Notes on Philemon

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Philemon

With translation of an amended text.

Introduction.

This letter, an appendix to the Pastoral Epistles, has a character of its own; so much so that those, whose mania it has been to doubt its genuineness as an inspired communication of the apostle, have without difficulty put together some slight appearances on which to build their destructive argument. Indeed Dr. Ellicott, one sees, does not include the letter to Philemon, but gives those only to Timothy and Titus as the Pastoral Epistles; and in this he does not differ from others. Nevertheless, allowing a marked difference, it is their beautiful complement and follows them so naturally that we may without violence class them together, rather than leave the letter to Philemon absolutely isolated.

But peculiarities there could not but be in a document so distinct from the governing instructions given to Paul's fellow-labourers in their general work of superintendence. For the subject-matter before us is the opposite side of gracious care in a matter of domestic life. Divine love actively applies itself, in a manner essentially its own, to the ease of a runaway slave from Colosse, who had been brought to God through the apostle during his first imprisonment in Rome. For the date of this Epistle is at least as certain as that of the Second to Timothy, which was the latest of the apostle's writings, just before his imminent death that closed the second imprisonment in the great metropolis: a date, as all know, far more defined than that of the First Epistle

to Timothy or of the letter to Titus. It was written, generally speaking, about the same time as those to the Ephesians and to the Colossians, as well as to the Philippians.

It is clear too from a comparison of the apostolic statements that Colosse in Phrygia was the city wherein lived Philemon, Archippus (it would seem) being an inmate of his house. Nor was this all that characterised it. As there was one assembly in the house of Nymphas the Laodicean, while we hear of the assembly of Laodiceans, so we read of the assembly in Philemon's house, though there was the assembly of Colossian faithful besides. All the saints composed the assembly in that locality; yet this in no way forbade, but well consisted with, the assembly in this house or in that.

The simple believer may wonder that it should be necessary to insist on what is so plain an inference from Col. 4:9, 17 compared with our Epistle, that Philemon, and Onesimus of course, as well as Archippus, resided in Colosse. Yet Grotius (Annott. in V. et N. Test. in loco) will have it that Philemon was not only an inhabitant of Ephesus, but an elder or bishop of the church there. And of late Wieseler contends that Philemon and the others belonged to Laodicea! Is it worth while to expose the feeble and false reasoning put forth in support of such strange suppositions? It is probable indeed, as the apostle had not visited Colosse or Laodicea before he wrote his Epistle to the former (Col. 2:1), that Philemon may have heard and received the truth at Ephesus (Acts 19:10); he was certainly indebted to the apostle for his conversion (Philemon 19). But "fellow-worker" is much too general a word to bear the construction that Philemon was set apart to the charge either of presbyter

or of deacon. He laboured in the truth, he cared for the saints; and the apostle owned him as his joint-workman, just as later still the apostle John acknowledged Gaius (3 John 5-8) on grounds at least as broad. Whatever the character of his work, it is undefined in an Epistle which from its nature does not set forth official distinction for the apostle himself, nor for Archippus, though we know from Col. 4:17 that the latter had a distinct ministry in the Lord which he was exhorted to fulfil. In our Epistle, however, the Holy Spirit for the wisest and best reasons would have all to be on the footing of grace.

This then is the key-note. The apostle acts in a practical way on the incomparable grace of Christ. It Is not merely that God despises not any, or that human compassion flows out toward the misery of one's fellow, even if a slave, yea so much the more because he was. There is the finest and liveliest field for the affections; but the spring is from above, and the power is in the Holy Spirit, that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, Whose is the glory and the dominion unto the ages of the ages. The title of the master is frankly admitted not only by Paul in word but also by the returning slave in deed. There is no glossing over the wrong done. Whatever was due positively or negatively, Paul will have it set to his account and becomes absolutely responsible for all. For true grace never enfeebles law nor shirks righteousness, but on the contrary establishes it, while itself rises far above and flows out freely and immeasurably beyond.

The infinite reality of Christ fills the apostle's heart, as it habitually did. The providence of God directed the feet of the fugitive to Rome, where detection was hardest for one so insignificant in the midst of a vast population

with extremes of grandeur and degradation, of wealth and penury, yet even the lowest not without mortification lavished on them from the lords of the world, sinking to utter ruin through sinful pleasures and systematic selfishness which enervated all far more than they satisfied any. There, through whatever motive led or possibly without one, the grace of God gave Onesimus to hear Paul and to believe the gospel It became his joy to serve the apostle, specially in his sufferings for Christ and the gospel's sake; but a single eye to Christ lays on Paul's heart the earthly master he had wronged. He too feels bound, and the gospel beyond all fortified his sense of the obligation, to return to his master at all cost, let the consequences be what they might. Hence the apostle, whatever his love to his son in the gospel, whatever his value for the services of love then rendered and acceptable, whatever his pity for one whose misconduct had exposed him to severe punishment for his own wrong and as an example to others, was led of the Spirit to write this Epistle instinct with the grace of the gospel from the first line to the last, as may be shown more clearly in weighing its every word.

It has been termed "the polite Epistle," one cannot say with christian propriety, though it be quite true that those who pique themselves most on their nice sense of honour and courtesy, of tact and courage, of prudence and friendship, of purity and tenderness, on the ground of human nature or of social standing, must feel themselves in the presence of what exceeds not their experience only but their ideal. It is not "the gentleman"1 that stands revealed in the Epistle, but "the Christian"; and this is not in theory or exhortation only but in living reality; that we, having the same Christ

and the same Spirit, may by grace make the same divine word good ourselves, and so commend this scripture all the more to others. In fact all round it is the exercise of divine life, which the Holy Spirit promotes, growing out of a mere domestic question calculated without Christ to provoke much anger, or to be condoned in condescending good nature and human self-complacency. As Christians we are exhorted to be imitators of God.

