

I. Thank God for Philemon

January 6/7, 2010

Philemon 1-7

Aim: To introduce Philemon, the epistle, and Philemon, the man.

A. Introduction

The book of Philemon is the shortest of Paul's inspired writings, and it is the only one of the prison epistles addressed to an individual. From verses 4-21, the words 'you' and 'yours' are in the singular. This is because they are addressed personally to the wealthy slave owner Philemon. The body of the letter, then, focuses consistently on a single individual. This letter is far more personal than anything in the Pastoral Epistles. The letter does not deal with ministry issues, but with personal matters. It is essentially a 'private' letter.

However, when we examine the words 'you' and 'yours' in verses 3, 22, and 25, we discover that they are in the plural. Although this is a personal letter, it is also written to 'Apphia, our sister, to Archippus our fellow-soldier, and to the church' that meets in Philemon's home (v. 2). Although this is a personal letter to Philemon, it is one that is intended to be read to Philemon's fellow believers.

1. Paul

The letter is clearly written by Paul; Paul claims authorship three times (vv. 1, 9, 19). The Pauline authorship of Philemon has only very rarely been questioned in the history of biblical criticism. The very lack of doctrinal content makes it difficult to imagine a motive for forgery. If someone were to create a forgery, they would certainly be motivated by a desire to corrupt some doctrine of importance to the faith.

This private letter was one of Paul's 'prison' epistles – Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, and Philippians. Paul calls himself a 'prisoner' four times in this short letter (vv. 1, 9, 13, 23). The letter is closely associated with Colossians, through Onesimus (cp. Col. 4:9), and the repetition of Paul's colleagues (cp. Col. 4:7-18 with Phm. 22-24). Colossians is further associated with Ephesians through Tychicus (Eph. 6:21; Col. 4:7) and the close correspondence of organization and topics in the two letters. Thus, it is highly probably that Philemon was written by Paul at the same time as Ephesians and Colossians.

Philemon, the addressee of this letter, is usually thought to be a resident of Colossae. Onesimus, the slave of Philemon, is said to be 'one of you' in the letter to the Colossians (4:9). Paul then, has written a general letter to the church at Colossae, along with this 'private' note to Philemon at the same time, sending both of them with Tychicus, who is accompanied by Onesimus (Col. 4:7-9).

The question of the location of Paul's imprisonment is intensely debated in commentaries. There are three possible suggestions: an unspecified imprisonment in Ephesus during his ministry there (52-55 AD); during his two years in Caesarea (57-59 AD); or during his two years in Rome (AD 60-62). Caesarea is thought to be highly unlikely for several reasons, not the least of which is the high improbability that runaway slave Onesimus would head there. Ephesus is a possible haven for the fugitive Onesimus, primarily because of its close proximity to Colossae (120 miles). However, the association of Colossians and Ephesians with Philemon make Ephesus less likely. The most probable location from which these prison letters were written remains the

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traditional one of Rome. Thus, it is most probable that Philemon was written at the same time as Colossians and Ephesians, early in Paul's 'first' imprisonment in Rome (Acts 28:11-31). The date of the letter, then, would be AD 60-61.

2. Philemon

At the time of writing, Paul had never been to Colossae, so the two men must have met somewhere else. Ephesus was the most likely place during Paul's three years of ministry there. Ephesus was a large and busy seaport that served as the business center for the whole region. Given that Philemon was a businessman, perhaps the Colossian trader met Paul in that bustling commercial center. It seems that Paul knew Philemon well, calling him 'our dear friend and fellow-worker' (v. 1).

Philemon had been led to saving faith in Jesus Christ several years earlier by Paul (cp. v. 19), probably during the apostle's ministry in Ephesus. When he returned home in Colossae, he was most enthusiastic about his new-found faith, and he told many about his Lord and Master. As a result, others came to trust in the Lord as their Savior too. This may explain why a church started to meet in the home of Philemon; he was wealthy, owning a house large enough for the Colossian church to meet in for worship and fellowship (v. 2). He was obviously active in serving the cause of Christ, because Paul refers to him as a 'fellow worker' (v. 1). He also owned at least one slave, a man named Onesimus (cp. Col. 4:9, which associates Onesimus with Colossae).

