

BIBLE STUDY GUIDES: READING AND UNDERSTANDING THE MESSAGE

A SERIES OF NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES

By Bob Young

PHILEMON

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PREFACE TO THE SERIES

A number of factors have converged in my life as influences on my method of Bible study and Bible teaching. My undergraduate training in Bible and biblical languages served as the basic foundation for 25 years of full-time preaching ministry. During those years in ministry, I took some graduate coursework in an effort to stay fresh.

When I decided to pursue graduate education, I already loved teaching from an exegetical viewpoint while paying special attention to the historical-cultural context and the grammatical-syntactical features of the text. I had seen the healthy way in which people respond to thoughtful efforts to explain and apply the message of the text. I had developed the habit of using the same kind of Bible study in my sermon preparation. For those reasons, I focused my graduate training in ministry dynamics and the integration of academic studies with practical applications. Because I did graduate work while continuing my full-time work in ministry, I was blessed by have a laboratory to apply and test what I was learning.

My years of teaching and administration in Christian higher education coupled with involvement in the world of missions have made me even more aware of the need to view the text, insofar as possible, outside one's own social, cultural, experiential, and religious backgrounds. My interpretative efforts today are influenced by my training and experience as I try to understand the biblical context, the historical-cultural context, and the literary context—vocabulary, genres, grammar, and syntax. I try to understand the original message of the author and the purpose of the text as first steps toward understanding the message of the text in today's world. I want to know what the text said and what it meant, so that I can know what it says and what it means today.

As I have prepared these study guides, I have constantly asked myself, "What would I want in a study guide to the biblical text?" I have been guided by this question, at times excluding technical details and academic questions, other times including such items because of their value in understanding and communicating the text. Above all, I have tried to provide a practical guide to put in clear relief what the text says as a first step toward valid interpretation of what the text means and how it should be applied in the world today.

I wrote these guides with multiple readers in mind. Preachers and Bible class teachers will find the detailed study of the text helpful, and Christians in the pews with an interest in the message of the Bible will also be helped by the textual jewels and the textual summaries that are included. May God bless you in your desire and your efforts to understand and apply the Bible!

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

The Purpose of These Guides

To describe the publications included in this series as “Bible study guides” says something about their intended purpose. As guides, these books do not attempt to answer every biblical question that may arise in your study of the biblical text. They are not commentaries in the strictest sense of the word. The focus of these guides is distinct.

I have as a primary goal to encourage you to do your own study of the biblical text. This series of study guides is designed to assist the Bible student with preliminary and basic exegetical work, and to suggest some study methods that will enrich your study and help you identify the message of the text—whether in a specific verse or paragraph, a larger context, or an entire book of the New Testament. A primary goal of these guides is to help you maintain a focus on the purpose and message of the original author. The message of the original writer should inform our understanding of the text and its application today. One should not think that the message and meaning of the text today would be significantly different than the message and meaning of the original document.

The title also says that these guides are “helps.” I have tried to provide resources to guide and enrich your study, keeping the purpose of the original author in view. This desire has informed the content of these study guides. Many study guides exist and there is no need to write more books that basically have the same content. Generally, the information included in these guides is designed to help identify the purpose of the original document. In some passages, the information included in these guides is not readily available in other resources.

What Kinds of “Helps” Are Included in These Guides?

These study guides reflect how I organize and understand the biblical text, taking into account various exegetical factors such as syntax, grammar, and vocabulary. Along the way, I share some observations that may help clarify passages that are difficult to understand. I have not tried to write about every passage where potential problems or differences in understanding exist. I have not noted every textual variant in the original text. At times my notes may seem to be unnecessary comments on passages where the meaning is clear; that probably means I am trying to share insights to deepen understanding and appreciation of the text. In other passages, some may ask why I have not included more comments or explanation. Such is the individualized nature of Bible study. While I try to explain some difficulties, the overall goal of my comments is to help maintain a focus on the original author’s message and purpose for writing—the “what it said and what it meant” of the original author in the original context.

For each chapter, there is a “Content” section that usually includes a brief outline, followed by notes (“Study Helps”) about the biblical text. The content sections of the guides (including how the text is divided and how subsections are described) are drawn from my own reading and analysis of the text, and from a comparison of several translations. In only a very few cases does the outline provided in this guide vary from the majority opinion, and those cases are noted and the reasons given. In some chapters, there are a few introductory comments to help orient the student to the overall content of the chapter. The textual notes at times provide a periphrastic summary, but as noted above they are not intended to answer

every question. In several cases, I have tried to address topics that are not treated in detail in other resources. Texts that are easily understood and matters that are usually included in other resources are, for the most part, not treated in detail here.

