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Michael A. G. Haykin

Praying Together: A Note on Philemon 22

The Professor of Church History at Heritage Baptist College and Theological Seminary, London, Ontario, has previously contributed to our pages with an important study of the place of the Holy Spirit in the Pastoral Epistles ('The Fading Vision? The Spirit and Freedom in the Pastoral Epistles', EQ 57, 1985, 291-305). We welcome another insightful excursion into the New Testament from his pen.

One of the drawbacks of modern English diction is that it is unable to distinguish between the plural and singular forms of a verb or pronoun in the second person. Unlike other European languages, for instance French with its various forms of *tu* and *vous*, modern English has to make do with the forms of one word for both the singular and plural: *you*. This lack causes some definite problems in the translation of the Greek of the New Testament, since the latter does make clear distinctions between the plural and singular forms of the verb, possessive adjective, and pronoun in the second person. In most cases this weakness of the English language makes no appreciable difference in the understanding of the New Testament text. But, in some cases, this weakness actually obscures the import of the text.

Consider, for instance, Phm. 22, where the Apostle Paul asks Philemon to 'prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you' [NKJV]. To whom is Paul referring in the latter part of this verse when he says 'your prayers' and 'granted to you'? With the exception of *Today's English Version* none of the modern English translations help to accurately answer this question.¹ If these translations alone are consulted, the im-

¹ *Today's English Version* translates this verse thus: 'At the same time, get a room ready for me, because I hope that God will answer the prayers of all of you and give me back to you.' See also the suggested translation of this verse by Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on Paul's Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Stuttgart, 1977), 132.

pression is received that Paul is alluding to Philemon's own private prayers.² Such an impression would be very misleading, however.

Paul's letter to Philemon is in the main a private one, in which the Apostle Paul takes up the subject of Philemon's runaway slave Onesimus with discretion and tact. Onesimus had fled from his master, Philemon, who lived at Colossae and somehow had come into contact with the Apostle Paul, who was imprisoned in Rome.³ There Onesimus had been converted [verse 10] and had proven to be of great service to Paul in his ministry [verses 11, 13]. Although the Apostle would have dearly loved to have kept Onesimus with him, he had no right to do so. Thus, he sends Onesimus back to Philemon with a letter in which Paul seeks to reconcile Onesimus and his master. After the mention of other Christians in the salutation and initial benediction [verses 1-3], Paul addresses himself in the body of the letter to one individual, namely Philemon. Thus, underlying all of the words translated by the English *you* or *your* from verse 4 to 22a is either a Greek verb in the second person singular or a form of the possessive adjective (σός) or personal pronoun (σύ) in the second person singular. But, then, in the middle of verse 22 there is a sudden shift from the second person singular to the second person plural. Paul asks Philemon to prepare (ἐτοίμαζε) a guest-room for him. The Apostle then goes on to give the reason for this request: 'I trust that through your (ὑμῶν) prayers I shall be granted to you (ὑμῖν).' Without warning Paul switches over to using forms of the second person plural personal pronoun (ὑμεῖς). This shift, hidden in nearly all modern English translations of the verse, is not a fortuitous one nor one that is done merely for stylistic effect. Behind it lies a profound appreciation of corporate prayer.

Although the body of the letter is directed to Philemon, since Paul is dealing with a personal matter which primarily concerns him, Paul never forgets the fact that Philemon also belongs to a circle of believers who meet in his home as a house-church. Paul mentions two of these believers by name in the opening salutation of the letter: Apphia and Archippus [verse 2]. Early commentators on this letter assumed, probably rightly so, that Apphia was Philemon's wife. Archippus may have been their son; though this cannot be known for certain.⁴ Paul further describes Archippus as 'our fellow soldier', a term that the Apostle uses to designate one who had worked

² For example, see the remarks of Holmes Rolston on this verse: 'a gracious tribute is paid to Philemon's prayers for Paul's release' [in Balmer H. Kelly, et al. eds., *The Layman's Bible Commentary* (Richmond, Virginia, 1963), 23:131].

³ For Rome as the most probable place of Paul's imprisonment, see Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (Waco, Texas, 1982), xlix-liii.

⁴ *Ibid.* 259, 273.

alongside him in his missionary labours and had stood by him through hardship and trial.⁵ C.F.D. Moule suggests that the word could well be translated 'fellow-campaigner'.⁶ This way of describing Archippus well reveals the Apostle Paul's collegial style of ministry. His ministry was regularly exercised from within the context of a team and broadly characterized by a deep reliance on other believers.⁷ Along with these two individuals, Paul also greets the church which meets in Philemon's house. Thus, even though the letter which follows deals with a private matter, Paul is conscious that the ever-present backdrop to Philemon's decision regarding Onesimus is the Christian community to which Philemon belongs.