3. Onesimus

Onesimus, who was not a Christian, ran away from his master to Rome. We don't know why he absconded. Perhaps he was a hard worker who simply longed for freedom and took advantage of Philemon's generous nature. Another supposition is that he was a lazy, ungrateful servant with a dishonest streak who saw his chance to make off with a big chunk of his master's savings and did it, leaving Philemon deeply hurt and in financial straits (there is a hint in verse 18 that he might have financed his life by stealing from his master, Philemon).

Rome is a long way from Colossae, but the runaway had found his way there, no doubt hoping to lose himself in the multitudes that thronged in the imperial city. It was probably a wretched existence, always on the lookout to be recaptured and punished.

Onesimus was in big trouble, for he was guilty of *two* capital crimes: running away and theft. They were capital because they were sins against the existing order. The Roman government dealt harshly with runaway slaves. Roman law practically imposed no limits to the power of the master over his slave. The alternative of life or death rested solely with Philemon, and slaves were constantly crucified for far lighter offenses than his. Runaway slaves were often branded on the forehead with the letter 'F' for '*fugitivus*;' a thief would be branded with 'CF' for '*cave furem*' ('beware of thief'). A thief and a runaway, he had no claim to forgiveness.

Onesimus found, like the prodigal son in Jesus' parable, that although you can run away from home, you can't run away from God. At some point during his stay in Rome, through circumstances unknown to us, he met the apostle Paul. Perhaps he ran into Epaphras, who was also from Colossae. Perhaps he obtained work helping to clean prisons. Maybe he was down and out, heard Paul's name discussed, remembered his contact with Philemon, and sought him out for help on his own. It is possible that he travelled to Ephesus with his master and met Paul during the apostle's ministry in that city. He certainly would have heard Philemon and his

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household speak lovingly of the great apostle. Perhaps the best solution is to assume that Onesimus had begun to have doubts about his decision to run away from his master. Having heard of Paul or met him on some occasion, he seeks out Paul to enlist his help in intervening with Philemon.

Whatever the circumstances by which he met Paul, his life was forever changed, for through that great preacher he met Jesus Christ. Was this, from the human point of view, pure coincidence? Or did this young fugitive, in deep spiritual turmoil, come to himself and seek Paul out, having heard of him from Philemon? We cannot know for sure, but it is clear that he became a changed man.

4. Occasion

Onesimus was totally transformed; he quickly endeared himself to the apostle (cp. vv. 12, 16). He then began to live up to his name by assisting Paul (vv. 11, 13). Onesimus means ‘useful’ or ‘profitable.’ It is the kind of patronizing name that people in the ancient world would give to a slave. He had not been useful at all as far as Philemon was concerned but, since his conversion, he had now become very useful to Paul. He did whatever he could to ease the apostle’s imprisonment – running errands, doing manual labor to help with expenses, counseling others.

As Onesimus grew in faith, the conviction that he must return to Philemon also grew. Paul would have gladly kept him at his side to continue to minister to him. There was, however, a matter that needed to be settled. As a runaway slave, Onesimus was a criminal. In running away he had defrauded his master, Philemon, by depriving him of his services. He may even have stolen money from Philemon when he fled (v. 18). Paul knew that the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon needed to be restored. Onesimus had to return to his master and seek forgiveness and restoration. Onesimus determined to make things right.

Sending Onesimus back to Colossae was an important, and difficult, step. Paul had benefitted from the presence of Onesimus. Onesimus had benefitted from a measure of freedom. Returning to Philemon would have been difficult. Yet, it is consistent with the tone of the letter, which emphasizes the changed spiritual condition of Onesimus. This emphasis suggests that the key issue is not a past quarrel between the two but an entirely new situation that has arisen because of Onesimus’ conversion.

