

# MORE THAN A SLAVE

## *A Study of Philemon*

### Study #2 An Effective Fellowship (Philemon 4-7)

- 4 *Εὐχαριστῶ τῷ θεῷ μου πάντοτε μνησίαν σου ποιούμενος ἐπὶ τῶν προσευχῶν μου,*  
5 *ἀκούων σου τὴν ἀγάπην καὶ τὴν πίστιν, ἣν ἔχεις πρὸς τὸν κύριον Ἰησοῦν καὶ εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους,*  
6 *ὅπως ἡ κοινωνία τῆς πίστεώς σου ἐνεργῆς γένηται ἐν ἐπιγνώσει παντὸς ἀγαθοῦ τοῦ ἐν ἡμῖν εἰς Χριστόν.*  
7 *χαρὰν γὰρ πολλὴν ἔσχον καὶ παράκλησιν ἐπὶ τῇ ἀγάπῃ σου, ὅτι τὰ σπλάγχνα τῶν ἁγίων ἀναπέπαιται διὰ σοῦ, ἀδελφέ.*

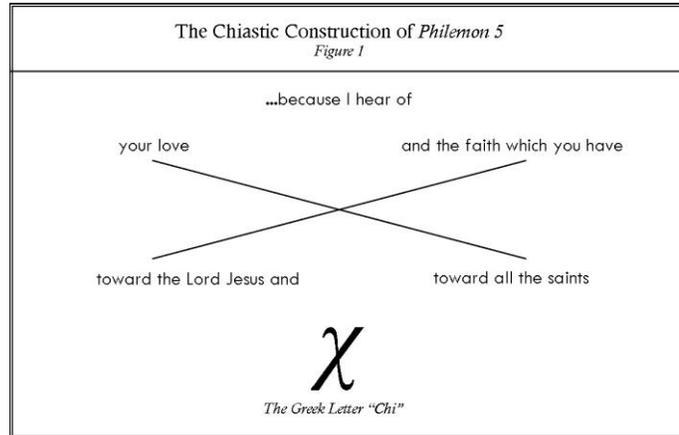
#### I. INTRODUCTION/REVIEW

- A. The Apostle Paul has written this short, very personal letter to his friend, spiritual son and Christian brother, Philemon, a slave owner from the city of Colossae.
- B. Paul has included the church that meets in Philemon's house, as witness to hold Philemon accountable to do as Paul asks of him. After all, Philemon has a good reputation with the church...and it is to that reputation that Paul now turns.

#### II. TEXT: PHILEMON 4-7

- A. *verse 4* = Paul assures Philemon of his faithfulness in praying and thanking God for him.
  1. “**I thank my God always...**” = Paul expresses gratitude to God for Philemon (cf. *1 Thessalonians 1:2-3; 2 Thessalonians 1:3; 2 Timothy 1:3*). In his letters, Paul often expresses gratitude to God for the testimony and work of other believers. Never in his letters, however, does Paul ever thank other men for these things.
    - a. “**I thank my God...**” = Paul is grateful for Philemon, and recognizes that the fruit in Philemon's life (*Philemon 5*) is the direct result of God's work in his life. But nowhere in the letter does Paul thank Philemon. Why? Consider Jesus' words:
      - i. *Luke 17:7-10* = We obey Christ out of love, yes—but also because it is our duty. We are His slaves, and our obedience neither mandates nor merits thanks. This does not mean we should not thank one another; but it does mean we should not demand that they thank *us*. Paul is writing to Philemon about his runaway slave, Onesimus. But you know, Philemon is a slave, too...of Christ! And so are we! Very important to have clear priorities and a right perspective. We are to be a thankful people, but ultimately thanks goes to God for His faithfulness in granting us the grace necessary for our lives to bear fruit.
    - b. “**...my God...**” = There is intimacy implied here. He is *our* God, corporately. But He is also *my* God personally, and yours, and Paul's. There is personal relationship involved.
    - c. “**...always...**” = Our attitude is to be one of continual gratitude (*Colossians 3:15-16, 4:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18*). It is helpful to remember Paul's circumstances as he writes to Philemon. He is a prisoner under house arrest in Rome, there on false, trumped-up charges. Yet he is continually thankful for the faithful testimonies of his brothers (note the continued emphasis on thanking God found in *Psalms 103-108*). Paul trusts God absolutely. What about you? Are you constantly grateful despite your sometimes unpleasant circumstances? Remember His promise: *Romans 8:28!*
  2. “**...making mention of you in my prayers...**” = When Paul prays, he mentions Philemon with an attitude of gratitude (cf. *Ephesians 6:18*).
- B. *verse 5* = Why is Paul continually grateful for Philemon?

1. "...because I hear..." = The testimony of Philemon is widely known and reported (cf. *1 Thessalonians 1:8-9*). This is another point of subtle pressure: The world is watching! What is *your* testimony? What do people see when they observe you?
2. "...of your love...toward all the saints..." = These two phrases, though separated in the text, are connected, forming a *chiastic* structure with the rest of the verse (see *Figure 1*). And this is yet another point of subtle pressure. Philemon's love for the saints is well-known, causing Paul to thank God. Surely this great love must inspire Philemon to comply with Paul's difficult request!



