While the letter is addressed to Philemon and (we guess) his wife and son, Paul asks that it be read to the church that meets in their house. It is delivered by Tychicus, who is also carrying the letter to Colosse, accompanied by Onesimus, whom he there calls 'our faithful and dear brother' (Col 4:9).

Questions

We believe that 'All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work'. (2 Timothy 3:16)

That raises two questions:

- Why is this brief, *personal* letter included in the New Testament?
- Since Paul *could* have 'pulled rank' as an apostle and *ordered* Philemon to treat Onesimus well, why does he choose to leave the life and death decision of his beloved 'son' to the vagaries of a master's whim?

Could it be there is an 'antitype' here, a matching-but-opposite event to what God has done in Christ? Could this be its purpose and place in revealing Christ 'in all the Scriptures' (Luke 24:27)?

Earthly story: A 'father' agrees with a 'son' that he should go back to a foreign country and re-engage as a slave. He is guilty of a capital offence — desertion — and could be condemned to death. The 'father' pleads for undeserved mercy on behalf of his son, that he should live.

Spiritual story: The Father agrees with His Son that he enter the world as a servant. He is totally innocent of all wrongdoing, yet it is the Father's will that he should be condemned to death. So his Son dies that others might live when God bestows his undeserved mercy on them.

Abbreviation convention: Phm. = Philemon; Phil. = Philippi

Greetings and thanksgiving

Background information

Paul's opening follows the usual pattern of all letters in those days: who it is from; to whom it is addressed, and greetings to them. This one is full of grace, tact and affection.

Word List

- 1 *Paul* an apostle *see* Acts 9:15
Timothy native of Lystra *see* Acts 16:1, became a fellow-worker with Paul; later he led the church in Ephesus *see* 1 Tim 1:3
- 2 *Philemon* leader of house-church in Colossae
Apphia ? Philemon's wife
Archippus ? their son, quite possibly the leader of church in Laodicea: *see* Colossians 4:17
- 3 *grace* Greek, *charis*, love freely given by God when we sinners do not deserve it.
peace Greek *eirene* (the OT *shalom*), spiritual well-being
- 4 *saints* forgiven sinners, fellow believers. The term (*lit* holy ones) is used because God reckons believers as holy, in Christ.
- 6 *Sharing faith* Greek *koinonia* = fellowship amongst believers (Acts 2:42)
Lit. 'So, as the fellowship of your faith works, you may become in full knowledge of every good thing in us for Christ'

Bible connections

- 3 *grace and peace also used at* Rom 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:3; Galatians 1:3; Ephesians 1:2; Philippians 1:2; Colossians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:2; 1 Timothy 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:2; 1 Peter 1:2; 2 Peter 1:2; Jude 1:2
- 4 *a prayer with thanksgiving typical at start of Paul's letters; see also* Romans 1:8; 1 Corinthians 1:4; Philippians 1:3; 4:6; Colossians 1:3; 3:17; 4:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:2; 5:17,18; 2 Thess. 2:3; 1 Timothy 2:1; 2 Timothy:1:3; 1 Galatians 1:6.

LOOK

1) The Text

What questions does the passage raise?

What surprises or confuses you?

2) The Context

What other parts of the Bible – surrounding passage, individual book, whole Bible, or Bible story – might help you understand this passage?

LEARN

1) How do you answer the questions the passage raises?

- 2) How do you resolve issues that surprised or confused you?
- 3) Give an overall 'picture' of the passage in a few sentences.

LISTEN

- 1) What is the lesson or the main point?
- 2) Which verse best sums up the message of the passage? v.

LIVE

- 1) What does it show about God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit)?
 - a) His nature and character?
 - b) His grace?
 - c) Jesus and His salvation?

Now underline the application of the Main Point.

- 2) What should I do?

Now underline the application of the Main Point.

Study 2

Philemon 1:8-21

Paul's Request

Background information

v8 “*Therefore*” relates the main matter of the letter to his introductory remarks. It is because of the love Philemon has shown to Paul, that Paul can write the way he does. Paul blends authority with a gracious humility.