The opportunity to send him back with someone came when Paul finished his letters to the Colossians and Ephesians. Because Tychicus would be delivering those letters, Onesimus could return to Colossae with him in relative safety. Not content merely to send Onesimus back under the protection of Tychicus, Paul sends along a letter to Philemon. In that letter, he urges Philemon to forgive Onesimus and receive him as a new brother in Christ. Paul wanted Philemon to tuck Onesimus back, not grudgingly, or on probation, but with open arms. Although Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon (v. 12), Onesimus must have been a willing partner in this venture. The whole purpose of this letter is to urge Philemon to have mercy on Onesimus and receive him back ‘no longer a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother’ (vv. 15-16). The key phrase is: ‘Receive him as you would me’ (v. 17).

5. Purpose

The letter is skillfully designed to constrain Philemon to accept Paul’s request, and yet, at the same time, it is extremely unclear what precisely Paul is requesting! Verse 17 is very clear that Paul wants Philemon to welcome back or receive Onesimus. However, verse 21 hints that Paul

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wants Philemon to do ‘even more.’ What is this ‘even more’? Based on hints in the letter, there are two main possibilities.

First, Paul might be requesting that Philemon make Onesimus available for ministry, whether in Colossae or, more likely, alongside Paul. This possibility is based on Paul’s praise of Onesimus as one who had become ‘useful’ in ‘serving’ Paul (v. 13). However, it is unlikely that Paul wants Philemon to send Onesimus back to him since he himself plans to visit Colossae soon (v. 22). Therefore, it seems unlikely that Paul is asking Philemon to release Onesimus for Christian ministry.

A second possibility is that the ‘even more’ that Paul wants Philemon to do might be the immediate manumission of Onesimus. By the first century, freedom was a real possibility for many slaves. Many shared deep friendships with their masters and were loved and cared for with generosity. Many slaves would not have taken their freedom if it had been offered because their employment was happy and beneficial. Slaves could also purchase their own freedom. Masters often designated in their wills that their slaves were to be freed or receive part of their estate after the master’s death. Manumission was thus widespread. Estimates of the average length of time a slave had to wait for his freedom range from seven to twenty years.

6. Slavery

Slavery forms the backdrop to Philemon. The issue of slavery would have looked quite different to a first-century Christian than it does to us today, in four respects.

First slavery was an integral part of the social and economic world of the first century. It was taken for granted as a normal part of life in the ancient world. Indeed the whole structure of Roman society was based on it. By the time of the New Testament, most slaves were born into slavery. The number of slaves was enormous, making up as much as one third of the population of the Empire. Slaves served in all kinds of capacities, from the grim and frightful mine workers whose life expectancy was very short, to trusted and respected household slaves who helped run businesses and raise children. Slaves could be doctors, musicians, teachers, artists, librarians, and accountants. It was not uncommon for a Roman to train a slave at his own trade. They had opportunities for education and training in almost all disciplines.

Second, ‘freedom’ or ‘liberation,’ was not in the first-century world the obvious good that it is for us in the modern world. While many people in the ancient world became slaves by force (through war), many others voluntarily sold themselves into slavery. Nor was slavery in the Greco-Roman world racially based; slaves came from all races and ethnic groups. And because they were spread over so many occupations and social classes, ancient slaves had little sense of solidarity.

Moreover, legal freedom was by no means always a positive move for a slave. Once set free, former slaves (‘freedmen’) were on their own and often found it very difficult to make a good living. Slaves were often better off than freedmen. They were assured of food, clothing, and shelter, while poor freedmen often slept in the streets, or in cheap housing. Freedmen had no job security and could lose their livelihood in times of economic duress. Many slaves ate and dressed as well as freedmen. Legal freedom would not, then, have been the obvious good in the first century that we would consider it to be today.

Third, the New Testament Christians were a tiny religious group living within an all-powerful, authoritarian empire. They lacked the power to influence government policy. More important,

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they lacked the categories within which they could conceive of what we would call ‘social action.’

Fourth – and most important, perhaps – the early Christians did not understand their calling in these terms. They rejoiced in their identity as the people of the new realm inaugurated by God through Christ. But they also knew quite well that the ‘old realm’ continued to exist and that it would exist until Christ returned in glory. New Testament Christians focused on the creation of an alternative society, a realm in which, whatever the realities around them, kingdom values would be lived out. Slavery, for instance, was not going to be abolished anytime soon; it was a reality that the early Christians lived with. If a Christian owned a slave, the highest duty to which that master could be called was not to set the other free but to love the slave with the self-giving love of Christ.

