

Paul
to
Philemon

A Model Letter Examined

The Epistle of Paul to Philemon

[American Standard Version]

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved and fellow-worker, and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow-soldier, and to the church in thy house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 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; that the fellowship of thy faith may become effectual, in the knowledge of every good thing which is in you, unto Christ. For I had much joy and comfort in thy love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through thee, brother. Wherefore, though I have all boldness in Christ to enjoin thee that which is befitting, yet for love's sake I rather beseech, being such a one as Paul the aged, and now a prisoner also of Christ Jesus: I beseech thee for my child, whom I have begotten in my bonds, Onesimus, who once was unprofitable to thee, but now is profitable to thee and to me: whom I have sent back to thee in his own person, that is, my very heart: whom I would fain have kept with me, that in thy behalf he might minister unto me in the bonds of the gospel: but without thy mind I would do nothing; that thy goodness should not be as of necessity, but of free will. For perhaps he was therefore parted from thee for a season, that thou shouldest have him for ever; no longer as a servant, but more than a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much rather to thee, both in the flesh and in the Lord. If then thou countest me a partner, receive him as myself. But if he hath wronged thee at all, or oweth thee aught, put that to mine account; I Paul write it with mine own hand, I will repay it: that I say not unto thee that thou owest to me even thine own self besides. Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my heart in Christ. Having confidence in thine obedience I write unto 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 unto you. Epaphras, my fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus, saluteth thee; and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

Verses 1 to 3 (American Standard Version)

“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved and fellow-worker, and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow-soldier, and to the church in thy house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Here, in the brief moment of a single epistle divided into only twenty-five short verses, two very lovable characters enter our Christian lives with their transforming fellowship. Portrayed by the vivid pen of the apostle Paul, “a prisoner of Jesus Christ,” they illustrate valuable lessons in practical Christianity.

The writer appeals to the emotions of the reader in the very first phrase. In five previous letters Paul calls himself “an apostle,” twice he writes without designation, and once he is “a servant of Jesus Christ.” Here, in order to soften the heart of Philemon, his brother in Christ, Paul speaks of the liberty which he himself had relinquished so that the name of his beloved Master might be heralded farther afield.

Why has a letter which relates to an entirely private matter been placed in the archives of sacred Scripture? This epistle makes no contribution to creed or theological points. The letter **has** made great contributions however. In these verses the power of unselfish love is revealed (a thing unknown to most minds of that, and this, day). Paul’s words unite two men: on the natural level they are at opposite poles of society; on the spiritual plane they are united. Genuine love is divine. All counterfeits are crude selfishness.

Are Christians Social Activists?

This letter illustrates in a practical way the true Christian attitude toward social problems. Largely ignoring the problems in which these two men found themselves, the epistle corrects them only by example. The subject

is slavery, and its treatment is a supreme example of refined courtesy, delicate subtleties, and tender consideration. The younger Pliny, a Roman letter writer of a generation later, has left us an example of how the world would deal with this matter. A comparison of the two letters may be beneficial and so we quote it as translated in the "Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges."

Your freedman, who so greatly displeased you, as you told me, has come to me, fallen at my feet, and clung to them as if they were your own; he wept much, begged much, was much silent too, and in brief guaranteed to me his penitence. I think him really reformed, for he feels that he has sinned. You are angry, as I know; justly angry, as I also know; but clemency wins its highest praise when the reasons for anger are most just.

You have loved the man, and I hope you will yet love him again; in the interval [interim] you are only asked to let yourself be brought to forgive. You will be quite free to be angry again if he deserves it; and this will have the more excuse if now you yield. Allow something for his youth, something for his tears, something for your own indulgence [of him]; do not put him to torture, or you may torture yourself too. For tortured you are when you, kindest of men, are angry.

I fear I may seem rather to insist than entreat if I join my prayers to his. But I will join them, the more fully and without reserve as I chide him sharply and severely, adding a stern warning that I could never beg him off again. This for *him* for I had to frighten him; but I take another tone with *you*! Perhaps I shall entreat again, and win again; so the case is one in which I may properly entreat, and you may properly bestow. Farewell.

Pliny is far outdistanced by Paul. The apostle is spontaneously warm, gracefully ingenious, even playful, with a natural courtesy that rises above what is usually termed tact. One wonders at the talent that could on the same day write both the profound and far-reaching

philosophy of the letter to the Colossian brethren and this model of simple grace, kindness, and exquisite tenderness. The perfection of this letter leaves one feeling not merely inspired, but that the guiding hand of the One who never errs may be discerned in every pen stroke.

The letter opens with greetings, closes with benedictions, and in between there are matters of personal interest and graceful complements to Philemon which propose to soften the heart of the reader to receive his suggestion. The central figures of the story are Philemon (an elder in the Colossian ecclesia and a slave-owner) and Onesimus (a run-away slave who is returning to his master in a new role).

Sanctified Reason

The intense hatred for Jewry by the Romans brought Paul before Caesar's power and into his imprisonment. In designating himself as a "prisoner of Jesus Christ," he ignores Caesar as a negligible second cause. Any manacles Paul wore were as if of gold, precious emblems of servitude to his heavenly bridegroom, ornaments placed on his wrists by his glorified Lord. What to others would have been a disgrace were to him a "grace" (Philippians 1:7). Like others of the apostles he rejoices that he is counted worthy to suffer for Christ's sake (Acts 5:41).

To one who was sustained by the consciousness that no harm can be done to the ambassador of the King of kings, all of the Pharisees, the governors, stewards, and even Caesar himself were to Paul's faith-inspired vision the mere pawns on life's chess board; they were a part of the necessary equipment that all things may work together for good. With assurance he can say, "*none of these things move me*" (Acts 20:24), for neither they nor anything else could separate him from Christ's love (Romans 8:35).

Commentators think that Philemon was a man of considerable wealth because of the salutation to the

church in his house (verse 2). But they seem to forget that there is no evidence of any church edifice until near the end of the second century (Acts 17:24), and that where two or three would gather together in Jesus' name he promised to be present (Matthew 18:20; cf. Romans 16:3,5; Colossians 4:15). The fact that Philemon owned slaves would also not necessarily indicate much about his social standing. In that day slaves far outnumbered free men and they were found in most homes.

Commentators also use Philemon's ability to entertain traveling brethren as an indication of his wealth. This reasoning is faulty because the spirit of Christianity has long led to the dividing of a crust with one who is in need, and those who travel find their joy in the fellowship furnished in breaking bread—regardless of the limitations of the household appointments or table provisions.

We are not told how long Onesimus had been absent from Philemon's house. If Philemon had received the truth into his heart and had begun to witness for his Master before Onesimus left, then it is interesting to note that the apostle commends him with the salutation "our dear fellow-laborer," instead of chiding him for not having converted Onesimus. Note that there is nothing of the spirit of distinction between laity and clergy which is found in later centuries from the pens of those who thought to sit as successors to Paul. Here he forgets his special honors and places himself on Philemon's level, as another servant in the harvest field. And how well his words demonstrate that we are all brethren, all equally acceptable to the master of the harvest. From sowing to reaping there are a variety of jobs to be done. Each servant who serves faithfully until the end of the harvest would hear that "well done good servant" from his master. The individual who removed the first shovel-full of soil for the construction of the Cologne Cathedral performed a task as necessary for the completion of that work as the person who gave it the last finishing touch a thousand years later. So also we may

regard Philemon. He has his part in making the spiritual bride ready for her wedding day. He supplied somewhat just as Paul alluded that each true believer would when he wrote:

“From whom all the body fitly framed and knit together through that which every joint supplieth, according to the working in due measure of each several part, maketh the increase of the body unto the building up of itself in love.”—Ephesians 4:16, ASV

Yes, Philemon contributed the flicker of a single candle to the light of the glorious gospel of Christ. He added to the veritable beacon which Paul had kindled. But the difference between them lay in the circumference of the circles in which the two men had influence, not on the inherent value of their individual service. Paul had none of that vulgar tendency of thinking little of that modest service of obscure people. Nor did any brother receive a front seat from his hand because of his golden jewelry or appearance. It did not matter to Paul whether Philemon was wealthy (even if it has mattered to many commentators). He was not interested in the earthly treasures that had been laid aside; no, Paul was interested in whether Philemon would be faithful in laying up treasure where thieves could not break in and steal (Matthew 6:19,20). Paul's letter is an encouragement to Philemon, to Onesimus, and to us to lay up treasures in heaven.

