

Philemon Devotionals

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OWING OURSELVES TO CHRIST

Alexander Maclaren

Philemon 1:19. - I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto Me even thine own self beside.'

THE incomparable delicacy of this letter of Paul's has often been the theme of eulogium. I do not know that anywhere else in literature one can find such a gem, so admirably adapted for the purpose in hand. But beyond the wonderful tenderness and ingenuity born of right feeling and inbred courtesy which mark the letter, there is another point of view from which I have been in the habit of looking at it, as if it were a kind of parable of the way in which our Master pleads with us to do the things that He desires. The motive and principles of practical Christianity are all reducible to one — imitation of Jesus Christ. And therefore it is not fanciful if here we see, shining through the demeanour and conduct of the Apostle, some hint of the manner of the Master.

I venture to take these words as spoken to each Christian soul by a higher and greater voice than Paul's. 'I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto Me even thine own self besides.'

I. The first thing upon which I touch is our transcendent debt.

The Christian teacher may say to the soul which by his ministrations has been brought back to God and to peace in a very real sense: Thou owest thyself to me.

And the bond which knits any of us, dear brethren, of whom that is true to one another, is one the tenderness of which cannot be overestimated. I hope I am speaking to some hearts to whom my words come with a power greater than their intrinsic force deserves, because this sacreddest of all human ties has, by God's mercy, been established between us.

But I pass from that altogether to the consideration of the loftier thought that is here. It is a literal fact that all of you Christian people, if you are Christians in any real sense, do owe your whole Selves to Jesus Christ. Does a child owe itself to its parent? And has not Jesus Christ, if you are His, breathed into you by supernatural and real communication a better life and a better self, so that you have to say: 'I live, yet not I, but Jesus Christ liveth in me.' And if that be so, is not your spiritual being, your Christian self, purely and distinctly a gift from Him?

Does a man who is lying wrestling with mortal disease, and who is raised up by the skill and tenderness of his physician, owe his life to the doctor? Does a man who is drowning, and is dragged out of the river by some strong hand, owe himself to his rescuer? And is it not true that you and I were struggling with a disease which in its present form was mortal, and would very quickly end in death? Is it not true that all souls separated from God, howsoever they may seem to be living, are dead: and have not you been dragged from that living death by this dear Lord, so that, if you have not perished, you owe yourselves to Him?

Does a madman, who has been restored to self-control and sanity, owe himself to the sedulous care of him that has healed him?

And is it not true, paradoxical as it sounds, that the more a man lives to himself the less he possesses himself; and that you have been delivered, if you are Christian men and women, from the tyranny of lust and passions, and from the abject servitude to the lower parts of your nature, and to all the shabby tyrants, in time and circumstance, that rob you of yourself; and have been set free and made sane and sober, and your own masters and your own owners, by Jesus Christ? To live to self is to lose self, and when we come to ourselves we depart from ourselves; and He who has enabled us to rule our own mutinous and anarchic nature, and to put will above passions and tastes and flesh, and conscience above will, and Christ above conscience has given us the gift which we never had before, of an assured possession of our own selves.

So, in simplest verity, as the Deliverer from the death that slays us, as the Restorer to us of the power of self-control and ownership, and as the Granter to us of a new and better life, which becomes the very self of our selves, and the heart of our being, Jesus Christ has given to us this great gift, and can look each of us in the face and say: 'I made thee.' The Eternal Word is Creator. 'I redeemed thee; I dwell in thee; I am thy better self, and thou owest to Me thine own self besides.'

II. Now for a word, in the next place, as to the all. comprehending obligation which is based upon this debt.

If it be true that by the sacrifice of Himself Christ has given us ourselves, what then? Why, then, dear brethren, the only adequate response to that

gift, made ours at such cost to the Giver, is to give our selves back wholly to Him who gave Himself wholly to us. Christ can only buy me at the cost of Himself. Christ only wants myself when He gives Himself. In the sweet commerce of that reciprocal love which is the foundation of all blessedness, the only equivalent for a heart is a heart. As in our daily life, and in our sweet human affections, husband and wife, and parent and children, have nothing that they can barter the one with the other except mutual interchange of self; so Jesus Christ's great gift to me can only be acknowledged, adequately responded to, when I give myself to Him.

'I give Thee all, I can no more, Poor though the offering be,'

must be the only language that can satisfy that infinite hunger of the divine human heart over us which prompted the death upon Calvary and made it, in His eyes who paid it, the only price to pay for the recompense of our love.

O brethren, surely when those majestic lips bend themselves into the utterance, 'Thou owest Me thine own self besides,' surely, surely, the answer that will spring to all our lips is:

'We live not to ourselves, but to Thee.'