Doddridge seems to have been the first to suggest the comparison of Pliny the younger's letter to Sabinianus (ix. 21), not merely the brief sequel of thanks which Alford cites (ix. 24): models, both of them, of fine natural sentiments expressed with beauty, terseness and force, as became a refined Roman of ability and rank, who writes to conciliate an intimate friend with his freedman that had offended and been discarded. In the heathen, as we might expect, nothing rises above self. In the Christian the love of Christ is drawn out on behalf of one brought to God from the depths of sin and wretchedness, whose conscience prompted a return to his master armed with authority to punish his delinquency; but that master a Christian dear to the apostle, not only for other things but for his habitually gracious bearing to the saints.

Philemon therefore Paul here addresses, to guard from the impulses of nature and from the jealous exercise of legal rights as in a man of the world, yea rather to lead into the communion of Christ's love in a case where it was readily liable to be overlooked. He would have him show "the kindness of God," like the man after God's heart in the O. T. to the family of his enemy, where a ground of love and truth presented itself. And was there

not a better basis here, where by sovereign grace Onesimus was in Christ as truly as Philemon? Did not Philemon also rejoice to have the opportunity of being "an imitator of God"? This the apostle was about that time inculcating on the Ephesian faithful, to walk in love even as Christ also loved and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for an odour of a sweet smell? How he pleads like Christ our Advocate in the face of sin on our part will appear in the details of the Epistle.

Notice also with what address the apostle brings in "the sister" wife, and the service of Archippus, as well as the assembly in Philemon's house; that love might be the more strengthened, severally and together, and the head of the house be led in the way of grace, not by constraint from without or within, but of a ready mind according to God.

The Epistle Of Paul To Philemon.

There were few or perhaps no great buildings in which the saints then congregated exclusively. Unity was maintained all the more strikingly in the Spirit's power, because they might meet in ever so many rooms or halls of a city. They were one body, not in idea or in a mere outward appearance, but in blessed truth, living reality, and holy practice. He who was a member of Christ was a member everywhere according to the place grace gave him in the one body, the church; and this was carefully insisted on alike as privilege and duty. Never do we hear of assemblies in a city, no matter what the extent of the city, or the number of the saints therein, or consequently of the meeting-places for convenience' sake. It is the church in Jerusalem, in Ephesus, etc., whether they met

together in one company or in ten. Coming together (ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ) supposes unity of purpose: the place might or might not be one, as has been proved fully. Even if they met in several quarters for convenience, ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ would still be true. So long as they acted in faith of the Lord's presence in their midst, it was the local expression of "one body and one Spirit." "Into one place" limits the gathering unduly and might be quite false as a fact. "Together" is the true thought, which leaves the fact open according to circumstances, but always as maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, if the Lord and the word of His grace be honoured. It was "for the same purpose."

The apostle opens his letter with that spiritual appropriateness which marks every scripture, in a wisdom higher than man's, yet with a gracious purpose which was suited to act on man's heart and turn the occasion to the richest profit from God. The assertion of his authority, however important in its place, as to the Romans, the Corinthians, the Galatians, the Ephesians, the Colossians, as well as to Timothy and Titus, is with no less propriety absent from his address to the Philippians and the Thessalonians (to say nothing of the Hebrews), as well as to Philemon. The motive for that absence may have a shade of difference in each; but there is the common ground of grace taken, instead of putting forward his primary position in the church. This however is only negative. We shall see that there is here as elsewhere what is positive, no less than carrying forward the end which the Holy Spirit had in view, as is ever the fact in scripture.

"Paul, prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy the brother, to Philemon our beloved and fellow-worker, and to

Apphia the sister, and to Archippus our fellow-soldier, and to the assembly in thy house: grace to you and peace from God our Father and [the] Lord Jesus Christ" (Philemon 1-3).

When Paul wrote to the Ephesians, the Colossians, and the Philippians, he was no less a "prisoner of Jesus Christ," than when he drew up his letter to Philemon. Indeed he twice alludes impressively to the fact in the body of the Epistle to the Ephesians as well as towards its close (Eph. 3:1, Eph. 4:1, Eph. 6:20), as he touches on it to the Philippians (Phil. 1:13, 14), and to the Colossians (Col. 4:4, cf. 10 also). To Philemon only he so designates himself at once in his salutation, "Paul, prisoner of Christ Jesus." This was the badge of honour with which he presented himself. "In behalf of you Gentiles" was a beautiful appeal to the Ephesians. Here the addition would have been out of place. It set forth Christ Jesus, and was all the more simple and direct to the heart of Philemon. It was not a bow drawn by a man at a venture, but an arrow of love aimed by a hand directed of the Holy Spirit.

"And Timothy the (or, our) brother:" was this haphazard? Surely not. He who was long so dear to the apostle, and now in the most trusted fellowship of government, and the sharer of his deepest solicitude both for sound doctrine and godly order, an overseer of overseers, is joined in the address, but just as carefully apart from ecclesiastical office as in his own case "Timothy the brother." All must here stand in gracious affection. Was not he too a "brother" on behalf of whom the Epistle was written?

