

LESSON 1 • TEACHING SCRIPT

How to Read Paul's Letters Well

A full spoken guide that can be followed closely or adapted

HOW TO USE THIS SCRIPT

Text in regular paragraphs is suggested spoken language. Italic gray paragraphs are teacher directions. Do not race to cover every sentence; preserve the movement of the lesson and let discussion breathe.

0:00-0:03 | Opening prayer

Pray briefly in your own words, asking the Holy Spirit to guide us, teach us, and help us understand and respond faithfully to God's Word.

Father, thank you for giving us your Word. Holy Spirit, guide us and teach us as we begin this study. Help us hear what you said through Paul, see Christ and the gospel clearly, and respond with faith and obedience. In Jesus' name, amen.

0:03-0:08 | Opening hook

Imagine that you find one paragraph from an old email. It says, 'Tell him I will cover what he owes. Please welcome him back.'

What questions would you immediately want answered?

Let the class respond. Likely answers: Who wrote it? To whom? Who is 'him'? What happened? What is owed? Why must he be welcomed back?

Exactly. Without the rest of the message, we could make that paragraph say almost anything. We might guess correctly, but we might also build an entire story that the writer never told.

Paul's letters are similar. We are reading someone else's mail. These were real letters written by a real apostle to real churches and people facing real situations. Yet God preserved them as Scripture for the whole church - including us.

So in this series, we will not merely collect favorite verses from Paul. We will learn to follow his thought, see the gospel at the center, and carry that truth faithfully into our church and lives.

0:08-0:15 | What this series is about

The title of this series is Paul's Letters: The Unchanging Gospel in a Changing Church.

Here is the sentence I want us to keep coming back to: Paul wrote real letters to real churches facing real problems - and he applied the same unchanging gospel to each changing situation.

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 and spiritual gifts, bad leadership, suffering, and confusion about the resurrection and Christ's return.

Paul does not paste the same paragraph into every letter. He shows how the same gospel answers each church's particular problem. That gives us our master question for the series: What problem is Paul addressing, and how does the gospel answer it?

Briefly note that the series follows a practical approximate chronology. Dating some letters is debated; we need not solve every scholarly debate to read the letters faithfully.

Paul also uses and adapts normal letter forms: sender and recipients, greeting or thanksgiving, a main argument, instruction, plans, and final greetings. But inside those letters we will find prayers, hymns, confessions, arguments, warnings, and commands. Each one needs to be read for what it is.

0:15-0:23 | Whole Bible -> Whole Letter -> Passage

Point to the three phrases written on the board.

We are going to practice reading at three levels.

First, the WHOLE BIBLE. Where does this letter fit in the Bible's great story - creation, fall, promise, Christ, church, and new creation? Paul did not invent a detached religious system. He announces that God's promises reach their fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

Second, the WHOLE LETTER. Who wrote to whom, from where, and why? What problem or question prompted the letter? What words repeat? Where does Paul's argument turn? When possible, we should read the whole letter in one sitting before slowing down to study individual paragraphs.

Third, the PASSAGE. What does this paragraph do here? What comes before it and after it? Is Paul explaining, arguing, praying, warning, confessing, or commanding?

Only then do we ask how to apply it. 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.

Ask: Which level are we most likely to skip? Allow two or three brief responses.

0:23-0:36 | Philemon reading lab

We are going to practice with Paul's shortest surviving letter. Please turn to Philemon. It is one chapter, tucked just before Hebrews.

As our reader reads the entire letter, listen for five things: the people involved, the situation, Paul's request, the reasons he gives, and gospel-shaped words or ideas.

Have the preselected reader read Philemon 1-25. Everyone else follows in a Bible or phone app.

Before we interpret, let's separate what the text states from what we infer and what it does not tell us.

Ask for stated facts first. Build the ladder orally; use the notes below only to keep the discussion anchored.

What does the letter explicitly state?

Anchor points: Paul appeals for Onesimus; Paul sends him back; Paul calls him his child and a beloved brother; Paul asks Philemon to receive him as he would receive Paul; Paul offers to cover anything owed.

What might reasonably be inferred, but is not directly stated?

A common reconstruction is that Onesimus ran away or wronged Philemon. That may be correct, but verse 18 says 'if he has done any wrong or owes anything. A reasonable reconstruction is not the same thing as an inspired statement.

What remains unknown?

We do not know exactly how Onesimus met Paul, all that happened before the letter, or how Philemon responded. Good readers are allowed to say, 'The text does not tell us.'

0:36-0:46 | Discussion and gospel connection

Use the questions that best fit the class. Do not force all of them.

1. What exactly does Paul ask Philemon to do, and how does he prepare for that request?
2. What repeated relationship words do you notice - brother, partner, heart, love, faith?
3. Where is the gospel present even though Paul never stops to give a full gospel summary?
4. What would we miss if we read only verse 16, 17, or 18?

Paul is not writing only about a private disagreement. A church meets in Philemon's home. That church will see whether the gospel truly reshapes status, debt, belonging, and reconciliation.

Onesimus is not to be received merely according to his former status. Paul calls him a beloved brother. Paul is willing to place the debt on his own account. The gospel is not pasted onto the end of the letter; it shapes the entire appeal.

That does not mean our setting is identical. We must not flatten the ancient world into ours. But the gospel still confronts churches that confess equality in Christ while allowing wealth, usefulness, education, reputation, politics, or past failure to decide whose presence and voice truly matter.

Because Christ receives indebted sinners as family, the church should become a place where shared belonging and costly reconciliation make grace visible.

Ask: What modern application preserves Paul's principle without pretending our situation is identical?

0:46-0:50 | Close and prayer

Let me leave us with two sentences.

First: What problem is Paul addressing, and how does the gospel answer it? That is the question we will carry through the whole series.

Second: 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. As you read, watch for Saul's identity and confidence before Christ, what the risen Jesus does, and how the church responds to him.

Close in your own words, or use the prayer below.

Father, thank you for preserving Paul's letters as your Word to the church. Teach us to listen carefully, to distinguish what you have said from what we merely assume, and to see how the gospel of Jesus Christ shapes your people. Give us faith to believe, humility to learn, and courage to obey. In Jesus' name, amen.