And if I might for a moment dwell upon the definite particulars into which such an answer will expand itself, I might say that this entire surrender of self will be manifested by the occupation of all our nature with Jesus Christ. He is meant to be the food of my mind as truth; He is meant to be the food of my heart as love; He is meant to be the Lord of my will as supreme Commander. Tastes, inclinations, faculties, hopes, memories, desires, aspirations, they are all meant as so many tendrils by which my many-fingered spirit can twine itself round Him, and draw from Him nourishment and peace. Not that He demands that we should cease to exercise these faculties of ours upon other objects which He Himself has provided, but that in all the lower reaches and ranges of our mental and spiritual occupations, in all our human loves and efforts and desires, there should blend the thought of Him. Just as a beam of light, if it struck down on us now, would disperse none of the motes which would be revealed dancing in its path, so the love of Christ and the occupation of our whole nature with Him, would give a glory to the lesser objects to which our other faculties and desires may turn. If we loved one another in Him we should find each other worthier of our love. If we pursued truth and study and knowledge in Him we should find the knowledge easier and more blessed. If all our hopes, desires, and efforts were illuminated by a reference to Himself, then they would all flash up into beauty and power.

And again, this entire self-surrender should maul lest itself in an utter and absolute submission to, and conformity with, His will. The slave has no will but his master's. That is degradation and blasphemy when it is tried to be enforced or practised as between two men; but it is honour and dignity and blessedness when it is practised as to Christ. Submit! submit! Obey! obey! Let your wills be held in suspense until His is manifested; and when it is, then cheerfully take what He sends, If His hand comes blighting and blasting, bow! If His hand comes pointing and directing, follow! The surrender of self must be accomplished in the region of the will. And when I can say, 'Not my will, but Thine be done,' then, and in that measure, I can say, 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me,'

Again, this entire surrender will manifest itself in the devotion of our whole being to His name and glory. Words easily spoken! words which if they were truly transmuted, into life by any of us would revolutionise our whole nature and conduct! To serve Him, to make Him the End for which we live; to try, as our highest purpose, to spread His sweet name, and to advance His Kingdom — theoretically that is what you Christian men and women say you are doing, by the profession that you make. Practically, I wonder how many of the people who owe themselves to Jesus Christ have never, in all their lives, done a thing for the simple purpose of honouring and glorifying His name.

And further, this entire surrender of self will manifest itself in regard not only to our being and our acting, but to our having. I do not want to dwell upon this point at any length, but let me remind you, dear friends, that a slave has no possessions of his own. And you and I, if we are our own owners are so only because we are Christ's slaves. Therefore we have nothing. In the old, bad days the slave's cottage, his little bits of chattels, the patch of garden ground with its vegetables, and the few coins that he might have saved by.. selling these, they all belonged to his master because he belonged to his master. And that is true about you and me, and our balance at our bankers' and our houses and our possessions of all sorts. We say we believe that; do we administer these possessions as if we did believe it? Oh, if there came into our hearts, and kept there, the gush of thankfulness which is the only reasonable answer to the great rush of sacrificing love which Christ has poured upon us, there would be no more difficulties about money in regard of Christian enterprise. Jesus is 'worthy to receive riches.' Let us see to it that, being His slaves we do not hide away what He has given us from the service of Him to whom it belongs.

And now, dear brethren, all that sacrifice of which have been speaking, while it is the plainest practical Christianity, and the only kind of life that corresponds to the facts of our relation to Jesus Christ, is a terrible contrast and a sharp rebuke to the average type of Christian among us. I do not want, God knows, I do not want to scold. And I know that if such surrender as my text implies is painful to any man, it is not worth the making; but I beseech you, Christian people, as I would plead with mine own self, to take these simple, threadbare thoughts into your hearts and consciences until it shall become pain to you to keep back, and a joy to surrender, all that you have to the Lord to whom we owe ourselves.

III. Lastly, and one word, about the repayment. Jesus Christ stops in no man's debt.

There is an old story in one of the historical books of the Old Testament about people who, in the middle of a doubtful negotiation, were smitten by conscience, and drew back from it. But one of them, with commercial shrewdness, remembered that a portion of their capital was already invested, and he says, 'What shall we do for the thousand talents that we have given, and are now sacrificing at the bidding of conscience?' And the answer was: 'The Lord is able to give thee much more than these.' That is true of all sacrifices for Him. He has given us abundant wages beforehand. What we give is His before it was ours. It remains His when it is called ours. We but give Him back His own. There is really nothing to repay, yet He repays, in a hundred ways. He does so by giving us a keen joy in the act of surrender.

That is fifty thousand times greater than the joy of keeping — or rather the difference between the two is not a question so much of quantity as of quality. What I give to Him I have; like a stone dropped into a stream, if the sun be shining and the ripples glancing, it looks far bigger, and any colour upon it is far brighter there, than when it lay in my hand. So all that is given to Jesus Christ comes back upon a man transformed and glorified, and when we give ourselves to Him, weak and sinful, He renders us back saints to ourselves. The joy of surrender is the sweetest of all the joys that a man has. 'It is more blessed to give than to receive,' and Christ bestows ourselves upon ourselves that we may have some portion of that joy.