Nor is there less divine skill in the way the master of the house is approached: “to Philemon our beloved and fellow-worker” — possibly “the beloved and our fellow-worker.” If there was a draught now to be made, it was on one whose affection in the Lord, known and proved, had made him (as it ever does) the beloved of all saints that knew; especially of the apostle whose heart strongly sympathised with and appreciated every soul that kept himself in the love of God, to say nothing of the personal link to which Philemon 20 alludes in its latter half. Besides, Paul describes Philemon as the fellow-worker of himself and Timothy. Can we conceive such an expression of honourable consideration without a powerful effect on his soul, especially as it came from one as far as possible from lightness of speech, who could write, if any man might so venture, “as of sincerity, as of God, before God we speak in Christ?” Flattering discourse was as far from him as covetousness or self-seeking in any shape. For him to call Philemon “fellow-worker” of himself and Timothy, what a cheer to one serving God amidst all sorts of trial and discouragement!

But there is a remarkable peculiarity that follows. The apostle here only incorporates a woman’s name in the address of his Epistle. Doubtless it is the only communication of his where it was tolerable. Here it is admirably in place. For a wife has far more to do with the practical guidance of the house than her husband. And the question of a run-away slave must touch a mistress closely, as it would affect all the family. Hence the gracious wisdom in the exceptional step of including Apphia, who, one can scarcely doubt, was Philemon’s wife, certainly holding the chief female place in his

household. We may see in the Second Epistle of John the only other, yet even more striking, exception; for that Epistle is addressed exclusively “to the elect lady and her children”: a fact quite unique in scripture. The reason is as obvious as solemn. The person of Christ was at stake; and a gracious woman and her children would be peculiarly exposed to Satan’s wiles, if one, known in brighter circumstances but now “an antichrist,” sought an opening into her house to prey on generous but exposed souls, if not to undermine the doctrine of Christ. Hence the direct address “to the elect lady and her children;” and hence too the peremptory course enjoined.

In fact it is grace acknowledging the due claim of Apphia to be considered in the proper sphere of a saintly woman. She is carefully said to be “the sister.” She had her title in the Lord; her conscience, mind, and heart were respected in the matter. The reading of the Received Text (“the beloved” as in Tyndale, Cranmer, and “our beloved” as in A.V.) rests on inferior witnesses. Wiclif and the English Version of Rheims follow the later copies of the Vulgate, which mix the wrong and the right (“most dere sister,” “our deerest sister”). But the ancient manuscripts, followed by such copies of the Vulgate as the Am. Tol. and Harl., give the true and only appropriate reading “the sister.” Christian relationship is recognised, and familiarity is avoided. Not that “beloved” might not he suitable in other cases; but it may be doubted that Paul would have so spoken of Persis, unless he could add “who laboured much in the Lord;” and this too, not when standing alone, but in a crowd of others of whom he had something distinctive to say.

Then we have one annexed, after those who stood at the head of the house, “and to Archippus our fellow-soldier.” It is the same man who is enjoined in Col. 4:17 to take heed to the ministry he had received in the Lord, that he should fulfil it. There is no ground to imagine him a son any more than “chaplain” of Philemon; but that he laboured in the assembly there as elsewhere is clear from scripture. Nor can one avoid the conviction that courage and endurance in spiritual warfare led the apostle to mark not only Epaphroditus but Archippus as “fellow-soldier.” Terms, such as this, are never applied but with the utmost precision, as is true of every word in scripture.

Lastly we read, “and to the assembly (or, church) in thy house.” This does not mean exclusively the Christian inmates, but those accustomed to meet there as gathered to the Lord’s name. Such appears to be the force of the phrase wherever it occurs (Rom. 16:5, 1 Cor. 16:19, Col. 4:15). There were many Christian households; but the assembly in any given house implied that there was a meeting in the house, as here in Philemon’s. This Paul includes in his address; for the saints who met in that house, whether of the household or not, were now to be face to face with Onesimus. They might or might not have known his misconduct in the past. He was now in Christ, and, returning to his master, he thus would come directly before the assembly in his house. Therefore is care taken to associate the assembly there with that which would affect them all. For fellowship of saints is real and precious, and none the less because a poor slave, now a Christian, is the occasion of putting it to the proof: Christ is the all, and He is in all.

But in writing to the Colossian saints generally the apostle refers to “Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother,” as of them (i. e., a Colossian inhabitant), but says not a word of what fills the Epistle to Philemon. It was as important to secure the cordial fellowship of his household and of the meeting in his house in a family matter, as it was right to withhold it from the Colossians as a whole. The church is one body; but the grace and truth which came by Jesus Christ guards the delicate propriety of the Christian household, or at most those saints who meet in the house. To these all, to these only, would he open his heart about Onesimus.

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and [the] Lord Jesus Christ” (Philemon 3). So the apostle greeted the saints in Rome, in Ephesus, in Philippi; so as to the church in Corinth, and the churches in Galatia, more briefly to those in Colosse, still more so in his First to the Thessalonians, quite fully in his Second. To Timothy, if not Titus, he adds “mercy” as needed by the individual. And how blessed it is, whatever the form! What an unfailing spring, and how worthy the effect! What better, what so good, could the Father bestow on His children, or the Lord on His servants?

“I thank my God always making mention of thee in my prayers, hearing of thy love and of the faith which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, so that the fellowship of thy faith may become effectual in the acknowledgment of every good thing that is in us2 toward Christ. For we have great joy and encouragement in thy love, because the bowels3 of the saints are refreshed through thee, brother” (Philemon 4-7).