The New Testament certainly does not endorse the institution of slavery; nor does it encourage Christians to buy or own slaves. It presumes that some Christians do own slaves, and encourages them to bring to bear on that relationship their Christian principles and values. It is significant that the New Testament nowhere attacks slavery directly. Had Jesus and the apostles done so, the result would have been chaos. Any slave insurrection would have been brutally crushed, and the slaves massacred. The gospel would have been swallowed up by the message of social reform.

Christianity, however, sowed the seeds of the destruction of slavery. It would be destroyed, not by social upheaval, but by changed hearts. The book of Philemon illustrates that principle. Paul does not order Philemon to free Onesimus, or teach that slavery is evil. But by ordering Philemon to treat Onesimus as a brother (v. 16; cp. Eph. 6:9; Col. 4:1), Paul eliminated the abuses of slavery. In one significant phrase, Paul transformed the character of the master-slave relationship. Onesimus is return no longer as a slave but as a beloved brother. It is clearly incongruous for a Christian master to ‘own’ a brother in Christ in the contemporary sense of the word, and although the existing order of society could not be immediately changed by Christianity without a political revolution, the Christian master-slave relationship was so transformed from within that it was bound to lead ultimately to the abolition of the system.

If Paul is hinting at a request that Onesimus be freed, the preservation of this letter makes it likely that Paul’s request was granted. What ultimately became of Onesimus we cannot know for sure. Some scholars think that Onesimus was not only freed but became the Bishop of Ephesus, since an early Christian source (Ignatius, in his *Letter to the Ephesians*) mentions an ‘Onesimus’ in that role in the early second century. But the name was common enough that this identification is by no means clear.

7. Theme

As important as it is, however, slavery is not what Philemon is ultimately ‘about.’ Paul’s one clear request with respect to Onesimus is that Philemon accept him as a Christian brother, with all that this acceptance would entail (v. 17). Paul builds his case for this acceptance on the new relationship of Philemon and Onesimus in the Lord. The letter to Philemon reconfigures the existing relationships between these three men. By his conversion, Onesimus is Paul’s ‘son’ in the faith (v. 10), and he is therefore a ‘brother’ of Philemon, whom Paul has also brought to faith. The central theme of Philemon is *koinōnia*, ‘fellowship.’ This word is featured in verse 6, as Paul lays the foundation for his appeal, and he picks it up, in another form (*koinōnos*) as he transitions to his central appeal (v. 17, ‘partner’). Believing in Christ joins us to other believers

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in an intimate family unit. This short private letter stands, then as an important reminder of the communitarian aspect of Christianity that many of us, in our individualist culture, are so prone to forget. In Christ we belong to one another; we enjoy each other's company and support; and we are obliged to support, to the point of sacrificing our own time, interests, and money, our brothers and sisters.

Why read the epistle to Philemon? At its heart there is a theme that is vital for all Christians – that of forgiveness. Paul takes the truth that Christians are to forgive one another (cp. Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13) and applies it to a specific situation – Philemon's runaway slave, Onesimus. The subject of forgiveness is of compelling interest to all Christians because we ourselves are a forgiven people. Just as we must ask God for our daily bread, so we must also ask for daily forgiveness. Further, forgiveness is an ongoing necessity in all our relationships. Christians are required to be a forgiving people. And even beyond that, forgiveness is a real need of the world around us. The world is aching for a demonstration of the power of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is so important that the Holy Spirit devoted an entire book of the Bible to it. In the brief book of Philemon, the spiritual duty to forgive is emphasized, but not in principle, parable, or word picture. Through a real life situation, involving two people dear to him, Paul teaches the importance of forgiving others.

B. Greeting (Philemon 1-3)

1. Paul (v. 1a)

Paul starts the letter with his name, following the customary practice in the ancient world. Paul was the noble apostle largely responsible for the spread of Christianity throughout the Greco-Roman world. He was also the one who had led Philemon to Christ (v. 19). What a privilege for Philemon—to have a letter from Paul, an inspired letter.

