

TEACHER'S GUIDE

Brother in Christ

A verse-by-verse adult Bible study of Philemon · six sessions

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Companion to *Brother in Christ*, volume four of *The Pauline Captivity Letters*

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SESSION ONE

A Letter from Prison

Philemon 1–3 · Introducing the Letter to Philemon

A Note to the Teacher

Welcome to Session One of *Brother in Christ*. You are beginning a six-session study of Paul's letter to Philemon — the shortest letter in the Pauline corpus, the most personal piece of writing we possess from the apostle, and the fourth and final volume of the series this study completes. The whole letter can be read aloud in about three minutes. The series gives it six weeks. This guide exists to help you teach those six weeks with confidence.

What you hold is a companion to the main Bible study book. The book itself is written for the student — a reader who will engage the chapter, look up the passages in his or her own Bible, and come to class prepared to discuss. This guide is written for you — the person responsible for shaping that hour of teaching and conversation.

Session One is especially important because of what it refuses to do. Your students may arrive wanting Onesimus — the runaway, the drama, the famous question of the slave and the master. He is not named in this session, and the student book does not apologize for that. It spends the entire first chapter on three verses, because the salutation is where Paul builds the room in which the whole appeal will live. A prisoner who could command chooses to identify himself by his chains. A household is addressed name by name — the master, the mistress, the pastor — and behind them the congregation that meets in their living room. If your students leave today understanding that every name in the greeting is load-bearing, and that the word *brother* has been laid down on purpose in the very first verse, the appeal of the next five weeks will land as gospel rather than pressure.

If you taught the earlier volumes of this series, this session is a harvest. The *In Christ* guide told your class, eleven sessions ago, that Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon left Rome together — in the same hands, on the same roads — and that the Tychicus and Onesimus connection could wait for the later volumes. The waiting is over. The household code your students studied in Ephesians 6 and Colossians 3–4 now gets its living test case: one house, one master, one slave, one gospel. And if you are coming to this volume fresh, take heart — Philemon is the gentlest on-ramp in the series, and everything a newcomer needs can be said in a single sentence.

THE BIG IDEA IN ONE SENTENCE

Philemon is the shortest and most personal letter Paul wrote — a prisoner who had every right to command chooses instead to appeal, and he addresses not one man but a whole household and the church that meets in it; establish today that the apostle has set aside his title, that the letter will be decided in the hearing of the saints, and that the word *brother* is the keyword of everything to come, and the next five sessions will stand on solid ground.

Preparing to Teach This Session

Before You Walk In

- ♦ Read Session One of the student book carefully, at least twice.
- ♦ Read Philemon in one sitting, aloud. It takes about three minutes. You are about to spend six weeks on a letter the Colossian church heard in less time than it takes to sing a hymn; begin with the whole letter in your ear, the way its first hearers received it.
- ♦ Pay special attention to the names in verses 1-2 and to verse 17 — *receive him as you would receive me*. That is the verse where this volume's title finds its anchor, and you will be steering toward it all study long.
- ♦ Read Colossians 4:7-18 — Tychicus and Onesimus on the road, Onesimus named *one of you*, and the charge to Archippus. The sibling letter traveled in the same satchel as this one, and the student book leans on it from the first page.
- ♦ Skim the opening pages of Luther's *On the Freedom of a Christian*. The student book quotes its famous double thesis in chapter one, and the preface calls the treatise the closest companion Philemon has in the Lutheran corpus. Your reading now will pay off in Sessions Three and Five.
- ♦ Pray. Six weeks is a short walk, but this letter goes to deep places quickly — vocation, authority, forgiveness, the gospel doing its work inside one ordinary house. Commit the study to the Lord's keeping from the start.

Materials to Have on Hand

- ♦ Your Bible, and ideally copies of the student book for any students who do not yet have one.
- ♦ A map showing Rome and Colossae. Any Bible atlas with Paul's journeys will have one. Students grasp this letter better when they can see the distance — well over a thousand miles of road and sea between the man writing and the house listening. You will use the map all six weeks.
- ♦ A whiteboard or flip chart. Today you will write the word *brother* at the top and begin a running tally — Timothy in verse one, Apphia *our sister* in verse two, the same kinship

word in the feminine. The tally will grow every week until it reaches Onesimus in verse sixteen, and this single visual, kept alive across six sessions, will do more to cement the letter's logic than any lecture.

- ♦ A copy of Colossians bookmarked at 4:9 and 4:17. The sibling letter will be cross-referenced throughout the study.
- ♦ Name tags if you have new students.

Knowing Your Class

Different classes will bring different baggage to Philemon. A few patterns to anticipate:

- ♦ Veterans of the first three volumes arrive with the frame already built — the Roman imprisonment, the captivity letters as a family, the household codes. Give them the payoff. They have twice watched Tychicus and Onesimus walk out of Rome carrying letters; let them feel the arrival. The seed planted in volume one is harvested in twenty-five verses.
- ♦ Some students arrive braced for the slavery question — wanting Paul to denounce the institution outright, or quietly troubled that he does not. Do not litigate this today. The student book treats the question directly and unflinchingly in Sessions Three and Four, and your task this week is simply to note that the letter's first word about the people in it is *brother*, and to promise that the hard question will get a full and honest hearing. Notice privately which students tense up; you will want to teach toward them when Session Four arrives.
- ♦ Some students will assume a postcard cannot carry six weeks. Today's pace — a whole session on three verses — is your answer, so frame it as the study's deliberate wager rather than as padding. The preface of the student book says it plainly: the brevity is the point. A letter that contains the gospel in miniature deserves to be read with attention, not stretched for the sake of length.
- ♦ Newcomers who skipped the earlier volumes need exactly one sentence of catch-up: Paul wrote four letters from one Roman imprisonment, and this is the shortest and most personal of them. Say it and move on. Do not spend ten minutes summarizing three volumes for the sake of two people; Philemon requires no prerequisites.

Suggested Time Plan

The following is one way to structure the sixty minutes. Adjust freely to fit your class, your venue, and the energy in the room.

TIME	SEGMENT
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer; the series so far and the smallest letter

TIME	SEGMENT
0:05–0:12	Paul, a prisoner: the title he set aside
0:12–0:18	Timothy our brother: the keyword laid down (begin the board)
0:18–0:26	Philemon, beloved fellow worker: the householder's vocation
0:26–0:32	Apphia our sister: the household and the priesthood of all believers
0:32–0:38	Archippus our fellow soldier: the pastor in the room
0:38–0:45	The church in your house: a letter for hearers
0:45–0:50	Grace to you and peace: the gospel in two words
0:50–0:57	Discussion (choose one question)
0:57–1:00	The hopes question, closing prayer, and Session 2 assignment

WHERE TO SLOW DOWN

The session has two weight-bearing walls: the opening contrast — a man who could command chooses to appeal — and the read-aloud setting of the letter, decided in the hearing of the church. If time gets tight, compress the survey of women in the house churches into two sentences and reduce the question of Archippus's identity to one. Never cut the renounced command, and never cut the room. Everything in the next five sessions stands on those two.



Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Why a Whole Session on Three Verses?

Open by reading Philemon 1–3 aloud — just the greeting. Then name the choice the student book has made: most studies of Philemon sprint to the runaway slave; this one sits down in the doorway. Let your students feel that this is deliberate. An ancient salutation is where the writer establishes who is speaking, to whom, and on what footing — and in a letter this short, Paul wastes nothing. Every name is doing work. Every title is chosen. The greeting is not the wrapping paper around the letter; it is the foundation poured under it.

Some students will be eager to get to “the good stuff.” Assure them it is coming — and that this session is what will make the good stuff good. An appeal from nowhere is a transac-

tion. An appeal from a chained apostle to a beloved fellow worker, made in front of the whole church, is a test of everything the gospel claims to do.

Paul, a Prisoner

The teaching move here is the broken pattern. Read the class Paul's openings in quick succession: *a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle* in Romans; *called by the will of God to be an apostle* in First Corinthians; *an apostle — not from men nor through man* in Galatians; *an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God* in Ephesians and Colossians. The pattern is steady. Then read Philemon 1 and let them hear the break: *a prisoner of Christ Jesus*. He does not claim the title here. He sets it down.

Give the Greek its two minutes: *desmios* — a bound one, a man in chains. Paul is in custody, probably in Rome under house arrest, awaiting the disposition of his appeal to Caesar. But the genitive does double work, and the student book will not let it go: he is a *prisoner of Christ Jesus*. The Romans hold him; Christ owns him. The chains on his wrists are not the only chains he wears.

Then make the point on which the whole letter turns, because the student book calls it the rhetorical heart: Paul is about to ask Philemon for something. He could ask as an apostle, with the full weight of the office behind the asking. He chooses not to. *Though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you* — that sentence is coming in verse eight, and the opening word has already prepared its ground. A prisoner appeals. He does not order. Do not rush past this. Five sessions of appeal hang on the command renounced here.

A CLASSIC LUTHERAN MOVE

When you reach Philemon's vocation later in the session, reach for the catechism your students already own. The Table of Duties in the Small Catechism gathers the stations of ordinary life — and among them, drawn straight from Ephesians 6 and Colossians 3–4, stand masters and servants. Luther put Philemon's situation in the back of the catechism. You do not need to develop this today — the student book will build the vocation thread across the study — but showing the class that their own catechism already contains this letter's cast of characters tells them something important: Philemon is not an exotic text about an extinct institution. It is a text about callings, and everyone in your room has one.

Timothy Our Brother

Two points, one small and one large. The small one: Timothy stands beside Paul's name here as he does in five other letters, and his presence signals that this is not a private

quarrel between two men. It is an apostolic matter, weighed by the apostolic team, conducted under the witness of the church. Timothy is co-witness to the appeal.

The large one is a single word, and it is your whiteboard moment. Paul names Timothy *our brother* — and that kinship word, the student book says plainly, is the keyword on which the whole letter will turn, laid down before Paul has crossed the second line. Write *brother* at the top of the board and make the first tally mark. Tell the class the word will gather weight every week: Philemon will be addressed as brother in verse seven and again in verse twenty; Onesimus — when we finally meet him — will be named *beloved brother* in verse sixteen. When you reach Apphia in a few minutes, add *our sister* beneath it — the same word in the feminine. The board you start today is the letter's argument in miniature, and in Session Four it will pay for itself.

To Philemon, Beloved Fellow Worker

Begin with what we know of the man, which is little and enough: he lived in or near Colossae; he was wealthy enough to own at least one slave and to host a congregation in his house; he came to faith through Paul's ministry — verse nineteen will hint that he owes Paul his very self; and he had a reputation for refreshing the hearts of the saints. Then deliver the student book's identification move, because it is the most personal sentence of the session: we are, most of us, not Pauls. We are Philemons. Not apostles, not missionaries, not names that recur in Acts — householders, who open what they have to the church and labor for the gospel within their station. Watch the room when you say this. For some students it will be the moment the study becomes theirs.

Then linger on *fellow worker* — *synergos* — because Paul uses the term sparingly and never as a courtesy. The hospitality, the hosting, the providing, the daily management of a believing household: Paul counts it labor in the same field as his own apostolic labor. This is where the Lutheran doctrine of vocation enters the study, and the student book gives it full voice — every Christian has a calling; each calling is a place where God hides Himself to be served and where the love that justifies is poured out in love that serves the neighbor. Plant the connection that is coming: when Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother, he will not be asking him to step outside his vocation as master of a household. He will be asking him to fulfill it. The student book's line is worth reading aloud: vocation is not the opposite of brotherhood; brotherhood is what vocation looks like when the gospel has done its work in it.

Apphia Our Sister

The conventional reading — almost certainly correct — is that Apphia is Philemon's wife, the woman of the house in which the church meets. The teaching point is that Paul did not have to name her, and he did. The question this letter raises will reach into the daily

life of a household — its table, its labor, its trust — and the household's response will be the household's response. Apphia is named because her voice is in the matter.

Give two unhurried minutes to the wider picture, no more: the early congregations met almost universally in homes, and women appear throughout the apostolic record as householders, hosts, and patrons — Lydia in Philippi, Nympha in Laodicea, Prisca with her husband Aquila, Phoebe at Cenchreae. Apphia stands in that line. Then make the Reformation connection the student book makes: the priesthood of all believers — every baptized Christian, man and woman, slave and free, standing before God as a priest. The vocations differ. The standing does not.

Be prepared for this section to raise contemporary questions about women and the church in some rooms. Keep the focus where the text keeps it: Apphia's honored standing and her real stake in a household decision. The letter does not legislate about the pastoral office — and helpfully, the very next name in the address shows that honored standing and distinct callings sit side by side in this letter without strain. If a student wants to press present-day questions of practice, offer to continue after class rather than letting Session One become a seminar on polity.

Archippus Our Fellow Soldier

Handle the identity question in two minutes, not ten. We have one slender piece of outside evidence: in Colossians 4:17 the apostle charges Archippus by name — *see that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord* — which tells us he holds some recognized office in the Lycus Valley churches, very likely as a pastor. The most natural reading of the address sequence — master, mistress, then Archippus — places him in the household, plausibly as Philemon's son. We cannot be certain, and nothing hangs on certainty. A teacher who handles an honest historical question in two calm sentences builds trust; a teacher who dwells on it loses the room.

The point to land is what his presence means: there is a pastor in the room. The letter is addressed to a minister of the gospel as well as to a master and mistress of a household, which means the handling of Onesimus is not a private domestic matter Philemon can settle and have the pastor bless after the fact. And here the student book makes a move that confessional Lutherans will savor — the proper distinction of callings. Philemon's vocation is the householder's; Archippus's is the pastor's. Two distinct offices, exercised under one roof, both addressed by one apostolic letter, neither collapsed into the other. Paul honors them both by naming them both.

The Church in Your House

This is the session's second weight-bearing wall, so give it room. First the picture: for the first three centuries there were no church buildings. A congregation was, more or less, the people who fit into someone's home, and the hospitality of householders was a struc-

tural requirement of the church's existence. The church at Colossae has an address, and the address is Philemon's.

Then the consequence, which changes what kind of letter this is: Philemon will not read this letter silently in his study. It is addressed to the church as well as to him, which means it will be read aloud — in the assembly, with Philemon present and Apphia present and Archippus present and the congregation listening. Whatever Philemon decides about Onesimus, he will decide it in the hearing of his fellow believers. The student book is direct: the pressure of the church's listening is part of the letter's design.

Add the Lutheran balance the student book supplies, because it prevents a misreading: this is not congregationalism by referendum. The confessional tradition preserves the proper office of the ministry and locates public teaching authority in the called servants of the Word. But it also confesses the church as the *communio sanctorum* — the communion of saints gathered around Word and Sacrament — and decisions about how the body of Christ lives together are not made over the heads of the saints. They are made within their hearing. Philemon is a letter for hearers, and so, you might tell your class, is every letter of Paul they have ever heard read from a lectern.

THE MOST IMPORTANT TEACHING MOVE

Do not teach the salutation as a list of names to be identified. Stage it. Have your class build the room in their imagination: a living room in Colossae, the master and mistress of the house, the pastor, the gathered saints, and a letter from Rome — over a thousand miles away — being unsealed in front of all of them. Every session of this study takes place in that room. And know, though you will not tell them yet, that the student book is withholding one name on purpose: the man who carried this letter up to that door is the man the letter is about. Let the empty space in the room do its quiet work today. Session Three will fill it.

Grace to You and Peace

Close the teaching with the greeting's last line, and resist the temptation to treat it as a formality, because the student book insists Paul is preaching the gospel in two words. Give the philology its two minutes and no more: *charis* is the ordinary Greek greeting bent toward grace, the unmerited favor of God toward sinners; *eirēnē* carries the Hebrew *shalom*, the wholeness God gives His covenant people. A Jew writing in Greek has woven both worlds' greetings into one confession.

Then preach the order, because the order is the point: grace first, peace second — the peace of the gospel is the peace that follows from grace, and there is no other kind on offer. And name the quiet enormity of the source: grace and peace come *from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ* — two persons named in one breath as the single fountain of one

gift. The Trinity is not a doctrine Paul argues anywhere in this letter; it is a reality his greeting already presupposes, and the creeds your students confess on Sunday are the church's long unfolding of what Paul says here in passing.

Land the session on the student book's grounding sentence, because it is the bridge to everything ahead: the whole appeal of this letter rests on the grace named in verse three. The grace that justifies the master is the grace that justifies the slave. Without that, the appeal Paul is about to make is sentiment. With it, the appeal is the only thing that makes sense.

Gathering the Threads

The student book closes the chapter by drawing six threads from three verses — the prisoner who will appeal rather than command; Timothy the co-witness; Philemon honored in his vocation; Apphia and the priesthood of all believers; Archippus and the distinction of offices; the listening church, greeted with grace and peace. You need not re-teach them. Read the list back briskly as your recap, or better, ask the class to reconstruct it from the board. The point to leave hanging in the air is the student book's own: we have not yet met Onesimus, we have not yet been told there is a problem — and yet the address has already done a great deal of work. We know who is in the room. Next week we learn what Paul gives thanks for.



Leading the Discussion

The student chapter offers six discussion questions. Pick one for this session. The introductory teaching content is substantial, and the frame needs to be established cleanly; favor a single deep question over several shallow ones.