And with it come other gladnesses. There is not only the joy of surrender, and the enhanced possession of all which is surrendered, but there is the larger possession of Himself which comes always as the issue of a surrender of ourselves to Him. When we thus yield He comes into our souls. It is only our self-engrossment that keeps Him out of our hearts; and when our hearts bow, they open: and when we give ourselves to Him it is possible for Him, in larger measure to give Himself to us. If you want to be assured of your gospel, live by it. If you want to have more of certitude of possessing His promises, try the experiment of yielding to His love. If you want more of Christ, give yourselves more to Him.

And as for the future, I need say little about that. There is a future, the overwhelming magnitude of whose recompense of reward shall beggar our loftiest anticipations, and surprise us with its greatness as well as shame us with the consciousness which it awakens that our poor, stained service is far overpaid by it. Such reaping from such sowing will make the joy of the harvest a wonder and a rapture. Who hath first given to Jesus, and it shall be recompensed to him again?

And now I beseech you to listen to your Saviour appealing to you with the tender word: 'I have given to thee Myself; and therein I have given to thee thyself. Now what dost thou give to Me?'

**JAMES SMITH
HANDFULS OF PURPOSE
STUDIES ON PHILEMON**

**The Task And Its Accomplishment
Book Of Philemon**

This is the briefest of all Paul's Epistles. It is the only sample of the Apostle's private correspondence that has been preserved. It is known as "The Courteous Epistle." Its object was to persuade Philemon not to punish, but reinstate, his runaway slave, called Onesimus, and as he was now converted, treat him as a brother in the Lord.

I. The Task.

Invariably, in those days, runaway slaves were crucified. Paul must try to conciliate the master- Philemon-without humiliating the servant-Onesimus; to commend the repentant wrong-doer, without extenuating his offence; thus he must balance the claims of justice and mercy.

II. Its Solution.

1. Touching Philemon's heart by several times mentioning that he was a prisoner for the Gospel's sake.
2. Frankly and fully recognised Philemon's most excellent Christian character, thus making it difficult for him to refuse to live up to his reputation, and to lead him to deal graciously with the defaulter.
3. Delayed mentioning the name of the penitent until he had paved the way.
4. Referred to Onesimus as his "son," thus establishing the new kinship in Christ.
5. After presenting his request, assumed Philemon would do as he had requested (Philemon 1:21).
6. Refused to command with the authority of an apostle, but entreated as a brother, as a bosom friend. See Philemon 1:8-9, Philemon 1:20; especially "Dearly beloved" (Philemon 1:1).
7. Frankly acknowledged the wrong done (Philemon 1:11), and promised to make good any loss (Philemon 1:18, 19).
8. By a careful choice of words, avoided irritation, as, for example, he says "departed" (Philemon 1:15), not fled or runaway, etc., etc.
9. Feels the slave must not encounter his outraged master alone, so arranges for Philemon's friend, Tychicus, to accompany him and act as mediator. It is clear that Tychicus conveyed this letter to Philemon with Onesimus. (See Col 4:7-9).
10. Mentions his plans to visit Philemon (Philemon 1:22); and how could he meet him if he had refused to carry out his request?

A Fourfold Fellowship Book Of Philemon

I. Fellow-believer. Trusting (Philemon 1:6).

1. "Fellowship of thy faith" is R.V. "This faith which you share with us" (Way.).
2. What a glorious fellowship is this of faith. What an honour to be numbered as a member of the Lord's Household of Faith.

II. Fellow-soldier. Fighting (Philemon 1:2).

1. Apphia is called "The Sister" in R.V. Was she Philemon's wife or daughter?
2. It is generally understood that Archippus was Philemon's son.
3. Fighting follows trusting. Soon the young believer discovers this. Fightings without-yes, and fightings within-"Flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh" (Gal 5:17). Remember it was immediately

after God had given water (type of Holy Spirit) to Israel, that Amalek (type of flesh) fought Israel. (See. Ex 17:1-8). Observe force of "Then" in Philemon 1:8. But in this fight, through our Heavenly Moses on the Mount-our Lord Jesus as Great High Priest-we are more than conquerors.

III. Fellow-labourer. Working (Philemon 1:1).

1. Philemon is not mentioned in the Epistle to the Colossians, but Archippus, whom Paul associates (in Philemon 1:2) with Philemon, is mentioned in such a way as to imply that both were office-bearers (Col 4:17). "Sharer in our toil" is Way's translation. Philemon was one of Paul's converts.

2. "Our fellow-workman" (J.N.D.).

IV. Fellow-prisoner. Suffering (Philemon 1:23).

1. Only Epistle where Paul begins by simply calling himself a "prisoner." Six times does he allude to this (Philemon 1:1,9,10,13,22,23).