He begins as usual with owning all that was divinely wrought in the heart and ways of Philemon who is personally and even pointedly addressed throughout. He only takes in the rest at the close (Philemon 25), as he had associated them with him here at the beginning. But of him individually he speaks, as he thanks his God always, making mention of him in his prayers, hearing of his love and the faith which he had towards the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints; and this so that the communion of his faith might become operative in recognising every good thing that is in us Christward. It is not love that is here prominent but faith, though in Philemon 5 love took precedence of faith, which is an unusual order (compare Eph. 1, Col. 1). But here the apostle would have Philemon in fellowship of faith with all that are Christ's, and this in practical power, acknowledging every good thing that is in us toward Christ. How mischievous when saints never rise above the sense of our natural evil, dwelling only on the heart deceitful above all things and desperately wicked! Is there no reality in the new creation? no power in the ever-indwelling Holy Spirit that makes good Christ in us?

The apostle counted on all that was worthy of the Saviour and suited to redemption in Philemon. He expects that it is but a fresh occasion for the working of the love and faith known hitherto, and a ground of prayer with thanksgiving. Hence it is that the pressure of his own apostolic authority would have been as unseasonable as the meddling of brothers or the coercion of church action. How different the gracious intervention of Paul prisoner of Jesus Christ and the assembly in the house deeply interested in it all!

Undoubtedly there had been evil in Onesimus, and in his desertion of his master. But is it not the word of God to overcome evil with good, instead of being overcome by it? Is it not so that grace has wrought for us and in us? Nothing different is looked for now, but rather accordance with that course of grace which had characterised Philemon. “For I had much joy4 and encouragement in thy love because the bowels of the saints were refreshed through thee, brother” (ver. 7). What a home-thrust of love in that last word, as and where it is! Scripture teaches us to use it, not merely as the formal title of Christians, but with telling force where the occasion calls for it emphatically. Certainly it is so applied here by Paul, as of old to him (Acts 9:17), when this word must have fallen on his heart as dew from Jehovah, as showers upon the grass.

It is one of the melancholy signs and proofs of where the church is now, that even in the most earnest children of God there is but little thought of refreshing the hearts of the saints. Zeal is absorbed in the simple conversion of sinners. The glory of God in the church goes for nothing, the love of Christ for His body and every member is ignored for the most part. If some faint idea rises, it is chiefly of a benevolent kind, which Doddridge here expresses when he thinks only of the “poor” saints. Surely a call to the converted has been a crying want for well nigh eighteen hundred years. One says not this to lessen pity for the perishing, but to urge the claims of Christ’s glory and grace on the saved. The flock, the beautiful flock of the Lord, oh I how scattered and famished. If this is grievous in the Lord’s eyes, what should it be to us who love Him and it?

We come here to the immediate object of the Epistle, for which the introduction so admirably prepared the way. Would Philemon now swerve, through pre-occupation with his rights or the influence of worldly feeling and practice, from that practical grace, which had filled the apostle with so much the more joy because the hearts of the saints had been refreshed by him? Was the relationship of “brother” henceforth to lose its value in his eyes? This certainly the apostle did not anticipate, but counted on the triumph of divine love.

“Wherefore, having much boldness to enjoin thee what is befitting, for love’s sake I rather entreat, being such a one as Paul aged and now also prisoner of Christ Jesus. I entreat thee for my child whom I begot in bonds,5 Onesimus, the once unprofitable to thee but now profitable both6 to thee and to me; whom I send back to thee,7 in person,8 that is my bowels; whom I could wish to have kept with myself, that for thee he might minister to me in the bonds of the gospel. But without thy mind I would do nothing, that thy good might not be as of necessity but of willingness. For perhaps he was therefore parted for a time that thou mightest have him for ever, no longer as a bondman but above a bondman, a brother beloved, specially to me but how much rather to thee, both in [the] flesh and in [the] Lord” (Philemon 8-16).

It is one of the peculiar and mightiest characteristics of the gospel with which the apostle here makes the appeal: the assertion of a title, true, just, and indisputable, which he none the less foregoes in order to have free and full scope for grace in the one appealed to. So Christ lived, moved, and had His being here below; so did He most impressively lead His own into

that mind which they are called evermore by faith to possess and represent every day. Hear Him (Matt. 17) anticipating Peter, who had been quick to assure the half-shekel collectors of his Master's readiness to pay like a staunch Jew. "What thinkest thou, Simon? The kings of the earth, from whom do they receive custom or tribute? from their sons or from strangers? And when he said, From strangers, Jesus said, Therefore are the sons free. But lest we cause them to stumble, go thou to the sea, and cast a hook, and take up the fish that first cometh up; and when thou hast opened his mouth, thou shalt find a stater (= a shekel): that take and give to them for Me and for thee."

Undoubtedly the law had a direct claim on every son of Israel. But had not Simon only a little before confessed Jesus to be Son of the living God? and later still, when he would hastily have put Moses and Elijah on a level with Him, dazzled by the glory of the kingdom, had he not been corrected by the Father owning Jesus as His beloved Son, the One now to be heard? All this was from the time when, in view of His sufferings and the glories that should follow, He forbade the disciples to tell any man that He was the Messiah. The mighty change was at hand: the larger and heavenly glory founded on His death, entailing on His own similar rejection meanwhile, till God vindicate His glory publicly at His return.