Question 1 — Prisoner before apostle

The most directly on-point question with the session's frame. Why does Paul set aside the title, and what does the choice signal? It requires no background knowledge, it reinforces the renounced command, and it surfaces a truth adults know from their own lives — the difference between being ordered and being asked by someone who had the right to order. Use it if you use only one.

Question 2 — Kinship language for the unrelated

Where does the New Testament locate the basis of Christian brotherhood? Watch for the sentimental answer — “we’re all God’s children” — and gently sharpen it: Scripture locates this kinship not in general human fraternity but in Christ, entered through Baptism and adoption. Galatians 3:26–28 is your verse if the class needs an anchor. This question quietly prepares Session Four.

Question 3 — The householder's vocation

Lands especially well with hosts, elders, and anyone whose service to the church is domestic and unglamorous. The danger is that it drifts into volunteerism — keep vocation as God's calling in one's station, not church busywork. The best fruit here is a student realizing their kitchen table is a place of gospel labor.

Question 4 — Why Apphia is named

A warm question in most rooms — many women in your class are Apphia, and naming that can be quietly powerful. Be aware it can also veer toward contemporary debates about women's roles; steer by the text's own footing — standing in Christ, a real voice in a household decision — and take questions of present-day practice offline.

Question 5 — A letter read aloud

The imaginative question, and a good choice for a quiet class, because it gives them something concrete to describe rather than an opinion to risk. How does the public hearing change the letter's character — and what pressure does it place on Philemon? This question stages the room for all six weeks.

Question 6 — Grace and peace, in that order

The most theological of the set. The trap is treating it as a word-study quiz; the payoff is the grounding sentence — the appeal rests on grace, and the grace that justifies the master justifies the slave. If the conversation floats into abstraction, anchor it there.

A PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATION

If you pick only one question for Session One, pick Question 1 — the title Paul set aside. It is the session's frame in question form and needs nothing but the text. Question 5 is a strong alternative for a class that warms to imagination. And whichever you choose, end the hour with a seventh question the student book does not print: *What are you hoping six weeks in the smallest letter of Paul will give you?* Write the answers down — literally, keep the page. Session Six will read them back, and few things land at the end of a study like hearing what you said you were seeking at its start.

If You Only Have Forty-Five Minutes

Occasionally you will have a session compressed by a church event, a lengthy announcement, or late arrivals. Here is what to keep and what to cut.

Keep

- ♦ The broken pattern and the renounced command — Paul could order and chooses to appeal. This is the session's reason for being. Never cut it.
- ♦ The word *brother* written at the top of the board with its first tally marks. Thirty seconds of writing that pays six weeks of dividends.
- ♦ The read-aloud room — two minutes minimum. The letter is decided in the hearing of the church.
- ♦ One discussion question, most likely Question 1.
- ♦ The hopes question, the closing prayer, and the Session 2 assignment.

Cut or Compress

- ♦ The survey of Paul's other letter openings. Name the pattern in one sentence — “everywhere else, *apostle*; here, *prisoner*” — and move on.
- ♦ The women of the house churches. One sentence: Apphia is named because the household will answer together.
- ♦ Archippus's identity. One sentence: a pastor is in the room; Colossians 4:17 can wait for a student who asks.
- ♦ The Greek of grace and peace. Preach the order; skip the philology.
- ♦ The Trinity in the greeting. A sentence, not a segment; the creeds will still be there next week.

THE SINGLE NON-NEGOTIABLE

If the session were reduced to one thing, it would be this sentence, established beyond forgetting: *he could command, and he chooses to appeal*. Everything else can be compressed, deferred, or rebuilt later — but a class that leaves knowing the man in chains set aside his title in the first line, with the word *brother* standing at the top of the whiteboard, has the key to the entire letter in hand. Get that established today, and the rest of the study will follow.



For Further Study

For Deeper Biblical Context

- ♦ Colossians 4:7–18. Tychicus and Onesimus on the road, Onesimus named *one of you*, the charge to Archippus, and *remember my chains*. The sibling letter's ending is this letter's setting.
- ♦ Colossians 3:18–4:1 and Ephesians 6:5–9. The household codes — bondservants and masters under one Lord. The teaching your students may have studied in the earlier volumes is about to be tested in a single house.
- ♦ Acts 28:16, 30–31. Paul's Roman custody — his own rented quarters, a soldier on guard, welcoming all who came to him. The room on the other end of this correspondence.
- ♦ Romans 16:3–5 and 1 Corinthians 16:19. *The church in their house* — Prisca and Aquila and the house-church pattern across the Pauline mission. Apphia and Philemon's situation was the normal shape of early Christian life.

From the Lutheran Tradition

- ♦ Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian* (1520). The double thesis quoted in chapter one — perfectly free lord of all, perfectly dutiful servant of all — is the nearest thing Philemon has to a companion volume in the Lutheran corpus. Even its opening pages will sharpen your teaching of the renounced command.
- ♦ Small Catechism, Table of Duties. Luther's gathering of the stations of ordinary life, masters and servants among them, drawn from the very household texts this letter will test. Your students already own Philemon's cast of characters.
- ♦ Augsburg Confession, Articles V and XIV. The office of the ministry, and the regular call. The confessional grounding for the distinction the Apphia-Archippus sequence displays: every believer a priest, not every believer a pastor.

Commentaries

- ♦ John G. Nordling, *Philemon* (Concordia Commentary, CPH). The fullest confessional Lutheran treatment of this letter ever written — hundreds of pages on twenty-five verses, with particular strength on slavery in the ancient world and the letter's rhetoric. If you buy one commentary for this study, buy this one.
- ♦ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon*. The classic older Lutheran exposition — dated in spots, but dogmatically sure-footed and warmly pastoral.

- ♦ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Pillar, Eerdmans). Careful evangelical scholarship. Moo is not Lutheran, but his historical and exegetical work on the Onesimus question is consistently valuable for the teacher who wants to go deeper.

A Final Word

You are about to walk six weeks with a group of students through the smallest letter Paul ever wrote — and you will discover, if you have not already, that small is not the same as slight. The Holy Spirit, who might have left the Church twenty-seven books of grand theological architecture, preserved instead a one-page letter about a runaway slave, a Christian master, and the apostle in chains who wrote between them. The student book's preface says it best: the brevity is the point. Teach it that way. Take the teaching seriously. Prepare each week. Pray for your class. Trust the Lord to do what only the Lord can do.

Session One is the foundation. If you establish the frame — a prisoner who will appeal rather than command, a household addressed name by name, a church listening as the letter is read — the remaining five sessions have solid ground under them. Do not skimp on this session because it covers “only” three verses. It is not introductory in the sense of preliminary; it is foundational in the sense of load-bearing.

Next week, the thanksgiving. Four verses in which Paul gives thanks for Philemon's faith and love, prays that the sharing of his faith would become effective, and tells him — in the phrase that gives Session Two its name — that *the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you*. Your students will read Philemon 4–7 before they arrive, and you will have the privilege of showing them that Paul's thanksgivings are never empty courtesy: this one quietly loads every word the appeal will need. Prepare carefully.

May the Lord bless your teaching, and may the God who kept His apostle through chains and trial keep you and your students through all the weeks ahead.

Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION TWO

Refresh My Heart in Christ

Philemon 4–7 · The Thanksgiving

A Note to the Teacher

Welcome to Session Two. Last week you assembled the room; this week Paul speaks into it, and what he says first is thanks. Your students have now read the thanksgiving — four verses that look, on a first pass, like the polite paragraph before the real business. The student book's central claim this session is that nothing of the kind is happening. The Pauline thanksgiving is where this letter loads every word the appeal will need: *faith* and *love* in their proper order, the *koinonia* of faith prayed into action, the word *brother* spoken at last to the man who must hear it, and — above all — the words *hearts* and *refreshed* deposited exactly where verses twelve and twenty will come back for them. This is the session where your class learns to read Paul as a deliberate writer, and once they learn it, they will never read his letters the same way again.

Do not be afraid of the Greek this week. The session leans on two words — *splanchna*, the visceral noun for the inward parts, and *anapauō*, the verb Jesus uses in *come to me, all who labor... and I will give you rest* — and the student book does all the technical work. Your job is not to parse; it is to let the class hear the echo. The arc that begins at verse seven will not finish until Session Five, which means you are planting this week and harvesting later. Teachers who love a payoff should take heart: this is the longest setup in the study, and it lands.

One pastoral note. This is also the warmest session of the six — a man in chains rejoicing over good news from a thousand miles away, a congregation's generosity reaching into a prison cell, the communion of saints functioning exactly as the catechism says it does. Let the warmth breathe. The chiasm and the word studies are worth their minutes, but if the hour turns entirely into analysis, you will have explained refreshment without anyone feeling refreshed. Keep the proclamation a half-step ahead of the grammar all hour long.

THE BIG IDEA IN ONE SENTENCE

Paul's thanksgiving is not a courtesy before the business — it is the seedbed of the whole appeal: faith toward the Lord Jesus producing love for all the saints, the fellowship of that faith prayed into effective action, the word *brother* finally addressed to Philemon himself, and the words *hearts* and *refreshed* planted where

verses twelve and twenty will harvest them; teach these four verses as deliberate prose, and the rest of the letter unfolds from inside them.

Preparing to Teach This Session

Before You Walk In

- ♦ Read Session Two of the student book carefully, at least twice.
- ♦ Read Philemon 4–7 aloud several times — and then read verses 12 and 20 aloud immediately after. *The hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you... I am sending my very heart... refresh my heart in Christ.* The arc must be in your ear before you teach its first station.
- ♦ Mark the chiasm of verse five in your own Bible: *love* and *faith* named first, *toward the Lord Jesus* and *for all the saints* named after. Draw the crossing arrows in your margin — faith to the Lord, love to the saints. You will draw the same X on the board, and it should already live in your hand.
- ♦ Review Augsburg Confession IV and VI, and spend some time in Apology IV on faith and its fruits. Faith justifies; love flows from faith; reverse the order and the gospel is lost. The chiasm session stands on that footing, and you want it in your bones, not on a notecard.
- ♦ Look up Matthew 11:28–30 and 1 Corinthians 12:26 — the two texts standing quietly behind verse seven: the Lord's own verb of rest, and the body whose members rejoice together.
- ♦ Pray — specifically for the weary in your class. This is the session about refreshment, and someone in your room has been carrying more than you know. Ask the Lord to do through the hour what the hour is about.

Materials to Have on Hand

- ♦ Your Bible, and copies of the student book for any who do not yet have one.
- ♦ The whiteboard with the *brother* board begun last week. Today it gains a third tally — *my brother*, verse seven, the vocative spoken to Philemon himself — and a second running visual beneath it: write *hearts (splanchna)* and *refreshed (anapauō)*, with the arc *v. 7 → v. 12 → v. 20* underneath. These two boards together are the letter's argument made visible, and they will carry you through Session Six.
- ♦ A way to display or hand out the chiasm of verse five — though honestly, drawing the crossing arrows live on the board teaches better than any handout.

- ♦ Optional: a hymnal opened to “I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say.” The hymn is Matthew 11:28 set to music, and reading or singing a stanza when you reach *anapauō* lets the class hear the Lord’s verb of rest the way the Church has sung it for generations.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Four theological points come into view in this passage:

- ♦ **Prayer is response, not cause.** Paul does not pray in order to produce God’s grace toward Philemon; he gives thanks because the grace has already moved him. This is the Small Catechism’s logic in every petition of the Lord’s Prayer — God’s name is already holy, His kingdom already coming, and we pray that these things would be so among us. Guard your class against prayer-as-leverage; the thanksgiving models prayer that has caught up with the gift.
- ♦ **Faith justifies; love is the fruit of faith.** The chiasm of verse five is Apology IV in miniature: faith runs to the Lord Jesus and clings to Him for everything; love flows out toward all the saints. The fruit cannot precede the root. Reverse the order — love first, and earn what is given — and you have left the gospel for religion.
- ♦ **The communion of saints is a real fellowship across distance.** Paul rejoices in Rome because Philemon loves in Colossae. One member’s joy is every member’s joy; the *communio sanctorum* of the Creed is not sentiment but the structure of the church.
- ♦ **Inspiration and craft are friends, not rivals.** The Spirit inspired considered prose. Paul deposits *splanchna* and *anapauō* in verse seven precisely where verses twelve and twenty will retrieve them. Students sometimes imagine inspiration as dictation that bypasses the writer; this letter shows the Spirit working through deliberate, patient human craftsmanship.

Suggested Time Plan

The following is one way to structure the sixty minutes. Adjust freely to fit your class, your venue, and the energy in the room.

TIME	SEGMENT
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer; the room recalled; the board from last week
0:05–0:12	I thank my God always: the praying apostle and the personal God
0:12–0:20	Faith and love: the chiasm of verse five (draw the crossing)
0:20–0:28	The sharing of your faith: the difficult verse
0:28–0:35	Joy and comfort, my brother: the communion of saints (add the tally)

TIME	SEGMENT
0:35–0:45	The hearts of the saints refreshed: the arc laid down (the heart of the session)
0:45–0:52	Discussion (choose one question)
0:52–0:57	Gathering the threads: verses 7, 12, and 20 read aloud in sequence
0:57–1:00	Closing prayer and Session 3 assignment

WHERE TO SLOW DOWN

The refreshment vocabulary — *splanchna* and *anapauō*, and the arc from verse seven through verses twelve and twenty — is the session's reason for being, and the chiasm of verse five is its doctrinal spine. If time gets tight, compress the survey of Pauline thanksgivings to one sentence and the *koinonia* debate to two minutes: name the three readings, commend the student book's, and move on. Never cut the chiasm, and never cut the arc.



Teaching Notes, Part by Part

I Thank My God Always

Open by reading verses 4–7 aloud, then name the form: Paul opens almost every letter he writes with a thanksgiving — Romans, both Corinthian letters, Philippians, Colossians, the Thessalonian and Timothy correspondence. Scholars call it the Pauline thanksgiving, and it is so consistent that it is simply how Paul writes. If your class studied Philippians in the second volume of this series, they have seen one up close already; remind them, and they will arrive at this one with trained eyes.

Then refuse the form's familiarity, because the student book does: this is not epistolary politeness. It is a report of a habit. Paul prays; he prays for Philemon; he prays for Philemon *often*; and what rises when he does is gratitude. Let the class hear the address — not *the* God, not even *our* God, but *my* God. Try saying the three aloud in sequence and let them feel the warming. The God of all nations has, in the gospel, given Himself to be possessed by His children — the same intimacy that puts *our Father* on our lips in the Lord's Prayer.

Sound the Lutheran note briefly and cleanly: prayer in the Reformation tradition is not a work that earns God's favor but the response of faith to a God who has first spoken. Paul does not pray to cause the grace; the grace has already moved him to thanks. One caution: this opening can balloon into a general lecture on prayer. It is a doorway, not the room. Five to seven minutes, then walk through.

Faith and Love

This is your first board moment, and it deserves real care. Write verse five's four terms in Paul's order — *love... faith... toward the Lord Jesus... for all the saints* — and ask the class to connect them. Someone will see it quickly: faith does not run toward the saints, and love does not terminate in the Lord as if He needed it. Draw the crossing arrows. Faith toward the Lord Jesus; love for all the saints. The Greeks called the figure a chiasm; your students will simply see an X that sorts the Christian life into its two directions — the vertical and the horizontal, the first table of the Law and the second, in one compact sentence.

Then make the move the student book makes, because the gospel is at stake in it: the order matters. Faith first — receiving, clinging, justified by what it receives. Love second — flowing out freely, because nothing depends on it. Religion in every other shape says *love first, and earn what is given*. The gospel says *believe first, receive what cannot be earned, and then love freely*. Philemon will recognize the structure because Philemon was catechized in it — he came to faith through Paul's own ministry. So, very likely, were most of the people in your room.

A CLASSIC LUTHERAN MOVE

When the chiasm is on the board, ask the class one question before you explain anything: *what changes if you reverse the arrows?* Let them sit with it. Faith aimed at the saints becomes trust in people, and love aimed at God as its terminus becomes the attempt to give Him what He does not need — and beneath both, the quiet engine of earning. Then anchor the right ordering where the Confessions anchor it: Apology IV, the article by which the church stands. Faith justifies; love is the fruit of faith; the fruit cannot precede the root. Your students have prayed this order every time they have confessed their sins and then been sent out to serve their neighbor. Today they see it compressed into one verse of a thank-you note.

The Sharing of Your Faith

Tell the class plainly that verse six is the hardest verse in the letter to translate — translators have wrestled with it, commentators have argued over it, and honest English versions make decisions the Greek does not force. A teacher who says this calmly builds trust; the student book models exactly this candor, and you should match it.