In his introduction, Paul chooses not to use his apostolic authority, but rather to appeal gently and singularly to a friend. On this occasion, Paul made no reference to being an apostle, but referred to himself in a very affecting manner as 'a prisoner of Christ Jesus.' At one level he had been deprived of his liberty by the Roman authorities, but he did not really see himself as Caesar's prisoner at all. Physically, he was at the mercy of the Roman authorities who had him in chains (vv. 10, 13), but spiritually he was bound to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul may have had another reason for mentioning his imprisonment. His purpose in writing the letter was to request a favor from Philemon. It would be all the more difficult for Philemon to refuse this request knowing the apostle's situation. Paul's appeal to Philemon is laced with allusions to the various relationships in which the key figures of the letter find themselves. Paul's imprisonment is a subtle reminder of his own sacrifices for the sake of the gospel and should lead Philemon to look on his request with sympathy. Paul sets up his case by saying in effect, 'If I can face the hard task of being in prison, can you not do the easier one that I'm going to ask of you?'

With his reference to being a prisoner, Paul also aligns himself with the weak and powerless Onesimus. Paul's allusion to his situation hinted at the underlying situation of 'ownership,' which is another key theme implicit in the letter: the reconfiguration of relationships in terms of the gospel. Already in the very first verse, the apostle has started to prepare Philemon to see that his slave, Onesimus, was not really owned by Philemon; his real Master was the Lord.

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Timothy was not the co-author of Philemon, but was with Paul at the time of writing and therefore included in the greeting. Paul describes him as ‘our brother’ because Philemon knew him. Timothy had been with Paul in Ephesus, where Philemon had probably met him.

2. Philemon (vv. 1b-2)

Paul valued Philemon as a person (‘beloved friend’) and also appreciated his contribution to the spread of the gospel (‘fellow laborer’). *Agapétos* (‘beloved’) is a familiar description, used by Paul both of individuals and groups (cp. Rom. 1:7; 16:5, 8-9, 12; 1 Cor. 10:14; Phil. 2:12). ‘Fellow worker’ is from *sunergos*, a term used by Paul for those who had worked alongside him in the cause of Christ (cp. Rom. 16:3; 2 Cor. 8:23; Phil. 2:25; Col. 4:11). Because Paul had never visited Colossae (Col. 2:1), their friendship probably developed during Paul’s ministry in Ephesus.

We get a portrait of Philemon in these opening verses. Philemon was *a man of means*. We are told that he owned a house large enough to host gatherings of the church. We don’t know if this was the only meeting place or if there were other ‘house churches’ in Colossae. First-century churches met in homes, church building being unknown until the third century. This letter was also addressed to the church that met in Philemon’s house. Although Philemon was a private letter, Paul wanted it read to the church. Paul gives indications in the letter that he has a larger audience in view. For while the bulk of the letter is addressed to an individual, with second-person singular forms, Paul also uses second-person *plural* forms in verses 3, 22, and 25. These references seem to imply that the whole community would have been present as the letter was publically read. By making the issue of Onesimus a public one, Paul increases the pressure on Philemon to respond as he wishes. They would then understand the importance of forgiveness and could hold Philemon accountable. This inclusion also gives us an insight about the early church, reflecting the corporate nature of early Christianity. No matter was ‘private’ but inevitably affect, and was affected by, one’s brothers and sisters in the new family of God.

Philemon was also *a family man*. ‘The beloved Apphia’ mentioned in verse 2 was probably his wife. She may have been active in ministry with her husband, like Priscilla with Aquila. However, she may be mentioned simply because the issue addressed in the letter is a ‘household’ matter that affects her as well as her husband.

Archippus is included in the introduction because he was likely Philemon’s son. If so, Philemon had a son old enough to have a ministry of his own. We don’t know what that ministry was, but in Colossians 4:17 there is a challenge that Archippus should take heed and fulfill it. Some commentators believe that Archippus lived at Laodicea and exercised his ministry there (because the preceding verse in Colossians – 4:16 – mentions Laodicea). Here, in this epistle, Paul spoke in more encouraging terms, describing the young man as a ‘fellow soldier.’ Along with Philemon, Archippus apparently was a prominent figure in the Colossian church.