A Useful Tool for Understanding the Message of the Bible

While the primary purpose of these guides is to assist in personal study of the biblical text, these guides will also serve the casual reader who wants to understand the basic message of Scripture. The guides are written in such a way that the reader can understand the general message of the text, along with some helpful details, simply by reading the guide. One might describe these guides as a kind of “CliffsNotes” to the Bible, but they are intended as helps and should not be thought of as taking the place of Bible reading and Bible study.

How to Use This Bible Study Guide in Personal Bible Study

This guide is not intended to take the place of your own Bible reading and study but is intended to provide insights and suggestions as you read the Bible, and to be a resource that will help you check your understanding. **No specific translation of the biblical text is included in this guide.** Two goals influenced the decision not to include a translation of the biblical text. First, it is hoped that the student will be encouraged to use his or her own study Bible. Second, these notes are designed to be helpful in biblical study, regardless of the version the reader may prefer for personal Bible study.

My primary purpose is to make it easier for you the reader or student to analyze and understand the text. Ultimately, you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible and you cannot simply follow what a favorite preacher or commentator says. Often the study of a chapter (or subsection of a chapter) contains a brief summary of the content, focusing on the message.

The suggested process for effectively using these Bible study guides involves five steps. First, you should first read the introduction to the book you wish to study. The introductions provided in these guides are for the most part briefer than normal and do not cover every detail. In some cases, one introduction is provided to cover several books, as in the case of the Thessalonian correspondence or the Pastoral Letters.

The second step in your study is to read the book through to understand the overall content. It will be helpful if this can be done at a single sitting. The student facing time constraints may have time for only one reading, but multiple readings will reveal additional details of the text being studied along with the opportunity to observe repeated words and phrases, the message of the book, how the book develops its message, and how various parts of the book are connected. You will find reading helps in the outlines of the books and the lists of themes that are provided in the introductions.

Now you are ready to begin your study of individual chapters or sections. The process is this: read a section of the text (probably a chapter) until you have a good understanding of it. This is not an in-depth reading to resolve every question but is a general reading to understand the content of the passage.

The fourth step is for you to write your own outline of the section or chapter, with paragraphing that reflects major thought patterns, divisions, and topics. The study guide for each chapter has a section with suggested paragraphing based on a comparison of various

translations. While it is possible to skip this step in which you do your own analysis and paragraphing, thereby moving directly to the paragraphing provided in the study guide, this is not the recommended approach. You will benefit from taking the time and investing the energy to do this work in initial reading and understanding.

Finally, the study guides have a section of study helps that will help you understand the text and keep the intent of the original author in mind as you do more focused study. In many chapters, a final section that summarizes the message of the chapter is included.

Initial Reading and Paragraphing

In other articles and publications, I have explained the importance of preparatory reading and personal study of the text. In the five-step process described above, initial reading and paragraphing occur in the second, third, and fourth steps. When the Bible student carefully works through these steps, it becomes clear that this is a “Bible” study and not just reading more background and commentary from a human author who is trying to explain the Bible. Although many students jump immediately from reading an introduction to the commentary, it is important that the student learn to do this part of the Bible study for herself or himself. Once the text is familiar, I suggest the student think about the themes that can be identified and how one would mark the paragraph divisions, based on the content of the passage and the subjects treated. Once this work is complete, it is good to compare the resulting paragraphing with that of several versions (or with the outlines in the content sections of these guides).

A Note About Paragraphing

Paragraph divisions are the key to understanding and following the original author's message. Most modern translations are divided into paragraphs and provide a summary. Ideally, every paragraph has one central topic, truth, or thought. Often, there will be several ways to describe the subject of the paragraph. Only when we understand the original author's message by following his logic and presentation can we truly understand the Bible. Only the original author is inspired—readers must take care not to change or modify the message. A first step toward integrity with the text is to develop the ability to analyze it and establish paragraphs.

READING AND UNDERSTANDING THE ORIGINAL MESSAGE

A Word About Formatting

The format of the Study Helps in each chapter follows the outline that is provided for the chapter. The major points of the outline are used to begin new sections of the Study Helps. Biblical references that introduce sections or subsections of the Study Helps are placed in bold type to assist the student. These biblical references are placed in progressive order on the basis of the first verse cited (in the case of citations that cover multiple verses).