Who are Apphia and Archippus? They are generally regarded as the wife and son of Philemon. The latter is called a “fellow-soldier,” but at the lips of such a battle-worn warrior as Paul the words may have as easily applied to a raw recruit. Note how Paul's Christian attitude contrasts to that of the world. First, he accepts the younger man as a fellow soldier. Next, he owns Apphia as his sister in Christ. The customs of those days had set a great gulf between various races, the sexes, and divergent planes of society. To Paul this gulf had been filled by the social upheaval which resulted from the death of Christ, and the literal earthquake of the crucifixion day

was a mere precursor of the great figurative earthquake that shook the social conditions of the earth.

Paul does not suggest that the church at Colosse might not receive Onesimus. He introduces this returned slave to them as “*one of yourselves.*” But in the centuries which have passed between his day and ours men still have not learned the lesson taught in the epistle to the Galatians:

“There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither bond nor free, there can be no male and female; for ye all are one man in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, heirs according to promise.”—Galatians 3:28,29, ASV

The world has progressed further in modifying its views of this subject, more than one might expect; but, unfortunately, in some cases individual Christian homes have progressed less than one has a right to expect.

Model Greetings

Paul’s customary greeting was “grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” In writing to Philemon there was no need to alter his pattern. The same greeting was his due as a Christian brother. What could be added to these wonderful words? “Grace” includes salvation from its initial to its final step. In his well-wishing, grace is accompanied by “peace,” just as it must always be in every life where there is the grace of God, “*for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*” (Romans 14:17, ASV). Eternity can offer no more.

Grace is undeserved favor, unselfishly bestowed, no ulterior motive marring the process; and when God is the giver, it is unrequited, for who has anything to give in return? Should there have been some few Christians through the age who have done all that was commanded of them (Matthew 28:20), even these would still have been unprofitable servants (Luke 17:10).

There are interesting suggestions in the literal meanings of these two words. Grace means "what causes leaping for joy." Peace means "what brings unto unity." Unity cannot endure where peace does not reign in the individual hearts, and therefore, in the affairs of the congregation. But how easily unity and peace are made when the hearts of the individuals are set on receiving the full measure of the grace of God and of our Lord Jesus Christ. Even the thought causes responsive hearts to leap with joy.

The apostle, in his salutation, combines ideas from the cultures of both east and west. Grace is a salutation borrowed from the peoples of the West. Peace is the Eastern salutation which was often used by Jesus, and it is particularly appropriate to an area where the lanes of travel and commerce were often infested with bandits.

Grace is love in action toward those who are in some respect below the well-wisher. Wishing grace to another places one under the obligation of cooperating to secure grace. From His fulness we have all received grace upon grace (John 1:16). The evidence of our worthiness to receive this grace is shown by the faithfulness with which we both pray and act, so that the peace which others enjoy may never be disturbed, and rather, that their peace may be increased by our association. With divine forgiveness already granted, the grace of receiving supplies of sufficient strength for every time of need (Hebrews 4:16) gives one the peace of God. What peace? The peace of knowing God's will and of resigning oneself to that will in joyful acquiescence. These two emotions can be fully appreciated only when the believer abides in his presence (Psalm 16:7). We might be asked, however, do we know that we have genuinely been made to "*sit with him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus*" (Ephesians 2:6). Our only assurance of this reality can be in the **quality** of the peace which is manifested in and diffused by us.

What determines the nature of a person's peace? Is it the circumstances of the individual? No, it is in the casting of all of our burdens upon the Lord (1 Peter 5:7). If our burdens find full rest in him, we can experience the Sabbath rest that is the heritage of every true saint. People have diverse personalities. This notwithstanding, in our fellowship we can reach a perfect harmony by God's grace in spite of the natural discord which exists between us, just as the mountain stream and the pasture's ridge both find their end in an undisturbed pool in which is reflected the beauty of God's character as revealed in the works of his hands.

Peace, the Gift of God's Love

The child of God is privileged to carry grace and peace with him for the blessing of all with whom he comes in contact. If we find discord marring our associations, we do well to ask whether we have **found** it, or **brought** it. We should not be surprised, either, if we are unable to carry enough of the spirit of the Master to bring fulness of peace into every association of our life. But our presence should bring the presence of the Master and some measure of his spirit into every assembly.

Coastal storms occasionally stir up wreckage from the ocean bottom and spread it along the shore, sometimes endangering the health of local residents. But a quiet, peaceful sea would not have disturbed these things: such is the influence of the believer in Christ, like oil upon troubled waters. We should look *"carefully lest there be any man that falleth short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby the many be defiled"* (Hebrews 12:15, ASV). *"Let the peace of God garrison your hearts"* (Colossians 3:15, author's translation).

Discord is present in every human heart. This is due to evil tendencies and the performance of imperfect humanity. So, if our salutation of "peace" is to be effective, there must be a guard set upon our life by the filling of our heart with the holy spirit: *"out of the abun-*

dance of the heart the mouth speaketh” (Matthew 12:34). If we fill our heart with the treasures of wisdom from above (one of the primary characteristics of which is peace), then we will be recognized as ambassadors of peace.

There are exceptions to this principle:

“If it be possible, as much as in you lieth, be at peace with all men. Avenge not yourselves, beloved, but give place unto the wrath of God: for it is written, Vengeance belongeth unto me; I will recompense, saith the Lord. But if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him to drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.”—Romans 12:18-21, ASV

The least which we can do is to always make sure that our spirit is contrary to the spirit of the flesh, manifested in contention and strife. We must recognize that even these emotions are sometimes an evidence of overzealousness. There are points which are dear to all of us. And we all may be eager to bless others with our own knowledge. But going beyond making our thoughts available, forcing our views upon another to the disregard of their rights, is to make **ourselves** contentious. Our salutation of “peace” might stir up our brother, but the example of peace might inspire him to stretch his every nerve in an effort to fill his heart with the spirit and peace of God. Such a demonstration of peace may convince him that there is more of the grace of God for him to secure; that is a lesson much more important than truth un-lived.

Peace, Fellowship’s Guardian

Evidently, Colosse had problems. Greeks, Jews, barbarians, and Scythians were all having difficulty getting along peaceably (Colossians 3:11). They were all there in the church by the calling of God, they were all “holy and beloved” (verse 12). What they needed was “*a heart of compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, long-suf-*

fering; forbearing one another, and forgiving each other ... even as the Lord forgave" (verses 12, 13, ASV) them. Above all else they needed to put on love, the bond of maturity (verse 14). But these things were not enough. It was necessary that they not stop, not be satisfied; they, and we all should "*let the peace of Christ rule in [our] hearts, to the which also [we] were called in one body*" (verse 15).

Anxiety is a disease for which some cure must be found. There is danger not only of the situation spreading into every avenue of an individual's life, but also of its infecting others. Who would wish to condemn another to many hours of personal suffering, or even to the loss of those eternal joys promised them at the right hand of the majesty on high (Romans 8:34)?

"In nothing be anxious; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus."—Philippians 4:6,7, ASV (cf. Galatians 5:22,23; Romans 14:17; Isaiah 26:3; Psalm 119:165)

I stand all astonished with wonder,
And gaze on the ocean of love;
And over its waves to my spirit
Comes peace, like a heavenly dove.

Verses 4 to 7 (American Standard Version)

“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; that the fellowship of thy faith may become effectual, in the knowledge of every good thing which is in you, unto Christ. For I had much joy and comfort in thy love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through thee, brother.”