Philemon’s home was clearly an attractive place, where the people of God were welcome and both generations were keen to do what they could for Jesus.

3. Greetings (v. 3)

The actual greeting that Paul used to conclude this opening section is identical to the one we find in Colossians 1:2, combining a normal Roman greeting with the Jewish one, except that both of them have Christian overtones. Instead of the Greek word for ‘greeting’ (*chairein*), the apostle

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used a similar-sounding word, which means ‘grace’ (*charis*). To this he added the Greek version of the familiar Jewish greeting, ‘*Shalōm*,’ or ‘peace.’

‘Grace’ is the undeserved favor of God, His kindness to those who merit His wrath and condemnation. Grace is a very big word; it speaks of all the blessings of salvation – past, present, and future.

‘Peace’ involves more than the absence of hostilities between God and man. This is a peace that sustains God’s people, even when they are going through great and serious times of trial. This peace has been established by God through the word of His Son (cp. Eph. 2:14-17; Col. 1:20).

C. Thanksgiving (Philemon 4-7)

Paul was confident that he could appeal to Philemon to forgive Onesimus because he knew that he was a man of real spiritual caliber. We learn in verses 4-7 that Paul prayed for Philemon and that when he did so, he thanked God for the man that grace had made him, for the character of forgiveness that was in Philemon.

A thanksgiving that acts as a ridge between the letter opening and the body of the letter is customary in the letters of Paul (it is omitted only in Galatians and Titus). Four discrete elements can be discerned. Paul (1) expresses thanks for Philemon (v. 4a); (2) reports that he constantly prays for him (v. 4b); (3) explains why he gives thanks for Philemon, mentioning his love and faith (v. 5); and (4) tells Philemon what he is praying for him (v. 6). Verse 7 is not formally part of the thanksgiving. It is transitional, elaborating the thanksgiving and preparing the way for Paul’s appeal to Philemon in verse 8. Verses 5-7 fall into a chiasmic arrangement: love – faith (v. 5) – faith (v. 6) – love (v. 7).

1. Paul’s Prayer (v. 4)

Paul begins the main body of his letter by praising Philemon. The virtuous character of Philemon becomes the foundation upon which Paul bases his appeal for him to forgive Onesimus.

Paul always thanks God for Philemon and remembers him in his prayers; and he does not grow weary in this exercise because he hears news of Philemon from time to time. Paul knew firsthand of Philemon’s character, having been God’s chosen tool to bring him to Christ and having worked with him. However, Paul talks about ‘hearing’ of Philemon’s love and faith because it has been so long since they have been together, likely 5 years or so. Epaphras, Philemon’s pastor at Colossae, was with Paul in Rome (v. 23). He, too, could testify about Philemon, as could Onesimus. What he hears encourages him to thank God more fervently.

Paul says much the same thing about many other individuals and churches (praying always for them). If Paul is not exaggerating in these verses, they reveal a man who spent quite considerable time in prayer for Christians all over the Mediterranean world – an implicit testimony to Paul’s view of the significance of prayer.

Paul often uses the language of ‘remembering’ for prayer (Rom. 1:9; Eph. 1:16; Phil. 1:3; Col. 4:18; 1 Th. 1:2, 3; 2 Tim. 1:3). ‘Remembering’ is a significant activity in Scripture, involving not just the recall of facts but a pondering on or presenting to someone those facts with a view toward changing one’s attitude. ‘Remembering’ people in prayer, then, involves not only the

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mental activity of considering them and their needs but also calling on God to consider them and act for their benefit.

2. Philemon's Character (v. 5)

It is noticeable that Philemon had a heart for Christ and a heart for his people (v. 5). The two things that Paul learns about Philemon concerns his faith and his love. Verse 5 has a chiasmic nature; the first part of the verse, 'love,' goes with the last phrase, 'toward all the saints,' while 'faith' is directed 'toward the Lord Jesus.' This understanding of the text matches the usual way Paul speaks of faith and love. These qualities stood out in Philemon's life.