How blessedly the practical fruit appears in our Lord! He leads on Peter from Jewish thoughts into His mind ere long to stamp him in word and deed. By his confession "the sons" of the king "are free;" and Son He confessedly was in His own right, as we become by grace through His redemption brought to His Father and our Father, His God and our God. This lifts the Christian

therefore above all thoughts Jewish or Gentile. “But lest we cause them to stumble, go,” etc. And thereon follows a most strikingly suitable miracle attesting His divine power, as His anticipation of Peter did His divine knowledge. A fish obeys its Creator and furnishes in its mouth the precise sum required of those under the law, which Peter was to pay for the Master as well as for himself! It is grace in every way flowing from infinite glory, but this in the humiliation and obedience of a man, for the present insisting on none of His rights, but associating believers in His own relationship, as far as this could be, as well as in His lowly ways here below.

It was in this spirit the apostle wrote, “Wherefore, having much boldness in Christ to enjoin on thee what is befitting, for love’s sake I rather entreat (or, exhort).” To command what is right is certainly not wrong in one possessed of due authority. But grace, while it respects law in its own sphere, acts incomparably above law in a sphere of its own, of which Christ is the centre and the fulness, the object, pattern, and motive. The apostle therefore, whatever the rights of his position and this even “in Christ,” puts love forward, and thus only beseeches one who like himself realised his incalculable debt to the love of God in Christ our Lord. Nor this only; in connection with his entreaty he brings in the affecting circumstances of himself, Paul, an old man and bondman or slave of Christ Jesus. He entreats for his child, for such was the runaway no less than Timothy. He adds whom he begot in his bonds; and this, which could not be said even of Timothy, was not written without purpose for Philemon’s bears who could not say as much of himself either.

But if he speaks thus touchingly on behalf of Onesimus, he does not refrain from allowing his altogether unsatisfactory conduct in the past: “Onesimus, that was once to thee unprofitable, but now both to thee and to me profitable.” He had found the Lord; he was brought to God, and was His child, not merely Paul’s. What more could Philemon ask as a guarantee of serviceableness? If he thought of himself as an injured master on the one hand, and on the other of the ingratitude and every other wrong of Onesimus, irritation might be natural, as well as justice and a warning pleaded. Yet if the grace that is in Christ Jesus could not but be recalled by the apostle’s words to Philemon, was he to be in unison with Christ or discordant? This question, though not formally asked, could not really be evaded. The Christian is here to reflect Christ. Such is to be his daily walk, his greatest business.

Not that the apostle had forgotten the title of the master over his slave: “Whom I send back to thee” (Philemon 11). Our idiom can hardly bear “I sent”; so in Philemon 19 we must say, “I write.” It is the epistolary aorist, as they call it, the writer going on to the time of reading. Philemon was thus reinstated; Onesimus returned to his master; the apostle sent him back. He did not write a letter to secure terms for the slave beforehand, nor to make a bargain with the master. If this could scarce be according to the law, still less would it answer to the grace and truth that came by Jesus Christ. He sends Onesimus back “in person, that is, mine own bowels,” or my very heart! Is not this the mind of heaven? Yea, rather it is to live Christ.

Wondrous to know and say, heaven looked down to Christ on earth, finding such a display of love for the

worthless as heaven itself could not furnish. And now it was for Philemon to prove the ground of his heart and the simplicity of his faith. Love me, love my dog, say men. The apostle says of Onesimus, He is my very bowels. Could such a one be a light object to Philemon? Assuredly Christ, Who never changes, changes us for all things and all things to us.. For the ignoble things of the world, and the despised did God choose, and the things that are not, that He might bring to nought the things that are; so that no flesh should boast before God. “But of Him are ye in Christ Jesus Who was made to us wisdom from God, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.” If the gospel be true, as there was no difference in that all sinned, so there is none in the great salvation. Onesimus, Philemon, Paul are alike blessed perfectly. Was Philemon insensible to grace so unspeakable, so unthinkable, yet most real and sure and believed?

Nor does the apostle’s advocacy stop even here. “whom I could wish to have kept with myself, that for thee (or, in thy behalf) he might minister to me in the bonds of the gospel; but without thy mind I would do nothing, that thy good might not be as of necessity but of willingness” (Philemon 13, 14). Love is of God, but it is always holy and always free. Hence therefore was the advocate sensitively careful that all should flow through Philemon’s heart under the action of the Spirit to Christ’s honour. His grace had been magnified in the slave: could he look for aught else in the master? Whatever might be his need as a prisoner for Christ, whatever his appreciation of the service of love, he looks for it from Philemon no less than in Onesimus.

And what can be finer than the simple yet deep and true suggestion that follows? “For perhaps he therefore was parted for a time, that thou mightest have him for ever, no more as a bondman but above a bondman, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much rather to thee, both in the flesh and in the Lord” (Philemon 15, 16). Words these are, weighty words of love that will never die, not sentimental, nor the play of a lively mind, still less the expression of dignified self-complacancy in condescension, but the outpouring of a heart constrained by the love of Christ; the privilege of which it is in a world of sin and selfishness and death, not only to view things on the side of God, but to share that love which, by virtue of Christ’s death and resurrection, enables those that live of His life to live no longer to themselves but to Him Who for them died and rose again.