2. The Epistle begins with Paul in bonds, but leads up to Paul in prayer.

3. Observe, "prisoner for Jesus Christ" (Philemon 1:1, R.V.). He does not dwell on this in any spirit of boasting or proud display, but for a benign purpose.

4. Suffering for the Lord falls naturally to the lot of all born-again ones. The lustings of the flesh, for example, cause suffering. Then grace does refine, making us more sensitive to the jeers and taunts of the world, and to the unkind and uncharitable criticisms of fellow-believers.

5. But let us never forget we are not the only sufferers, for this is the common lot of all believers. "Fellow-prisoner."

6. It is generally understood that the prominent brethren took turns in voluntarily sharing the Apostle's imprisonment, so as to minister to him in his bonds, "not being ashamed of his chain" (2 Timothy 1:16). By such a fellowship of suffering they must have refreshed the heart of the Apostle.

7. Epaphras is the shortened or provincial form of Epaphroditus.

An Analogy Of Our Salvation Book Of Philemon

I. Original Position. God created man perfect, and thus man was His property. But in sinning he not only departed from God, as Onesimus had done, but also robbed Him of His rights and just dues.

II. Sad Plight. As Onesimus fled to Rome, and was in a parlous position, so with man. As Roman law gave a slave no right to asylum, so the Law of God affords man no right of asylum, no resting place, no way of escape. The Law says, "The soul that sinneth, it shall die." (Ezekiel 18:4, 20, contrast Nu 15:28)

III. God has a Partner (Philemon 1:17). It is thought by some that Philemon and the Apostle had been partners in some business concern. In Jesus, God has a Partner utterly and entirely one with Him. He interposes on our behalf. Knowing to the full how much we have wronged God, and how much we owe Him, Jesus says, "Put that on Mine account." All our debt is put to Christ's account.

IV. Grace Intervenes. Roman law permitted a slave to flee to his master's friend, who could plead for him. Onesimus sought out his master's friend, Paul the Apostle, and he was born again-"whom I have begotten in my bonds" (Philemon 1:10). Sinners fly to the Lord Jesus Christ. In Him, and through Him, they receive pardon, are begotten anew as sons, and find both a Saviour, an Intercessor, and a Father. The sinner returns to God, and is received, not as a runaway slave, but as Christ Himself (Philemon 1:16).

**In Christ Jesus
Philemon 1:5-8**

There are eleven references to the Lord Jesus by name in this short Epistle of but one chapter. The specially significant phrase, "In Christ Jesus," occurs oftener than in the same number of verses anywhere else in Scripture. The Lord Jesus is referred to in many offices, as follows:

I. The Object of the faith and love of His people (Philemon 1:5). "A faith that looks up to our Lord Jesus" (Way).

II. The Channel through which God's grace and peace becomes ours (Philemon 1:3, 25).

III. The Source of any good thing in us (Philemon 1:6).

IV. The Transforming Power (Philemon 1:16). In Philemon 1:11 we have two pictures of one man. Here is a play upon the meaning of the name of Onesimus, which is "Profitable." Profitable by name, he became, through sin, unprofitable to his Master, but through the grace of the Lord, and through Christ's wonderful transforming power, profitable to both Paul and his friend Philemon. The Lord transforms waste into wealth. "In the Lord" (Philemon 1:16), that is the explanation of the wonderful transformation in Onesimus.

V. Gives Boldness to His servants (Philemon 1:8).

VI. Gives Satisfaction and refreshment to workers, by prompting their converts to generous and praiseworthy actions (Philemon 1:20).

VII. Gives Restfulness in the consciousness that He knows all, and that nothing can come to us save by God's permission (Philemon 1:1, 9, 23). Observe, Paul calls himself, not a prisoner of the Roman authorities, true though that was, but of Jesus Christ. Behind Rome he saw the Lord, and knew his imprisonment could not have been but for Divine permission.

Receive Book Of Philemon

This may be taken as the key-word of the Epistle, and forms both its heart and radiating centre. Observe the gathering emphasis in his repetition of this word, how he strikes each time a louder note and a higher key.

I. The Act. What was he to do? Receive (Philemon 1:12).

II. The Manner.-How was he to receive Onesimus?

1. As Philemon would Receive Paul Himself (Philemon 1:12, 17). "As my own flesh and blood" (C. & H.). "As a piece of my very heart" (Way). "I send part of myself" (W.). As Dr. Scofield has pointed out, "Receive him as myself"-reckon to him my merit. "If he hath wronged thee or oweth thee ought, put that to my account" -reckon to me his demerit. Striking illustration of the Divine reckoning in our justification.

2. As a Beloved Brother in the Lord (Philemon 1:16). In the flesh, Philemon has his brother-man for his slave; in the Lord Jesus he has the slave for his brother. By conversion, one sinner becomes son to Paul and brother to Philemon, his owner and master.