The body of the letter begins with the first phrase given above and it is a sentiment found in most of Paul’s epistles. In this epistle there is a specific reason for this expression, *“I always thank my God when I mention you in my prayers”* (Moffatt). By the end of the letter Paul will have asked a favor of Philemon and the only recompense to be had by Philemon would be through his God. The thing for which Paul is expressing thanks is the beauty of Philemon’s character. He is saying that the same God who is working in himself is the one to whom all credit must be given for any beauty that Philemon possesses. In one phrase he has acknowledged his God, his duty and obligations to him, expressed his reverence for him, and reminded Philemon that we have no good in us except what has come from God.

The construction of the Greek text permits us to connect “always” with the giving of thanks (as the Revised Version and others do), or as an indication of the frequency with which he made mention of Philemon in his prayers. Probably both are true. The graciousness in his own heart makes him recognize the same in Philemon. It would not be strange if every one of Paul’s prayers would have remembered Philemon as one of the outstanding examples of God’s grace. Some are inclined to devote their prayers to those who (in their estimation) are lacking in the divine requirements. This is not the apostle’s practice. He knows from experience that the saints who

are most faithful in their obligations and most appreciative of their privileges are the ones whom Satan is most eager to turn from the pathway of right.

Paul records no selfish prayer. He leaves us an example of thinking about others. The luscious fruitage of his life should inspire us to develop that self-forgetfulness in which we may love without seeking our own interests (1 Corinthians 13:5).

Paul says that he thanked God [the Greek indicates the idea "continually"] because he heard of their love and faith extended toward the Lord and his saints. No one would accuse him of insincerity in such a prayer or ascribe his love of Philemon to weakness. A baser heart, however, might attribute the graceful complement which Paul here pays to mere diplomacy. Some Bible students, recognizing that Paul's phraseology actually describes Philemon's faith and love as for the Lord Jesus and unto his saints, for some reason have decided that the apostle did not express himself as well as they could have done and that what he meant to describe was faith in the Lord Jesus and love for the saints. Their difficulty lies in limiting a person's emotions to those which they themselves can feel. They seem to think that it is not possible to have both a love for a fellow saint and also a faith in that saint. And this is precisely the reason for Paul's letter: he hoped that Philemon was the sort of individual in whom he could have faith that his letter would bring results. If Philemon were not this kind of person, he would be inclined to think evil of other people rather than rejoicing in and magnifying their virtues. To express one's faith in another person does not mean that we expect them to perform everything perfectly (or even according to our expectations). This is merely a coincidence that God's grace will accomplish in them the same miracle which is being accomplished in all of the fully consecrated children of God. *"For it is God who worketh in you both to will and to work, for his good pleasure"* (Philippians 2:13, ASV).

["Some commentators (see Ellicott's note, where the view is discussed and rejected) explain this as 'fidelity' (as probably Galatians 5:22 and certainly Titus 2:10). But that meaning is rare in St. Paul, and needs strong evidence for adoption in any given case. The ruling meaning, 'trust,' 'reliance,' is quite in place here."—*Cambridge Bible*, page 169.]

The received text shows two prepositions indicating love and faith *toward* Christ and *unto* the saints. In the former:

"The idea is that of a movement of yearning after an un-attained good ... as of the soaring of an eagle to the sun, or the climbing [of] tendrils to the summit of the supporting stem. In Christ there is always something beyond." —*Expositor's Bible*

But any Christian is capable of developing faith in and love for all fellow saints in proportion to their worthiness, therefore the force of the expression "love and faith *unto* the saints." Those who take Christ as their "center" will draw circles of love and faith which are large enough to encompass their brethren, and the circles of their love will be large enough even to include their enemies. Paul is here asking Philemon to make sure that his circle is large enough for his present need—to include Onesimus. The graceful compliment which he pays is intended to assure this condition. If he had suspected Philemon of harboring pride, the compliment would not have been risked. A good heart is made better by sincere appreciation.

Purpose Finally Revealed

The apostle hints at his purpose in the sixth verse: "*That the communication* [ASV: "fellowship"] *of thy faith may become effectual.*" The word that is used here is also used elsewhere. It describes our fellowship with the Father and with the son as used by the beloved John. It denotes our partnership in the divine nature as used by Peter. Paul elsewhere uses it to describe our partnership in the bread and cup of the memorial supper (cf.

Romans 15:26; 2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:13; Philippians 1:5; Hebrews 13:16). It is generally used with the idea of mutuality—benefaction—a sharing with another. That viewpoint appears to be **too** narrow in this context. Benjamin Wilson, in the translation given in his *Emphatic Diaglott*, shows verse five as parenthetical. By this arrangement the apostle is saying that his prayers are to the effect that Philemon's fellowships, which are the outgrowth of his faith, may become active to the extent that others will take knowledge of him that he has been with Jesus and learned of him. The prayer is not that they may learn something good about Philemon but that his conduct may be a revelation of "*every good thing which is in*" him. Some manuscripts read "every good thing that is in us," a thought not out of harmony with the passage; but the reading "in you" seems a much more likely one, as the apostle is preparing to suggest to Philemon a service to his Master which will be a revelation of a Christlike love far surpassing the world's variety, a greater demonstration than even most Christians ever have the privilege of making.

Philemon has grown admirably in his likeness to Jesus. But the apostle Paul is insatiable in his desire to have Philemon "*filled with **all** the fulness of God.*" He is, we infer, urging him not to be a rocking-chair Christian. Rather, the entire purpose of the Christian life is the exerting of every ounce of strength that is in his control toward attaining "*the **mark** [of] the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 3:14, emphasis added).

Living Faith: A Commendation

Paul must have been confident that Philemon would not be one of those who would prefer to be involved with great and marvelous works. Hence, he does not apologize for asking from him a devotion to the thing that counts most and will some day receive the Master's approval in the words, "*Well done, thou good and faithful servant ... enter thou into the joy of thy lord*"

(Matthew 25:21). Only those who have attained the stature of the fulness of Christ (Ephesians 4:13) will hear those words. These will have had their prayer fulfilled, that Christ may dwell in their hearts by faith. How strange that mere baubles can darken so great a light. How could a person ever think that there is the danger of a lessening of good works because one is devoting himself to learning more of his God. That point the apostle covers in his epistle to the Colossians (1:10). There is no other process by which to walk worthy of God. The ninth and tenth verses read as follows:

“[I] do not cease praying on your behalf, that you may be filled, as to the exact knowledge of his will, with all spiritual wisdom and understanding; to walk worthily of the Lord, pleasing him in all things; bringing forth fruit by **every good work**, and increasing in the **exact knowledge of God.**”—*Emphatic Diaglott*, emphasis added).

If one does not attempt to live up to his religion, it eventually shrinks to the level of his life. The apostle is asking our brother to live up to both his theories and the actual practices of the past; asking him not to have a mere theory but a practical religion; not a religion of works, but a religion in which the works are based on love and faith—an outgrowth of them.

Heaven is for Christians, not for theorists. A Christian is one who walks as his Master walked, who went about doing good and healing others. That Christian does not do things just to be seen by men. True Christians are content to lie low at the Master's feet so that others may see **him** who instructed us that in the giving of charity we ought not to let the left hand know what the right hand is doing (Matthew 6:3). This we find is the basis upon which God shall reward us, and only by the grace of humility can we learn to keep the silence of our own mouths so that God may reward us in his due time. “*Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are through Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God*” (Philippians 1:11, ASV). Yes, the fruit of righteousness is

by Jesus Christ and it is for the glory and praise of God. When we seek our own works, when we would have the praise of men, then we disgrace him and ourselves. It is then that we risk having these words pronounced over **our** life's efforts: "*And I then will profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity*" (Matthew 7:23).

