



THRU the **BIBLE**

with *J. Vernon McFee*

PHILEMON

BIBLE COMPANION



EPISTLES

READ THIS FIRST

This Bible Companion is a summary of Dr. J. Vernon McGee's teaching of the book of Philemon heard on THRU the BIBLE. These summarized lessons get to the heart of Bible passages and are intended to stir your own thinking, prayer, and study.



Begin with prayer. Dr. McGee said, "We are living in the day of the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the day of grace, when the Spirit of God takes the things of Christ and reveals them to us." Before you start each lesson, ask the Lord to use it to grow you up in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ as He is revealed in that section. Dr. McGee said, "This is the secret of life and of Christian living."



As you study, read the Bible passage first. Invite God to open your eyes and deepen your understanding of His Word. That's a request God loves to answer!



If you want to listen to Dr. McGee's complete teaching on any specific passage, go to *TTB.org/Philemon* (or any book of the Bible).

The corresponding audio messages are listed at the top of the summaries. You can also use this Bible Companion to follow along and take notes while you listen to Dr. McGee teach a book of the Bible on the radio or online.



After every lesson, several questions are listed for your personal consideration or, if you're reading this as a group, for your discussion. Ask the Spirit to help you take to heart what He wants to show you.

LET THE WORD OF CHRIST DWELL IN YOU
RICHLY IN ALL WISDOM AND TEACHING....

COLOSSIANS 3:16^A

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LESSON 1

PHILEMON



Begin with prayer



Read Philemon



Listen at [TTB.org/Philemon](https://www.TTB.org/Philemon) to **Philemon**

In the Old Testament, God communicated through law, history, poetry, prophecy, and narratives, but now in the church age, He inspired letters—a new, more personal and direct method. Most of the letters were written to churches, but we have one personal letter, written from Paul to Philemon. Honestly, it feels like we’re looking over Philemon’s shoulder at his mail, but the Holy Spirit included this letter in Scripture for a very definite reason, and it’s both inspired and important.

Behind this letter is a story, of course—a pretty dramatic one set against the backdrop of slavery. Philemon was a rich man living in Colosse, in modern-day Turkey. He owned many slaves, all subject to the whim of their master.

Apparently, Philemon knew Paul from Ephesus when Paul taught every day in the school of Tyrannus. Of the thousands of people who heard Paul teach over the two years there, Philemon was just one who came to a saving faith in the Lord Jesus.

Somewhere in Philemon’s story, his slave, Onesimus, took a chance one day, as any slave would have done, and made a run for it. Onesimus made it all the way to Rome where he could get lost in the great population.

One day, Onesimus found out there was a slavery in freedom and there was a freedom in slavery. Imagine him going down a Roman road one day and seeing a group of people gathered around a teacher. The odd thing was the teacher was in chains. Onesimus had run away from chains, and he thought he was free. But when he listened to that man he thought, *That man's free, and I'm still a slave—to appetite, to the economy, to myself. But although he's chained, that man is free.*

After the others had drifted away, Onesimus asked Paul more about the gospel he was preaching, and soon a miracle happened in Onesimus' life and he was set free indeed. He put his trust in Christ and became a new creation in Christ Jesus.

Then this new man, Onesimus, confessed the things that were wrong in his life and which he wanted to make right—including his status as a runaway slave. They exchanged “small world” stories and realized that Paul knew Onesimus' master, Philemon. *“Should I go back to him?”* Onesimus wondered.

“Yes, Onesimus, you must go back, but you are going to go back to a different situation. I will send a letter with you.”

And that's the letter we have in Scripture—the Epistle of Paul to Philemon. As we read over Philemon's shoulder, we see two purposes in its short pages. The first is a spiritual illustration of Jesus' love for us when he pleads our case before God. Paul's letter to Philemon is one of the best illustrations of Jesus' substitution for us. When Paul writes, “receive him as you would me. But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account” (vs. 17-18), we can hear Christ agreeing to take our place and to have all our sin imputed to Him. He took our place in death, but He gives us His place in life. We can stand like Christ does before God, or we have no standing at all. *“Give Onesimus the kind of welcome you'd give me,”* Paul asks.

The *practical* purpose in this letter is to teach brotherly love. In his other prison letters, Paul spoke of the new relationship between master and servant. Here he demonstrates how it should work. These men, belonging to two different classes in the Roman Empire, hating each other and hurting each other, are now brothers in Christ, and they are to act like it. The human heart has always had a great desire to be free. Now these two men were free to follow Christ, and it meant something unique to both of them.

JESUS ASKS US TO GO THE SECOND MILE.

He is a
generous Lord.