III. The Period. "Receive him forever" (Philemon 1:15). "For perhaps he therefore departed for an hour (lit.), that thou shouldest receive him for ever." What a contrast we have here. Paul suggests a loving Providence over-ruling

Beseech Philemon 1:8-10

Note the intensity of feeling apparent by Paul's use and repetition of the strong word "beseech." But pray also note the Apostle's great wisdom in waiving his authority to command.

I. Paul's Authority (Philemon 1:18). "Therefore, though I might with Christ's authority speak very freely and order you to do what is fitting, it is for love's sake that-instead of that- ... I entreat you" (W.). Paul had authority to command Philemon to reinstate Onesimus, because

1st. He was an Apostle.

2nd. He was Philemon's spiritual father.

3rd. Philemon was an office-bearer under Paul.

II. Paul's Wisdom (Philemon 1:19). Paul wisely decided, in this case, not to exercise his authority, but to appeal to their mutual love, and to his aged and suffering condition. Elder brethren, and Christian leaders in Churches, would be well advised to more frequently emulate Paul's example, and to take care that their responsible position does not create a permanent, officious, domineering, autocratic, and dictatorial spirit. Such can easily be developed. Note the frequency in Paul's Pastoral Epistles of his commendation of a "gentle" spirit. There is a world of wisdom in that exhortation.

III. Paul's Success (Philemon 1:10). There is no doubt whatever that Paul succeeded in his plea. His skill in presenting his case, and, above all, his gentle, loving entreaties were overwhelming. More success would be granted in many difficult Assembly and Church matters if Paul's example were more frequently copied.

Exposition of Philemon

C H Spurgeon

Philemon 1:1. Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, —

This is one of Paul's private letters, though it has the stamp of inspiration upon it. It was not written concerning church business, nor to teach some great doctrinal truth, but there was a runaway slave who had come to Rome, and who had been converted under Paul's ministry, and Paul was sending him back to his master; and this was the letter which he was to take with him, to make some sort of apology for him, and to ask his master to receive him with kindness, and to forgive his fault. Every word of this Epistle is very wisely put. Paul begins by calling himself "a prisoner of Jesus Christ." Who would not grant him his desire when he was wearing a chain for Christ's sake? If a letter were to come to you from some beloved minister, whom you knew to be lying in a dungeon and likely soon to die, you would be greatly touched if you noticed the traces of the rust of his fetters on the letter. "Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ," —

THIS has been called "the polite epistle," for Paul used great courtesy and tact in writing it. Onesimus, a slave, had robbed his master Philemon, and had then run away from him. Hoping to conceal himself best in the metropolis, Onesimus had fled to Rome, where he heard Paul preach and became converted. The apostle sent him back to his Christian master with the following letter of apology. Although its first object was only to restore a runaway slave to his master, it is a weighty letter, and every syllable has substance in it.

Philemon 1:1, 2. And Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer, and to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house;

He joins Timothy with himself, to give double weight to the message. Probably Timothy was well known to Philemon, and much respected by him, so he puts Timothy's name that there might be two to plead with him. Then, notice the loving titles with which Paul addresses Philemon: "our dearly beloved, and fellow laborer." Probably the person whom Paul called "beloved Apphia" was Philemon's wife, so he writes to help also for perhaps the wife was the more tender-hearted of the two, so she might put in a good word for Onesimus, and her husband would all the more readily grant Paul's request. He also mentions Archippus, who was either the pastor of the church at Colosse, or an evangelist who stayed occasionally at the house of Philemon. So he mentions him with all the rest of the household who met there for worship, and so made up the church in the house.

Philemon 1:2 (Morning and Evening) - Is there a Church in this house? Are parents, children, friends, servants, all members of it? or are some still unconverted? Let us pause here and let the question go round—Am I a member of the Church in this house? How would father's heart leap for joy, and mother's eyes fill with holy tears if from the eldest to the youngest all were saved! Let us pray for this great mercy until the Lord shall grant it to us. Probably it had been the dearest object of Philemon's desires to have all his household saved; but it was not at first granted him in its fulness. He had a wicked servant, Onesimus, who, having wronged him, ran away from his service. His master's prayers followed him, and at last, as God would have it, Onesimus was led to hear Paul preach; his heart was touched, and he returned to Philemon, not only to be a faithful servant, but a brother beloved, adding another member to the Church in Philemon's house. Is there an unconverted servant or child absent this morning? Make special supplication that such may, on their return to their home, gladden all hearts with good news of what grace has done! Is there one present? Let

him partake in the same earnest entreaty. If there be such a Church in our house, let us order it well, and let all act as in the sight of God. Let us move in the common affairs of life with studied holiness, diligence, kindness, and integrity. More is expected of a Church than of an ordinary household; family worship must, in such a case, be more devout and hearty; internal love must be more warm and unbroken, and external conduct must be more sanctified and Christlike. We need not fear that the smallness of our number will put us out of the list of Churches, for the Holy Spirit has here enrolled a family-church in the inspired book of remembrance. As a Church let us now draw nigh to the great head of the one Church universal, and let us beseech him to give us grace to shine before men to the glory of his name.