At some time in the past Philemon had eternally dedicated himself to the doing of the will of God and to living to and for his glory. This step may have occurred at the instruction of Paul. He had been taught to acknowledge the One who gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purity for himself a people of his own, who are zealous of good deeds (cf. Titus 2:14). Elsewhere in the same letter we are instructed, "*And let our people also learn to maintain good works for necessary uses, that they be not unfruitful*" (Titus 3:14, ASV). The Revised Standard Version of this verse is clearer and perhaps more exact: "*Let our people learn to apply themselves to good deeds, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not to be unfruitful*" (cf. James 1:27). Paul is carrying out the instructions to "*consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works*" (Hebrews 10:24).

We have suggested that Paul is not asking something new of Philemon. The seventh verse tells him that in his prison cell in Rome he has been much comforted to know that Philemon has been faithfully living up to his privileges. It was probably quite a surprise to Philemon to learn that anything he had done could be a comfort to so distinguished a prisoner in Rome, many hundreds of miles away. Perhaps it will be still more of a surprise to him to learn that his faithfulness has been an inspiration to the saints who have lived during the nineteen hundred years since he completed his course. It would be well for each of us to remember that we can never know what effect the littlest word or the simplest act may have on others. It is, therefore, a great responsibility for us to conduct ourselves as is appropriate to the

members of the body of Christ. Only if we are careful about our actions can we join Paul in saying,

“But thanks be unto God, who always leadeth us in triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest through us the savor of his knowledge in every place. For we are a sweet savor of Christ unto God, in them that are saved, and in them that perish; to the one a savor from death unto death; to the other a savor from life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things?”—
2 Corinthians 2:14-16, ASV

We conclude by summarizing Paul's thoughts thus far: Philemon, you have had many wonderful opportunities of carrying out the Master's instruction to let your light shine before men so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. In heaven's providence the privilege has now been granted you of a still larger demonstration of the power of divine love all excelling. Though I am physically absent from you, yet I am with you in spirit, and I rejoice that you are building up a superstructure of love on the only dependable foundation. I rejoice, too, in the firmness of your faith in Christ and his body members. I have no doubt as to the outcome of this present trial upon your faith and love.

Can he have the same faith in us who live in the perilous times of the end of the quickly closing age?

Help us to help each other Lord—
Each other's burdens bear.
Let each his friendly aid afford,
To sooth another's care.

Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.

Verses 8 to 11 (American Standard Version)

“Wherefore, though I have all boldness in Christ to enjoin thee that which is befitting, yet for love’s sake I rather beseech, being such a one as Paul the aged, and now a prisoner also of Christ Jesus: I beseech thee for my child, whom I have begotten in my bonds, Onesimus, who once was unprofitable to thee, but now is profitable to thee and to me.”

We have seen that Martin Luther’s recommendation of this lovely letter is not exaggerated. He wrote of it:

“This epistle showeth a right noble, lovely example of Christian love. Here we see how St. Paul layeth himself out for poor Onesimus, and with all his means pleadeth for his cause with his master; and so setteth himself as if he were Onesimus, and had himself done wrong to Philemon. Yet this he doth not with force nor constraint, as if he had full right. Nay he putteth himself out of his rights; whereby he constraineth Philemon (to perceive) that he also must strip himself of his rights. Even as Christ did for us with God ... thus also doeth St. Paul for Onesimus with Philemon. For Christ also hath put himself out of his rights, and with love and humbleness hath prevailed with his Father that he should lay aside wrath and his rights, and receive us to grace, for Christ’s sake, who so earnestly intercedeth for us, and layeth himself out so tenderly for us. For we are all his Onesimi, if we will believe it.”

This passage is not to be taken as a statement of doubt on Luther’s part as to the Father’s love. “It is his pictorial way of putting the work of atonement and intercession.”

Professor Franke Halle (18th Century) wrote: “The Epistle of Philemon far surpasses all the wisdom of the world.” The better we understand history the more outstanding is Paul’s wisdom in approaching this very

delicate matter. Slaves were living tools in those days, a form of private property just as literally as machinery in a factory is today. Their only purpose—for most masters—was to provide a luxurious living for their master. They were not their own but were purchased, an idea which Paul applies spiritually to us and our relationship with Jesus (1 Corinthians 6:19,20). The extension was complete: the master thought; the slave acted.

It would be natural to think that this situation was apt to be very bad for the slaves and very good for the master. The fact was that all Christian slaves, as the apostles indicate, were by their very condition given wonderful opportunities of learning the submission necessary (absolutely necessary) to every one under the headship of our heavenly Master. The lesson is of such extreme importance that the apostle even advises slaves to remain in the condition in which the Lord found them upon becoming Christians—even slavery—unless definitely delivered by the Lord's hand. The apostles clearly made the point that as cruel as their earthly master may have been, they were to accept him as though he had been placed over them by the Lord himself (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:21,22).

Slaves under Roman law had little protection from the cruelty of their master. Death—even death by crucifixion—could be imposed upon a slave for the most trifling of offenses. During the reign of Augustus this lack of protection reached its extreme when it was declared that if a slave killed his master then not only the offending slave but also every fellow slave should be put to death. Vedlus Pollis, a friend of Emperor Augustus, chose to put his slaves to death by throwing them into a fish pond where they became the food for his huge electric eels. One day when he was entertaining the emperor, a cup-bearer broke a crystal goblet. Sentence was immediately passed upon him. The poor fellow threw himself at the prince's feet, begging not for forgiveness, but that he might be killed by some more humane method. Augustus ordered the man's freedom.

Slaves: A Menace To Life

As part of the system of protection **against** slaves the government furnished *fugitivarii*, the truant officers of the day. It was their business to track down runaway slaves and return them—often to the death penalty. This severity was largely due to the popular fear that the slave population would revolt. In the year 300 B.C. there were 21,000 freedmen in Athens who lived in daily fear of their 400,000 slaves. Conditions were similar in Philemon's day.

When Onesimus bore this letter to Philemon, he had to take it upon faith that the master whom he had served had been developing a loving and merciful heart like that of Jesus who *"humbled himself ... and took upon him the form of a servant"* (Philippians 2:8,7). Jesus ended his period of service by performing one of the most menial of services. He wrapped a towel around himself, kneeled at the feet of his own messengers, and washed from their feet the travel's stains.

Onesimus had to be strong in faith when he left the presence of Paul on his way home. He had to be confident in the transforming power of God's love and in Philemon's willingness to be transformed—being devoted to the Lord and his word. Even so, it is not surprising to note the delicate balance in which he weighs every word used to prepare Philemon's heart for the test which this great ordeal would put upon his Christianity. Paul was precipitating a test of Philemon's love and faith toward the Lord Jesus, and toward his saint—in particular, toward Onesimus.

Paul's plea adds two sentimental touches. He asks for Philemon's sympathy toward himself as a prisoner "of Jesus Christ." Then, he extends his own request for sympathy to include his status as "Paul, the aged." We do not think that he referred to his natural age but probably that he had been aged before his time by the experiences of which he tells:

“In labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once I was stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches.”—2 Corinthians 11:23-28

“In Christ” one who had endured so much for him could be “bold,” but aside from that relationship he had nothing he would think of using to place any obligation upon Philemon. Love is the only appropriate means of securing from a brother of Philemon’s development “that which is fitting” to a Christian.

There must have been a great bond of love between the two brothers, but it is not this personal love to which the apostle appeals. He begs “for love’s sake,” for the sake of the standard of Christian love, that its reputation may be maintained among the brethren and before the heathen and angels, remembering that we are a spectacle unto men and to angels (1 Corinthians 4:9).