Thus could the apostle interpret the otherwise unworthy escapade of Onesimus; and yet he adds a delicate “perhaps” if he might, as he trusted, carry along Philemon with himself. Some of us know the brutality of Roman or Greek masters in such cases; and it has not been at all peculiar to those places and times. But the Christian may and ought to see things in the light and love and interests of Christ. Thus he does not even say that Onesimus departed, but “perhaps for this reason he was parted for a time, that thou mightest have him fully (ἀπέχῃς) for ever.” For truly the Christian tie is not temporary but everlasting.

Had Onesimus served ever so faithfully and without the least interval of desertion, after all a heathen could have no link with a Christian beyond the things that perish. But in the admirable grace of God, the poor heathen

slave had, in his separation from the household to which he belonged, heard the voice of Christ and returned, that Philemon might have him as never before, no longer as a bondman (though bondman he was, and he would be the last to dispute the fact), but above a bondman through the Son of God Who became a bondman to make him His freedman, yea a brother beloved, as Paul assured and Philemon would rejoice to learn: a brother beloved, specially to me, says the apostle, whom God employed in that work of His love for eternity, yet now and here to be testified, that others may heed the same call, and, if believing, enter into the same blessing. For there are open arms on Christ's part, and God is glorified thereby, and heaven rejoices therein' whatever be the scorn and enmity of a lost race rushing away from God heedlessly, under the guidance of a rebel mightier than themselves, whose power and wiles are the deadlier the more they are ignored.

A brother beloved, says the apostle, "specially to me," of all outside Philemon; for the tie was intimate and most dear to him who begot him, and in bonds too. Yet he adds "but how much rather to thee, both in the flesh and in the Lord." For Philemon had known him habitually and stood in a relationship of nearness, which the apostle still recognises ("in the flesh"), whilst he asserts a new one ("in the Lord") which can never grow old.

How blessed is that grace of God, which in the cross condemned sin far more deeply than law ever did or could, yet has reached to us in our lowest state to seat us far above princes, yea, or principalities and powers; for by the Spirit we are one with Christ Himself on the throne of God. Yet is it the only principle that has power to keep everything in its place, after having put them

there. The grace that conciliates a runaway slave with his master is the same, which, only in a deeper form and way, conciliates a sinner with God through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. It is grace too which maintains love amidst and above all provocations and injuries. It is grace which hinders salvation from turning to pride of heart and licentiousness of walk. Without it man would pervert the gospel into a cloak of maliciousness, and make the church of God a scene of democratic levelling and socialistic robbery.

By grace all Christians are brethren; but by the same grace God set some in the church, first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers, etc.; every one we may say in his own order, but as it pleased Him. And as the Christian slave is Christ's freedman, so the Christian master is glad to own himself Christ's bondman. To ground Christian privilege on the rights of man is to deny the grace of God, and can end only in the worst lawlessness. It is our blessedness to be ever dependent on God, as Christ was; to receive all from His hand, and have the bitterest things thus made sweet. Thus is our lot best maintained, when most forlorn; and the lines are fallen to us in pleasant places, a goodly heritage; whereas all otherwise, if we see aright, must fill the heart with dreariness and disappointment.

The nice tact of the apostle's appeal is as striking as the deep ground of grace on which all is based, as ought to be in the dealings of saints one with another. The circumstances of the case we have seen enhanced this. For on the one hand the wrong done by Onesimus was great and manifest, and denied by none, least of all by himself or the blessed apostle. On the other hand, grace had wrought savingly and therefore with fruit of

righteousness and peace in the returned runaway. God had intervened after the offence, not merely giving repentance and remission of sins through His Son, but as ever along with that boon the positive gift of eternal life and of the Holy Spirit. As one who had believed in God, and been justified by His grace, Onesimus came to place himself unreservedly in his master's hands, animated and strengthened doubtless to this by the apostolic instrument of divine blessing, who was no less jealous that divine grace might work as unreservedly and simply in Philemon's heart. Believing masters and bondmen are alike debtors to grace, alike responsible to see to it that they pay diligent attention to good works. And the best of all works is to answer practically in spirit, word, and deed, to the gracious Master of us all who believe, whether free or bond.

To represent Christ's goodness aright in his ways is the daily problem that each Christian has to solve. Does it not demand grace every hour? Unquestionably; but did not His love provide for every need from the start? "Of His fulness we all received, and grace for grace." But is not present and continual dependence needed? Beyond any doubt: else the gift of abounding grace would make us independent of God, the greatest dishonour of Christ, the deepest shame of a Christian. Through Christ we have got and possess (ἐσχήκαμεν) the access by faith into this grace wherein we stand. It is a constant place of favour before Him as children of God, in pointed contrast with the most favoured sons, not of Adam merely, but of Israel under the law with its. necessary effect of bondage gendering fear of death and condemnation. But the fulness of grace possessed and known is only the more to draw out the clinging to

grace, and to wither self-confidence, for every duty, for every call of love, hour by hour. Hence the word is, Thou therefore, my child (as the apostle impressed on another blessed by his means), be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 2:1). It is there for us, but we always need to wait on Him for it. Dependence on and confidence in Him are the sinews of obedience. Otherwise we fail and have none justly to blame but ourselves for slighting that grace to which we owe everything we boast, if indeed we may boast save in Christ and His cross, its deepest proof and most wondrous display.

With this sense of grace filling his own heart the apostle says, “If then thou countess me a partner, receive him as me. But if he wronged thee or oweth thee aught, put this to my account: I Paul write with mine own hand, I will repay; that I say not to thee that thou owest to me besides even thine own self. Yea, brother, let me have profit of thee in [the] Lord; refresh my bowels in Christ” (Philemon 17-20).