Now, at the conclusion of the letter, Paul informs Philemon of his intention to visit him and his assurance that the believers who comprise the house-church which meets in Philemon's home are regularly remembering him in prayer [verse 22]. Paul links these two items of information together by making his intended visit to Philemon dependent on God hearing the prayers of Philemon and his house-church. It is noteworthy that Paul does not assume that he knows God's mind in this matter. By using the verb in the passive voice at this point—pray that 'I shall be granted (χαρισθήσομαι) to you'—Paul recognizes that ultimately his release is in the hands of a sovereign God. The Apostle knew from experience that those who engage in genuine prayer are ever-conscious of their limitations and lack of insight, and that all too often they do not know what to pray for [Rom. 8:26]. Thus, mature prayers never leave God's sovereignty out of the picture.⁸ Nevertheless, this deep sense of God's sovereign control over the events of his life does not issue in an attitude of fatalism, in which prayer is regarded as next to useless. On the contrary, Paul knows that God's sovereign purposes are regularly accomplished through the prayers of his people. Thomas Blundel (ca. 1752–1824), an eighteenth-century British Baptist and friend of William Carey, well expresses Paul's conviction when he states that 'it is chiefly in answer to prayer that God has carried on his cause in

⁵ See the use of the same term in Phil. 2:25 with reference to Epaphroditus. See also the comments of O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 273.

⁶ *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Cambridge, 1957), 140.

⁷ Cf. the remarks of Mary Ann Getty, 'The Theology of Philemon' in Kent Harold Richards, ed., *Society of Biblical Literature 1987 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta, 1987), 507.

⁸ See the astute comments of Alexander Maclaren in this regard, *Colossians and Philemon* (London, 1889), 489. Murray J. Harris describes Paul's use of the passive voice here as a 'theological passive'. By this he means that Paul employs the passive voice in order to avoid naming God directly [*Colossians & Philemon* (Grand Rapids, 1991), 279].

the world: he could work without any such means; but he does not, neither will he.⁹

Moreover, it is as God's people engage in corporate prayer that God accomplishes his purposes for the advance of his kingdom. The communal context of this letter, reflected in verses 1 and 2, now suddenly re-emerges. As Paul thinks of Philemon praying for his release from prison and his forthcoming visit to his home, he cannot isolate Philemon's prayers from those of his fellow believers. Paul's reliance on other believers in his ministry is again evident as he mentions his assurance that not only Philemon, but also his entire house-church is remembering him in prayer. Furthermore, the context for these prayers should not be regarded as limited to these believers' personal times of prayer. Paul's language envisages the house-church in Philemon's home praying as a whole and together for his release.¹⁰ Further support for this conclusion comes from the fact noted above that this letter, despite its personal nature, has a communal tone right from its start. It should also be recognized that Paul's release from prison is not simply a matter affecting his own personal welfare. His release is of deep importance for his ongoing apostolic ministry in the Lycus Valley, where Philemon's house-church was located.¹¹ The mention of Onesimus and Archippus in Col. 4:9 and 4:17 respectively implies that Paul's letter to the Colossians was written on the same occasion as his letter to Philemon. If so, then Paul was writing to Philemon at a critical juncture when the latter's church was being threatened with the false teaching which Paul seeks to refute in his letter to the Colossians. Praying for his release from imprisonment was therefore a matter of concern for the entire house-church, and something which he naturally expected all of them to be engaged in as a congregation of believers.

Finally, this request for prayer at the conclusion of Paul's letter to Philemon needs to be read in conjunction with other references to corporate prayer in Paul's letters, in particular, 2 Cor. 1:9-11 and Phil. 1:19. In both of these texts and, as we have hopefully shown, Phm. 22, the Apostle displays his conviction that, as the eighteenth-century Baptist commentator John Gill (1697-1771) puts it: 'the prayer of a righteous man availeth much with God, and is very

⁹ *Sermons on Various Subjects* (London, 1806), 183.

¹⁰ See Lewis B. Radford, *The Epistle to the Colossians and the Epistle to Philemon* (London, 1931), 366.

¹¹ Gordon P. Wiles, *Paul's Intercessory Prayers: The Significance of the Intercessory Prayer Passages in the Letters of St. Paul* (Cambridge, 1974), 282.

prevalent with him, and much more the prayers of a whole church.¹²

Abstract

The significance of the shift to the second person plural in Philemon 22 has often been ignored. The entire house church should, it is assumed, be engaged in prayer for Paul and not just Philemon himself.

¹² *An Exposition of The New Testament* (1809 ed.; repr. Paris, Arkansas, 1989), III, 124.