Paul could have said, “I enjoin you to do what I am about to request because I am the apostle Paul,” or he could have said, “You know that I have a better brain than the average and I therefore urge you to follow the advice I am about to give.” Philemon might, possibly, have accepted his instructions on that basis, but we are glad for that brother’s sake and for the sake of every one who has profited by this letter that the infinitely superior argument was used. Self-love says, There is no excuse for your not seeing it my way. Christian love says, I beseech you, therefore by the tender mercies of Jesus Christ, by the love he has implanted in the hearts of every true Christian. There must be outward

authority at times, but love does not seek compliance, only a oneness in resignation to the will of God. The lightest wish of mutual love is stronger than the sternest word of authority. The light touch of a finger will start the rocking stones in motion, though howling tempests have failed to move them. The secret is in knowing where to touch. Earthquakes and spirit trumpet-blasts left Israel disobedient. Even the perfect humanity of Jesus failed to bring reformation to that stiff-necked, hard-hearted generation. The Lord has planned something more effective than the sight of a perfect human body to bring them to their knees and teach them to "*confess with their tongues*" (Philippians 2:11). "*The goodness of God leadeth ... to repentance*" (Romans 2:4). The gentleness of an entreating voice halted the threatenings and slaughter of the young zealot. Hear the tender, "*Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?*" (Acts 9:4). Learn the lesson of love's power! Apparently Paul needed only that one lesson to convince him that love is more effective than authority. The latter, however, is still the usual method of the weak or the selfish man. A lazy teacher prefers temporary obedience to the permanency that love secures. It alone writes in indelible letters upon the tablets of the heart.

Wisdom Which Comes From Above

Many Christian precepts may be found in heathen religions; but in none of them is its motivating love to be discovered. Paul knows that it is a thing operative at all times in the faithful Christian and considers it appropriate that he should remind Philemon that an exercise of that love in doing the thing he is about to request will give relief to the aching bones of his aged, wearied body, acting as it were as a little silk to be put under the manacles that gall the flesh of the "prisoner of Jesus Christ."

Beginning with verse ten Paul has sufficiently prepared the ground so that he can now plainly tell Philemon what has been trembling on his lips all this time: "*I beseech thee for my child, whom I have begotten in my*

bonds, Onesimus.” There is a touch of tenderness here in the Greek that our English does not show, a touch used elsewhere by the apostle. It is accomplished by reserving the name until the very close of his petition. This he follows in verse eleven with a little play on words (Onesimus meaning “profitable”), to add the softening influence of humor to the situation. (For a few other instances of Paul’s tenderness notice his discourse at Miletus to the Ephesian elders, his speech before Agrippa, Acts 22:2-29; all of Romans; Galatians 4:11-20; Philippians 1:29 to 2:2; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13.)

Formerly a slave, a thief, Onesimus is now, “my son Onesimus.” Some lesser lights might be accused of “darkening counsel” by speaking of him as his son, but this is a favorite figure of the apostle (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:15; Galatians 3:25,26; 1 Timothy 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:2; 2:1; Titus 1:4). It was his way of showing his love and trust in a brother.

We are told that the name Philemon comes from a word meaning “friendly,” and that it has the idea of “one who is loving or kindly.” The fact that our brother bore this name does not mean that this was necessarily his disposition before Christianity brought its influence upon him. It merely indicates that this is what his parents may have desired of him. With such ambitions for their son we can imagine that in all probability he was above average, a real gentleman.

Classical literature brands slaves as generally “liars, thieves, idle, treacherous, master-haters, ever watchful for opportunities of retribution.” The name Onesimus, however, was frequently borne by slaves. Its meaning is “helpful, profitable.” Such descriptive words were often used as slave names. Verse eleven indicates that Onesimus had not lived up to his name, but Paul who had “begotten” him in his bonds does not doubt that he will now be as “profitable” to Philemon as he had proved

to be to himself, serving the apostle faithfully in his imprisonment. Paul's faith was not in Philemon or Onesimus personally but in the grace of God working in their hearts, and he was confident it would keep them faithful even in a trial such as this would be for both. Evidently both of them had indicated steadfastness, not spasmodically but continually applying for "grace sufficient."

This writer once had the experience of riding twenty-five miles on an electric trolley at a time of year when the power lines were covered with ice. Only after the comparatively warm trolley wheel had been on the wire long enough to melt the ice could any electrical contact be made. A flash would result, sending the car a few feet ahead and lighting up the countryside and producing a fairy-land of sparkling ice—but it did not get the passengers very far on the way to their destination. There are Christians who are like that illustration. Their interest, apparently, is not in the sanctifying power of truth—that steady, daily, striving for more of his likeness. Their enthusiasm is often super-abundant and their zeal is frequently deflected to speculative interpretation and the nourishment of the natural desires. Writing about such believers Alexander MacLaren says: "If a Christian does not show that his religion is changing him into the fair likeness of his Master, and fitting him for all relations of life, the reason is simply that he has so little of it, and that little so mechanical and tepid."

The order of the apostle's next expression is important: "profitable to thee and to me." While the words sound correct to us, they are not according to the Greek usage. Their customary order was, "to me and to thee." Paul by his reversal places an emphasis on the pronouns: "You yourself will find him helpful even as I myself have done."

By the failure of Onesimus we are reminded that we too are unprofitable servants. There is less a different hope for us than that which existed for Onesimus. Even if we do all that we are commanded (and who does?) we

can still be **no more than** unprofitable servants. The price that was paid to induct us into our heavenly Father's service is too great a one to make possible our returning anything that could be called profit. However, when we have reached our heavenly home, things will be as different for us as they were for Onesimus on reaching Colosse. As runaway vagabonds, those who have robbed our Master of that which was his due, we come pleading admittance, confidently expecting acceptance as those "now profitable." Our Father has the love that suffers long and is kind (1 Corinthians 13:4), the love that hopes for all things (verse 7). His Son has the love that can say, "If he hath wronged thee at all, or oweth thee aught, put that to mine account."

Verses 12 to 19 (American Standard Version)

"I have sent [Onesimus] back to thee in his own person, that is, my very heart: whom I would fain have kept with me, that in thy behalf he might minister unto me in the bonds of the gospel: but without thy mind I would do nothing; that thy goodness should not be as of necessity, but of free will. For perhaps he was therefore parted from thee for a season, that thou shouldest have him for ever; no longer as a servant, but more than a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much rather to thee, both in the flesh and in the Lord. If then thou countest me a partner, receive him as myself. But if he hath wronged thee at all, or oweth thee ought, put that to mine account; I Paul write it with mine own hand, I will repay it: that I say not unto thee that thou owest to me even thine own self besides."

Fugitive slaves who sought refuge on the decks of English men-of-war soon discovered that the government sided with their owners, instructing that every one be returned to his master. Paul, similarly, sided with the slave owner. Onesimus, however, does not return as one who must be dragged from the horns of the altar (1 Kings 2:28). Instead, he gladly returned to his servitude as a bond-slave of Jesus Christ.

We know not the intimate details of his thoughts as he carried Paul's letter to his master, Philemon. Perhaps he was fearful and tempted to turn back to the freedom which he had so briefly enjoyed. But that course offered no lasting freedom: if he were to be caught by the law he would be dragged back to his master; he would probably die, as well as all those others who had been his companions in slavery. An ordinary slave in an ordinary household could not help but be plagued by such thoughts. But Onesimus' nine-hundred-mile journey was not only taking him back to an earthly master but also to a fellow servant of Jesus Christ.

What is the strangest of all Christian experiences? Is it not, perhaps, the desire to be released from the bondage to Christ and his principles? The discrete answer to one's own heart's longing is, "To whom shall we go?" (John 6:68). If we yield to our desire, we would only return to the bondage of corruption (Romans 8:21), the cords of sin (Proverbs 5:22), and would be departing from the service of Christ and entering the service of Satan (cf. John 8:34; Romans 6:16; 2 Peter 2:10,20). There is a sad ending in store for those who **do** draw back. The last verse cited indicates that the "*latter end*" of these is worse than their first condition. They were born in sin and shaped by iniquity (Psalm 51:5), and it is a blessing for such that their lives will simply be ended—final destruction (Philippians 3:19), nothingness. It is inconceivable that a loving God would continue their lives eternally, into ever increasing depths of depravity. No, the lives of these will end in final and complete destruction (Hebrews 6:6). That will be the only way to assure a cleansed universe for the habitation of God's obedient creatures.