Philemon 1:3-7. Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers, hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints; that the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.

Paul recalls how much Philemon had done in the comforting of persecuted and poor saints. And when you are about to ask a favor of anyone, it is well to show your gratitude for what you or others have already received from him.

Philemon 1:4-6 - Paul knew Philemon was a true believer, and therefore prayed that others might feel the power of his piety, by seeing how he acted in the present case.

Philemon 1:8, 9. Therefore though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient, yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

He says in effect, "I am an apostle, and I am your spiritual father, so I might have spoken with authority to you, and have said, 'It is your duty to do this;' but I am not going to do anything of the kind. I am going to plead with you, and beseech it of you as a kindness and a favor. Pay a loving tribute to my old age; and beside that, I am a prisoner shut up in the dungeon for Christ's sake; hear the clanking of my chains, and grant my request for love's sake."

This is the best of pleading. Philemon's heart would be sure to yield to it.

Philemon 1:10. I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:

"He came to hear me preach in the prison. He has been listening to me while I am still a captive, and he has been given to me, as another son in the gospel, to be a comfort to me in my bonds. I beseech you for him."

Philemon 1:11, 12. Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me: whom I have sent again:

"He was thy slave, and therefore I have sent him back to thee."

Philemon 1:12. Thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:

"Look upon him as though he were my very heart, and receive him as you would receive me if I could go to you."

"Mine own bowels" (my very heart,) - who is so dear to me that he carries my heart with him wherever he goes.

Philemon 1:13, 14. Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel: but without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.

"I would have kept him," says Paul, "for I need someone to be my companion, to comfort me in my distress; but I would not do it without asking your leave, lest I should seem to take advantage of you. Though I know that you would willingly consent to it, yet, nevertheless, that it might be perfectly voluntary on your part, I have sent him back to you, that you may do as you will with him."

Though he felt sure that Philemon would have been glad to spare his servant to care for his aged friend, yet Paul would not take the liberty of using his services, but gave Philemon the opportunity to do it of his own accord if he thought fit.

Philemon 1:15-17. For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever; not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, especially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord? If thou count me therefore a partner,-

"If thou hast true fellowship and communion with me," —

Philemon 1:16 - Providence suffered him to run away that he might come under Paul's influence and become a Christian: the gracious purpose of God overrules evil for good.

Philemon 1:17. Receive him as myself.

How beautifully this is put all through! It very much reminds me of our Lord Jesus Christ, who seems to say to the Divine Father, "This poor child is in fellowship with me. Receive him, therefore, as myself;" and this is just what God does in the case of repenting and believing sinners; he receives them just as if he could see Christ in them.

Philemon 1:18. If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account;

How generously this is put by this poor prisoner at Rome, and how gloriously, in this, he is like our Master, who stands as Surety for us!

Philemon 1:19. I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.

Paul had been the means of Philemon's conversion, so he was immeasurably in debt to the apostle; but Paul only gently reminds him of the fact as a reason why he should deal kindly with Onesimus for his sake.

Philemon 1:20. Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord.

"You have refreshed others, then, surely, you will not let me be without refreshment now You have been very kind to all sorts of saints; then you cannot be unkind to the man who is your own spiritual father."

Philemon 1:21. Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that than it also do more than I say.

This is delicately yet forcibly put, and we feel certain that Philemon must have done as Paul wished, even though we have no record of the fact.

Is not this a graceful way of putting it? Who could have the heart to resist such pleading? Yet every word is gentle and quiet. Mild language is mighty.

Our Father in heaven, we hallow thy name,
O'er earth may thy kingdom establish its claim!
Oh, give to us daily our portion of bread;
It is from thy bounty that all must be fed.

Forgive our transgressions, and teach us to know
The humble compassion that pardons each foe;
Keep us from temptation, from weakness, and sin,
And thine be the glory for ever. Amen.