Standard abbreviations of biblical books are used. Verse citations that do not include a book (e.g. 2:14) refer to the book being studied. Other abbreviations that may not be familiar to some readers include the following: cf. = compare; e.g. = for example; v. = verse; vv. = verses.

The first time a translation is mentioned, the standard abbreviation is included. Subsequent references use only the abbreviation.

Greek words are placed in italics. Often, the corresponding Greek word, a literal meaning, and other translation possibilities are placed in parentheses immediately after an English word. Greek words are written as transliterations in English letters, using the basic lexical form of the word, to make it easier for the reader without a knowledge of Greek. Many readers will find these references interesting, especially in the repeated usage of the same Greek word. Readers can quickly pass over this inserted parenthetical information if desired. In a few cases, parentheses are used to indicate Greek verbal forms or noun forms, where this information would be significant to the student with some understanding of grammar. Again, the reader can pass over this information rapidly if desired. The Greek text used is the 27th edition of *Novum Testamentus Graece* which is identical with the 4th revised edition of *The Greek New Testament*.

Quotation marks are often used to call attention to special words or topics, and also to indicate citations or translations of the biblical text, many of which are my own. This is done to help the reader identify references to the biblical text, since no specific translation of the biblical text is not included in this Study Guide.

Parentheses are used liberally to enclose information and comments that would often be included in footnotes. It is hoped that readers will find this more convenient, both those who want to read the expanded explanation and those who wish to skip over the parenthetical material.

Comments concerning contemporary applications of the text are limited, but are included from time to time.

A summary of each chapter is provided at the end of the chapter. Some of these are written in first person, from the standpoint of the author, but the majority are written in third

person and are explanations of the content. These are not translations and are not paraphrases. They are an attempt to communicate the basic points and purpose of the original message.

READING AND UNDERSTANDING THE ORIGINAL MESSAGE

Introduction to Philemon

Summary

The little letter from Paul to his friend Philemon has a unique place in the New Testament. Philemon is a personal letter, the shortest Pauline letter in the New Testament. It is an example of what a private letter would look like in the first century world. It probably fit on a single papyrus sheet. It is identified as a letter to Philemon, although there are also references to Apphia and Archippus and the house church (v. 2) as possible recipients. The content of the letter suggests that Philemon was the primary recipient.

The letter reveals the pastoral heart of the Apostle Paul, and provides a helpful model for resolving pastoral conflicts. The methods used by Paul are worthy of imitation. The letter also suggests how Christianity was impacting the social structures of the Roman world as churches were composed of those from different social and economic classes (see for example the references in Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11).

Author

The personal nature of the letter convinces most readers that the author was Paul. The books of Colossians and Philemon are closely related as they were sent to the same location. They have the same author, they mention many of the same people, and the greetings and closing are similar. Tychicus carried the letter to the Colossians and traveled with Onesimus (cf. Col. 4:7,9).

Date and Place of Writing

Paul was in prison three times: in Caesarea; in Philippi; and in Rome. Some have seen the possibility of an imprisonment in Ephesus in the texts of 1 Cor. 15:32 and 2 Cor. 1:8. I date this letter, and the other Prison Epistles, during an imprisonment in Rome in the early 60s, as this date best fits the Acts timeline.

Purpose

The letters of the New Testament have unique purposes because they are occasional literature, that is, they were written to specific persons at specific times to address specific circumstances or needs.

The occasion for the letter to Philemon can be discerned by the content of the letter. It is also helpful to identify some of the people mentioned in the letter, and to note what the Bible says about them (comparing the books of Philemon, Ephesians, and Colossians).

- Philemon was a Christian who lived in Colossae. He was the owner of a slave named Onesimus. He was probably a convert of Paul (v. 19), possibly during the three years of Paul's stay in Ephesus (Acts 19).
- Onesimus was a runaway slave of Philemon. He was also a convert of Paul, during the time of Paul's imprisonment at Rome (A.D. 61-63). It is uncertain how Paul and Onesimus met. It is commonly thought that both were prisoners, although it has also been suggested that Onesimus was sent on an errand to Paul, or that he sought out Paul after arriving in Rome as a runaway.

- Epaphras was a believer from Asia Minor. He brought word to Paul in prison about the heresy in Colossae and about Philemon's faithfulness.
- Tychicus carried three of Paul's letters: Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon (Col. 4:7-9; Eph. 6:21-22). It appears that Onesimus accompanied him as he went back to face his master (Philm. 11).