These are burning words of the love that never fails; for it has its spring in God Himself; and Christ, as He was Himself the fulness of it, and not a mere stream or emanation, so has He made it to spring up in us who believe, and to flow out as rivers of living water. It is inseparable from the Holy Ghost given to us in energising power, as the first man is judged that the Second may be here magnified in us, glorified on high as He is.

And what did not Philemon feel, when he heard words which we may readily conceive he had never had addressed to him, as no occasion had occurred to draw

them forth, though the same love was always there? It was not a magnate but a slave, once worthless and guilty, now the everlasting object of the love of Christ which stirred the depths of the apostle's heart, who in his turn would kindle the holiest affections of Philemon as never before. Yet to be Paul's imitator, as he was of Christ, had evidently been the saintly ambition of Philemon hitherto; and Paul would have it fired with fresh zeal now. "If thou holdest me [not an imitator only, great as this honour was, but] a partner." What! Philemon reckon the great apostle partner with him! It was even so he read with his own eyes and under the apostle's own hand. It hung, it is true, on his receiving Onesimus, nay far more than this, on his receiving Onesimus as Paul! "Receive him as me." Can aught match the wonders of grace? Receive the repentant runaway slave as the apostle! Yet if grace had its way, could it be adequately otherwise? What men, still ungodly and children of wrath, falsely claim throughout Christendom to the shame of faith, the gospel and Christ Himself give. Onesimus was in truth a child of God and a member of Christ. This the others are not, by any scriptural judgment however "charitable," though they may be tares in the kingdom of heaven; for certainly they are not wheat. Yet charity would not bolster up false hopes, but warn them of judgment, while preaching to them the grace of God in Christ, if peradventure they might believe and be saved ere it be too late.

The poorest Christian, once the most depraved or guilty of men, is in Christ no less than the greatest of apostles. Of one as much as another is it written by another apostle, "Herein is love made perfect with us, that we

may have boldness in the day of judgment; because even as He is, we also are in this world" (1 John 4:17). It is not imagination nor exaggeration, but the wondrous yet sober and certain truth of God. Onesimus even then was, in virtue of divine love in Christ, perfected as Christ Himself in God's eyes, and therefore to the eye and heart of faith. So it was with Paul; and so he would have it with Philemon.

Then what more consummate than the address of his advocacy? What we love intensely we strive to do best; and here the Holy Spirit inspired all infallibly. "But if he wronged or oweth thee aught, this put to my account: I Paul write with mine own hand, I will repay; that I say not to thee, that thou owest besides even thyself to me." Could appeal of love be more irresistible? Grace does not, could not, deny the evils it forgives; even law does not condemn the sinner comparably with the condemnation of sin. (root, as well as branch and fruit) in the cross of Christ. Grace proves sin to be so hopelessly bad that only God sending His own Son in the likeness of flesh of sin, and for sin [i.e., as a sacrifice for it], could surmount its otherwise impossibility (τὸ ἀδύνατον τοῦ νόμου). But evil has been perfectly met in the cross, and God there glorified even as. to sin in the suffering Son of man; so that even righteousness has only the happy task of pronouncing the justification of them that believe.

How without effort the apostle breathes and speaks nothing but grace, and grace reigning through righteousness! "If he wronged or oweth thee aught, put this to my account." Would Philemon answer in a spirit of law or grace? Were he indeed as merciless as the servant in the parable which closes Matt. 18, Paul

stands forth with repeated personal emphasis in the spirit of loving substitution: “I Paul write with mine own hand, I will repay.” But he will not let Philemon go even here without a gracious (certainly not a Parthian) arrow, however effectual, “That I say not to thee, how thou owest besides even thyself to me.” Here was a debt indeed, which Philemon would be the last to forget or to under-estimate. And if the apostle had not reminded him before, as may well be doubted, he does not fail to allude now to good purpose however passingly. Even to say a word was more than enough for the heart of so good a man, in presence of a debt that never could be paid. What in comparison was any bad debt on the score of the poor slave? Philemon owed, gladly owed, himself to Paul.

Again, all this is wound up by the touching close of this appeal; “Yea, brother, let me have profit of thee in [the] Lord: refresh my bowels in Christ.” As he began so touchingly with “brother” in ver. 7, so not less does he reiterate it here in Philemon 20. It was not in vain for Philemon. Paul sought earnest love, not condescension. The gain that he yearned after was Philemon’s yet more than his own, without telling him so. Grace on his part in presence of the present need and all past provocation would be the most balmy refreshment to the wounds and sufferings of the aged apostle. Selfishness was excluded. All he sought was in the Lord — in Christ. There the quality is never strained, and the blessing threefold. May we know, enjoy, and manifest it, for whom these undying words of God are given which were primarily addressed to Philemon and those concerned.

There is a beautiful supplement, by no means unconnected in purpose with the direct appeal now

concluded, which we do well to ponder. “Having confidence of thine obedience I write to thee, knowing that thou wilt do even beyond what I say. But withal prepare me also a lodging; for I hope that through your prayers I shall be granted to you” (Philemon 21, Philemon 22). Comparing this with Col. 4:9 where Onesimus is introduced to the Colossian brethren in the most formal manner as “the faithful and beloved brother who is [one] of you,” I think he is not mistaken who infers that the apostle looked for more in the transformed bondman than a simple saint; and that he was therefore the more urgent for a new triumph of grace in Philemon, not only in taking back to his heart the wrong-doer, but in setting him free.