C H Spurgeon
Onesimus - A Runaway Slave
Philemon 1:15

[\(Click](#) for sermon on Philemon 1:2)

Philemon 1:15 "Perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him forever"—

Nature is selfish, but grace is loving. He who boasts that he cares for nobody, and nobody cares for him, is the reverse of a Christian, for Jesus Christ enlarges the heart when he cleanses it. There is none so tender and sympathetic as our Master, and if we be truly his disciples, the same mind will be in us which was also in Christ. The apostle Paul was eminently large-hearted and sympathetic. Surely he had enough to do at Rome to bear his own troubles and to preach the Gospel. If, like the priest in the parable of the good Samaritan, he had "passed by on the other side," he might have been excused, for he was on the urgent business of that Master who once said to his seventy messengers, "Salute no man by the way." We might not have wondered if he had said, "I cannot find time to attend to the wants of a runaway slave." But Paul was not of that mind. He had been preaching, and Onesimus had been converted, and henceforth he regarded him as his own son. I do not know why Onesimus came to Paul. Perhaps he went to him as a great many rogues have come to me—because their fathers knew me; and so, as Onesimus' master had known Paul, the servant applied to his master's friend, perhaps to beg some little help in his extremity. Anyhow, Paul seized the opportunity and preached to him Jesus, and the runaway slave became a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul watched him, admired the

character of his convert, and was glad to be served by him, and when he thought it right that he should return to his master, Philemon, he took a deal of trouble to compose a letter of apology for him, a letter which shows long thinking, since every word is well selected: albeit that the Holy Spirit dictated it, inspiration does not prevent a man's exercising thought and care on what he writes. Every word is chosen for a purpose. If he had been pleading for himself, he could not have pleaded more earnestly or wisely. Paul, as you know, was not accustomed to write letters with his own hand, but dictated to an amanuensis. It is supposed that he had an affection of the eyes, and therefore when he did write he used large capital letters, as he says in one of the epistles, "Ye see how large a letter I have written unto you with my own hand." The epistle was not a large one, but he probably alluded to the largeness of the characters which he was obliged to use whenever he himself wrote. This letter to Philemon, at least part of it, was not dictated, but was written by his own hand. See the nineteenth verse. "I Paul have written it with mine own hand. I will repay it." It is the only note of hand which I recollect in Scripture, but there it is—an I O U for whatever amount Onesimus may have stolen.

Let us cultivate a large-hearted spirit, and sympathize with the people of God, especially with new converts, if we find them in trouble through past wrong-doing. If anything needs setting right, do not let us condemn them off-hand, and say, "You have been stealing from your master, have you? You profess to be converted, but we do not believe it." Such suspicious and severe treatment may be deserved, but it is not such as the love of Christ would suggest. Try and set the fallen ones right, and give them again, as we say, "a fair start in the world." If God has forgiven them, surely we may, and if Jesus Christ has received them, they cannot be too bad for us to receive. Let us do for them what Jesus would have done had he been here, so shall we truly be the disciples of Jesus.

First, let us look at Onesimus as an instance of divine grace.

We see the grace of God in his election. He was a slave. In those days slaves were very ignorant, untaught, and degraded. Being barbarously used, they were for the most part themselves sunk in the lowest barbarism, neither did their masters attempt to raise them out of it. It is possible that Philemon's attempt to do good to Onesimus may have been irksome to the man, and he may therefore have fled from his house. His master's prayers, warnings, and Christian regulations may have been disagreeable to him, and therefore he ran away. He wronged his master, which he could scarcely have done if he had not been treated as a confidential servant to some extent. Possibly the unusual kindness of Philemon, and the trust reposed in him may have been too much for his untrained nature. We know not what he stole, but evidently he had taken something, for the apostle says, "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account." He ran away from Colosse, therefore, and thinking that he would be less likely to be discovered by the ministers of justice, he sought the city of Rome, which was then as large as the city of London now is, and perhaps larger. There in those back slums, such as the Jews' quarter in Rome now is, Onesimus would go and hide; for among those gangs of thieves which infested the imperial city, he would not be known or heard of any more, so he thought; and he could live the free and easy life of a thief. Yet, mark you, the Lord looked out of heaven with an eye of love, and set that eye on Onesimus.

Were there no free men, that God must elect a slave? Were there no faithful servants, that he must choose one who had embezzled his master's money? Were there none of the educated and polite, that he must needs look upon a barbarian? Were there none among the moral and the excellent, that infinite love should fix itself upon this degraded being, who was now mixed up with the very scum of society? And what the scum of society was in old Rome I should not like to think, for the upper classes were about as brutalized in their general habits as we can very well conceive; and what the lowest scum of all must have been, none of us can tell. Onesimus was part and parcel of the dregs of a sink of sin. Read Paul's first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, if you can, and you will see in what a horrible state the heathen world was at that time, and Onesimus was among the worst of the worst; and yet eternal love, which passed by kings and princes, and left Pharisees and Sadducees, philosophers and magi, to stumble in the dark as they chose, fixed its eye upon this poor benighted creature that he might be made a vessel to honor, fit for the Master's use.

***Just like his nature in his grace,
All sovereign, and all free;
Great God, how searchless are thy ways,
How deep thy judgments be!***

"I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion," rolls like thunder alike from the cross of Calvary and from the mount of Sinai. The Lord is a sovereign, and does as he pleases. Let us admire that marvelous electing love which selected such a one as Onesimus!

Grace also is to be observed, in the next place, in the conversion of this runaway slave.