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About Onesimus. His name means “profitable,” and Paul played with that meaning as he wrote to Philemon. As a slave, Onesimus wasn’t very useful. His heart wasn’t in his work, but now Paul is sending him back to Philemon as a believer, and he says, *“He is going to be profitable to you now. However, don’t receive him as a slave. Take him back as a brother.”*

About Philemon. Paul calls Philemon, “our beloved friend.” Paul loved this man, and he is confident in asking this favor of him. If you write out a prayer list of the apostle Paul, be sure to put Philemon on that list. Every time Paul mentions his name, Paul is praying for him. Likely Philemon was a prominent person in his city, but more importantly, his life was a testimony to the Lord Jesus Christ. He loved the Lord, he refreshed God’s people, and he was faithful to them both. He lived in responsive obedience, reverent and sensitive before God. He believed God to work in him what pleased Him (see Philippians 2:13).

About the favor. Paul writes Philemon to ask a favor. He’s diplomatic, cautious, and loving and appeals to Philemon on a threefold basis:

- Please receive Onesimus as “a beloved brother” (i.e. don’t punish him as a captured runaway slave).
- Do this “for love’s sake”—our shared love as believers in Christ Jesus.
- Do this “for [me], the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.” Paul was near the end of his life and had suffered and been persecuted as a missionary for Christ. In this letter, Paul doesn’t call himself an apostle, but “a prisoner of Jesus Christ” (not a prisoner of Rome.) He can’t come accompany Onesimus personally because he’s in chains in Rome.

Paul is pleading on behalf of his “spiritual” son. He calls Timothy and Titus his sons, and now Onesimus. He admits Onesimus would have been helpful to him in Rome (prisoners needed outsiders to help with life’s basic necessities). *“If you want to send him back to me, that will be all right.”* Did Philemon send Onesimus back to Paul? Again, we don’t know, but it’s not a stretch to imagine that on the next boat returning to Rome, there was Onesimus carrying a lot of things to add to Paul’s comfort.

Since Onesimus has become a believer, his status and relationship to Philemon are different. He is still a slave according to the Roman law, but he is more than that to Philemon. He is now a beloved brother.

Behind this beautiful letter is a grand illustration of what Jesus does for us. He pleads for us to the Father on our behalf as a sinner who trusts Christ as the Savior. *“Receive this sinner as You receive me, Father.”* We have as much right to heaven as Christ has, for we have His right to be there.

Paul says, *“Since you count me as a partner, Philemon, receive Onesimus just like you would receive me. You always put me up in that fancy guest room. Don’t send him out in the cold; put him up in the guest room, too.”*

Paul continues, *“Look, if Onesimus stole something from you or did something wrong, just put it on my credit card.”*

Do you see this glorious picture? When you came to God the Father for salvation, imagine the Lord Jesus Christ saying, “If he/she has wronged You or owes You anything, put it on My account.” Christ on the cross paid off your debt created by your sin. He gave His life and shed His blood to pay our entire debt of sin. But that isn’t all. Even then, you weren’t fit for heaven, but the Lord Jesus says, *“If You count Me as Your Son, treat him/her as You would Me.”* That’s what it means to be in Christ—accepted in the Beloved. *“Put him/her in the nicest guest room.”* That’s how God the Father accepts us on behalf of the Lord’s pleading for us.

We don’t know how this situation worked out for Onesimus. Paul felt confident that Philemon will do even more than he requests, like any true believer would. Jesus asks us to go the second mile. He is a generous Lord. We should be generous people—even when wronged. Because that’s when the light shines brightest in this dark world.

LESSON 1



FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. What does it tell us about the Apostle Paul that he was still preaching the gospel, even when he was chained and on house arrest?
2. Why would Paul tell Onesimus to go back to slavery, even though he had escaped?
3. How does the gospel level the ground between different groups of people, even slaves and masters?

4. The gospel changed Onesimus from being unprofitable to profitable. What are some ways the gospel has changed you?
5. Paul could have commanded Philemon with his authority as an apostle; instead, he pleaded with him to make a wise decision. Why do you think he chose this approach?
6. Onesimus' status changed from slave to brother. What are some ways that accepting Christ has changed your identity?

7. Imagine you were a companion of Paul's. Would you anticipate Onesimus returning to Philemon? Why or why not?

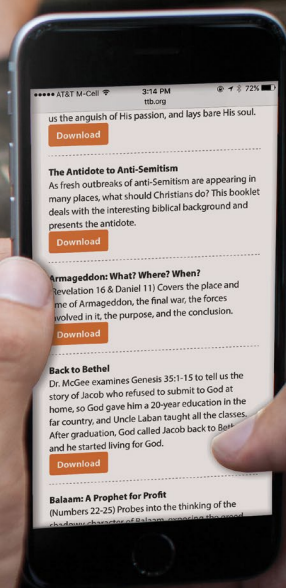
A photograph of two men, one Black and one white, smiling and talking to each other outdoors. They are both gesturing with their hands. In the background, other people are blurred.

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**KEEP YOUR BIBLE BUS JOURNEY
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A young woman with voluminous curly hair is shown from the chest up, looking out of a window. She is wearing white earbuds and a light-colored blazer. Her right hand is raised towards the window frame. The background is a blurred view of a city street.

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A man wearing a blue robe and a black head covering is shown from the waist up, pointing his right hand towards a distant town. The background features a desert landscape with a small town and mountains in the distance.

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ENDS OF THE WORLD
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