



CAPITOL COMMISSION

A Life Prepared to Glorify (Philemon 4-7)

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Philemon 4-7 – [4] I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, [5] because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, [6] and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. [7] For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

Opening this letter with a prayer of thanksgiving follows the typical pattern in which Paul begins most of his epistles. The emphasis of his introductory statement shows how constantly Paul remembered Philemon. To Paul, he was one who stood with him in his ministry. He was a constant source of joy inspiring prayers of thanksgiving to God.

IT IS LIKELY THAT PAUL LEARNED OF PHILEMON'S FAITH AND LOVE FOR ALL THE SAINTS FROM PHILEMON'S OWN SLAVE ONESIMUS. ONESIMUS HAS APPARENTLY NOT BEEN SLANDERING PHILEMON.

SALVERY & CHRISTIANITY - JOHN W. ROBBINS

As Paul elaborates on his prayer for Philemon in V5-7, we find that the content of his prayer lays the foundation upon which Paul will address the situation at hand. This also seems to be typical in his other church epistles. The focus of Paul's prayer of thanks initiates the conversation and points the direction where his letter is heading. For example, in his letter to the church in Rome which had limited apostolic influence, he prays that the way may be opened to visit them so that he may impart some spiritual gift to make them strong.¹ For the church in Corinth who struggled with much grievous sin, Paul gave thanks for the grace given them in Christ Jesus.² For the church in Philippi, whom Paul had to leave in its infancy, he prays with thanks, confident that God will complete the good work he began in their lives.³

THANKS FOR LOVE AND FAITH

In the same way, Paul provides for us a roadmap for how he will address the reconciliation of Philemon and Onesimus. He builds upon two of the three key components of Christianity: faith and love. These two are tied together often in the NT Scriptures. We also see it in Paul's prayers of thanks for the church in Colossae to which Philemon belonged. In

Paul's letter to the Galatians, he addresses these same topics as he seeks to defend the Gospel against legalism through adherence to the Old

Covenant, specifically circumcision. In defense of the Gospel he makes this statement, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love."⁴ What we see from this passage and will find in the book of Philemon is this, both faith and love are required in order for Jesus to be exalted in the lives of his people.

APPLICATION:

Paul's life as demonstrated in the epistles was a life of prayer. He never approached a situation in a cavalier or callous manner. His response to the challenges of proclaiming, establishing and defending the Gospel was with a mind that sought to see the good in the lives of his brothers and sisters and to bring the challenges he faced before his Father in heaven. How often we dismiss people and disregard God because we think we know what should be done in a given situation! Prayer affords us the opportunity to humble ourselves as we consider others and bring life's circumstances before our Father in heaven.

A CHRIST-LIKE PATTERN

While the ESV provides a more literal wording of V5, this verse should be understood to mean faith in the Lord Jesus and love for all the saints. If one were to take the literal wording of the Greek, it would require an awkward understanding of "faith." Example, how could faith be directed toward the saints?⁵

From Paul's prayer, we begin to see an encouraging picture of Philemon. He was a man whose faith is described in the present tense ("you have"). This reveals a life of consistent faith in Christ. He was also a man who demonstrates a genuine love and devotion for those in the body of Christ. He possessed exemplary qualities as a Christian, and these attributes made him sensitive to the request Paul was making.⁶

In V6-7, we find Paul expanding his discourse concerning Philemon's faith and love. He transitions in V6 from a prayer of thanksgiving to one of intercession for Philemon's faith. In this verse, we find the thrust of Paul's appeal. He considers the matter of reconciling these two brothers as a matter of faith. At a later point, we will consider why Paul placed his emphasis on dealing with this situation on what Philemon believed, not on what he would do.

Let us focus on what Paul considered Philemon's strength. In V7, we find nothing but glowing praise for his love of the brothers. Philemon's actions have brought not only much joy but also encouragement. Paul can expect

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"good things" regarding Onesimus because he has shown to be a man who is accustomed to doing "good things" toward those in the family of Christ. The only question in Paul's mind appears to be whether he will see Onesimus as one in the family of Christ, an equal at the foot of the cross. If this is accomplished, Paul is then confident of Philemon's response toward Onesimus because he has already demonstrated a lifestyle of love for those in the body of Christ.

APPLICATION:

How do we respond when we find ourselves in life's messy situations? Is our typical reaction why us? If we were Philemon, would we have hoped that Onesimus would have disappeared, not to be heard from again? In his return, would we question why we are forced to deal with this situation? This type of thinking misses the point. When considering Philemon and Onesimus, do we see them as the men chosen by God for this moment, men God created and prepared to serve His kingdom in this way? When confronted with these moments in our lives, let us see this as a vote of confidence from God. Let us not shrink back from the way God chooses to use us, but may we bring glory to his name by living honorably before God in the midst of life's challenging situations. Also, as we look to the future, let us prepare ourselves to be those who others can place confidence in because of the Christ-like pattern of our lives.

OUR SHARED FAITH IN CHRIST

Circling back to the question asked earlier, why would Paul seek to address the reconciling of Philemon with Onesimus as an issue of faith? We find the word "faith" is used in two ways in the Scriptures. It is used subjectively, the mental act of believing. It is also used objectively, a proposition believed. In V6, Paul prays that the sharing of one's faith may be effective. This word for "sharing" in the Greek is the word *koinonia*. It can also be translated as fellowship or partnership.⁷ Paul is reminding Philemon that our belief in Jesus, while it is something we do personally, also connects us with others who share the same set of beliefs. This is what Paul needed Philemon to grasp. He needed to understand not only that his faith connected him to Christ but also to Onesimus.

Paul's desire for Philemon was to live by this truth, to understand he is connected to all those who have faith in Christ. This connection is on the basis of a shared set of beliefs about Jesus Christ and his work on the cross. Our relationships based on our shared beliefs in Christ have depth because this connection is not based on our action or feelings toward that person but upon what Jesus did for us.

Paul desires for this sharing of the faith to be effective in the life of Philemon. He tells him this occurs as we come to know the good things that are in our lives for Jesus' sake. Philemon might ask, what are these "good things"? Paul answers this for him. He does not leave Philemon in the dark. It is quite simply the receiving of Onesimus back, not as a slave but better than a slave, as a dear brother.⁸ Yet, while having a relationship with Onesimus as a dear brother is good, Paul wants to make one thing abundantly clear. This good thing he had received should never be used in a selfish manner, and this relationship exists in his life for the sake of Jesus.

APPLICATION:

Let us consider the concept of Radical Fellowship, a fellowship in which those who belong to Christ love each other as Jesus loved them. We see that this type of response is built upon a faith that expresses itself in love. It is not a love that is sentimental, or wishy-washy, but a love that is grounded in the belief that our connection to one another is on the basis of our shared faith in Christ. We can not pick and choose whom we love in the body of Christ. Understanding this truth, we can experience the same power that can unite slave and master through Christ. Let us love each other in the same way, not on the basis of our common ideology or natural affinity with one another, but our shared faith in Christ. May the world know that we are disciples of Jesus because they see this love we have for one another in the body of Christ. This love breaks through all worldly barriers and unites man first to Christ on the basis of faith, then to each other through the love modeled by Christ.

1- Roman 1:11 (ESV)

2- 1 Corinthian 1:4 (ESV)

3- Philippians 1:6 (ESV)

4 - Galatians 5:6 (ESV)

5- M. R. Vincent, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Philippians and to Philemon*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1897), 178,

6- Richard R. Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, electronic ed., Logos Library System; *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001). 353

7 – Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider. *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990-.Volume 1

8 – Philemon 17 (ESV)