'Faith' never stands alone; Paul makes it clear that Philemon's faith is not in himself or his abilities – not even in Paul. His faith is in the Lord Jesus Christ. In this context, 'faith' does not necessarily mean that faith that saves so much as loyal and steadfast commitment. The present tense of *echō* ('you have') demonstrates the continuous nature of Philemon's concern for the Lord.

Paul meant that Philemon's love, both for Jesus and His people, was loyal and dependable. *Agapé* ('love') is the love of will and choice, of self-sacrifice and humility. Because of this faith in the Lord, he is enabled to show true biblical love. That love expressed itself in a concern for people, for 'all the saints (*hagious*).' Philemon's concern for people gave him the ability to forgive. Paul never again refers to Philemon's faith (although, of course, he takes it for granted), but he appeals twice more to Philemon's 'love' as a way of motivating him to extend grace to Onesimus (vv. 7, 9).

3. Paul's Desire (v. 6)

Paul goes on to encourage Philemon to continue to show these virtues of faith and love. Paul's prayer for Philemon in verse 6 is difficult to translate. The main idea seems to be that Paul prayed that Philemon would benefit more and more as the quality of his discipleship intensified. The 'sharing' of his faith mentioned here is not to do with evangelism, but sharing himself with his fellow believers, a sharing in faith and in Christ.

a) Fellowship of Your Faith (v. 6a)

This verse is universally recognized as the most difficult in Philemon. A glance at several English translations will reveal several key differences in interpretation. The conjunction that links the verse to the previous verse (*hopōs*) could indicate purpose or result. If we give the word this meaning, then verse 6 will indicate the purpose or result of Philemon's faith and love. But this connection does not make very good sense. Most of the versions, therefore, introduce the verb 'pray' as a way of suggesting that v. 6 indicates the purpose or content of Paul's prayer in verse 4b.

The diversity of translations reveals the difficulty of the next phrase. The two key words in the phrase, *koinōnia* ('fellowship') and *pistis* ('faith'), have a variety of meanings. *Koinōnia* ('fellowship') is difficult to render precisely in English. It is usually translated 'fellowship,' but it means much more than merely enjoying each other's company. It refers to a mutual sharing of all life, and could be translated 'belonging.' Believers belong to each other in a mutual partnership, produced by their faith in Christ. Christians 'participate in' or 'share in' the realities of the new covenant blessings or the 'sharing with' other believers in those realities.

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Pistis ('faith') normally has an active sense in Paul, referring to 'the act of believing.' But it can also sometimes have a passive sense, denoting 'that which one believes,' for example, the 'Christian faith.' One way to interpret this phrase treats 'faith' as the 'object,' or the things in which one participates. In this view, Paul would be praying that Philemon's participation with other Christians in the Christian faith or ministry or act of believing might become effective.

However, it seems more likely that Paul seems to be praying that Philemon's fellowship with other believers, based on faith, might be effective. In this view, 'faith' is not the object of fellowship but the basis for it. This viewpoint better accounts for the prominence of the word *koinōnia* in this verse, especially in light of the overall argument of the letter. Paul could have prayed simply that Philemon's 'faith' might become more effective. But instead, he puts *koinōnia* in the position. The word captures a central concern of the letter: to highlight the reality of the close and intimate 'fellowship' that Christians enjoy with one another as a fundamental basis for the way we perceive ourselves and for the way that we are to respond to specific situations. 'Fellowship based on faith, or produced by faith,' rather than 'fellowship in faith' better captures this significance. Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon, bound together in faith, are forced by circumstances to think through the radical implications of their *koinōnia*.

Real faith and love will inevitably result in a concern for fellowship. There is no place in the Body of Christ for an individualism that does not care about others. That concern for fellowship was also motivation for Philemon to forgive Onesimus. Failing to do so would lead to a rift in the fellowship since Onesimus was now also a believer.

b) Knowledge of Every Good Thing (v. 6b)

Paul assumes, then, that Philemon exists in fellowship with other believers. His prayer is that that fellowship might 'be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ.' 'Effective' translates *energēs*, which literally means 'powerful' and connotes activity and energy.