- a. "...love..." = This Greek word and its cognates are used five times in this short letter! This *agape* love for other believers is a defining mark of genuine Christians (*John 13:34-35, 15:12; 1 John 4:7-8, 11-12*). How is *your* love life?
3. "...the faith which you have...toward the Lord Jesus..." = Here is the second half of the *chiastic* phrase. Philemon's faith, and his consequent faithful life, is also well-known to the church. This, again, makes Paul grateful to God for His work in Philemon's life (cf. *Romans 1:8*).
- C. *verse 6* = What is Paul's prayer for Philemon? *Verse 5* really forms a kind of parenthesis, and Paul's thought from *verse 4* continues on in *verse 6*, joined by the Greek conjunction *hopos* ("that"). Read this way, the thought is, "...making mention of you in my prayers...that the fellowship of your faith..."
  1. "...and I pray..." = These words do not exist in the Greek manuscripts, but are supplied by the translators to give the sense, and to help connect this phrase logically and grammatically with *verse 4*.
  2. "...that the fellowship of your faith..." = This is a peculiar phrase, used only here in the New Testament. What Paul is probably expressing is the relationship that believers have with one another, and all the ramifications of that. Believers have a bond with one another, a certain commonality—and thus there is a high expectation for our conduct in relating to and dealing with one another.
    - a. *Jude 3* = Our salvation is a common one, meaning:
      - i. It is the same for all believers (*Romans 1:16; Titus 1:4; 2 Peter 1:1*).
      - ii. It unites us into the same body/household (*1 Corinthians 12:12-13; Ephesians 2:19, 4:1-6; 1 Timothy 3:14-15*). As such, there is an expectation regarding our conduct toward one another.
  3. "...may become effective..." = This Greek adjective, *energes*, is used only two other times in the New Testament (*1 Corinthians 16:9; Hebrews 4:12*), though its cognates are used several times. The idea here is that the bond we have as believers should manifest itself in our practice also (*1 Timothy 3:15; James 1:21-25, 2:14-18; 1 John 3:16-18*). The verb "become" does not necessarily imply that Philemon's life does not already reflect, in his practice, the reality of his faith. Only that in the specific issue that Paul is addressing, the challenge for Philemon will be to take what he knows as truth and act on it, even when this goes against his basic nature, and even when it is contrary to his well-established rights under Roman law.
  4. "...through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you..." = Doctrine is profoundly practical! Our behavior is modified as we learn truth more fully and allow it to transform our lives (*Romans 12:2; 2 Corinthians 3:18*). Paul's prayer for Philemon is this: Remember who you are in Christ and what He has done in and for you, and then reflect that toward other believers. Again we see the subtle pressure Paul is working into the letter as he builds toward his appeal in *verses 10* and following.
  5. "...for Christ's sake." = (*lit.* "into Christ") This is the only passage in the New Testament where this Greek phrase is translated this way in the NASB. Other similar passages in the NASB are formed from

different Greek constructions. In my opinion, the phrase is a continuation of Paul's thought, by which he means to urge Philemon into conformity with Christ's character; although with no other New Testament references, I can't be dogmatic.

- D. *verse 7* = Paul expresses his reason to pray for Philemon's effective fellowship, and especially his conviction and confidence that Philemon will respond properly to his appeal for Onesimus.
1. **"For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love..."** = Paul has, over time, come to appreciate Philemon's love for other believers. It brings him both joy and comfort (cf. *2 Corinthians 7:4*).
    - a. **"...joy..."** = Paul experiences great joy because of Philemon's love for the brothers (cf. *Philippians 2:1-2; 3 John 4*). What is the source of *your* joy? Are you swept up in the worldly pursuit of "happiness?" Or does your greatest joy come in the things of God, and particularly seeing other believers do what is right?
    - b. **"...comfort..."** = Paul's heart is comforted by Philemon's love for other believers (cf. *1 Thessalonians 3:6-8; Philemon 20*).
  2. **"...because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother."** = The source of Paul's joy and comfort through Philemon is that Philemon's love has refreshed the hearts of the saints. It ought to be our goal to refresh our brothers as much and as often as possible; we live in a very corrupt and challenging world, and God comforts us with the express intent that we will pass that comfort on (*2 Corinthians 1:3-4*). Philemon was doing this, and it caused Paul to rejoice. In fact, later in the letter, Paul will ask Philemon specifically to refresh *him* by doing as he asks (*verse 20*).

### III. CONCLUSION

- A. Does your prayer life include prayers of thanksgiving for other believers in your life?
- B. Does your testimony before other believers and before a watching world include two parts: love toward each other, and faith in the Lord Jesus?
- C. Is the "fellowship of your faith" effective? In other words, are you putting into practice what you profess to believe, as it relates to your conduct toward other believers?
- D. Are you seeking ways to refresh the hearts of your brothers and sisters in Christ?

### IV. PRAYER