Bondage could not annul that liberty wherewith Christ delivers; but if called to serve the Lord, in the gospel for instance, the circumstances of slavery must hinder activity not a little. The apostle does but hint at more than he said: Philemon, as well as the rest, and not least Apphia, would easily see more. and correctly; for love, divine love at least, gives sharply discerning eyes. The apostle’s announced visit too would not hinder all he desired for Onesimus, uttered or unexpressed. The lodging might be outside or within the house of Philemon, the language being purposely vague, the intent that nothing should be by constraint but of a willing mind. The prayers of the saints too are sought as ever; for the apostle says no more than “I hope.” Prayers would help on more than his coming.

The salutations follow, which include with one omission several names that appear in the Epistle to the Colossians written and sent at the same time. Yet are there instructive differences to be noted. Here Epaphras

takes the first place, as Aristarchus the Thessalonian in the longer Epistle; yet there Epaphras has much fuller mention, and such as would endear him to the Colossians. “Epaphras, my fellow-captive in Christ Jesus, saluteth thee; Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow-workers” (Philemon 23, Philemon 24). It is not “fellow-soldier,” as said of Archippus in ver. 2, an expression applied to Epaphroditus in Phil. 2:25, and best illustrated by the “soldier” of Christ Jesus in 2 Tim. 2. It is not exactly δέσμιος, “prisoner,” as Paul speaks of himself in this and in other Epistles. Nor have we sufficient reason to say that Andronicus, Junias, and Epaphras were literally bound in a chain as the apostle was for Christ’s sake. Yet is it a word of force, and means a captive, or war prisoner. Certainly we hear of no external event in the conflicts of the gospel that furnishes a ground for such a title. Meyer after Fritzsche suggests the idea that certain of the apostle’s companions voluntarily shared his prison by turns: and that it was the turn of Aristarchus when he was writing to the Colossians, of Epaphras when he wrote to Philemon. By this he would explain why Aristarchus is here συνεργὸς and there συναιχμάλωτος, whilst Epaphras is there σύνδουλος and here συναιχμάλωτος. This is ingenious no doubt; but Rom. 16:7 presents no small difficulty to receiving it.

Mark follows next, the first of those called simply “fellow-workers.” Here is no such introduction of him as to the Colossians. Nor was it called for here as it was there, and in 2 Tim. 4 also, where the apostle confirms to the end a restoration of confidence referred to those in Colosse, in accordance with injunctions previously received.

The omitted name of “Jesus that was called Justus” was honoured enough by the mention in Col. 4:11. There was no need of sending to Philemon the salutation of one so little known. Then comes Aristarchus, of whom enough has been remarked already, followed by Demas, who appears in Col. 4:14 without a word: a preparation in God’s mind, it would seem, for a sadder “mention in 2 Tim. 4:10. Luke, styled “the beloved physician” in Col. 4:14, here comes the last named of the fellow-workers: a clear proof that the order in no way marks, as men do, the spiritual value or the honourable rank of those brought before us.

“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit” (Philemon 25) is the final greeting of the apostle to them all. This is in the exactest keeping with the Epistle. It is the answer on the practical side (and what is the good of truth in which we do not live and walk?) to grace reigning through righteousness unto eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. The apostle does not fail to wish it to all saints, and in every Epistle of his great or small. It may be more or less enlarged or abridged in its form; but it is found at the bottom everywhere; and in none is the wish of faith and love more seasonable than here.

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1 It may be worth while pointing out here that “courteously” is used appropriately, both of Julius the Roman centurion (φιλανθρώπως, better “kindly”), Acts 27:3, and of Publius the chief man of Melita (φιλοφρόνως), Acts 28:7. In 1 Peter 3:8 it is excluded on solid ground by intelligent critical editors who read the

more suited “humble-minded” (ταπεινόφρονες). Again, συναπαγόμενοι in Rom. 12:16 means a voluntary course of love, not “condescend” (as in the A. and R. versions), but “consorting along with” the lowly, as Gal. 2:13 and 2 Peter 3:17 shows its bad sense. Certainly Zos. Hist. v. 6 does not support “condescending to” rather sharing or being involved in the common capture of Hellas. “Condescend to” keeps our social station as men “living in the world”; whereas as Christians we died with Christ to this and far more, and we are as such exhorted to bear ourselves away from it all, and along with the lowly ones (or, lowly things).

2 Here the MSS. differ, ὑμῖν, “you” in F G P, many cursives, and most ancient versions etc.; while A C D E K L, about 50 juniors several good ancient versions, and some fathers read ἡμῖν, “us.”

3 The Revisers seem to have yielded to bad taste in discarding here and elsewhere the strong scriptural word “bowels” for the feebler “hearts,” which has its own expression. How came they to retain “belly” in the good sense of John 7:38? Had it been the suggestion of the American Committee, it would be less surprising.

4 χάριν is the clerical error of K L P, and many cursives and fathers, one of whom says χάριν ἔχομεν τουτέστι χάραν ἔχομεν. Tischendorf only discarded it in his eighth edition.

5 The Text. Rec. adds μου, but the best are adverse.

6 The Text. Rec. followed by A.V, as being supported by many copies departs singularly from the older witnesses. It omits καὶ “both” before the first σοὶ, as well as the second σοὶ itself, and instead of this gives σὺ

δὲ and adds προσλαβοῦ from ver. 17, whereas αὐτὸν is really in apposition with the object preceding.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.