The crux is *koinonia* — the sharing of your faith — one of the most loaded words in the New Testament. It can mean sharing in the sense of giving, fellowship in the sense of common life, participation in the sense of joint partaking; Acts 2:42 uses it for the apostolic fellowship, First Corinthians 10:16 for the partaking of the Lord's Supper, Philippians 1:5 for partnership in the gospel. Three readings of the verse contend: evangelism (Philem-

on's outward telling of the faith), fellowship between believers, and participation in Christ Himself. Present all three fairly, then commend the student book's choice — the second — for the book's own reason: it sits most naturally between verse five's love for the saints and verse seven's hearts of the saints refreshed. And then refuse to die on the hill, because the verse's function is clearer than its translation: Paul is praying, in Philemon's hearing, that the fellowship of his faith would become *effective* — energetic, active — for every good thing. The appeal has not been named, but the prayer for it has been prayed. The student book's sentence is worth writing down: verse six is the petition; verse sixteen is the answer Paul hopes will come.

Joy and Comfort, My Brother

Slow down for the smallness of the scene, because it is easy to miss and impossible to forget once seen. Paul is in custody. He cannot travel. News reaches him the way news reached prisoners in every age — a visitor, a letter, a name spoken. And when the news is that Philemon, a thousand miles east, has been loving the saints, the news produces in a chained man *joy* and *comfort* — two of Paul's favorite prison words, two of the things a man in chains most needs. The student book's sentence deserves the board or at least a slow repetition: *Paul rejoices in Rome because Philemon loves in Colossae*. That is the communion of saints — not a phrase in the Creed but a working circulatory system, one body whose members' joys travel. If one member is honored, all rejoice together; verse seven is that doctrine with an address on it.

Then the vocative: *my brother*. Make your third tally on the board. Timothy was named brother in verse one, Apphia sister in verse two; now the word is spoken directly to the man who matters most for what the letter will ask. Tell the class what Paul is doing, because the craft is pastoral genius: the category that will define Onesimus's new standing in verse sixteen is being used, freely and warmly, of Philemon himself — deposited in the thanksgiving before it is ever spent in the appeal. The word does the work.

The Hearts of the Saints Refreshed

This is the heart of the session; give it ten unhurried minutes. Two Greek words, and the student book has done the technical labor for you.

Splanchna, translated *hearts*, is visceral — the inward parts, the gut, the place where the ancient world located deep feeling. Handle the anatomy with a light touch; adults can smile at “entrails” and still take the point, which is not anatomy but depth: the saints have been given rest in the place where they feel most deeply. *Anapauō*, translated *refreshed*, is the verb Jesus uses in Matthew 11:28 — *come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*. Let that land: by his love, Philemon has been functioning toward the saints around him the way Jesus functions toward all who come to Him. If you brought the hymnal, this is the moment for a stanza of “I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say.”

Then lay down the arc, which is the study's single most important piece of forward construction. These two words will return: in verse twelve, Paul will call Onesimus *my very heart* — the same noun; in verse twenty, he will close the appeal with *refresh my heart in Christ* — same verb, same noun. Write the arc under the words on the board: *v. 7 → v. 12 → v. 20*. The thanksgiving is depositing the keywords the appeal will pick up — and the tenderness of the construction is the point. Paul is saying, in effect: you have done this again and again for the saints; now I am sending you the deepest piece of my own heart, and I am asking you to do for me what you have done for them.

THE MOST IMPORTANT TEACHING MOVE

Do not explain the arc first. Sound it first. Have three voices — or one good one — read verse 7, then verse 12, then verse 20 aloud, back to back, with nothing in between. *The hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you... I am sending my very heart... refresh my heart in Christ*. The repetition teaches itself in the ear before a word of explanation is offered; students hear the letter rhyme. Then draw the arc on the board and tell them they have just heard how the whole letter was built. A class that hears the echo this week will feel Session Five land like a resolved chord.

Gathering the Threads

Recap from the boards rather than from notes — they now hold the session: the brother tally at three, the crossing arrows of faith and love, the arc waiting under *hearts* and *refreshed*. The student book's closing line is your closing line, and it is worth saying verbatim: the thanksgiving was never an empty courtesy. It was the foundation. Next week, Paul finally says why he is writing — and a name your class has been waiting two weeks to hear gets spoken at last.



Leading the Discussion

The student chapter offers six discussion questions. One done well will serve you better than three done quickly; this session's teaching content is dense enough that the conversation needs room to breathe.

Question 1 — The praying apostle and *my God*

A gentle opener. The risk is drift into prayer technique — how often, what words; keep the center on the God addressed, the universal God made personal by the gospel. The best fruit is a student noticing how rarely their own prayers turn into thanksgiving for other Christians by name.

Question 2 — Faith and love in that order

The doctrinal heart of the set, and the live wire is the final clause: what goes wrong when the order is reversed. Most adults have lived the reversal — years of loving in order to be accepted. Expect quiet self-recognition, let testimony breathe, and keep the absolution close: faith receives everything first, and then love is free. This is the most catechetically valuable conversation the session offers.

Question 3 — Which reading of *koinonia*?

The brainy question, good for a class that enjoys weighing options. Model how to hold a genuinely difficult verse — three honest readings, a commended choice, no anathemas. Do not let it become a translation committee; land on the verse's function, which all three readings share: the prayer prepares the appeal.

Question 4 — Joy in chains and the communion of saints

The warm question. Invite concrete stories — news that reached someone at a low moment, a card, word from a missionary — and then name what the stories are: the *communio sanctorum* working. Best for classes strong in fellowship and light on abstraction.

Question 5 — The weight of *my brother*

A craft question that doubles as a bridge to next week. It rewards the class that has been watching the board: why deposit the word before spending it? Because an appeal made in a category you have already granted is very hard to refuse.

Question 6 — The repetition of *splanchna* and *anapauō*

The writer's-workshop question — what does the careful repetition suggest about how Paul wrote? It draws out your readers and writers, and the deep answer is the fourth anchor point: the Spirit inspired considered prose. A strong choice if the read-aloud of verses 7, 12, and 20 visibly landed.

A PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATION

If you pick only one question, pick Question 2 — the order of faith and love. It is the gospel itself in conversational form, and no other hour in this study puts justification and its fruits on the table so plainly. Question 6 is a strong alternative if the arc clearly captured your class. And one stewardship note: the page of hopes you recorded last week — keep it somewhere it cannot be lost. Session Six is counting on it.

If You Only Have Forty-Five Minutes

Occasionally you will have a session compressed by a church event, a lengthy announcement, or late arrivals. Here is what to keep and what to cut.

Keep

- ♦ The chiasm of verse five, even compressed to five minutes. Faith toward the Lord; love toward the saints; the order is the gospel.
- ♦ The arc — verses 7, 12, and 20 read aloud in sequence, and the diagram on the board. This is the session's reason for being. Never cut it.
- ♦ The *my brother* tally. Thirty seconds that keeps the study's spine visible.
- ♦ One discussion question, most likely Question 2.
- ♦ The closing prayer and the Session 3 assignment.

Cut or Compress

- ♦ The survey of Pauline thanksgivings. One sentence — “Paul opens nearly every letter this way” — and move on.
- ♦ The theology of prayer. One sentence: response, not cause.
- ♦ The *koinonia* debate. Name the student book's reading and the verse's function in one minute; the three-way comparison can live in the book.
- ♦ The *splanchna* anatomy. One sentence: the word is gut-deep; the point is depth of feeling, not a vocabulary lesson.

THE SINGLE NON-NEGOTIABLE

If the session were reduced to one thing, it would be the sound of the arc: your class hears verses 7, 12, and 20 read aloud in sequence, and sees the line *v. 7* → *v. 12* → *v. 20* on the board beneath the words *hearts* and *refreshed*. Everything else this week can be rebuilt later from the student book — but the planted echo cannot be replanted once Sessions Three and Five have passed. Sound it today, and the rest of the letter will keep paying it off.



For Further Study

For Deeper Biblical Context

- ♦ Matthew 11:28–30. The Lord's own use of *anapauō* — rest for the weary and heavy laden. The verse standing behind everything verse seven says Philemon has been doing.
- ♦ 1 Corinthians 12:12–26. One body, many members, and the shared joy of verse 26. The doctrinal skeleton of Paul's joy-in-chains.
- ♦ Philippians 1:3–11. A sibling thanksgiving from the same imprisonment — *I thank my God in all my remembrance of you*. Reading it beside Philemon 4–7 shows both the form and the tailoring; students of this series' second volume will recognize old ground.
- ♦ Acts 2:42–47. The *koinonia* of the first church — teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayers. The widest backdrop for verse six's contested noun.

From the Lutheran Tradition

- ♦ Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV. The confessional charter of this session: faith justifies; love and works are the fruits of faith. Even a portion read slowly will steady your teaching of the chiasm.
- ♦ Small Catechism, the Lord's Prayer. The petitions' logic — God's name is already holy, His kingdom already coming — is the same logic as Paul's thanksgiving: prayer as the response of faith to grace already given.
- ♦ Large Catechism, the Creed, Third Article. Luther on the communion of saints — the Christian church as the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word. The richest confessional commentary on why Philemon's love in Colossae reaches a prison in Rome.

Commentaries

- ♦ John G. Nordling, *Philemon* (Concordia Commentary, CPH). Particularly strong on the form and function of the Pauline thanksgiving and on the rhetorical preparation of the appeal — the scholarly version of what this session teaches.
- ♦ R. C. H. Lenski, *Colossians-Philemon*. Warmly pastoral on verse seven; Lenski's paragraphs on the refreshed hearts of the saints read like a devotion.
- ♦ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Pillar, Eerdmans). The clearest guide through the translation problem of verse six — Moo lays out the options with patience and lets you see why honest versions differ.

A Final Word

You taught the doorway last week; this week you taught the table — the warmth of a thanksgiving that turns out to be load-bearing. There is a quiet privilege in that. Most of your students have written and received a hundred polite thank-yous; today they watched an apostle turn one into a foundation, and some of them will start to suspect that nothing in Scripture is filler. That suspicion is one of the best gifts a Bible teacher can give, and it will serve them for the rest of their reading lives.

Keep the boards alive. The brother tally and the refreshment arc are no longer illustrations; they are the letter's own architecture made visible, and every week from here forward will add weight to both. A photograph of the whiteboard before you erase it is not a bad idea — you will want to rebuild it exactly.

Next week, the appeal proper. Verses eight through fourteen contain the moment the whole study has been waiting for: Paul names Onesimus — and the way he names him is one of the most artful strokes in the New Testament. Your students will read Philemon 8–14 before they arrive. Tell them, as the student book tells them, to watch for the moment the name is spoken and for *how* it is spoken. The names, in Paul, are rarely accidental — and next week your class finds out why.

May the Lord bless your teaching, and may the God who refreshed His apostle through the love of one householder refresh you and your students in the week ahead.

Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION THREE

I Appeal to You

Philemon 8–14 · The Appeal Proper

A Note to the Teacher

Welcome to Session Three — the session your class has been waiting for. Two weeks of careful groundwork end today: Paul turns to the reason he is writing, and in verse ten a name your students have been anticipating since the cover of the student book is finally spoken aloud. The craft demand on you this week is to protect the sequence. Paul confesses a real authority *before* he lays it down; he establishes a relation — *my child* — *before* he says the name; he admits he wanted to keep Onesimus *before* he explains why he sent him back. Every one of those orderings is doing pastoral work, and a teacher who blurts destinations will flatten what the apostle built on a slope. Teach it in Paul's order, at Paul's pace, and the session will carry itself.

This is also the most explicitly Lutheran hour of the study, and not because we have imported anything. The student book's claim is worth quoting to yourself as you prepare: verse fourteen is the most Lutheran note in the whole letter, *and it is here without any need for our interpretation to make it so*. Paul tells Philemon in plain words that goodness produced by compulsion is not the goodness he wants — it must come *of your own accord*. That is *On the Freedom of a Christian* four hundred and fifty years before Luther wrote it, and this week you have the rare privilege of teaching Christian freedom from the very text the Reformation was recovering.

Two housekeeping notes. First, the chains: Paul names them in verse nine, verse ten, and verse thirteen — three of the letter's five mentions land in this single session, and the board should start counting. Second, the slavery question grows sharper this week now that a runaway is named and a master addressed. Hold your line one more session: the student book turns to face that question fully in Session Four, and the students you flagged in Session One will be best served by the full treatment, not a preview under time pressure.

THE BIG IDEA IN ONE SENTENCE

Paul confesses an authority that is entirely real and lays it down for love's sake; he names Onesimus only after naming him *my child*; he sends his own heart back to Colossae rather than keep what he was free to keep — all so that Philemon's goodness can be voluntary rather than compelled; teach the sequence as Paul built it, and

verse fourteen will preach the freedom of a Christian better than any lecture about it.

Preparing to Teach This Session

Before You Walk In

- ♦ Read Session Three of the student book carefully, at least twice.
- ♦ Read Philemon 8–14 aloud, slowly, more than once — and practice verse ten. The Greek holds the name back to the end: *I appeal to you for my child — whose father I became in my imprisonment — Onesimus*. You will read this aloud in class, and the pause before the name is the session's hinge. Rehearse it until the pause feels natural rather than theatrical.
- ♦ Read 1 Corinthians 4:14–17, Paul's fullest statement of spiritual fatherhood — *I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel* — and Ephesians 6:20, the *ambassador in chains*, so the *πρεσβυτης* question holds no surprises for you.
- ♦ Read, or re-read, the opening of Luther's *On the Freedom of a Christian*. Sessions One and Two told you this reading would pay off; this is the week it does. Verse fourteen is its anchor in this letter.
- ♦ Refresh the three uses of the law — curb, mirror, guide — from Formula of Concord VI, at least in the Epitome. The student book leans on them to explain why Paul will not deploy the law on Philemon, and many of your students memorized the triad in confirmation.
- ♦ Pray — for any student for whom *father* is tender ground, and for the class to receive the joke in verse eleven as the joy it is. Ask the Lord to make the freedom of verse fourteen land on every parent, employer, and board member in the room.

Materials to Have on Hand

- ♦ Your Bible, and copies of the student book for any who do not yet have one.
- ♦ The whiteboard with both running visuals — the *brother* tally and the refreshment arc. Today the arc gets its second station: circle *v. 12* when you reach *sending my very heart*. And the board gains a third element: the chains. Write *the chains*: *v. 1 · v. 9 · v. 10 · v. 13 · ___* and fill the first four today, telling the class the fifth waits for the letter's final lines. Five mentions in twenty-five verses; the count makes the lever visible.
- ♦ Space on the board for the pun: *achrēstos* (useless) → *euchrēstos* (useful), with *Onēsimos* = “Useful” above it. The wordplay teaches best when the class can see the two adjectives sitting side by side.

- ♦ A copy of Luther's double thesis from *On the Freedom of a Christian*, written out or marked for reading: *a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none; a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all*. You will set it beside verse fourteen.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Four theological points come into view in this passage:

- ♦ **The authority of the office is real — and it belongs to Christ.** Paul names his right to command before he sets it aside, because a renounced authority must first be an actual one. The Confessions are careful here: there is an office of the ministry; its authority is real; it belongs to Christ and is exercised through called and ordained servants of the Word; it is a property of the office, not of the man. Augsburg Confession XXVIII and the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope stand behind this session's opening.
- ♦ **The gospel works by love, not coercion.** The law remains — curb, mirror, guide — but it is not the engine of Christian love. The new man in Christ does freely what the law could only require externally. Paul declines to use the lash on Philemon because the Spirit has already given Philemon a better engine.
- ♦ **Spiritual fatherhood works through the means of grace.** Paul *begot* Onesimus in his chains — yet the minister is instrument, not source; the Spirit gives the new birth through Word and Sacrament. The gospel preached by a prisoner converted a runaway slave: the theology of the cross in a single scene. The student book's line deserves the board: *out of two captivities, God made one freedom*.
- ♦ **Voluntary goodness is the only goodness the gospel wants.** Verse fourteen — *not by compulsion but of your own accord* — is the freedom of a Christian in apostolic miniature. Goodness extracted under pressure may order a household; it cannot refresh a heart.

Suggested Time Plan

The following is one way to structure the sixty minutes. Adjust freely to fit your class, your venue, and the energy in the room.

TIME	SEGMENT
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer; the boards recalled; two weeks of waiting end today
0:05–0:13	Bold enough to command: the authority confessed (v. 8)
0:13–0:20	For love's sake: appeal, not command; the old man in chains (v. 9; begin the chains count)
0:20–0:28	My child, Onesimus: the name at last (v. 10 — the staged reading)

TIME	SEGMENT
0:28–0:34	Useless, now useful: the only joke in the letter (v. 11)
0:34–0:41	Sending my very heart: the arc's second station (v. 12)
0:41–0:49	Not by compulsion: the freedom of a Christian (vv. 13–14)
0:49–0:55	Discussion (choose one question)
0:55–1:00	Gathering the threads; closing prayer; Session 4 assignment

WHERE TO SLOW DOWN

Verses ten and fourteen are the twin peaks of the session — the naming and the freedom — and each deserves its full, unhurried minutes. If time gets tight, compress the *παρρησια* word study to a sentence, reduce the *old man or ambassador* note to one calm remark, and let the pun land in two minutes rather than six; the joke is fast on its feet. Never rush the staged reading of verse ten, and never let verse fourteen become the thing you mention on the way to the closing prayer.



Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Bold Enough to Command

Open by reading verses 8–14 whole, then return to the first word: *accordingly*. The little connector ties the appeal to everything behind it — the thanksgiving has done its work, the ground is prepared, and now Paul turns to business. Your class has watched two sessions of preparation; let them feel the gears engage.

Then the striking move: Paul announces an authority he is about to refuse to use. He is *bold enough in Christ to command* — the word is *παρρησια*, the free citizen's right to speak openly, the Christian's gospel-given frankness — and he names that right out loud. Ask the class why, and let them work on it before you answer, because the answer is the session's rhetorical key: if Paul had simply asked, we might have assumed he asked because chains had left him nothing else. He will not let us think it. The authority is real; the right is his; the laying-aside is therefore an act, not a default. A renunciation only weighs what the renounced thing weighed.

Sound the confessional note briefly: the office of the ministry carries real authority — the Confessions say so without embarrassment — but the authority belongs to Christ, is exercised through called and ordained servants of the Word, and is a property of the office,

not the man. One caution: this paragraph borders on church politics in some rooms. Name the doctrine, anchor it in Augsburg Confession XXVIII, and keep walking.

For Love's Sake I Prefer to Appeal

The reason for the renunciation is three words: *for love's sake* — δια τὴν ἀγάπην, on account of *the* love, definite article, the love that is the climate of the whole Christian life. Here the student book makes its New Covenant point, and it preaches: the law writes its requirements on tablets of stone; the gospel writes its love on hearts of flesh. Paul, ministering under the New Covenant, prefers to ask in love what the law could only have required.

A CLASSIC LUTHERAN MOVE

Before you explain why Paul will not command, ask your confirmation veterans to recite the three uses of the law — and watch *curb*, *mirror*, *guide* come back from memory across the room. Then deliver the punchline: Paul declines to use *any* of them on Philemon. Not because the law is abolished — it still curbs the flesh, still shows sin, still guides the sanctified life — but because none of the three is the engine of Christian love. The law can restrain a master; it cannot make him a brother. Only the gospel does that. Your students learned the triad as children; today they watch an apostle honor it by setting the whole toolbox down.

Handle the *old man* note the way the student book does — honestly and in two minutes. The Greek πρεσβυτης means old man; a related form means ambassador, and Paul calls himself an *ambassador in chains* in Ephesians 6:20, so some careful interpreters have wondered. The readings are theologically compatible; text and context favor *old man*; we take it that way and move on. A teacher unafraid of an honest variant builds trust; a teacher who dwells on it loses the room.

Then the chains, named again in verse nine — and your new board line begins. Mark verses 1 and 9, and tell the class two more mentions arrive within the next five verses. Paul is not letting Philemon forget the chains, and the student book will not let us forget them either: the man who appeals is old, he is bound, and he asks from a position of voluntarily chosen weakness. The rhetoric is powerful precisely because none of it is performance. He is genuinely old. He is genuinely in chains.

My Child, Onesimus

This is the moment, and how you read it matters more than anything you will say about it. The Greek of verse ten holds the name to the very end: *I appeal to you for my child — whose father I became in my imprisonment — Onesimus*. Read it that way, with the pause. Everyone in your room already knows the name; the ear does not care. The frame still lands: relation before identification, *my child* before the file is opened.

Then put the class in Philemon's chair, because the student book stages the scene deliberately: a master in his own living room, the church around him, a letter from Rome being read aloud — and he has been waiting for this name, perhaps with apprehension, perhaps with anger. When it finally comes, it arrives wrapped in an apostle's affection. Whoever Onesimus is to Philemon, Philemon now knows who he is to Paul.

THE MOST IMPORTANT TEACHING MOVE

After the staged reading, ask one question: *what did Paul establish before he said the name?* Let the class find it — the relation came first. Then widen the lens, because this is not merely rhetoric; it is the gospel's own grammar. This is how God speaks of every sinner who is in Christ: *my child* before the record is read, the relation before the offense, the name spoken inside adoption rather than inside accusation. Philemon is being shown how to receive Onesimus by the way Paul introduces him — and your students are overhearing how God has received them. Land that, and the session has done its deepest work.

Teach the fatherhood plainly: ἐγέννησα, *I begot* — the same verb and metaphor as 1 Corinthians 4:15. Onesimus ran from Colossae, surfaced in Rome, somehow found Paul, heard the gospel, and believed. The student book models restraint here — we do not know how the meeting happened, and you should not speculate either; the mystery is part of the providence. What we know is the outcome, and its shape is the theology of the cross: God did His work through an old prisoner in a rented room, and the gospel preached by a chained man set a runaway free. *Out of two captivities, God made one freedom* — write it on the board. Then the Lutheran tenderness: the minister is midwife, not source; the Spirit gives the birth through Word and Sacrament; and the chain of spiritual paternity runs from that prison cell through every pulpit and every catechism class to the people sitting in front of you.

Useless, Now Useful

Give the class permission to laugh, because verse eleven is the only joke in the letter and it is a good one. *Onēsimos* means *useful* — a common slave name, an owner's wish stamped on a man. Onesimus had not lived up to it: ἄχρηστος, *useless* — a runaway, possibly a thief. *But now*, says Paul, εἰχρηστος — genuinely useful, to Philemon and to Paul alike. Put the two adjectives side by side on the board and let the class see the conversion written into the vocabulary: the man named Useless has finally become his name, because he now belongs to the One who makes people what they were made to be.

Then offer the deeper resonance with the student book's own restraint. The adjective *chrēstos* (useful, kind) and the title *Christos* sounded nearly identical in the spoken Greek of the first century, and the church's early teachers loved the near-pun: the Christian is

the one made *chrēstos* by *Christos*. Paul does not labor it, and neither should you — play the Onesimus pun openly, let the Christ-resonance hover, and move on. The pastoral point under the humor is worth one plain sentence: Paul's joy in this man's conversion is large enough to joke about, and joy that relaxed is itself a confession of how secure the gospel's work is.

Sending My Very Heart

Verse twelve is the arc's second station, and the board does the teaching. Point to the line you drew in Session Two — *v. 7* → *v. 12* → *v. 20* — and circle the middle station. Then sound it: read verse 7, then verse 12, back to back. *The hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you... I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.* The same visceral noun, σπλάγχνα. The man Philemon is asked to receive is the apostle's inmost heart — which means the welcome question has quietly changed shape. To welcome Onesimus is to welcome Paul; to refuse Onesimus is to refuse Paul. Say that sentence slowly; verse seventeen will stand on it next week.

Flag, for your own preparation, what the student book does in this section's last paragraph: the gospel does not abolish the natural relations — master and slave remain social facts in Philemon's world — but it builds a deeper web underneath them: father, child, brother. The categories of the household remain in the letter's language; they are simply no longer the deepest categories. That single distinction is the seed of Session Four's two-kingdoms work. You need not develop it today. Plant it and keep moving.

Not by Compulsion but of Your Own Accord

Begin with Paul's honesty, because it disarms the room: *I would have been glad to keep him.* The aging prisoner had, at last, a beloved son beside him — serving him, refreshing him — and he admits he wanted the arrangement to continue. The admission is rhetoric that works only because it is true, and your class should feel the cost in it. Paul is not sending back a convenience. He is sending back his heart.

Then the reason, and the summit of the session: he sends Onesimus so that Philemon's goodness might be *not by compulsion but of your own accord*. Paul could have kept Onesimus and forced Philemon to ratify the fact; he refuses, because coerced goodness is not the goodness the gospel produces. Now set Luther's double thesis beside the verse and read them together: *a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none; a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.* The student book calls this the most explicitly Lutheran note in the whole letter — there without any interpretive help from us — and your class should see why: the inner man, justified by faith, does freely what the law could only have demanded. The treatise of 1520 and the letter of the early 60s illuminate each other across fifteen centuries.

Close the segment with the student book's three-sentence ethic, read slowly: we do not deploy authority where love can do the work; we do not coerce where freedom would yield

the same fruit; we do not impose what could be received. Then let it find its targets, gently — every parent, employer, committee chair, and grandparent in your room holds some authority they could deploy this week. You do not need to apply the verse for them. Verse fourteen applies itself.

Gathering the Threads

The student book counts seven movements in seven verses; recap them from the boards rather than a list — the chains line now at four marks, the arc circled at its second station, the pun pair still visible. Then hand the class the book's closing sentence as your bridge to next week: the ground has been so carefully prepared that the request, when it comes, *will feel like the only thing that could have come next*. They will find out in seven days whether that is true.



Leading the Discussion

The student chapter offers six discussion questions. Choose one and give it room; the teaching content this week is heavy, and verse fourteen in particular deserves conversation rather than coverage.

Question 1 — Authority named, then set aside

A strong opener that adults answer from experience: everyone has known the boss who could order but asked, and the one who only ever ordered. The deep end is the rhetorical insight — a renunciation only weighs what the renounced authority weighed. Use it for a newer or quieter class.

Question 2 — When should Christians appeal rather than command?

The application question, richest for those who hold authority — parents, employers, elders. The danger is drift into leadership-seminar technique; keep the tether on Paul's stated reason, *for love's sake*. The aim is not effective persuasion but the kind of goodness the gospel wants from those we lead.

Question 3 — Spiritual fatherhood

Warm and personal. Invite students to name their own fathers and mothers in the faith — a pastor, a grandmother, a teacher — and expect tenderness, including from those for whom earthly fatherhood is a wound. Keep the doctrine clear underneath the warmth: the minister is instrument, the Spirit is agent, the means are Word and Sacrament.

Question 4 — The only joke in the letter

Lighter, and quietly profound: why does Paul permit himself humor here, and what does the pun say about how he *sees* this conversion? Watch for over-solemn students who suspect laughter of irreverence; the text itself is your warrant. Joy this relaxed is a form of confidence in the gospel.

Question 5 — *My very heart*

The craft question, best for a class that has been tracking the boards. It looks forward: identifying Onesimus with Paul's own inward parts quietly rewrites next week's question — refusing the slave would mean refusing the apostle. A natural choice if the arc's second station visibly landed.

Question 6 — Why must the response be free?

The doctrinal summit. Expect the honest objection — *then why does the church have rules at all?* — and answer with the morning's own triad: the law still curbs, mirrors, and guides; what it cannot do is produce the love Paul is asking for. Connect to Luther explicitly; this is the conversation the whole session has been building toward.

A PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATION

If your class can go deep, pick Question 6 — the freedom question is the session's summit, and an hour that ends discussing why God wants sons rather than slaves is an hour well spent. For a newer class, Question 1 reaches the same truth by a gentler road. And whichever you choose, do not let discussion crowd out the staged reading of verse ten. The pause before the name is not optional this week; it is the sermon.

If You Only Have Forty-Five Minutes

Occasionally you will have a session compressed by a church event, a lengthy announcement, or late arrivals. Here is what to keep and what to cut.

Keep

- ♦ The staged reading of verse ten — relation before name, with the pause. Two minutes that carry the session.
- ♦ Verses thirteen and fourteen with Luther's double thesis beside them — five minutes minimum. This is the doctrinal heart.
- ♦ The arc's second station: circle verse 12 on the board and re-sound verses 7 and 12 back to back. One minute.
- ♦ The chains count updated to four. Thirty seconds.

- ♦ One discussion question, most likely Question 6, and the closing prayer with the Session 4 assignment.

Cut or Compress

- ♦ The παρρησια word study. One sentence: the boldness is real and apostolic.
- ♦ The *old man or ambassador* note. Skip it entirely unless a student raises it.
- ♦ The chrēstos/Christos resonance. Play the Onesimus pun in one minute; save the deeper echo for a student who asks.
- ♦ The New Covenant stone-and-flesh paragraph. One sentence on the way to the three uses.
- ♦ The house-church staging of the naming. The pause in your reading will do the staging for you.

THE SINGLE NON-NEGOTIABLE

If the session were reduced to one thing, it would be verse fourteen established as the letter's Lutheran heart: *not by compulsion but of your own accord*, read aloud with Luther's free-lord-and-dutiful-servant beside it. Everything else this week — the boldness, the pun, even the staging of the name — can be rebuilt from the student book later. But a class that leaves knowing the gospel refuses coerced goodness, from the very page of Scripture where Paul refuses to coerce it, has the freedom of a Christian in hand. Get that established today, and Sessions Four and Five will have the ground they need.



For Further Study

For Deeper Biblical Context

- ♦ 1 Corinthians 4:14–17. Paul's fullest statement of spiritual fatherhood — *I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel* — with Timothy as the other beloved child. The doctrinal background of *my child, Onesimus*.
- ♦ 2 Corinthians 8:8–9. *I say this not as a command...* — Paul declining compulsion in almost the same breath as Philemon 8–14, and grounding the appeal in the Lord who *though He was rich, yet for your sake became poor*. A quiet foreshadow of next session's exchange.
- ♦ Galatians 5:1, 6, 13–14. Freedom, faith working through love, and liberty spent in service of the neighbor — the Pauline frame around verse fourteen.

- ♦ Ephesians 6:18–20. The *ambassador in chains* from the sibling letter — the source of the *πρεσβυτης* variant, and the same imprisonment vocabulary your veterans will recognize from volume one.

From the Lutheran Tradition

- ♦ Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian* (1520). This is the week the treatise pays off. Read it whole if you can; the double thesis and the inner-man argument are the closest historical companions verse fourteen has.
- ♦ Formula of Concord, Article VI. The third use of the law, with the first two in view — curb, mirror, guide — and why none of the three is the engine of the new obedience. The confessional backbone of *for love's sake*.
- ♦ Augsburg Confession XXVIII and the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope. The authority of the office: real, Christ's own, exercised through the called servants of the Word. The grounding for *bold enough in Christ to command*.

Commentaries

- ♦ John G. Nordling, *Philemon* (Concordia Commentary, CPH). Exceptional on the rhetoric of the appeal, the runaway-slave background, and the Onesimus name-pun — a full scholarly treatment of everything this session touches.
- ♦ R. C. H. Lenski, *Colossians–Philemon*. Strong and warm on verses thirteen and fourteen — Lenski presses the voluntary character of the new man's obedience with old Lutheran confidence.
- ♦ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Pillar, Eerdmans). The clearest evenhanded walk through the *old man versus ambassador* question, and careful on the verb tenses of sending and keeping in verses twelve and thirteen.

A Final Word

Today your class met the man the letter is about, and they met him the way Paul wanted Philemon to meet him — inside an apostle's affection, name held back until the relation was established. There are not many hours in adult education when the *order of words* becomes the lesson, and you just taught one. Some of your students will go home and reread the letter and notice, for the first time in their lives, that Scripture's sentences are built. That noticing is permanent.

The boards now carry three threads — the brothers, the heart-and-refresh arc with its middle station circled, and the chains at four of five. Everything is in position. The student book has been promising your class that the request, when it finally comes, will feel inevitable. Next week we find out.

And next week is the heart. Verses fifteen through seventeen contain the sentence this whole volume is named for — *no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, a beloved brother* — and the verse where the title finds its anchor: *receive him as you would receive me*. It is also the week the student book turns to face the slavery question directly, with the doctrine of the two kingdoms in hand, and the students you have been watching since Session One will need your steadiest teaching. Have them read Philemon 15–17 before they arrive — slowly, and more than once. Tell them to notice what Paul says and what he does not say. Then prepare carefully, because Session Four is the summit of the study.

May the Lord bless your teaching, and may the God who made one freedom out of two captivities keep you and your students in the true freedom of His Son.

Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION FOUR

No Longer as a Slave

Philemon 15–17 · The Heart of the Letter

A Note to the Teacher

Welcome to Session Four — the summit of the study. Three verses lie before your class this week, and they are the verses the whole letter exists to deliver: *no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother... receive him as you would receive me*. The students you flagged in Session One — the ones braced for the slavery question, wanting Paul to denounce the institution or quietly troubled that he does not — have waited three weeks for this hour. Today they get their full hearing, and they will need your steadiest teaching to receive it well.

Your model is the student book's double honesty, and you should make it your own before you walk in. Paul does not call for the abolition of slavery in this letter — no manumission order, no command to the masters of the church, nothing of the kind appears on the page. Neither does he endorse the institution — no defense of property rights, no counsel of contentment in bondage, nothing of that kind appears on the page either. The teacher's twin temptations this week are to apologize for the text or to over-defend it. The text needs neither. It needs to be read — and what it actually does, the student book argues, is more careful and, in the long run, more revolutionary than either modern projection: it installs a deeper category that the institution cannot, in the long run, survive.

This is also the week the doctrine of the two kingdoms stops being a term your students half-remember and becomes a reading tool. Paul speaks both registers in a single phrase — *both in the flesh and in the Lord* — and once your class sees the two kingdoms operating inside one sentence of Scripture, they will own the doctrine in a way no abstract lecture could give them. It is also the week the brother board pays off: verse sixteen is what the tally has been for since the first Sunday.

One tone note, offered plainly. The history of the church's engagement with slavery is long and not uniformly honorable, and the student book says so without flinching — abolitionists and defenders of the institution both cited this letter, and both missed it; American Lutherans of the nineteenth century did not speak with one voice. That history sits in your room whether you name it or not. Teach with gravity and without defensiveness, keep the gospel category in front, and trust the text to do what it has been doing for two thousand years.