Men instinctively realize their imperfection, excusing themselves for their failures. Some recognize that the cause of their failures lies in sin. It may be that this inherent recognition of sin is the reason that human organizations can so easily control and rule men. Christians are particularly aware of their need for direction, supervision, and correction. They joyfully accept the bonds of their one Master: he who can teach them to sever their connections with all previous bondages; he who can protect the servant from the degrading influences of sin and everything that would lower the standard of Christ-like living.

When the master is the mental superior of the servant, then servitude can be a blessing. That such is the case when **any one** enters the service of our Lord Jesus is manifest. He is wisdom personified. His character and compassion are perfect. His service is joy! (Matthew

11:28-30) Men avoid absolute bondage even when they have never known complete freedom. Because of this aversion, man must be brought into subjection to the will of Christ.

What is the most important element of our freedom? Interestingly, Paul points out that it is not our bodily freedom from other humans:

“Wast thou called being a bondservant? care not for it: nay, even if thou canst become free, use it rather. For he that was called in the Lord being a bondservant, is the Lord’s freedman: likewise he that was called being free, is Christ’s bondservant ... Brethren, let each man, wherein he was called, therein abide with God.”
—1 Corinthians 7:21,22,24, ASV

Paul, therefore, is sending Onesimus back to Philemon not as the servant of a human master but as the Lord’s servant. Justice compelled Paul to send Onesimus back but love forced him to write this lovely letter. Onesimus’ sanctified conscience and his consecrated desire for God’s glory forced him to return.

Seemingly More Feeble

Paul and this slave had become intimate friends. Notice the figurative expression in the twelfth verse. He speaks of Onesimus as though he were part of his own body—as essential to him as his own heart and lungs. The symbolism here is not excessive. No saint can count himself spiritually healthy if he is not benefitting from the other members of the body whom the Lord has provided for his assistance. We will suffer spiritually if we do not **take** that which every member supplies (Ephesians 4:16) and **apply** it to our lives. The King James translation uses the archaic word “bowels” here; in our current vocabulary the word “heart” more clearly conveys the idea which Paul expressed in the Greek of his day. The word he used is only applied to the “higher organs” (those of thought, emotion, etc.) and as such it expresses a greater importance in the relationship than the Authorized reading suggests.

These preceding thoughts were Paul's seventh argument in Onesimus' favor. We move now to the eighth. Paul would have enjoyed keeping Onesimus there with him. He indicates that he had considered it—and stifled the thought at its inception. He writes, saying that he was “wishing,” but that he would do nothing without the consent of Philemon. “The language is exact; there is a universe between [wishing and willing]” (*Expositor's Bible*). Justly, Paul could not have accepted the service of Onesimus without Philemon's consent and Paul does not even suggest the **possibility** of Onesimus being returned by Philemon to him. Paul imitates the heavenly Master by accepting his free-will service.

The church's present mission is preparatory to a larger mission than even those reforms which are so needed in this world! God's purposes will have to be accomplished before men will realize just how far short they have fallen (in even their best attempts to free each other from sin and selfishness). Men have emancipated many of their fellows—history tells the story plainly and with valor. But this freedom has been incomplete and the removal of one shackle has resulted in their more severe chafing under the other forms of bondage in which all men remain.

The true church knows a different freedom, however. Whomever Christ makes free is free indeed (John 8:36). Only a comparative few have taken advantage of this freedom, but Isaiah speaks of the extended emancipation which is yet to come:

“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.”—Isaiah 61:1

There will be only one exception to this liberty: all will have to submit to the Mediator of the New Covenant. This Mediator is defined as our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Hebrews 8:6; 9:15; 12:24). There is a similar mission pointed out for the followers of Jesus in the future (cf. Isaiah 42:6,7; Acts 13:47; Romans 8:21). Yes, this is their work too! The spirit speaks of this as though it were something which the entire world awaits—even though they do not exactly understand **what** they are waiting for. When the sons of God are manifested, the world will know the blessings which God has planned for them (Romans 8:22).

Freed For Service

Soldiers of the cross are never drafted. Their only compulsion comes from the power of love. We understand that there will be a rigid rule in the Millennial kingdom of Jesus, but our understanding is broadened when we think of this as in the expression “shepherding them with a rod of iron.” Appropriately, those who will assist Jesus in bringing liberty to Satan’s captives are those who themselves appreciate that blessing. The Scriptures indicate that this will always be true of those because “*where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty*” (2 Corinthians 3:17, ASV).

This liberty could easily be abused, becoming a stumbling block to brethren who are weaker in the faith (1 Corinthians 8:9):

“For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”—Galatians 5:13,14

Contrasting Illustrations

In Paul’s next argument we find him beginning with a word which is very difficult for men to accept: “perhaps.” But is it not better to begin with a “perhaps” and change it in time (as we mature) to a “truly” than to begin with a “verily” and end by having to apologize and say “I was

wrong”? We can all learn by this careful use of words. However careful we may be in wording our statements, we can still be gracious and humble—just as our Master and as the apostle Paul give us example. It is doubtful that **anyone** has ever spoken **only** the certified words of the holy spirit without the interjection of their own personal opinions. And haven’t we all found that at times our most completely thought-out ideas have been contradicted by the truth: disclaiming our thoughts?

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.”—Isaiah 55:8,9

The apostle confirms this, saying that we are not “*sufficient of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our sufficiency is from God*” (2 Corinthians 3:5, RSV).

Human errors **can** be made profitable to our spiritual progress **if** we know how to take them. We need to humbly confess our mistakes and when the next situation arises, to wait on the Lord (Psalm 123:2) for those things which the Lord will reveal to us (Deuteronomy 29:29). When we recognize that God’s ways **are** higher than ours, we cannot but help reflect that our carefully reasoned arguments must appear immature and infantile to the all-wise God. It should be apparent from the volume of Scriptural testimony that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:3) have been **hidden** in Christ. No human system of discovery or speculation will detect even the greatest of these “hidden” truths. These things are within his control; they await his time for their revealing. And in support of this fact we point to the many times that God denounced the prophets for speaking without his authorization (cf. Jeremiah 14:14; 23:14-16, 25-32, etc.).

When Paul used the word “perhaps” in the fifteenth verse, he was not speculating. He was not unclear about God’s benevolence, but he was unclear about whether Philemon would demonstrate himself a mature Chris-

tian. Note how easy and attractive Paul presents the situation to Philemon. The King James translation uses the rather harsh word “departed.” Paul’s word in the original text is much softer. He says that Onesimus was “*parted from you for awhile.*” It was clear to Paul that his God arranged **all** things after the counsel of his own will (Ephesians 1:11). Paul did not doubt the wisdom which timed and directed the feet of Onesimus to the city where God’s messenger waited with an abundance of time to preach to every listening ear. Paul’s imprisonment gave him a special insight. The holy spirit was preparing them for the “furtherance of the Gospel” (Philippians 1:12). And so, it was not a runaway slave whom Paul “received.” Onesimus had been temporarily parted by divine providence so that Philemon might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave, but as a beloved brother (verses 15 and 16).

A simple principle lies behind this situation. However, when we try to apply this concept to our lives, it becomes rather more difficult. He who lives such a life does not merely believe. Nor does he merely hope. To live that kind of life one must **know** (Hebrews 11:3). Faith surpasses any mechanical radar in assisting the consecrated mind to see beyond the difficulties of life to the inspiration which is to be found in the ocean of God’s love. Those who are unaided by faith view the world only through the fog of human speculation.

Let us illustrate this point. Flax is a plant used to make the great hawsers which tow giant ships into a harbor. The plant also produces lovely blue flower bells. But these flowers are not spared when the entire plant is plunged into a chemical vat to rot (a process necessary to soften the tough flax fibers so that they may later be turned into heavy cable). Sown in weakness, raised in power is the life story of a Christian. Men see only the pain and suffering when they try to judge the Almighty. Faith, however, sees a kingdom filling the entire earth with righteousness, peace, and joy in the holy spirit. There is an old Moravian translation of

the Scriptures which says, "to his kingdom and peace there shall be no boundary."