The immediate purpose of the letter was to encourage Philemon to accept Onesimus back as a slave, and also as a brother in Christ.

Lessons

Several lessons can be gleaned from the letter: (1) it shows how Paul did not use his apostolic authority, even though it was available to him, (2) it shows how Paul addressed a specific pastoral situation, (3) it reveals the pastoral heart of Paul, (4) it shows how slaves and slave owners, rich and poor existed together in the churches of the first century, and (5) it tells us that Paul believed he would be released from his imprisonment and would be able to visit Asia Minor again.

Background Information

Exactly how Onesimus came to be a part of the life of Paul during Paul's imprisonment in Rome is not revealed. Once Onesimus made the decision to be a Christian, Paul felt compelled to help him and protect him. The situation of Onesimus was quite tenuous considering the laws of the first century. As a runaway slave, he was considered derelict legally, and the laws allowed punishment to be quite severe, even to the point of death.

The text does not say why he had run away, but once Onesimus became a Christian, he was bound to try to return to his master, regardless of what difficult circumstances he might encounter.

READING AND UNDERSTANDING THE ORIGINAL MESSAGE

Philemon

[Note: it is suggested that the student read the introductory materials on page 3-5 of this guide before beginning an individual preparatory reading and analysis.]

CONTENT

The paragraphing included in the Content section of each chapter are merely suggestions or guides. The student is encouraged to identify the paragraphs, and subsections within each paragraph, to assist in his or her own study. The division of the biblical text into paragraphs is usually fairly standard in modern translations.

Outline of Chapter

1-3, greeting, salutation

4-7, thanksgiving and commendation for Philemon's love and faith

8-16, Paul makes his appeal on behalf of Onesimus

17-21, Paul encourages Philemon's positive response

22, personal request

23-25, final greetings

STUDY HELPS

1-3. Paul is identified as the author. He also identifies himself as a prisoner (literally, one in bonds) of Christ Jesus, probably a reference to his physical imprisonment, but possibly a spiritual reference to his status as a slave or bondservant of Christ, thus identifying himself with the slave and prisoner Onesimus. It is interesting that he does not identify himself as an apostle, but perhaps not surprising in a personal letter. Timothy is included in the salutation. This refers to Timothy's presence with Paul and that Timothy may be sending greetings. The inclusion of Timothy does not make him a co-author. Some studies have noted that Jesus is described in several different ways in this short letter.

The typical salutation in the Greek letter form included the recipients. Here are mentioned not only Philemon, but also Apphia, Archippus, and a house church in Colossae (which may have met in Philemon's house). The contents of the letter seem to indicate that Paul knew Philemon personally, and had perhaps been involved in his conversion to Christ. Grace and peace conclude the salutation in typical fashion.

4-7. Paul's mention of his prayers is common. The Greek letter form often included a salutation (from whom and to whom), a blessing or thanksgiving, a prayer (to the gods, but in biblical literature a prayer to God), and a theme statement.

5. It is not absolutely certain whether Paul had ever visited Colossae. On the basis of internal references in the Colossians letter, it appears that he had not. This is supported by his statement "I hear of your love and faith." The exact connection between faith and love and the Lord Jesus and the saints is not clear. The text speaks of faith and love toward (*pros*) the Lord and unto (*eis*) all the saints.

6-7. Grammatically, this verse appears to mention the specific content of the prayers in v. 4. (The repeated reference to prayer that appears in some translations is not in the original text.) Paul's prayer for them is that the fellowship of faith (shared faith, or sharing faith) may be effective in or with the knowledge of every good thing which they have in Christ Jesus, so they will continue to bless others as they have blessed Paul and other Christians. Some have seen a reference to evangelism in v. 6.

Brother is singular, indicating that much of the letter will be directed specifically to Philemon.

8-16. This section is Paul's appeal to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus, a request that Philemon accept Onesimus back. Paul motivates Philemon's response by mentioning multiple factors: doing what is right, Paul's authority as an apostle, Paul's age, Paul's imprisonment, Paul's ministry in the conversion of Onesimus, Onesimus's ministry to Paul, Paul's love for Onesimus, Onesimus's changed life, Onesimus's possible ministry to Philemon, Philemon's relationship with Paul, Philemon's salvation, and Philemon's ministry to Paul (the last three from vv. 17-20).

