

LESSON 1 • PARTICIPANT HANDOUT

How to Read Paul's Letters Well

Read the whole letter. Trace the gospel. Respond faithfully.

SERIES QUESTION

What problem is Paul addressing, and how does the gospel answer it?

The big idea

Paul wrote real letters to real churches facing real problems - and he applied the same unchanging gospel to each changing situation.

Paul's letters are...

- Real correspondence - written by an apostle to particular churches and people.
- Occasional - each letter arose from a specific occasion, question, conflict, or need.
- Pastoral - Paul writes to form faithful people, not merely to transfer information.
- Authoritative Scripture - God speaks through these ancient letters to the whole church.
- Gospel-centered - what God has done in Christ governs what God's people believe and do.

Read at three levels

1 WHOLE BIBLE

Where does it fit in God's story?

2 WHOLE LETTER

Who, where, when, why - and how does the argument unfold?

3 PASSAGE

What does this paragraph do here, and what comes before and after?

Questions to ask

1. What do I know about the writer, recipients, setting, and occasion?
2. What problem, question, or need is being addressed?
3. How does this paragraph function in Paul's developing argument?
4. What does Paul say God has done, is doing, or will do in Christ?
5. What response - belief, worship, obedience, endurance, or reconciliation - flows from that gospel truth?

Philemon reading lab

Read Philemon 1-25. Listen for the people, situation, Paul's request, reasons supporting his request, and gospel-shaped language.

CERTAINTY	NOTES
STATED	What the text explicitly tells us
INFERRED	A reasonable conclusion - but not directly stated
UNKNOWN	What the text does not tell us

Discuss

6. What exactly does Paul ask Philemon to do, and how does he support that appeal?
7. Where do you see the gospel reshaping identity, power, debt, and relationship?
8. What would be lost if we pulled one verse out of this letter and ignored the rest?

BEFORE LESSON 2

Read Acts 7:54-9:31; Galatians 1:11-24; and Philippians 3:4-11. Watch for Saul's identity, confidence, opposition, Christ's initiative, and the community that receives him.