Hopeful Love

Verse 16 reminds us of Paul's attachment for the slave. He has become "*beloved ... in the Lord.*" Paul expected that he would become even more precious to Philemon: "*beloved, specially to me, but how much rather to thee, both in the flesh and in the Lord.*" But Philemon would first have to accept Onesimus in his new capacity as a brother and the first few days of their reunion would be the most difficult. Paul pleads, therefore, "*If then thou countest me a partner, receive him as myself.*" This is not the demand of a superior but the plea of a peer: two men standing on equal footing. Paul asks the heartiest of welcomes for his protégé, "*more than a servant, a brother beloved.*" There are many men who are **willing** to be partners on Sunday with those whom they despise during the rest of the week—if only they will remember their places from Monday to Saturday. But the only satisfactory arrangement for the apostle was an unrestricted seven-day partnership. Anything less than this would be living after the flesh (cf. Galatians 2:20; Romans 8:8,9). Almost any human mind would be intrigued at the prospect of a "partnership" with the Father and the Son. Our beloved John assures us that if we live according to the understanding which such a partnership will bring to our lives, then we will also have partnership with one another (1 John 1:3). He adds a startling provision to this idea, saying that "*the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin*" (1:7). The implication here is that if one were to reject the partnership of the humblest brother, he would risk rejection of the blood of our Savior himself.

This is an extreme warning! Nevertheless, consider the variety of fences which have been made by human

interests so as to exclude others from this partnership at various times during the Gospel age. If we **fully** believed this text, we would tend to accept as brethren **all** who name the name of Christ regardless of the fact that human reason may doubt the person's sincerity.

The ancient writer Horace records one of the common fears of the slave owner: the "anxious master fears lest his slaves shall pillage him and fly." Note how Paul avoids antagonizing Philemon when he refers to this crime in reference to Onesimus. He does not tell Philemon, "Onesimus has robbed you, he told me so himself." Instead he says, "but if he has wronged you." Love is kind (1 Corinthians 13:4) and Paul exercises love in selecting these gentle words to address the subject.

"Charge that to my account," is the lawyer-like phraseology he used, and we sense in the words a half-playful attitude on the part of Paul. But, nevertheless, he completes the legality of his offer saying, "I Paul write it with mine own hand." At least this much of the letter was written by Paul, assuring Philemon that this was a debt which could be collected. The Greek here is an infrequent use by Paul of a rare word in description of an even more rarely found Christ-like act. Paul took upon himself the chastisement of Onesimus' peace (Isaiah 53:5).

It is not necessary to fully understand the circumstances which made possible Paul's fourteenth argument: "I do not say that you owe me your own life." Whether the allusion is physical or spiritual does not matter. But it points to another basis upon which Paul could have commanded Philemon. But Paul had learned the lesson of the far greater power of love. "True love never presses its claims, nor recounts its services" (Alexander MacLaren). The truth of these words brands many of the acts which parade themselves as "acts of love" as being of their true master, the Devil. Paul is not boasting. His gesture of love hopes to obtain for both of these brothers the favor of the Lord. Love delights to

give, asking no return. Selfishness has its eye on reward, the praise of men, the comfort of a satisfied conscience, and the warmth of self-commendation. We, too, have a debt. We owe our lives to Christ. If there is gratitude, there is response, an eagerness to give what we can—all that we have (cf. Galatians 4:15; 1 Thessalonians 2:8).

Like a river glorious is God's perfect peace,
Over all victorious in its glad increase.
Perfect; yet it floweth *fuller* every day;
Perfect; yet it groweth *deeper* all the way.
Stayed upon Jehovah, hearts are truly blest,
Finding, as he promised, perfect peace and rest.

Hidden in the hollow of his blessed hand,
Never foe can follow, never traitor stand;
Not a surge of worry, not a shade of care,
Not a blast of hurry toucheth spirit there.
Stayed upon Jehovah, hearts are truly blest,
Finding, as he promised, perfect peace and rest.

Every joy or trial cometh from above,
Traced upon our dial by the Sun of love.
We may trust him solely, all for us to do;
They who trust him wholly, find him wholly true.
Stayed upon Jehovah, hearts are truly blest,
Finding, as he promised, perfect peace and rest.

Verses 20 to 25 (American Standard Version)

“Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my heart in Christ. Having confidence in thine obedience I write unto 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 unto you. Epaphras, my fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus, saluteth thee; and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.”

The apostle Paul's final argument to Philemon is to ask of him a favor. He already knows of Philemon's faithfulness. Now he asks the additional comfort of Philemon's cooperation. *“Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my heart in Christ.”* The word “yea,” here, is an adverbial form of pleading for which no one seems to have found an adequate English substitute when it is used as in this passage. Similarly, the original word for the English “joy” is impossible to put into graceful English. The form of speech which the apostle here employs is that of a play on words, the most difficult of the translator's problems.

A literal translation of this text (though an awkward one) would be: “Oh, brother, let me be onesimied (‘have joy’) by you.” In effect Paul is saying, I am sending you Onesimus, the helpful, and thus you have the opportunity to be helpful to me, comforting my spirit by letting me hear that you have extended your helpfulness to this new brother in Christ—one with whom you might be tempted to be overly severe (in view of his past unhelpfulness, yes even unfaithfulness). I hope you will remember the need of an aged prisoner for all the consolation he can have and add my need to your reasons for accepting this former slave, now a new fellow-bond-servant of Christ, accepting him just as you would accept myself. I am not asking that you give me merely

human pleasure; it is my "heart in Christ Jesus" to which you will be giving rest, repose.

The word "heart" (cf. verses 7 and 12) is the English nearest approach to a correct translation of the Greek. The word indicates the "higher organs" of the heart and lungs and reminds us of Paul's plea: "Let this mind be in you which is in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5). Four words are required to translate into English the thought of one Greek word. This verb implies much more than the translation suggests. It is based on the noun which is the name of the diaphragm (or "midriff")—the most powerful muscle in the human body. This muscle separates the higher and lower organs. All of the organs (on both sides of the diaphragm) were used by the ancients to represent the mind, and fittingly they represent the two prevailing types. What is Paul thus exhorting? "Let this separation be in you which was in Christ Jesus who never lived for a moment for the gratification of the lower desires, but always lived for the things of eternity."

He is instructing us to diligently (2 Peter 1:5) set our affections or "heart" (Colossians 3:2) on heavenly things. So doing, we can be filled with the spirit of God (Acts 9:17) and breathe that heavenly atmosphere with him.

The under-priests can only be prepared to share the office of the glorious High Priest by their being conformed to his teachings and character. All else must be made secondary to their development of characters like his. Paul uses a symbol to express this idea: "*Christ Jesus himself being the chief corner stone; in whom each several building, fitly framed together, groweth into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom ye also are builded together for a habitation of God in the Spirit*" (Ephesians 2:20-22, ASV). Those for whom old things have passed away and all things have become new, receive as *in the Lord* (Romans 16:2) those whom he has chosen *in himself* (16:13); marry *in the Lord* (1 Corinthians 7:39); labor *in the Lord* (Romans 16:12); do their glorying *in the Lord* (1 Corinthians 1:31); recognize all faithfulness

in themselves and in others as traceable to their relationship *in the Lord*. He is in fact their “*all in all*” (1 Corinthians 15:28; cf. 4:17).

The intimate interrelationship between Christians is illustrated by a picture of the Lord’s “body.” He is the head and does all the thinking. We are the organs through which he accomplishes his will. We are connected to the head by a mysterious spiritual nervous system and thus we are also connected with every other member for our mutual benefit. When one member suffers, all of the body suffers (1 Corinthians 12:25,26). Only a diseased member of the body would fail to respond to pain in other members of the body—or to a threat to it. Only when we are in Christ Jesus can we conquer all harshness and judgmental thinking, those disheartening manifestations of selfishness—traces of which must persist in us until the day when we are filled with all of the fulness of God (Ephesians 3:19) and when all the ugliness of the old self has been crowded out. It is that day when the faithful bride of Christ shall be ushered into the Father’s presence.