8. Paul could use his apostolic authority and issue an order, but he is confident that Philemon will want to do what is proper (what should be done).

9. Paul refers to himself as an old man and also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus (see comments on prisoner in vv. 1-3).

10-11. Onesimus is identified as Paul's child (*teknon*, often translated as son) spiritually. The name Onesimus means useful or profitable. The literal reading of v. 10 puts the name Onesimus in the last position: I exhort you concerning my son whom I bore in my bonds—Onesimus. Paul says that Onesimus was formerly useless (*achrēstos*), but is now "useful" (*euchrētos* cf. 2 Tim. 4:11) to both Paul and Philemon.

12. Paul uses a legal phrase that can mean "to refer a case to someone." In the first century, the slave owner had many legal rights, including the right of sentencing in the case of a runaway slave (see "Background Information" in the Introduction). Paul mentions how much he cares for Onesimus, how much he cares for Philemon, and his concern for the restoration of relationship between the two.

13-14. Paul would have liked to keep Onesimus with him, and that would have been advantageous for Paul. But Philemon had first rights to his slave. Paul was always very careful not to take advantage of his converts. This is especially true with regard to receiving financial help from the churches he established. The same principle is at work here in his relationship with Philemon. Paul wanted Philemon to know the blessing of love and generosity more than the satisfaction of obedience. The obedient heart is blessed by God; the generous heart is doubly blessed.

15-16. Paul reminds Philemon that all of this is working for the good. It was not right for Onesimus to flee, but the separation can result in a more stable and continuing relationship in the future since Onesimus will be both a slave and a brother in Christ.

17-21. In this section, Paul continues his appeal but mentions several specific aspects of his personal relationship with Philemon in order to encourage a positive response to the request.

17-18. The two conditional clauses are both true from the author's perspective. Paul and Philemon were sharers together, Onesimus had wronged Philemon. *Koinonos* (v. 17)

comes from the same root as *koinonia*, which sometimes has a financial aspect (Phil. 4:15), so this may be a subtle wordplay. Paul would know that his relationship with Philemon was firm when Philemon accepted Onesimus, even as we show love for God by loving those whom God loves, that is, by loving one another. Paul is willing to pay any debt Onesimus owes to Philemon.

19. Paul often used scribes (amanuenses) to write his letters, but here he writes with his own hand (cf. 1 Cor. 16:21; Gal. 6:11; Col. 4:18; 2 Thess. 3:17; Philm. 1:19). The verse continues the thought from vv. 17-18 regarding Paul's willingness to pay the debt. The latter part of the verse is often understood to mean that Paul had been instrumental in converting Philemon to Christianity.

20-21. Note the repetition of the thought of vv. 6-7, refreshing the heart. We can encourage one another by our way of life, and by being sensitive to the needs and desires of others. Paul tactfully communicates his confidence in Philemon's positive response.

22-25. The final section contains a personal request and concluding greetings.

22. Paul expected to be released and to be able to visit Philemon again in Colossae. He believed in the power of the prayers of those who were praying for him.

23-25. The final verses are similar to the conclusion of Colossians. Other Bible study resources give good background studies of the people mentioned here, all of whom were apparently with Paul. The concluding blessing is typical of Paul. "Your" is plural, "spirit" is likely used to indicate the spirit of a person (the self), an idiomatic way of saying "with your selves," also affirming that human beings are spirit beings.

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

To Philemon, my coworker whom I love, along with others in the church there: grace and peace.

First, I am grateful for the loving faithful influence you have had on the Christians, and I pray that you will have more and more opportunities to share your faith, and that such efforts will continue to be effective, so that people fully know Christ. Your example in these things has been for me a source of joy, not to mention that others have been encouraged.

Now, I want to present to you a special appeal for Onesimus. (I do not want to obligate you by telling you what you should do.) Onesimus has become a Christian here. He used to be useless, but now he is very useful to me and I would be helped by his presence here, but I am sending him back to you. You have to decide what to do, but it seems God was at work, so that he was separated from you for a time so you could have him forever, not only as a slave but also as a spiritual brother in the Lord.

I encourage you to receive him as you would receive a Christian brother, as you would receive me. If he owes you money, don't worry about that; I will repay it in full. We all have obligations to one another, and in a sense, you owe me your very self. I know I am asking something from you in the Lord, continue to refresh my spirit by your positive response.

I am confident you will do what is right. Make sure my guest room is ready as I hope to come soon, by your prayers and God's grace. Several send their greetings. Grace be with you all.