THE BIG IDEA IN ONE SENTENCE

Paul neither abolishes slavery nor endorses it — he installs a deeper category, *beloved brother*, that operates in two registers at once, both in the flesh and in the Lord, and that, when fully heard, the institution cannot in the long run survive; teach the two kingdoms as the letter's own structure, let verse sixteen pay off the brother board, and let verse seventeen stand as the climax seventeen verses have been building toward.

Preparing to Teach This Session

Before You Walk In

- ♦ Read Session Four of the student book carefully, at least twice — and a third time if you can manage it. No session in the study asks more of you.
- ♦ Read Philemon 15–17 aloud until the phrases live in your ear: *no longer as a bondservant... a beloved brother... both in the flesh and in the Lord... receive him as you would receive me*. You will be quoting these from memory by Thursday, and you should be.
- ♦ Read the household codes once more — Colossians 3:22–4:1 and Ephesians 6:5–9. This is the week the seed texts meet their living test case, and your veterans of the earlier volumes will be making the connection whether you make it or not.
- ♦ Review the doctrine of the two kingdoms at its sources: Augsburg Confession XVI on civil affairs, and — if you have the time — Luther's *Temporal Authority* of 1523. You want the distinction crisp: two ways God governs, distinguished but never opposed, both His.
- ♦ Write down the two or three questions you most fear being asked this week — *why didn't Paul just condemn it? what about American slavery? was Paul complicit?* — and decide your honest answers now, with the student book open beside you. The session will go where you have prepared to go, and nowhere is preparation more visible to a class than here.
- ♦ Pray — for the students who have been braced since Session One, for honesty without defensiveness in your own teaching, and for the gospel category to land where the Lord intends it.

Materials to Have on Hand

- ♦ Your Bible, and copies of the student book for any who do not yet have one.
- ♦ The whiteboard with all three running visuals. Today the *brother* tally reaches its destination: when you teach verse sixteen, add the mark the whole board has been

waiting for — *beloved brother*, v. 16 — and let the class see the line complete from Timothy to Onesimus. The arc stands ready but gains no station this week; its third and final station comes next session. The chains hold at four of five.

- ♦ Clear space for a two-column table you will build live: *in the flesh* on one side, *in the Lord* on the other. This diagram is the session's doctrinal centerpiece, and building it with the class teaches better than presenting it finished.
- ♦ Optional: a copy of the Book of Concord open to Augsburg Confession XVI, for the moment a student asks where the two-kingdoms teaching actually lives.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Four theological points come into view in this passage:

- ♦ **Providence is read with “perhaps.”** Paul, who claims real authority to teach and command, claims no authority to read God's secret counsels — *perhaps this is why he was parted from you*. The hidden God works in ways that often look like the opposite of the gospel's promises; the Christian draws certainty from the revealed God in Word and Sacrament, and says *perhaps* about everything else. Guard the class from the slogan version — “everything happens for a reason” claims more than Paul does.
- ♦ **The two kingdoms are distinguished, not opposed.** With His left hand God orders the civil and social structures of the world; with His right hand He calls the church into being through Word and Sacrament. Paul speaks both registers in one sentence — *in the flesh and in the Lord* — and when the registers describe Onesimus differently, the gospel register names what he most deeply is.
- ♦ **Brotherhood is sacramental reality, not sentiment.** Master and slave were baptized into the same death and raised to the same life, sons of one Father by adoption. *Brother* is not a warm flourish; it is the precise theological name of a real relation. The bond is not sentiment — it is sacrament.
- ♦ **The gospel's categories outlast the world's institutions.** The letter does not abolish slavery; it installs a category slavery cannot, in the long run, accommodate without being changed. The seed has been in verse sixteen the whole time — and the history of its growth is uneven, often shameful, and still being worked out.

Suggested Time Plan

The following is one way to structure the sixty minutes. Adjust freely to fit your class, your venue, and the energy in the room.

TIME	SEGMENT
0:00-0:05	Opening prayer; the boards recalled; today is the heart of the letter

TIME	SEGMENT
0:05–0:12	Perhaps this is why: reading providence with humility (v. 15a)
0:12–0:18	For a while, forever: the hour against the age (v. 15b)
0:18–0:27	No longer as a slave: what Paul says and does not say (v. 16a)
0:27–0:33	A beloved brother: the board reaches its destination (v. 16b)
0:33–0:41	In the flesh and in the Lord: the two kingdoms (v. 16c — build the table)
0:41–0:48	Receive him as you would receive me: the climax (v. 17)
0:48–0:55	Discussion (choose one question)
0:55–1:00	Gathering the threads; closing prayer; Session 5 assignment

WHERE TO SLOW DOWN

The honest word — what Paul says and what he does not say, in both directions — and the two registers of verse sixteen are the session's load-bearing segments; protect their minutes above everything. If time gets tight, the providence opening can shrink to three minutes, the for-a-while/forever contrast to two, and the survey of the church's record to two careful sentences. Never compress the double honesty, and never let verse seventeen arrive out of breath.



Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Perhaps This Is Why

Open by reading verses 15–17 aloud, whole, and tell the class plainly: this is the heart of the letter, and the student book reads it phrase by phrase, so we will too. Then begin where Paul begins — with a hedge. *For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while.* The Greek is *τάχα*, *perhaps*, and the student book insists the hedge is doctrine: the apostle who claims real authority to teach, correct, and command claims no authority to read God's secret counsels. He ventures an interpretation of providence and immediately tempers it.

Give the Lutheran frame its two minutes, because it is load-bearing: the hidden God — *Deus absconditus* — works in ways that often look, in the moment, like the opposite of what the gospel promises, and Luther insisted we know God savingly only in the revealed God of Word and Sacrament, in Christ crucified and risen. About the gospel, certainty. About

the hidden workings, *perhaps*. Then the quiet grammatical marvel: Paul says Onesimus *was parted* — passive voice — not *he fled*, though flee he certainly did. The divine passive leaves the agent unnamed with God understood behind the event. Paul is not denying the man's guilt; he is foregrounding the divine possibility instead — perhaps Philemon's loss was the gospel's gain.

This section is pastoral gold, and you should know it before you teach it: every adult in your room has a loss they have tried to read. Paul gives them the only safe grammar for the attempt. One caution — do not let *perhaps* harden into “everything happens for a reason.” Paul's word is humbler than the slogan, and the humility is the point.

For a While, Forever

The verse closes on a deliberate opposition: *for a while* is πρὸς ὥραν, “for an hour, for a season”; *forever* is αἰώνιον, “of the age to come.” The hour against the age. The separation, however long it felt, was a season; the reunion Paul is inviting Philemon to make possible has no end — these two men will be together in the resurrection, at the marriage supper of the Lamb. The student book's reorientation deserves slow delivery: the question before Philemon is not only what to do about a slave who has come home; it is what to do about a relationship that will outlast time. How he receives Onesimus in this temporary life is the first chapter of a story that continues without end. Touch the now-and-not-yet briefly — receiving Onesimus as a brother is the age to come breaking into the present — and keep moving. This section is beautiful, and brief; do not camp here.

No Longer as a Slave

Now the most carefully constructed sentence in the letter, and your most demanding ten minutes of the study. Take the three Greek words in order, as the book does. Οἰκέτι — *no longer* — sets past against present; a new chapter opens. Δοῦλον — bluntly, *slave*; the ESV's *bondservant* is a careful compromise, and your class should know the underlying word carried its full Greco-Roman weight. And between them the hinge, two letters long: ὥς — *as*. Paul does not say Onesimus is *not* a slave; he says he is no longer to be received *as* one. What is being denied is not the legal category — Onesimus's civil status under Roman law may persist for now — but the relational mode. The little preposition is doing the heaviest lifting in the verse, and the two kingdoms are about to walk through the door it opens.

THE MOST IMPORTANT TEACHING MOVE

Before you teach what Paul does in verse sixteen, stand still and tell the class what he does not do — on both sides, and almost verbatim from the student book. He does not call for abolition; he does not order manumission; he does not tell the gathered masters that the gospel forbids them to own slaves; he does not tell Onesimus he owes Philemon nothing. None of that appears on the page. Neither does he endorse:

he does not tell Philemon to exercise his property rights; he does not call the institution an ordinance of God; he does not counsel slaves anywhere to be content in bondage. None of that appears on the page either. Watch the students you flagged in Session One while you say this — you will see shoulders come down. Honesty about the text's silences is what earns you the right to teach its speech, and a class that trusts you with the silences will follow you anywhere the text actually goes.

Then teach where it goes: Paul reframes the categories. In the left-hand kingdom — the civil and social structures through which God providentially orders the world — the legal status may continue for now. In the right-hand kingdom — the gospel calling the church into being through Word and Sacrament — a deeper category has been installed that relativizes the first. Philemon, by baptism and by citizenship, stands in both kingdoms at once; and when the two registers describe Onesimus differently, the gospel register names what he most deeply is.

Handle the history in two careful minutes, with the book's own candor: the church's record on slavery is long and not uniformly honorable; abolitionists cited this letter and so did defenders of the institution, and both, in different ways, missed what Paul is doing on this page; nineteenth-century American Lutherans did not speak with one voice. No defensiveness, no anachronistic self-congratulation. Close the segment with the student book's unblinking summary: the letter does not abolish the institution, and does not endorse it — it installs a category that, when fully heard, makes the institution morally untenable wherever Christian masters and Christian slaves stand within it. The deeper logic worked itself out over centuries. We are still, in many ways, working it out.

A Beloved Brother

Now walk to the board, because this is what the tally has been for. The deeper category has a name: ὑπὲρ δοῦλον, ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν — *more than a bondservant, a beloved brother*. Add the mark — v. 16 — and let the class see the line run complete: Timothy in verse one, Apphia in verse two, Philemon in verses seven and twenty, and now Onesimus, the destination the word has been traveling toward since the letter's first breath.

Then the adjective, which your sharper students may catch before you say it: ἀγαπητός, *beloved*, is the same word Paul used of Philemon himself in verse one — *our beloved fellow worker*. The master and the slave, the two poles of the household, now wear the same adjective. Beloved in the gospel does not discriminate by social station. Tell the class plainly that this phrase is the title of the volume in their hands — the exact words *brother in Christ* never appear in the letter, as the student book's preface noted, but verse sixteen is the reality the title names.

Then ground the brotherhood where the book grounds it, because this is where sentiment becomes doctrine: Christians call each other brother and sister not as metaphor gone soft

but because, by adoption, they share a Father — the rebirth of Baptism, the indwelling Spirit, the union with Christ that faith effects. *Brother* is the precise theological name of a real relation. The early church knew it: *frater* became the standard Christian address, crossing every line the Greco-Roman world considered uncrossable — free and slave, Jew and Gentile, citizen and barbarian, rich and poor.

A CLASSIC LUTHERAN MOVE

When you reach the *communio sanctorum*, take the class to the font — literally, if your classroom is near the sanctuary; the ninety-second walk is worth it, and if not, point toward it. The brotherhood Philemon is being asked to acknowledge was not created by negotiation, sentiment, or social progress. It was created at a font: the master and the slave were baptized into the same death and raised to the same new life — *as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ; there is neither slave nor free*. Then give them the student book's sentence to keep, because it is the session in nine words: *the bond is not sentiment — it is sacrament*. Your students stood at that font, or one like it. So did everyone they will ever share an altar rail with. Verse sixteen is their verse too.

In the Flesh and in the Lord

First the comparison, which is warmer than it looks: Onesimus is a beloved brother *especially to me, but how much more to you*. Why *more* to Philemon? Because Paul has loved Onesimus from a distance, in chains, for a season — and Philemon will love him up close, under one roof, for the rest of his life. The daily relation is the one that must bear the new category's weight. How much more.

Then build the table, and build it with the class rather than for them. Two columns: ἐν σαρκί, *in the flesh*; ἐν Κυρίῳ, *in the Lord*. Ask what belongs under each and write what they give you. In the flesh: the household structure, Roman law, who serves whom, who owes whom. In the Lord: the communion of saints, the brotherhood of the baptized, the Word preached and the Supper celebrated — in Philemon's own house. Both registers are real. Both operate under his roof. Paul's *both* refuses to let either column erase the other.

Then the doctrine, stated as the student book states it: this is the great Lutheran insight made textually explicit — the two kingdoms are not opposed; they are *distinguished*. The fleshly register cannot be allowed to override the gospel register, and the gospel register cannot pretend the fleshly register does not exist. Write the governing sentence between the columns: *he must conduct himself, in the flesh, in a way that does not contradict what he is, in the Lord*. And note what the letter does not supply — no legal formula, no “manumit him on Tuesday.” The working-out is left to Philemon in the freedom of the inner man, which your class will recognize as last week's verse fourteen still doing its work.

Close the segment with the seed: wherever the gospel has been taken seriously by Christian masters, slaves have eventually been freed; wherever the brotherhood of believers has been confessed as deeper than the world's structures, those structures have eventually been called into question. The history is uneven and often shameful — say so — but the seed has been here, in verse sixteen, the whole time. The gospel put a category into the world that the world's institutions cannot, in the long run, accommodate without being changed.

Receive Him as You Would Receive Me

The climax, and the student book counts the cost of arrival: seventeen verses of preparation for one sentence. *So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.* Begin with the word *partner* — κοινωνός — and let your class hear the comeback: this is the κοινωνία-language from verse six, the difficult verse, the petition. Session Two told them verse six was the prayer and verse sixteen the hoped-for answer; verse seventeen now invokes the fellowship by name and spends it. The conditional is not really conditional — Paul knows Philemon counts him a partner; the *if* simply deploys a settled relation as the basis of the request.

Then the verb: προσλαμβάνω — to take to oneself, to welcome in. Not tolerant acknowledgment; a genuine taking-in, a place at the table not in question. *As you would receive me* — as you would welcome the apostle who brought you the gospel, your father in the faith. The identification planted in verse twelve is now fully deployed: to receive Onesimus is to receive Paul; to refuse Onesimus is to refuse Paul. The apostle has bound his own honor to a runaway's welcome.

And then lift the class's eyes, as the book does, to the pattern behind the pattern: *whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me* — and deeper still, *as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.* Paul's identification with Onesimus stands inside Christ's identification with the least. Philemon, sitting in his own living room with the church around him and the letter being read aloud, has reached the moment of decision.

End the teaching on the ending we are not given — and the one we are. Scripture never records what Philemon did; the letter simply stops. Tradition offers a tantalizing possibility — early sources name an Onesimus as bishop of Ephesus in the early second century; perhaps the same man, perhaps not; the student book will not claim more than the evidence holds. But then the quiet argument that lands like a bell: the letter was *preserved*. The early church kept it, copied it, read it as Scripture — and it would not have done so if the story it asked for had ended in refusal. The very fact that your class is holding this letter is the evidence of how it ended. Read the student book's last words on it slowly, and then stop talking: *Onesimus was received. The beloved brother came home.*

Gathering the Threads

Recap entirely from the boards this week — they have earned it: the brother tally complete at its destination, the two-column table still standing, the chains at four of five. The student book's six threads will reassemble themselves if you simply walk the class across the visuals. Then the bridge: the heart of the letter is now behind us; what remains is the working-out — and next week the working-out contains, in the book's words, one of the most beautiful sentences in the New Testament.



Leading the Discussion

The student chapter offers six discussion questions. This week more than any other, one question done honestly will serve better than three done carefully. Choose by what your class is carrying.

Question 1 — Reading providence with *perhaps*

The most personal question of the set, and pastoral gold: every adult has a loss they have tried to read. Expect real griefs to surface, and let them. Guard the rail on both sides — against the slogan (“everything happens for a reason” claims more certainty than Paul does) and against despair (the *perhaps* is genuinely hopeful). Keep the revealed God in Word and Sacrament near as the place certainty actually lives.

Question 2 — For a while against forever

The comfort question, especially strong in a class acquainted with grief. The eternal perspective must reframe loss without minimizing present pain — Paul does both in one verse, and the class should practice doing both in one conversation.

Question 3 — What Paul says, what he does not say, and the two kingdoms

The session's center in question form, and the conversation this study has been promising since Session One. Hold the double honesty; do not let the two kingdoms become an escape hatch that excuses the church's record, and do not let the record erase what the text actually does. The students who tensed in week one most need to hear this conversation held steadily.

Question 4 — Brothers without contradiction

The paradox question: how can master and slave be brothers in Christ while remaining, in the flesh, master and slave? The answer lives in the two registers; watch for students who resolve the tension too quickly in either direction — collapsing the kingdoms is the error on both sides.

Question 5 — Both registers today

The application question. Where do your students live in both at once — the employer and employee who share a pew, the landlord and tenant at the same rail, the supervisor communing beside the supervised? Where is the gospel reshaping how the flesh-register is inhabited? Concrete examples will carry this; press gently for them.

Question 6 — The total identification

The Christological deep end: why does Paul bind his honor so completely to Onesimus, and how does it echo Christ's identification with the least of His brothers? Matthew 25 is the companion text. This question quietly opens the door Session Five will walk through.

A PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATION

For most classes, pick Question 3. It is the question the study has been promising for four weeks, and the students who came braced deserve to hear their class talk about it honestly rather than hear it deferred again. Question 1 is the right alternative for a class carrying fresh grief — providence before polity. And whichever you choose, do not let anyone leave without the preservation argument: the letter in their hands is itself the evidence that the beloved brother came home. End the hour there if you possibly can.

If You Only Have Forty-Five Minutes

Occasionally you will have a session compressed by a church event, a lengthy announcement, or late arrivals. Here is what to keep and what to cut.

Keep

- ♦ The double honesty of verse sixteen — both “none of this appears on the page” lists, read almost verbatim. Five minutes minimum. This is the session's reason for being.
- ♦ The two-column table — *in the flesh* and *in the Lord* — even in abbreviated form, with the governing sentence between the columns.
- ♦ The brother board's destination mark at verse sixteen, with the shared adjective named. Two minutes that pay off four weeks.
- ♦ Verse seventeen with the preservation ending. The class must hear how the story ended.
- ♦ One discussion question, most likely Question 3, and the closing prayer with the Session 5 assignment.

Cut or Compress

- ♦ The providence opening. Three minutes: *perhaps* as the Christian's grammar, the divine passive in one sentence.
- ♦ The for-a-while/forever contrast. Two minutes: the hour against the age.
- ♦ The early-church *frater* survey. One sentence: the word crossed every line the world drew.
- ♦ The church-history paragraph. Two sentences: the record is uneven; both sides cited this letter and both missed it.
- ♦ The Onesimus-of-Ephesus tradition. One sentence, or skip it — but keep the preservation argument itself.

THE SINGLE NON-NEGOTIABLE

If the session were reduced to one thing, it would be the double honesty of verse sixteen and the category installed in its place: Paul neither abolishes nor endorses — he names Onesimus a *beloved brother*, both in the flesh and in the Lord, and the gospel register names what the man most deeply is. A class that carries that structure out the door — two kingdoms, distinguished not opposed, with the deeper category governing — can rebuild everything else from the student book. Without it, the week's conversation happened; the week's teaching did not.



For Further Study

For Deeper Biblical Context

- ♦ Colossians 3:22–4:1 and Ephesians 6:5–9. The household codes from the sibling letters — bondservants and masters under one Lord who shows no partiality. The seed texts of the earlier volumes meeting their test case in a single house.
- ♦ Galatians 3:26–28. *Baptized into Christ... neither slave nor free*. The baptismal charter of verse sixteen's brotherhood, and the text behind this session's walk to the font.
- ♦ 1 Corinthians 7:20–24. Paul's fullest direct counsel on slave status — *if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity* — honest, unsystematic, and essential background for the question of what Paul did and did not say.
- ♦ Matthew 25:31–40. *As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me*. The Lord's identification with the least, standing behind Paul's identification with Onesimus in verse seventeen.

From the Lutheran Tradition

- ♦ Luther, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed* (1523). The charter document of the two-kingdoms teaching — God's two governments, distinguished and never confused. The doctrinal backbone of *in the flesh and in the Lord*.
- ♦ Augsburg Confession, Article XVI. The confessional statement on civil affairs: the gospel does not overthrow the orders of this world but requires Christians to live faithfully within them — while never surrendering the deeper allegiance of conscience.
- ♦ Large Catechism, Holy Baptism. Luther on what the font actually accomplishes — death, resurrection, a new creature. The reason verse sixteen's brotherhood is sacrament rather than sentiment.

Commentaries

- ♦ John G. Nordling, *Philemon* (Concordia Commentary, CPH). The standout resource for this session — his extended treatments of slavery in the Greco-Roman world and of the letter's reception history are the fullest confessional Lutheran handling of the hard questions in print.
- ♦ R. C. H. Lenski, *Colossians-Philemon*. Firm and clear on verse sixteen — Lenski presses the reality of the spiritual brotherhood with characteristic confidence, and his pastoral instincts on verse seventeen are sound.
- ♦ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Pillar, Eerdmans). Measured and thorough on slavery and the New Testament, with a careful exegesis of *more than a bondservant* that complements the confessional readings.

A Final Word

You have just taught the summit, and you should let yourself feel the weight of what happened in your classroom this week. The students who came into this study braced — waiting to see whether the church would be honest about this letter — have now heard the honest reading: what Paul did not say, in both directions, and the category he installed that outlived the institution around it. The brother board is complete. The word that entered the letter in its first verse has reached the man it was always traveling toward. Few hours of adult education carry that much freight, and you carried it.

Do not be surprised if this week's conversation continues without you — in the parking lot, over Sunday dinner, in emails you did not expect. The two kingdoms, once seen inside a single verse, reorganize how people read everything from the newspaper to their own workplaces. That is the doctrine doing what it does. Be available, and be unhurried.

Next week, the working-out — and the sentence the student book calls one of the most beautiful in the New Testament: *if he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account*. Verses eighteen through twenty-two put the gospel of imputed righteousness on the page in plain words: a debt that is not Paul's, taken by Paul; a standing that is not Onesimus's, given to Onesimus. Luther had a name for that shape, and Session Five will say it in German. Have your students read Philemon 18–22 before they arrive, and tell them to watch for the moment Paul takes the pen from the secretary's hand and writes in his own. The verses are short. They are not small.

May the Lord bless your teaching, and may the God who made brothers of a master and a slave keep you and your students in the communion of saints, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION FIVE

Charge It to My Account

Philemon 18–22 · The Gospel in Miniature

A Note to the Teacher

Welcome to Session Five. Last week you taught the summit; this week you teach the jewel. Verse eighteen — *if he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account* — is, in the student book's words, gospel substitution in miniature: a debt that is not Paul's, transferred onto Paul's ledger; a wrong that is not Paul's, absorbed by Paul's pledge. The book goes so far as to say that in three English words the apostle has preached the gospel in the middle of a personal letter. Most of your students learned the doctrine of imputation, if they learned it at all, from a catechism or a dogmatics lecture. This week they get to learn it from an accountant's verb in a one-page letter — and doctrine learned from a living page stays learned.

This is also the week the German arrives. Last session's Final Word promised your class that Luther had a name for the shape of verses eighteen and nineteen, and that Session Five would say it in German: *fröhlicher Wechsel* — the joyful exchange. The whole series has read the captivity letters with Luther in hand, and this is the hour where Luther's central image of the gospel and Paul's letter become visibly one thing. Write the German on the board and do not apologize for it; your students will carry the phrase out the door, and some of them will keep it for life.

Structurally, the session completes the study's longest investment: the refreshment arc planted in Session Two reaches its third and final station at verse twenty — *refresh my heart in Christ* — and the pun from verse eleven makes one last appearance in the optative verb ὁναίμην. And for classes that have walked the whole series, the student book hands you a milestone paragraph: the four prepositional phrases that bind the four volumes — *in Christ, to live is Christ, Christ in you, brother in Christ* — named together on one page, with the fourth finding its anchor in this very verse.

One tone note: after the gravity of Session Four, this hour should be glad. The exchange is called *joyful* for a reason, and a teacher who smiles through verse eighteen is teaching it correctly.

THE BIG IDEA IN ONE SENTENCE

Paul transfers a debt that is not his onto his own account and signs the pledge with his own chained hand — the great substitution of the cross written small in a personal letter, the *fröhlicher Wechsel* Luther put at the center of the gospel — and at verse twenty the seedwords planted in the thanksgiving come to full flower: *refresh my heart in Christ*; teach the exchange as the gospel it is, complete the arc on the board, and let the hour carry the joy of the doctrine's German name.

Preparing to Teach This Session

Before You Walk In

- ♦ Read Session Five of the student book carefully, at least twice.
- ♦ Read Philemon 18–22 aloud — and then read 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Colossians 2:13–15 immediately after. The cosmic-scale texts behind the small-scale offer should be fresh in your mind: *made him to be sin who knew no sin... the record of debt... nailed to the cross*.
- ♦ Read verses 7, 12, and 20 in sequence one final time, aloud. You first performed this read-aloud in Session Two; this week it completes, and the performance should be polished. The arc is the study's longest setup, and you are about to land it.
- ♦ Spend time in Apology IV on imputation — the longest article in the Lutheran Symbols, and even selections will steady you — and find the bridegroom passage in Luther's *On the Freedom of a Christian*: the rich and kingly bridegroom who weds the poor and indebted bride, taking her debts as his own and giving her his riches. You will read it aloud beside verse eighteen.
- ♦ Review the Fifth Petition and its explanation in the Small Catechism. The *as of forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive* is this session's pastoral center.
- ♦ Pray — and let this week's preparation prayer be mostly thanksgiving. Then ask the Lord for the students carrying unforgiven debts in either direction: the ones still collecting, and the ones still owing. Both will be sitting in front of you when you teach the ledger.

Materials to Have on Hand

- ♦ Your Bible, and copies of the student book for any who do not yet have one.
- ♦ The whiteboard with all three running visuals. Today the arc completes: when you reach verse twenty, circle the third station and draw the line clean through all three — *v. 7 → v. 12 → v. 20*. The brother tally gains its final vocative — *Yes, brother*, verse twenty. The chains hold at four of five; tell the class the fifth arrives next week, in the letter's last lines.

- ♦ A ledger, checkbook register, or ruled account page as a physical prop. The verb ἐλλόγα is an accountant's word, and it comes alive when the class watches you write a name at the top of a debit column, then cross it out and write another. Thirty seconds of theater that teaches imputation better than thirty minutes of definition.
- ♦ Luther's bridegroom passage from *On the Freedom of a Christian*, marked for reading aloud.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Four theological points come into view in this passage:

- ♦ **Imputation is forensic, not infused.** Apology IV, the longest article in the Symbols, is exact: God justifies the ungodly not by infusing a quality of righteousness into them but by reckoning Christ's righteousness to them through faith. Verse eighteen's accounting verb — *reckon it to my ledger* — is the doctrine's native vocabulary, on the page a generation before any theologian systematized it.
- ♦ **The *fröhlicher Wechsel* is the gospel's shape.** Our sin charged to Christ; His righteousness credited to us — *for our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*. Luther called it the joyful exchange and put it at the center of everything. Paul's offer to Philemon is the exchange written small, and the small copy proves the pattern: those who have received the great substitution perform little substitutions for their brothers.
- ♦ **The forgiven forgive.** The Fifth Petition's *as* binds the two ledgers together. Philemon's incalculable debt to Paul reframes Onesimus's small debt to Philemon — and every student keeps both ledgers too. The economy of grace replaces the economy of strict accounting.
- ♦ **Faith obeys freely, and gifts come through prayer.** The *obedience* of verse twenty-one is the obedience of faith — voluntary because no human authority compelled it, obedient because the gospel-formed conscience recognizes what must be done. And the hoped-for release of verse twenty-two is χαρισθήσομαι — *graciously given* — God's gift arriving through the prayers of the saints, exactly as the catechism's petitions teach.

Suggested Time Plan

The following is one way to structure the sixty minutes. Adjust freely to fit your class, your venue, and the energy in the room.

TIME	SEGMENT
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer; the boards recalled; this week is the jewel
0:05–0:15	Charge it to my account: the accountant's verb and the joyful exchange (v. 18)

TIME	SEGMENT
0:15–0:22	I, Paul, write this with my own hand: the signature and the cross (v. 19a)
0:22–0:29	You owe me even your own self: the two ledgers (v. 19b)
0:29–0:38	Refresh my heart in Christ: the arc completes; the pun returns (v. 20)
0:38–0:44	Confident of your obedience: even more than I say (v. 21)
0:44–0:48	Prepare a guest room: the visit, and the gift through prayer (v. 22)
0:48–0:55	Discussion (choose one question)
0:55–1:00	Gathering the threads; closing prayer; Session 6 assignment

WHERE TO SLOW DOWN

Verses eighteen and twenty are the session's twin centers — the exchange and the arc's completion — and each needs its unhurried minutes. If time gets tight, compress the amanuensis background to one sentence, the guest-room verse to two minutes, and the obedience question to three. Never rush the ledger, and never rush the final reading of verses 7, 12, and 20. Those two moments are the session.



Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Charge It to My Account

Open by reading verses 18–22 aloud, then return to the delicacy of the first word: *if*. Paul knows, almost certainly, that Onesimus wronged Philemon — flight from a master was itself a serious offense in the Roman world, and the theft that often accompanied flight a further one. Yet Paul says *if he has wronged you, if he owes you anything*, leaving the verbs in the conditional. The student book's observation is worth a slow sentence of your own: Paul refuses to weigh Onesimus down with the precise tally of his sins before Philemon has even seen his face. Offer the class the pastoral aside — this is how forgiven people learn to speak about other people's sins — and move to the verb.

Now the ledger. The Greek is ἐλλόγα, from ἐλλογέω — a commercial term, an accountant's word, used in ordinary life for transferring a debt from one account to another, and appearing only once more in the whole New Testament, at Romans 5:13, where it names how sin is reckoned. Take out your ledger prop. Write *Onesimus* at the head of the debit column with a few figures beneath it. Then cross the name out and write *Paul*. Say nothing for a beat; the class will do the theology themselves. Then say it anyway, with the

student book: *the verse is gospel substitution in miniature*. The doctrine has a technical name — imputation — and a confessional home — Apology IV, the longest article in the Symbols: God justifies the ungodly not by infusing some quality of righteousness into them but by reckoning Christ's righteousness to them through faith. Read 2 Corinthians 5:21 aloud over your crossed-out ledger: *for our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*.

Then write the German on the board, say it slowly, and translate it: *fröhlicher Wechsel* — the joyful exchange. The debt of the guilty charged to the innocent; the righteousness of the innocent credited to the guilty. Luther put this exchange at the center of the gospel, and Paul's offer to Philemon — on the small canvas of one runaway and one master — is, in the student book's words, a small living instance of the same structural pattern. Close the segment with the book's astonishing claim, which you should let stand at full strength: in three English words, the apostle has preached the gospel in the middle of a personal letter. And the pattern repeats wherever the gospel has done its work: the Christian who has received the great substitution finds himself performing small substitutions for his brothers. Paul shows us how.

A CLASSIC LUTHERAN MOVE

With the ledger still visible, read Luther's bridegroom passage from *On the Freedom of a Christian* — the rich and kingly bridegroom, Christ, who marries the poor and debt-ridden bride, the soul; by the wedding her debts become his and his riches become hers. Then point from the page to the board: your class has now seen the same exchange in two languages — Paul's accounting language and Luther's wedding language. Same gospel, two metaphors. Ask them which image lands harder, the ledger or the wedding, and why — and listen carefully to the answers, because they will tell you how each student receives grace: some by the canceling of what they owe, some by the giving of what they lack. Both are verse eighteen. Both are the *Wechsel*. The treatise you have been reading since Session One was never about Philemon's letter only; it was about every soul in your room.

I, Paul, Write This with My Own Hand

Give the amanuensis background its one minute: Paul, like most ancient letter-writers, dictated to a secretary — Romans even preserves the secretary's name, Tertius, slipping in his own greeting. Then the moment: at verse nineteen, Paul takes the pen out of the secretary's hand and writes the next words himself. *I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it*.

Two reasons converge, and the student book gives both. First, the legal one: in the ancient world a personal signature made a promissory note binding. Paul is creating, in plain terms, an IOU — a written guarantee Philemon could call in. Second, the rhetorical one:

the signature proves the offer of verse eighteen is no literary flourish. He is not asking Philemon to imagine the transfer in some metaphorical sense; he is executing it. And then let the class feel what makes the moment moving: the hand that signs is the chained hand of a poor man. Paul is in prison, dependent on the gifts of his churches, a tentmaker when he could work. He is in no financial position to discharge a slave's debt easily — and he signs anyway. The student book's sentence is the segment's center: *the willingness is the gospel-shape of his life*.

Then the echo the Lutheran ear cannot miss, and the book sounds it fully: Christ, too, signed the bond — not on parchment but on the cross. *He took it away, nailing it to the cross*, Paul will write to Colossae in the same satchel — the record of debt that stood against us, canceled, signed, posted at Golgotha for any creditor to see; the marks in His hands, shown to Thomas, the signature on the paid note. Give the class the closing triplet slowly, because it belongs on the board: *the substitute signs the note. The note is binding. The debt is paid*.

You Owe Me Even Your Own Self

Then the aside that sounds like Paul saying something he meant only to think: *to say nothing of your owing me even your own self*. Name the device lightly — rhetoricians call it paralipsis, mentioning a thing by declining to mention it — and your adults will smile in recognition; everyone has deployed *not to mention...* The content of the unmentioned mention: Philemon came to faith through Paul's ministry. The debt he owes Paul is not financial; it is his very self.

THE MOST IMPORTANT TEACHING MOVE

Draw two ledgers side by side on the board. On the left: what Onesimus owes Philemon — some money, some labor, a wrong. On the right: what Philemon owes Paul — *himself*. Ask the class which ledger Philemon should consult before he starts collecting on the other, and let the arithmetic of fairness collapse in real time. Then — and this is the move — turn both ledgers toward the room: every person present keeps the same two books. One lists what others owe me; the other lists what I have been forgiven. The unmerciful servant of Matthew 18 is the man who read only his receivables. Do not let the class discuss Philemon's bookkeeping without opening their own — but end at the absolution, not the conviction: the point of verse nineteen is not that Philemon is shamed into forgiving, but that he is *freed* into it. The student book's closing line is the landing: the economy of grace replaces the economy of strict accounting. The ledger is closed.