What a commendable ambition it is to seek to please other men in righteousness! But Christians should always recognize the higher motive that Paul suggests to Philemon. We all have opportunities to please other members in the Lord. We can all please others because of our relationship in that mystical body, and can therefore also please our Head. Christians’ words and actions should not be aimed at pleasing men but toward pleasing God (1 Thessalonians 2:4).

No one would be surprised if Philemon’s first thought had been, “What will my neighbors think?” Whose neighbors cannot be counted on to criticize? Any leniency on his part would be viewed by his unbelieving neighbors as encouragements to revolt on the part of the thousands of slaves in their community. But Philemon could serve only one master! In order to please God it was necessary that he not “*walk in the counsel of the ungodly*” (Psalm 1:1).

Paul's confidence in the success of his letter is seen in the twenty-first verse. Doubtless, some credit is due to his letter but most of the credit must go to the quality of Philemon's character. In review we note the reasons for Paul's confidence.

Philemon had a history of faithfulness. Since the request had been made as from a body member to a body member in Christ Jesus for the preservation of the principle which bound them together, love, Philemon could be expected to assent to Paul's request. Further, it was an opportunity to give comfort to an aged prisoner of Christ Jesus while risking nothing since Paul would pay any debt left by Onesimus. Additionally, Onesimus was a changed man and would not disappoint him, but would be found by Philemon to be profitable, as a brother, as a son, and as a fellow-bond-servant of Jesus Christ. Philemon was assured that the apostle loved Onesimus enough so that he wished he might keep him with him; but best of all because if he were there, Philemon had reason to believe that it was God who sent him away so that he might return as an added blessing to him and all the congregation in his house. In this state he would be more beloved to him than even to Paul, Philemon's own partner, and one to whom he owed his very life.

"But the liberal deviseth liberal things and in liberal things shall be established" (Isaiah 32:8, author's translation). One who has been liberal in giving himself (his all to the Lord) finds it easy to be liberal with others, generous in deeds, in giving and in judgment. Although Philemon knows these things, Paul makes his practice of them easier by expressing his confidence in him. Poor teachers often assure the disobedience of their students by treating them in such a way as to imply that they expect the student's disobedience. "A will which mere authority could not bend, like iron when cold, may be made flexible when warmed by this gentle heat" of love in the heart and in the tone, is the testimony of Alexander MacLaren. Agreeing with this principle, the apostle

writes: “*Having confidence in your obedience I write unto you, **knowing** that you will do even beyond what I say.*” Love does not plan to do the **least** it can, but the **most**.

Lightfoot comments that “the word emancipation seems to be trembling on the apostle’s lips, and yet he does not once utter it.” No such suggestion was necessary for, as Wordsworth observes:

“By Christianizing the master, the Gospel enfranchised the slave. It did not legislate about mere names and forms, but it went to the root of the evil — it spoke to the heart of man. When the heart of the master was filled with divine grace and was warmed with the love of Christ, the rest would soon follow. The lips would speak kind words: the hands would do liberal things. Every Onesimus would be treated by every Philemon as a beloved brother in Christ.”

According to a person’s disposition one could take Paul’s added request for a place of lodging for himself either as a sly way of urging Philemon to prompt obedience or as a reward for the generosity toward Onesimus which he has already said he **knows** will be exercised.

Paul ardently wanted to visit Colosse. He asks for the prayers of his brother that he may have that privilege. “*I **know** you will act like a Christian toward brother Onesimus; but I **hope** my own eyes can have the joy of seeing you together as brothers.*” We are not told if Paul did have that privilege but we do know that his prayers were answered. He did not say, “Send Paul to Colosse because I wish it,” but “Send Paul to Colosse if it is your will.” The first is the prayer of faith in self. The second is the prayer of faith in God and in his superior wisdom. Such a prayer can never be denied. However, the expression “prayer of faith” is often misapplied to prayers of selfishness by those who are determined to have their own will done. True faith fears to have its own will considered, knowing that God’s will is always as much higher than his as the heavens are higher than the earth. Many of the saints were praying for Stephen

but he was stoned nevertheless. What a blessing he has been to us in his martyr's death. Jesus prayed for Peter, but he denied the Lord anyway. He thus showed us the lengths to which God's mercy will reach.

The mutual love between Paul and Philemon must have inspired them to pray in earnest to know whether it was God's will that Paul "come quickly." Paul did not want to visit to check up on Philemon, driving him to obedience, but rather for the larger privilege and joy of service to the Lord's people. Joyful service freely given is the kind that yields the richest fruitage. It is said the finest wines are made from grapes which are so ripe that little pressure is required to extract their juice.

The pleadings of Paul and Jesus bear remarkable similarities. Both accept deeds done to their loved ones as if done to themselves. Both joy in the imperfect acts of those who respond because they are moved by love. Both expect that degree of love which will perform more than is requested. Both long for a day of reunion and use that mutual longing to inspire greater faithfulness. Paul, like Jesus Christ his master, prefers the tone of love to that of authority. Our Lord binds himself to pay all our indebtedness, reminds us that we owe him our lives—a debt that eternity cannot cancel—and asks us to prepare a place for him in our hearts where he can abide. Paul joins us in our prayer for assistance toward that end:

"For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, that ye may be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inward man."—Ephesians 3:14-16, ASV

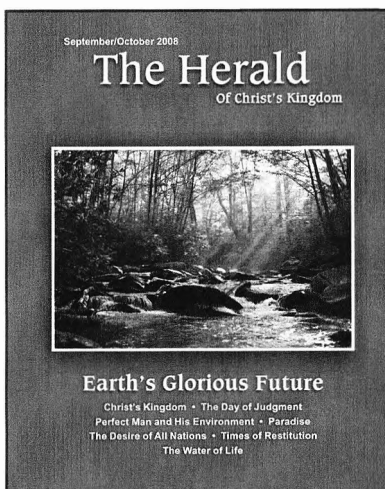
This letter closes with greetings from Epaphras and Aristarchus. The former is called his fellow prisoner and the latter his fellow worker. Interestingly, these designations are reversed in the Colossian letter (4:10, 12). Since the designations fit both men, we suggest the explanation of Meyer: "These attendants of Paul

voluntarily took turns in ministering to him in his place of confinement; hence one at a time, and another at another time, would be Paul's 'fellow prisoner.' ”

At this point in the letter Philemon would have had but the few words of final greeting to read before turning to Onesimus to pronounce sentence upon him. This inspired “short story” leaves it to the reader to supply the story's conclusion. Onesimus had fled as an ignorant heathen, a slinking thief, with rebellion and mutiny in his heart, and with stolen property on his person. Though he feared for his life, nevertheless, he had returned to his master. His life was now hidden in Christ (Colossians 3:3). He was a trusted representative of a well respected Christian, he longed for the perfection of holiness, of knowledge, and of the love of God. He hoped for a kingly crown and the privilege of reigning with Christ at his appearing. He joyed at the service opened to him in the meantime, ready to do good to all men as he had opportunity (Galatians 6:10), and doing all things as unto the Lord (Colossians 3:23).

The little letter in his hand, by implication, tells Philemon all these things. Need we question what his answer will be? Need we doubt the joy that will flood Paul's prison-dwelling, no, that **did** fill his cell in the writing of this letter? He **knew** that Philemon would do even more than he asked!

Each of the apostle's letters are a precious self-portrait of the author. But none so faithfully depict the tender heart which penned these words. There is no part of the letter so Pauline or more telling of his character than the benediction which closes it. Who cannot visualize in the mind's eye the two brothers clenched in a typically oriental embrace when Philemon has read these final words? And in the lower corner of the letter we find the final identification that corresponds with the name at the letter's heading: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.”



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