

LESSON 1 • TEACHING GUIDE WITH NOTES

How to Read Paul's Letters Well

A 50-minute plan for leading the class in your own voice

BIG IDEA

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

Purpose and outcome

By the end of the lesson, the class should be able to:

- explain why Paul's letters must be read both as real ancient correspondence and as authoritative Scripture;
- use the Whole Bible -> Whole Letter -> Passage framework; and
- ask the series question: What problem is Paul addressing, and how does the gospel answer it?

Lesson at a glance

TIME	MOVEMENT	AIM
0-3	Opening prayer	Ask the Holy Spirit to guide and teach the class.
3-8	Hook	We are reading someone else's mail - written for us.
8-15	Series theme	One gospel; different churches, cultures, questions, and crises.
15-23	Reading framework	Whole Bible -> Whole Letter -> Passage; then faithful response.
23-36	Philemon lab	One reader reads the letter; the class listens for people, situation, request, reasons, and gospel language.
36-46	Discussion	Distinguish stated facts, reasonable inferences, and unknowns; trace gospel-shaped reconciliation.

46-50

Close and prayer

Restate the series question;
assign Lesson 2 readings; ask
God to help the class read and
obey faithfully.

Before class

- Write Whole Bible -> Whole Letter -> Passage on the board before class.
- Choose one reader for Philemon 1-25 and let that person know before class if practical.
- Invite everyone else to follow in their own Bible or phone app. The class normally uses NIV; NIV 1984 and ESV wording differences are welcome observations when relevant.
- Keep the discussion flexible. If the class begins late, shorten the route-through-the-series explanation before shortening the Philemon exercise.

Opening hook

Imagine finding one paragraph from an old email: 'Tell him I will cover what he owes. Please welcome him back.' We immediately want to know: Who wrote this? To whom? Who is 'him'? What happened? Without the rest of the message, we can make it say almost anything. Paul's letters are similar: they are someone else's mail, but God preserved them as Scripture for the whole church.

Transition: We will not merely collect favorite verses from Paul. We will learn to follow his thought, see the gospel at the center, and then carry that truth faithfully into our church and lives.

The route through the series

We will follow a practical, approximate chronology. The dating and order of some letters are debated; that uncertainty does not change their message. Paul adapts normal letter forms rather than following a rigid template: sender and recipients, greeting or thanksgiving, main argument, exhortation and instruction, plans, and final greetings.

Teaching notes

1. Introduce the series theme

The gospel does not change: Jesus Christ died for our sins, was buried, was raised, reigns as Lord, and saves by grace those who trust him. But the churches receiving Paul's letters were constantly changing. They faced persecution, division, false teaching, sexual disorder, class conflict, Jew-Gentile tension, questions about worship, leadership, suffering, and resurrection.

Paul does not paste the same paragraph into every letter. He shows how the same gospel answers each church's particular problem. That is the pattern the class will trace.

2. Teach the three-level reading framework

- **WHOLE BIBLE** - Where does the letter fit in the Bible's story: creation, fall, promise, Christ, church, and new creation?
- **WHOLE LETTER** - Who wrote to whom, from where, and why? Read the letter in one sitting when possible. Trace repeated words, transitions, problems, and the developing argument.
- **PASSAGE** - What does this paragraph contribute to the letter? What comes before and after it? Is Paul explaining, arguing, praying, warning, confessing, or commanding?

Only then ask: What truth about God's work in Christ governs this passage, and what faithful response does it call for today? Application is the destination, but context is the road.

3. Philemon lab

Have one reader read Philemon 1-25 aloud. Ask the class to listen for five things: people, situation, Paul's request, reasons supporting the request, and gospel-shaped language.

CERTAINTY LADDER

STATED: Paul appeals for Onesimus, sends him back, calls him a brother, and offers to cover a debt (vv. 10-19). **INFERRED:** Onesimus may have run away or wronged Philemon, but verse 18 is conditional. **UNKNOWN:** How Onesimus met Paul, exactly what happened earlier, and how Philemon responded.

Discussion questions

1. What does Paul explicitly ask Philemon to do? How does he prepare for that request?
2. Which relationships and words repeat - brother, partner, heart, love, faith, useful? What work are they doing in Paul's appeal?
3. Where is the gospel present even though Paul never stops to give a full gospel summary?
4. What would we miss or distort if we read only verse 16, 17, or 18 instead of the entire letter?
5. How does the unchanging gospel confront this changing situation? What modern applications preserve Paul's principle without pretending our setting is identical?
6. Which reading mistake tempts us most: ignoring context, isolating a verse, treating inference as fact, or jumping to application?

The Gospel Then and Now

- **Then:** Philemon and the house church must receive Onesimus as a beloved brother, not merely according to his former status.
- **Now:** Churches may confess equality in Christ while allowing usefulness, reputation, wealth, education, or past failure to determine whose presence and voice matter.
- **Gospel answer:** Because Christ receives indebted sinners as family, the church must make grace visible through shared belonging and costly reconciliation.

Close

Repeat: Paul's letters are letters, but inside them we find prayers, hymns, confessions, arguments, warnings, and instructions - and each one needs to be read for what it is.

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.

Optional closing prayer help: Thank God for preserving these letters as Scripture. Ask him to keep the class from forcing isolated verses to say what they do not say, to show Christ and the gospel clearly, and to produce faithful belief and obedience.