Note for your own preparation what Paul does *not* do with the vast debt: he does not demand it. He notes it, in passing, and invites Philemon into the logic the gospel has already

taught him — the logic of the Fifth Petition, the only petition with a comparative clause: *forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*. The forgiven forgive. That single *as* is the hinge of the whole aside, and it will be the hinge of your discussion hour if you choose Question 3.

Refresh My Heart in Christ

Now the verse the study has been waiting for since Session Two, and it opens with the board's last tally: *Yes, brother* — ἀδελφέ, the vocative, sounded one final time in the climactic position. Mark it.

Then the petition, and the pun's curtain call. *I want some benefit from you in the Lord* — ἐγὼ σου ὀναίμην — and the verb ὀναίμην shares its root with the name Ἡνήσιμος. The optative mood, the rare mood of wishes, phrases it gently: *may I have benefit from you* — may I have, literally, Onesimus-benefit from you. The joke from verse eleven has come full circle, and your class should be allowed to savor it: Paul is asking the *master* to live up to the *slave's* name. The man named Useful has become useful; now let the man who owns him be useful in the same Lord. The two men, master and slave, are placed by the apostle in one vocational frame.

Then the ceremony. Read verses 7, 12, and 20 aloud, in sequence, one last time — the same exercise you performed in Session Two, now with a class that knows everything the words are carrying. *The hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you... I am sending my very heart... refresh my heart in Christ*. Same noun, σπλάγχνα; same verb, ἀναπαύω; the seedwords of the thanksgiving at full flower. Circle verse 20 on the board and draw the line clean through all three stations. Give the class the student book's quiet summary: the line is straight; Paul has simply allowed the words he planted at the beginning to do their work as the letter unfolded.

And then the series payoff, which the student book delivers on this page and you should deliver whole: the phrase *in Christ* at the verse's close is the phrase that titled the first volume of this series. Four volumes, four prepositional phrases, one reality: *In Christ* — Ephesians. *To Live Is Christ* — Philippians. *Christ in You* — Colossians. And now *brother in Christ* finds its anchor — in the request that Philemon refresh Paul's heart *in Christ* by receiving Onesimus as a beloved brother. For your series veterans, this is the moment four spines on a bookshelf become one sentence. For newcomers, it is simpler and just as good: the title of the book in their hands lives in this verse.

Confident of Your Obedience

Verse twenty-one hands you an apparent contradiction, and you should let the class find it before you resolve it: Paul has spent the whole letter refusing to command — and now he speaks of his confidence in Philemon's *obedience*. Obedience to what? There has been no order. The resolution is the obedience of faith — the phrase Paul uses in Romans for the

very goal of his apostolate. Voluntary, because no human authority compelled it; obedient, because the conscience formed by the gospel recognizes what must be done and does it. And note where Paul's confidence rests — not in Philemon's natural goodness but in the Spirit's work in Philemon. Where the gospel is at work, this kind of response is what tends to follow.

Then the famous hint: *knowing that you will do even more than I say*. The student book gives the traditional reading and owns it as the right one: Paul is gesturing toward manumission. He has not asked for it — he has asked only that Onesimus be received as a beloved brother — but the gospel-logic of the request, followed to its end, points further, because receiving a man as a brother while holding him as a slave is a tension the gospel cannot, in the long run, sustain. Your class heard that sentence's twin in Session Four; let them hear the rhyme. And then honor the restraint: Paul does not specify what *more* looks like, the student book does not specify, and neither should you. He plants the seed and trusts the Spirit — one of the most Pauline moments in the letter. The apostle has done his work. The Spirit will do the rest.

Prepare a Guest Room

The tone turns practical, and there is a twinkle in it your class may catch before you name it: *prepare a guest room for me*. Paul expects to be released; he expects to travel; and he expects, in due course, to stand in Philemon's doorway and see for himself how Onesimus was received. He says none of that directly. He just books the room. Let the class smile — the verse has earned it — but do not teach it cynically; this is pastoral oversight with a human face, not surveillance. The letter's appeal will, before long, be a face-to-face fellowship.

Then the quieter word, which is the segment's real freight: *I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you*. The verb is *χαρισθήσομαι* — *given as a gift of grace*. Paul views his possible release neither as something he will arrange nor something he has earned, but as a gift God may give — and a gift mediated *through your prayers*. Sound the catechism's petition-logic one more time, because your class heard it in Session Two and will recognize the return: the gift is God's; the prayer is ours; the gift comes, by grace, through the prayer. Prayer does not coerce God. God has nonetheless chosen to attend to the prayers of His saints. Both things are true, and verse twenty-two holds them together in one hope.

Gathering the Threads

Recap from the boards, which are now nearly full: the arc complete and circled end to end, the brother tally at its final count, the chains at four with one space waiting, the two ledgers and the German still legible. The student book's six threads will fall into place as you walk the visuals. Then the bridge: the appeal is complete; the substantive work of the

letter is done; only the greetings remain — and next week your class discovers that in this letter, even the greetings are anything but empty.



Leading the Discussion

The student chapter offers six discussion questions. Choose one; this session's teaching is dense and its joy deserves unhurried conversation.

Question 1 — The accountant's verb and imputation

The doctrinal anchor. Strong for catechetically minded classes; the danger is abstraction — if the conversation floats, bring it back to the ledger you crossed out. The best fruit: a student realizing that *reckoned* is not a metaphor softening the gospel but the gospel's own precise word.

Question 2 — The signature

Concrete and warm: why does writing it *in his own hand* matter? Adults who have co-signed loans understand instantly what Paul did — and be gentle here, because some of those stories carry real financial pain. The deep end is the chained hand: willingness exceeding capacity, and the cross as Christ's own signature.

Question 3 — The aside and the Fifth Petition

The pastoral center of the set. The *as* of *forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors* will land on every person in the room, because everyone is keeping both ledgers. Expect conviction; let it breathe; end at absolution — the forgiven are *freed* to forgive, not shamed into it.

Question 4 — The completed arc

The craft question, and the full-circle twin of Session Two's Question 6. What does it suggest about how Paul wrote that the closing petition uses the exact vocabulary of the opening thanksgiving? The answer your class built five weeks for: deliberate, patient, Spirit-breathed craftsmanship.

Question 5 — Obedience without command

The doctrinal sequel to Session Three's freedom conversation. What kind of obedience does the gospel produce, and how does it differ from what the law could compel? Watch for the student who hears "obedience" and tenses; the optative gentleness of the whole letter is the reassurance.

Question 6 — Graciously given through your prayers

The warm closer. Invite the class to name gifts in their own lives that came, as best they can tell, through the prayers of others — and then name what they were: *χαρισθήσομαι*, grace-gifts through the saints. A lovely question for a class that prays together.

A PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATION

Pick Question 3 for most classes. The Fifth Petition conversation is the one your students will still be living on Thursday — everyone in the room is holding a ledger, and the gospel closes books. Question 1 is the alternative for a doctrine-hungry class that wants to sit with imputation itself. And one logistical word that matters more than it sounds: next week is the final session. Find the page of hopes you recorded in Session One and bring it. The guide will tell you what to do with it — and you will be glad you kept it.

If You Only Have Forty-Five Minutes

Occasionally you will have a session compressed by a church event, a lengthy announcement, or late arrivals. Here is what to keep and what to cut.

Keep

- ♦ The ledger — verse eighteen with the name crossed out, Apology IV named, and the *fröhlicher Wechsel* on the board. Seven minutes minimum. This is the session.
- ♦ The signature and the cross — verse nineteen with Colossians 2:14 read over it. Three minutes.
- ♦ The arc's completion — verses 7, 12, and 20 read aloud, the line drawn through all three stations. Three minutes that land five weeks.
- ♦ The final brother tally at verse twenty.
- ♦ One discussion question, most likely Question 3, and the closing prayer with the Session 6 assignment and the hopes-page reminder.

Cut or Compress

- ♦ The amanuensis background. One sentence: Paul usually dictated; here he takes the pen.
- ♦ The paralipsis terminology. Play the move — *to say nothing of...* — without naming the rhetoric.

- ♦ The manumission hint. One sentence: *more than I say* points beyond the letter; let it point.
- ♦ The guest room. One minute: the visit is coming, and the release, if it comes, will be gift through prayer.
- ♦ The four-volumes payoff — with a judgment call: for a newcomer class, one sentence; for a class that walked all four volumes, this is *not* the thing to cut. Trim the guest room further instead.

THE SINGLE NON-NEGOTIABLE

If the session were reduced to one thing, it would be the exchange itself: your class hears *charge that to my account* identified as the gospel — their debt, His account — with the crossed-out ledger in front of them and the words *fröhlicher Wechsel* on the board. Everything else this week adorns that center. A class that leaves able to say “what Christ did for sinners, Paul does for Onesimus — and the forgiven do for one another” has the session in one sentence, and the doctrine of imputation for life.



For Further Study

For Deeper Biblical Context

- ♦ 2 Corinthians 5:16–21. The exchange on the cosmic scale — *he made him to be sin who knew no sin* — and the ministry of reconciliation entrusted to those who have received it. The text to read directly over verse eighteen.
- ♦ Colossians 2:13–15. The record of debt, canceled and nailed to the cross — from the letter that shared the satchel. The Lord’s own signature on the paid note.
- ♦ Romans 4:1–8. *Counted to him as righteousness... blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.* Paul’s fullest exposition of reckoning, with Abraham and David as the exhibits.
- ♦ Matthew 18:21–35. The unmerciful servant — the two ledgers in parable form, and the Lord’s own commentary on what happens when the forgiven refuse to forgive.

From the Lutheran Tradition

- ♦ Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian* (1520) — the bridegroom passage. The joyful exchange in Luther’s own wedding imagery: her debts become his, his riches hers. The series has pointed to this treatise since Session One; this is the page it was pointing at.

- ♦ Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV — on imputation. The longest article in the Symbols, and the confessional exposition of verse eighteen's accounting: righteousness reckoned, not infused.
- ♦ Small Catechism, the Fifth Petition. *As we forgive* — Luther's explanation of the one petition with a comparative clause, and the catechetical home of the two-ledgers move.

Commentaries

- ♦ John G. Nordling, *Philemon* (Concordia Commentary, CPH). Outstanding on the legal and commercial background of verses eighteen and nineteen — the promissory formula, the amanuensis convention, and the binding force of the autograph pledge.
- ♦ R. C. H. Lenski, *Colossians-Philemon*. Warm and exact on verse twenty — the optative mood, the returning pun, and the completed arc; Lenski clearly delights in this verse.
- ♦ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Pillar, Eerdmans). Judicious on verse twenty-one's *even more than I say* — Moo walks the manumission question with care and leaves it exactly as open as Paul left it.

A Final Word

You preached the gospel from a ledger this week, and there are worse sentences to have on one's record as a teacher. Imputation, the joyful exchange, the Fifth Petition, the completed arc — your students received in one hour what the church has treasured in this little letter for twenty centuries: the great substitution, written small enough to fit a personal note, and personal enough to fit every soul in your room. If the hour felt glad, you taught it right.

The boards are nearly full now. The arc runs complete from verse seven to verse twenty. The brother tally has made its last mark. Only one space remains open — the fifth mention of the chains — and it waits in the letter's final lines, in a greeting from a man named Epaphras.

Next week is the last session, and it is a homecoming in more ways than one. The closing greetings name the company around Paul — Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, the same five names that close Colossians, the letter from the same satchel — and each name carries its own small history into the farewell. The letter ends with grace, as it began with grace. And the session ends the whole four-volume journey: the guide will walk you through closing not just the letter but the series, and it will ask you to bring the page of hopes from Session One. Have your students read Philemon 23-25 before they arrive — three short verses, and not one of them empty.

May the Lord bless your teaching, and may the One who charged our debts to His own account keep you and your students in the joy of the exchange.

Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION SIX

In the Lord

Philemon 23–25 · The Closing Greetings, and the Close of the Series

A Note to the Teacher

Welcome to Session Six — the last session of this study, and the last session of *The Pauline Captivity Letters*. This hour does double duty: it closes the letter, and it closes the series. The student book makes no secret of the fact; its final chapter ends with the plain words *there is no Looking Ahead, there is no next chapter*. Your task is to land both endings well, and the tone to aim for is gratitude rather than melancholy. The letter ends with grace. So should the study.

Do not let the word “greetings” tempt you to race. Three verses, five names — and not one of the names is empty. Epaphras carries the letter’s fifth and final mention of the chains, the mark your board has held a space for since Session Three. Mark carries one of the most poignant restoration stories in the New Testament — sealed, remarkably, with the very adjective Paul used for Onesimus. Demas carries a warning the New Testament attaches to no other name quite this way. Luke carries the quiet glory of simply having stayed. The names are not the ending’s preamble; they are its furniture, and the student book pauses where Paul does not. So will you.

One instruction outranks all others this week: bring the page of hopes from Session One. The guide has reminded you twice; this is why. Near the end of the hour you will read your students’ own words back to them — what they said, six weeks ago, they were hoping to receive from the smallest letter of Paul — and you will ask what was given. Few moments in adult education land like that one. If, despite everything, the page has been lost, do not panic: ask the class to recall aloud what they hoped, and proceed. But if you have it, you are holding the study’s crown.

And a word to you, if you are among the teachers who have walked this series from its first volume: counting the chapters of all four student books, you have led your class through thirty-five sessions of the captivity letters — Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon — one Roman imprisonment, four congregations, and now one household where it all came home. This guide will help you close the whole arc today. You have earned the closing.

THE BIG IDEA IN ONE SENTENCE

The letter ends as it began — in chains and in grace: Epaphras completes the five-fold chain that framed the whole appeal, the company around Paul puts faces on restoration, warning, and faithfulness, and the benediction of verse twenty-five bookends the letter with the same grace that opened it; close the letter, close the four-volume series, read back the hopes of Session One, and send your students out under the grace the apostle spoke over the church in Philemon's house.

Preparing to Teach This Session

Before You Walk In

- ♦ Read Session Six of the student book carefully, at least twice — including its Closing Word, which you will echo at the hour's end.
- ♦ Read Philemon whole, aloud, one final time. You did this before Session One; do it again now, and notice how different the three minutes sound with six weeks inside them. That difference is what you will be naming for your class.
- ♦ Read Colossians 4:7–18 beside Philemon 23–25 — the same five names, the same satchel, and the curious trade of the title *fellow prisoner* between Aristarchus and Epaphras. Then read 2 Timothy 4:9–13, the last roll call, where Demas departs and *Luke alone is with me*. You will be teaching from both ends of these men's stories.
- ♦ Find the page of hopes from Session One and put it in your Bible at Philemon. Do this today, not Saturday night.
- ♦ Look at the closing of your own congregation's liturgy — the benediction your students receive every week. The grace bookend of verses 3 and 25 is the shape of the Divine Service, and you will want the connection ready.
- ♦ Pray — through the list of your students by name, the way Epaphras prayed for Colossae. Thank God for each one. Then ask Him to do, in the last hour, whatever six weeks have been preparing.

Materials to Have on Hand

- ♦ Your Bible, and the student books.
- ♦ The whiteboard with everything on it: the brother tally complete, the arc circled end to end, the chains at four of five with one space waiting. Today you make the final mark — *v. 23, Epaphras* — and the board is finished. Before you erase it at hour's end, photograph it; you may teach this study again, and you will want the map.
- ♦ The page of hopes from Session One. It belongs on the table in front of you from the first minute, where you can see it and your students can wonder about it.

- ♦ Optional: your hymnal open to a sending hymn, if your class likes to close a series with singing — something with grace in its last stanza.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Four theological points come into view in this passage:

- ♦ **The chains framed the letter — the theology of the cross in epistolary form.** Five mentions in twenty-five verses: verses 1, 9, 10, 13, and now 23. The appeal for a slave's freedom-in-brotherhood was written by a chained apostle with a chained fellow pastor beside him. The kingdom of God comes, in this letter, not by institutional power but by the suffering testimony of the saints. The student book's sentence is the anchor: *they were not a triumphant institution; they were a small fellowship in chains; the Holy Spirit was using them anyway.*
- ♦ **The gospel restores the broken — and the same greeting carries a warning.** Mark, who once abandoned the mission and split Paul from Barnabas, stands here as a fellow worker and will one day be called *very useful* — εἰρηστος, Onesimus's own adjective. Demas, a fellow worker here, will desert, *in love with this present world*. Restoration and warning share one verse, because perseverance is daily faith in daily mercies, not a possession settled in advance.
- ♦ **Faithfulness most often looks like staying.** Luke — the *we* of Acts, the beloved physician, the *Luke alone is with me* of Paul's last letter — gives a face to the perseverance that has no spectacle in it: the ordinary vocation, faithfully kept, in the steady company of a friend who does not leave. The means were ordinary; the fruit was extraordinary.
- ♦ **Grace bookends everything.** *Grace to you* in verse three; *the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit* in verse twenty-five. The whole appeal rests, at both ends, on grace — addressed to the plural *you* of the gathered church, who share one singular *spirit*. The Christian life begins in grace and ends in grace, and everything between is grace working itself out.