Epignōsis ('knowledge') refers to deep, rich, full, experimental knowledge. It is the knowledge that comes through personal acquaintance with the truth. It is a practical, experiential knowledge. Philemon could read of forgiveness, or hear a sermon about it. But until he forgave, he could have no experiential knowledge of it. By forgiving Onesimus, Philemon would experience that good thing in him know as forgiveness. Practicing the truths of Scripture leads to the *epignōsis* that brings spiritual maturity (cp. Eph. 4:12-13). It is wonderful to understand what it means to trust God, but more wonderful to experience His power in the times when we trusted him with no strength of our own.

Paul wants Philemon 'to understand and put into practice' 'every good thing.' This expression is deliberately vague. Again, Paul deftly introduces a concept that will appear later and more specifically in the letter; if Philemon does learn to do 'every good thing' (*pantos agathou*), he will be glad to comply with Paul's request that he do a specific 'good thing' (*agathon*) (v. 14, 'favor').

Philemon is to strive for this knowledge 'for Christ's sake.' The Greek text literally reads, 'unto Christ' (*eis Christon*). The goal of everything believers do should be the glory of Christ (cp. 1 Cor. 10:31).

In summary, here is a paraphrase of verse 6 based on the exegetical decisions presented above: 'Philemon, I am praying that the mutual participation that arises from your faith in Christ may

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become effective in leading you to understand and put into practice all the good that God wills for us and that is found in our community; and do all this for the sake of Christ.’

4. Philemon’s Ministry (v. 7)

The theme of love in verse 7 ties this verse back to verse 5, completing a chiasm: Philemon’s love and faith (v. 5) – Philemon’s faith (v. 6) – Philemon’s love (v. 7). At the same time, verse 7 functions as a personal reflection on all of verses 4-6. But verse 7 also looks ahead: with its focus on Philemon’s love and his refreshing of the ‘hearts’ of believers, it lays further groundwork for the appeal that follows (‘love’ in v. 9; ‘heart’ in vv. 12, 20).

Paul has ‘great joy and encouragement’ because of Philemon’s love. The word translated ‘encouragement’ (*paraklésis*) could also mean ‘comfort.’

We read that Philemon had refreshed ‘the hearts of the saints’ (v. 7). ‘Hearts’ translates *splancha*, which literally means ‘inward parts,’ ‘entrails,’ or ‘bowels.’ In the New Testament, it generally refers to the seat of the feelings or emotions. Paul uses this word to stress that Philemon’s love had ‘refreshed’ the people of God at the deepest and most significant level of their being. Some interpreters think that Paul may be referring to one particular act of kindness on Philemon’s part. But this is not clear, and it is perhaps more likely that he reflects on the lasting effects of Philemon’s ministry over a period of time.

‘Refreshed’ is from *anapauō*, a military term that speaks of an army resting from a march. Philemon brought troubled people rest and renewal; he was a peacemaker. His secular occupation was a businessman, we do not know if he was an elder, deacon, or teacher in the church. But he was a man of instinctive kindness, a source of blessing to everyone. As a well-to-do man he was generous and big-hearted.

5. Application

What does all this have to do with the main thrust of the letter? Paul understood that he was asking a good deal of Philemon. Forgiveness is demanding precisely because it does not come naturally. Paul could appeal to Philemon because he was a man who strove for excellence in every area of spiritual life. He was a man of well-rounded godliness.

The return of Onesimus would present Philemon with another challenge. There was potentially more at stake than the healing of a relationship between two men, one a Christian slave-owner and the other a believing slave. His reaction to one converted slave in particular would give Philemon the opportunity to reflect on his treatment of slaves in general. Would he be able to see that the claims of Christian brotherhood could somehow leap across the enormous social chasm that separated him from his work force.

These verses remind us of a sober fact. We all want forgiveness when we are in the wrong, but it takes a person of rare caliber to be forgiving, and there is more at stake than the act of pardon itself. Philemon was a man of well-rounded godliness. That is precisely why Paul anticipated a favorable outcome for his appeal that his friend should forgive Onesimus. If we can develop the habit of cultivating all-round Christian maturity in the meantime, forgiveness may not prove quite so hard as it sometimes can.

For next time: Read Philemon 8-25.