See also the Introduction to this study, p2

Word List

7,20 <i>heart</i>	<i>lit 'bowels'</i> - the seat of the emotions
9 <i>old man</i>	or ambassador
<i>prisoner of Christ Jesus</i>	literally a prisoner, probably in Rome under house arrest (see Acts 28:16) but also held captive by the love of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:14)
10 <i>Onesimus</i>	Philemon's slave; the name means 'Useful'
12 <i>sending back</i>	<i>gk anapempein</i> 'refer a case to'
15 <i>for good</i>	<i>gk 'aionios'</i> eternal
16 <i>dear to</i>	<i>gk agapeton</i> beloved (cf (1 Cor 13)
17 <i>partner</i>	<i>gk Koinonos</i> (cf <i>Koinonia</i> –fellowship (Acts 2:42)
19 <i>hand writing</i>	<i>gk cheiro ...graphon</i> a technical word for a hand written note, acknowledging indebtedness

Bible connections

slaves and masters see Colossians 3:22 – 4:1, written to the church of which Philemon was a part.

Cf Ephesians 5:21, 6:5-9

change of status in Christ Galatians 3:26-29

14 *cheerful, not forced giving or service* see 2 Corinthians 9:7

15 *divine providence* see Romans 8:28; Esther 4:14

16 *a dear brother* Galatians 3:26-29

21 *more than I ask* Ephesians 3:20

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Now underline the application of the Main Point.

- 2) What should I do?

Now underline the application of the Main Point.

Study 3

Philemon 1:22-25

Conclusion

Background information

Paul puts further pressure on Philemon to spare Onesimus by hoping (threatening?!) to visit Colossae if and when he is released from prison. There is no record that he actually *did* make that visit. He also sends greetings from his fellow-prisoner, Epaphras and several fellow-workers.

Word List

22 *one more thing* Lit 'at the same time'. A concurrent request

23 *Epaphras* One of Paul's friends and, like Philemon, a resident of Colossae *see* Colossians 1:7; 4:12 Name abbreviated from *Epaphroditus* meaning 'charming'

Mark John Mark, a young companion of Paul on his first missionary journey *see* Acts 12:12,25; 13:13; probably the writer of the Gospel of Mark

Aristarchus one of Paul's travelling companions, a native of Macedonia, possibly not Jewish

Demas a co-worker with Paul, possibly a Jew from Thessalonica, who would later desert Paul (2 Timothy 4:10)

Luke Co-worker with Paul, who calls him 'the beloved doctor', Author of The Gospel of Luke, and The Acts of the Apostles. Joined Paul's 2nd missionary journey at Troas (Acts 16:11)

Bible connections

22 *duty of hospitality* *see* Romans 12:13; 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9

23 *John Mark* *see* Acts 12:12, 25; 13:5, 13; 15:37-39; Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11; 1 Peter 5:13

Aristarchus *see* Acts 19:29; 20:4; 27:2; Col. 4:10; possibly 2 Cor. 8:18

Demas *see* Col. 4:14; *but* deserter 2 Tim. 4:10 Cf Judas (Jn 6:70, 71)

Luke Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-21:18; 27:1-28:16; Col 4:14; 2 Tim 4:11

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- 2) What should I do?

Now underline the application of the Main Point.

Sharing the Word

Use

'Hearing the Word' can be used alone, with another, or in a group.

Preparation

Time put in alone beforehand will greatly benefit time spent together.

Work through the stages - LOOK, LEARN, LISTEN, LIVE. *

Write down your own questions and answers.

(With good preparation and discipline in the time together, the study may be conducted in as little as 45 mins!)

Format

- a. LOOK - Any questions? (If answer is known or not!)
Relevant cross references in rest of the Bible?
- b. LEARN - Answers to questions?
- c. LISTEN - Key verse and Main Point?
- d. LIVE - What does it show about God /His grace/ Jesus?
What should I do

n.b. Leave plenty of time for the LIVE section!

By also eating together and a time of prayer, you will have shared something of the life of the early church! (Acts 2:42-47)

Remember!

As we gather round God's Word -

- a) Listen to the views of others.
- b) Make room for the novice. (They can join in too when you start by listing 'Any questions'.)
- c) Don't let the 'knowledgeable' dominate. Encourage everyone to think for themselves.
- d) Try to include others, especially 'seekers', in your time together.

* The **process** is explained and practiced in a four-hour course, suitable for all, called **'An Introduction to 'Hearing the Word'**

<https://hearingtheword.org.uk>

“I can read the Bible for myself!”

To show that the Bible is accessible to all,
the Rev Nigel Barge, former minister of Torrance Parish Church,
has devised a tool called ‘Hearing the Word’.

The Manual explains the basic principles of Bible reading,
teaches them by means of an interactive course,
and practices them on a single passage, Mark 10:35-45,
Participants follow in a Workbook: *Hearing the Word - Introduction*,
which includes the next six passages in Mark,
so they may follow on for themselves.

As the principles apply equally to all, the course will both
instruct the novice and refresh the ‘hardened’ Bible student!