Suggested Time Plan

The following is one way to structure the sixty minutes — with the closing movements given more room than usual. This is the week to guard the final fifteen minutes fiercely.

TIME	SEGMENT
0:00-0:05	Opening prayer; the boards one last time; the page on the table
0:05-0:13	Epaphras, my fellow prisoner: the fifth chain (complete the board)

TIME	SEGMENT
0:13–0:20	Mark and Aristarchus: the restored and the steadfast
0:20–0:26	Demas, in this letter: the warning in the greeting
0:26–0:32	Luke, the beloved physician: the one who stayed
0:32–0:38	The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ: the bookend and the benediction
0:38–0:44	And so the letter ends: closing the four-volume series
0:44–0:50	Discussion (choose one question)
0:50–0:57	The hopes of Session One, read back
0:57–1:00	The benediction and sending

WHERE TO SLOW DOWN

The fifth chain and the grace bookend are the letter's own closing weights; the hopes reading and the benediction are the study's. Everything else can flex. If time runs short, compress Aristarchus's itinerary to a sentence and Mark's Acts history to two — but the final fifteen minutes are not negotiable this week. A study that has taken six weeks to build deserves an ending that is not rushed, and your students will remember the last ten minutes of this hour longer than almost anything else in the series.



Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Epaphras, My Fellow Prisoner

Open by reading verses 23–25 aloud — the whole remaining text — and then name what is happening: the curtain opens. Paul's has been the only voice for twenty-two verses; now, in the farewell, we discover he was never alone. Five companions stand around him, and the first is Epaphras.

Give Epaphras his résumé, because your veterans of the third volume will be leaning forward: this is the man who, by Paul's own reckoning, planted the Colossian church — the *beloved fellow servant* of Colossians 1:7 who first taught the Lycus Valley the gospel, the man *always struggling on your behalf in his prayers* of Colossians 4:12. The pastor of the very congregation listening to this letter is in Rome, beside Paul — and he is named συναϊχμάλωτος, *fellow prisoner*, a martial word, a comrade captured in the same cam-

paign. The student book weighs the metaphorical reading and lands on the literal one: Epaphras shared Paul's custody.

Then walk to the board and finish what Session Three began. V. 23. Five mentions in twenty-five verses: 1, 9, 10, 13, 23. Read the student book's verdict slowly, because it is the motif's epitaph: the chains opened the letter; they close it; *they have been the lever by which the appeal moved from start to finish*. And then the theology, which is pure theology of the cross: the letter your class has spent six weeks inside was written by an imprisoned church — a small cell of suffering Christians from whom the gospel went out into the world. The kingdom did not come by institutional power. It came by the testimony of a small fellowship in chains — and the Holy Spirit was using them anyway. Let that sentence land on every student who has ever felt their congregation was too small to matter.

Mark and Aristarchus

Four more names, and the student book pauses where Paul does not. Take Mark first, because his story is the greeting's hidden jewel. This is John Mark — cousin of Barnabas, author of the second Gospel — who set out on the first missionary journey and turned back in Pamphylia; Acts records the bare fact without explanation. When Barnabas wanted to bring him on the second journey, Paul refused, and Acts 15:39 does not soften it: *there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other*. The partnership that carried the church's first mission broke over this man.

And now look where he is standing. *Mark... my fellow worker* — συνεργός, the same word Paul gave Philemon in verse one. The estrangement has been repaired. And the seal on the restoration comes years later, in Paul's last letter: *Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me* — and the Greek for *useful* is εἰρηστος, the very adjective of verse eleven. Let the class hear it: Mark, like Onesimus, has become useful. The student book's sentence closes the circle and belongs in your mouth verbatim: *the gospel-grace that restores Onesimus to Philemon is the same gospel-grace that has restored Mark to Paul*. Somewhere in your room is a person carrying a broken Christian friendship. You do not need to find them. Mark will.

Aristarchus takes two minutes: the Thessalonian, dragged into the Ephesus theater during the silversmiths' riot, member of the Jerusalem delegation, aboard the ship that ran aground at Malta — one of the most faithful travelers Paul ever had. The curious detail is worth one of those minutes: in Colossians, written the same week and carried in the same satchel, *Aristarchus* is the fellow prisoner and Epaphras is not; here it is reversed. The student book's suggestion — that the co-workers took turns sharing Paul's confinement, voluntarily — is offered with proper tentativeness, and you should keep the tentativeness. What is certain is the point: Paul did not endure his imprisonment alone. His friends came, and stayed, and in their staying shared the cost of his chains.

Demas, in This Letter

Now the hard name, and the student book's section title tells you how to teach it: *Demas, in this letter*. Here, at the moment of writing, Demas is a fellow worker — present, laboring, named without a shadow. But your class must hear the other verse, because Scripture wrote it: *Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica*. The verb is ἐγκαταλείπω — the Septuagint's verb from Psalm 22, the psalm of the forsaken cry from the cross. He did not leave for martyrdom or a mission field. He went back to comfort.

Teach the two verses together as the student book does — one early, one late, two verdicts on one name — and draw out the sobriety without theatrics: the faithfulness of one moment is not, by itself, a guarantee of all the moments to come. The New Testament is honest about falling away — Hebrews is honest, the parable of the seed is honest — and Demas is that honesty wearing a name. Then give the class the two pastoral handholds the book provides. First, the silence: we do not know the rest of Demas's story, and the reader may pray for him — for whatever mercy met him when his strength gave out. Second, the location of perseverance: it is not a fortress of willpower but daily faith in daily mercies, daily clinging to the gospel. Do not let this segment become fear; let it become the reason your students keep coming to the rail.

Luke, the Beloved Physician

Then turn the same verse of Second Timothy over, because the sentence that records Demas's departure carries five more words: *Luke alone is with me*. The last name in Philemon's greeting is the one who never left. Give the class his slender biography — the beloved physician of Colossians 4:14, the traveling companion whose pen gave the church a Gospel and the Acts — and the loveliest evidence of his presence: the *we* sections, where the narrative of Acts quietly shifts into the first person plural because the author was there, on the road, on the ship, in the storm. He is here in Philemon's greeting because he was there in the Roman lodging. He is in Second Timothy because, at the very end, he was still there.

This is the segment to slow down and look at your class, because Luke is most of them. He appears in Scripture not as a great preacher or wonder-worker but as the man who *stayed* — and the student book names this as the most common form Christian perseverance takes: the steady, attentive presence of a believer who simply does not leave. Then complete the circle the study opened in Session One: this is vocation. A physician, presumably still practicing his calling, healed bodies, wrote a Gospel, and sat beside a chained apostle to the end. Philemon served with a household; Luke served with a medical bag and a pen. The book's closing couplet on him is the whole doctrine in eight words: *the*

means were ordinary. The fruit was extraordinary. Every retired teacher, every ride-giver, every casserole-bringer in your room should leave knowing whose company they are in.

The Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ

The benediction first, then the bookend. *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit* — Paul's standard close, nearly word for word what ends Galatians. But its placement here is the letter's last piece of architecture: grace opened the letter at verse three; grace closes it at verse twenty-five. The first word and the last word, in effect, are the same word — and everything the letter asked for in between is framed by it. Read the student book's structural confession plainly: the Christian life begins in grace and ends in grace, and Philemon's welcome of Onesimus — the act the whole letter exists to call forth — is itself grace flowing from grace.

Then the grammar, which preaches: the *your* is plural — the benediction falls on everyone in the room in Colossae, Philemon and Apphia and Archippus and the saints and Onesimus standing among them — but the *spirit* is singular. Not *your spirits*: *your spirit*. One body, one grace, one shared life. The *communio sanctorum* your class has met in every session of this study is hiding in a singular noun in the letter's last line.

A CLASSIC LUTHERAN MOVE

Ask your class where they were the last time someone spoke words almost exactly like verse twenty-five over them — and let them realize the answer is *last Sunday*. The benediction that closes Philemon is the benediction that closes the Divine Service: the church has ended its gatherings with grace spoken over a plural people since the apostles ended their letters that way. Then draw the larger shape: the service begins with invocation and absolution — grace at the front door — and ends with benediction — grace at the back door — and everything between is Word and Sacrament delivering what grace gives. The liturgy is built like Philemon. Your students have been living inside this letter's architecture every Sunday of their lives; today they learn the floor plan was apostolic.

And So the Letter Ends

Now close the letter, and then close the series — the student book does both in one final section, and so should you. The letter first: twenty-five verses; three recipients, five companions, one name at the heart of it; the runaway received back as a beloved brother; and the verdict the preface promised six weeks ago, now proven — *the brevity is concentration; the brevity is the point*.

Then the series, and take your time, because for some classes this paragraph closes years of shared work. Four letters from one imprisonment; four volumes; four prepositional

phrases. *In Christ*: Ephesians taught us we have been raised and seated with Him. *To Live Is Christ*: Philippians showed us an aging apostle facing death with steady joy. *Christ in You*: Colossians unveiled the mystery, the hope of glory. And *Brother in Christ*: Philemon showed us, on the canvas of one ordinary household, what all of it looks like when the gospel works itself out between believers. The student book's summary is the series in one breath, and you should read it aloud: to be in Christ is to live as Christ; to live as Christ is to have Christ in you; to have Christ in you is to receive every brother and sister He died for as your own. Four facets. One reality. Then the landscape sentence, slowly: the whole landscape of the believing community — master and slave as brothers, apostle and householder as fellow workers, the woman of the house and the young pastor, the fathers and the children in the faith, the one who stayed and the one who left — laid out before us, in twenty-five verses, by an apostle in chains. And the whole landscape rests on grace.

THE MOST IMPORTANT TEACHING MOVE

Now the page. Take out the hopes your class spoke in Session One and tell them what it is — their own words, six weeks old. Read the hopes aloud, one at a time, slowly, without commentary; attribution is your call, but unattributed reading is usually the gentler choice. Then ask a single question and let it do all the work: *what was given?* Resist the urge to summarize, connect, or improve the answers. Let students hear each other testify — some will name doctrine, some a verse, some a changed relationship, and someone, in many classes, will simply be quiet in a way that is also an answer. When the answers have run their course, name what the moment is with the vocabulary the study has given you: this too was *χαρισθήσομαι* — graciously given, through six weeks of shared prayer around an open Bible. Then move directly to the benediction. Do not insert anything between the gift and the grace.



Leading the Discussion

The student chapter offers six discussion questions. This week, choose with the clock in mind: the hopes reading and the benediction own the final ten minutes, so pick a question that flows toward them rather than away.

Question 1 — The fifth chain

The retrospective question: what has the chain motif done across the letter? Your board answers half of it on sight. The deep end is the theology of the cross — why the church's most tender letter came from its least powerful address.

Question 2 — Mark's restoration

The warmest question of the set, and a live one: *where in your own life does such a restoration need to happen?* Expect real answers and protect them; some broken Christian friendships in your room are decades old. Keep the gospel ground in view — the same grace, the same adjective, the same Lord.

Question 3 — The trajectory of Demas

The sober question. Hold the rail on both sides: no smugness (Demas was a fellow worker once, and so are we) and no terror (perseverance lives in the means of grace, not in anxious self-inspection). His name is warning *and* witness — the study's last honesty.

Question 4 — The faithfulness that stays

Luke's question, and the one most likely to honor the quiet saints in your room. Ask for faces: who has been the Luke in your life — the one who was simply there? The vocational turn matters: ordinary callings are where this faithfulness lives.

Question 5 — Bookended by grace

The structural question with the liturgical payoff. If you taught the Classic Lutheran Move, this conversation extends it naturally: what does it mean that everything the letter asks sits between two announcements of grace — and that everything our congregation does sits between invocation and benediction?

Question 6 — The four phrases of the series

The capstone: *in Christ, to live is Christ, Christ in you, brother in Christ* — what do they name together, and which has carried the most weight in your own walking? For any class that has traveled multiple volumes, this is the question the years were for.

A PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATION

Pick Question 6 if your class has walked more than one volume of the series — it gathers everything, and it flows perfectly into the hopes reading: which phrase weighed most, then what was given, then the grace. For a class that joined at Philemon, pick Question 2 or Question 4; restoration and faithfulness are this letter's own gifts and need no series history. Whichever you choose, watch the clock with unusual discipline. The discussion serves the ending this week, not the other way around.

If You Only Have Forty-Five Minutes

Even on the last day, the fellowship breakfast can run long. Here is what to keep and what to cut.

Keep

- ♦ The fifth chain — Epaphras named, the board completed, the motif's epitaph read. Three minutes that close a four-week thread.
- ♦ The Demas-Luke contrast — the two verdicts of 2 Timothy 4, the warning and the one who stayed. Five minutes; this is the greeting's pastoral freight.
- ♦ The grace bookend — verses 3 and 25, with the Sunday benediction named. Three minutes.
- ♦ The series close — the four phrases, even in two sentences.
- ♦ The hopes read back and the benediction spoken. Never cut these. They are the reason the hour exists.

Cut or Compress

- ♦ Aristarchus's itinerary. One sentence: the faithful Thessalonian who was on every hard road, including this one.
- ♦ The fellow-prisoner rotation theory. Skip it; the certainty — Paul was not alone — is what matters.
- ♦ Mark's full Acts history. Two sentences: he left the mission, the gospel brought him back, and Paul's last letter calls him by Onesimus's own adjective.
- ♦ The singular-spirit grammar. One sentence inside the benediction segment.
- ♦ The photograph of the board. Take it after class.

THE SINGLE NON-NEGOTIABLE

If the final session were reduced to one thing, it would be the ending itself, done whole: the hopes of Session One read aloud, the question *what was given* answered by the students' own voices, and the class sent out under verse twenty-five spoken over them as benediction. Everything else in this session can be rebuilt from the student book on any future day. The ending cannot. A study of grace must end in grace — heard, named, and pronounced — and a teacher who protects those ten minutes has finished the work.



For Further Study

For Deeper Biblical Context

- ♦ Colossians 4:7–18. The sibling farewell — the same five names, Tychicus and Onesimus on the road, and *remember my chains*. Reading the two closings side by side is the best single exercise for seeing how the satchel letters interlock.
- ♦ 2 Timothy 4:9–18. The last roll call: Demas gone, Mark wanted, *Luke alone is with me*, and the Lord who stood by Paul when everyone else did not. The other end of every story this session told.
- ♦ Acts 16:6–15. The first *we* section — Luke stepping silently into his own narrative at Troas. The eyewitness signature of the man who stayed.
- ♦ Numbers 6:22–27. The Aaronic benediction — the Lord putting His name on His people — and the deep background of every apostolic grace-wish, including verse twenty-five and next Sunday's sending.

From the Lutheran Tradition

- ♦ Luther, *Preface to the New Testament*. Luther's account of what the gospel is — one message of the one Christ across many books — is the right companion for closing a four-volume walk through four letters that turned out to be one reality.
- ♦ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration XI. Perseverance and election taught as comfort: the Demas question answered the Lutheran way — assurance located in the means of grace, not in anxious self-examination.
- ♦ Small Catechism, Daily Prayers and the Table of Duties. The take-home: the study ends, the stations remain. Morning and evening under grace, callings kept in faith — the catechism's quiet program for everything this series taught.

Commentaries

- ♦ John G. Nordling, *Philemon* (Concordia Commentary, CPH). His treatment of the closing greetings and of each named companion is generous and warm — and for any student asking “what should I read next,” this volume is the answer.
- ♦ R. C. H. Lenski, *Colossians–Philemon*. Lenski's pages on the benediction and the grace-frame of the letter close his exposition the way a pastor closes a sermon — doctrinally and devotionally at once.
- ♦ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Pillar, Eerdmans). Careful prosopography on the five companions and a balanced weighing of the fellow-prisoner question across the two letters.

A Final Word

The study is finished. Before anything else: thank you. For six weeks — or for thirty-five sessions across four volumes, if you have walked the whole road — you have done the work of Epaphras, struggling in prayer on behalf of your people; the work of Luke, simply being there, week after week, with your Bible open and your preparation done; the work of Tychicus and Onesimus, carrying a letter from an apostle in chains into a room of listening saints. Teaching the Word to the people of God is among the oldest labors of the church, and you have just completed a long stretch of it. *Well done* is not too strong, and it is not flattery. It is the truth.

You may feel, today, the particular emptiness that follows a finished work — the Sunday after the last session, when there is no chapter to prepare. Let the student book's own closing counsel be yours as well: the Bible study was never a substitute for the gathering of the church around Word and Sacrament; it was a help to the church's hearing. Send your students back to the Divine Service with sharper ears, and go back yourself the same way. The lectern and the rail were always the destination. The study was a road.

And the letter you have just finished teaching will keep working long after the boards are erased. Somewhere down the years, a student of yours will face a Philemon decision — someone returning who once did harm, a debt that grace asks them to close, a brother arriving in the place where the flesh sees only an offense — and twenty-five verses will rise up in them with your voice somewhere inside. That is how this works. The seed has been here the whole time. You spent six weeks planting it.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit — with yours, teacher, and with every saint you taught. The series is complete. The letter is delivered. The beloved brother came home.

Soli Deo Gloria