Look at him! How unlikely he appears to become a convert. This man had been dishonest, and he was daring withal, for after taking his master's property he was bold enough to make a long journey from Colosse to reach Rome. But everlasting love means to convert the man, and converted he shall be. He may have heard Paul preach at Colosse and Athens, but yet he had not been impressed. At Rome, Paul was not preaching in St. Peter's: it was in no such noble building. But it was probably down there at the back of the Palatine hill, where the praetorian guard have their lodgings, and where there was a prison called the Praetorium. In a bare room in the barrack prison Paul sat with a soldier chained to his hand, preaching to all who were admitted to hear him, and

there it was that the grace of God reached the heart of this wild young man; and, oh, what a change it made in him immediately! Now you see him repenting of his sin, grieved to think he has wronged a good man, vexed to see the depravity of his heart as well as the error of his life. He weeps; Paul preaches to him Christ crucified, and the glance of joy is in his eye: and from that heavy heart a load is taken. New thoughts light up that dark mind; the very face is changed, and the entire man renewed, for the grace of God can turn the lion to a lamb, the raven to a dove.

Some of us, I have no doubt, are quite as wonderful instances of divine election and effectual calling as Onesimus was. Let us, therefore, record the lovingkindness of the Lord, and let us say to ourselves, "Christ shall have the glory of it. The Lord hath done it; and unto the Lord be honor, world without end."

The grace of God was conspicuous in the character which it wrought in Onesimus upon his conversion, for he appears to have been helpful, useful, and profitable. So Paul says. Paul was willing to have had him as an associate. He was evidently of a kind, tender, loving spirit. Paul at once called him brother, and would have liked to retain him. When he sent him back, was it not a clear proof of change of heart in Onesimus that he would go back? Away as he was in Rome, he might have passed on from one town to another, and have remained perfectly free, but feeling that he was under some kind of bond to his master—especially since he had injured him—he takes Paul's advice to return to his old position. He will go back, and take a letter of apology or introduction to his master; for he feels that it is his duty to make reparation for the wrong that he has done. I always like to see a resolve to make restitution of former wrongs in people who profess to be converted. If they have taken any money wrongfully they ought to repay it; it were well if they returned seven-fold. Do not think it is to be passed over by saying, "God has forgiven me, and therefore I may leave it." No, dear friend, but inasmuch as God has forgiven you, try to undo all the wrong, and prove the sincerity of your repentance by so doing. So Onesimus will go back to Philemon, and work out his term of years with him, or otherwise do Philemon's wishes, for though he might have preferred to wait upon Paul, his first duty was due to the man whom he had injured. That showed a gentle, humble, honest, upright spirit; and let Onesimus be commended for it: nay, let the grace of God be extolled for it. Look at the difference between the man who robbed, and the man who now comes back to be profitable to his master.

What wonders the grace of God has done! What wonders the grace of God can do! Many plans are employed in the world for the reformation of the wicked and the reclaiming of the fallen, and to every one of these, as far as they are rightly concerned, we wish good success; for whatever things are lovely and pure, and of good report, we wish them God speed. But mark this word—the true reforming of the drunkard lies in giving him a new heart; the true reclaiming of the harlot is to be found in a renewed nature. She must be washed in the Savior's blood, or she will never be clean. The lowest strata of society will never be brought into the light of virtue, sobriety, and purity, except by Jesus Christ and his Gospel; and we must stick to that. Let all others do what they like, but God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, secondly, we have in our text, and its connections, a very interesting INSTANCE OF SIN OVERRULED.

Onesimus had no right to rob his master and run away; but God was pleased to make use of that crime for his conversion. It brought him to Rome, and so brought him where Paul was preaching, and thus it brought him to Christ, and to his right mind. Now, when we speak of this, we must be cautious. When Paul says, "Perhaps he departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him forever," he does not excuse his departure. He does not make it out that Onesimus did right—not for a moment. Sin is sin, and, whatever sin may be overruled to do, yet sin is still sin. The crucifixion of our Savior has brought the greatest conceivable blessings upon mankind, yet none the less it was "with wicked hands" that they took Jesus and crucified him. The selling of Joseph into Egypt was the means in the hand of God of the preservation of Jacob, and his sons, in the time of famine; but his brethren had nothing to do with that, and they were none the less guilty for having sold their brother for a slave. Let it always be remembered that the faultiness or virtue of an act is not contingent upon the result of that act. If, for instance, a man who has been set on a railway to turn the switch forgets to do it, you call it a very great crime if the train comes to mischief and a dozen people are killed. Yes, but the crime is the same if nobody is killed. It is not the result of the carelessness, but the carelessness itself which deserves punishment. If it were the man's duty to turn the switch in such-and-such a way, and his not doing so should even by some strange accident turn to the saving of life, the man would be equally blameworthy. There would be no credit due to him, for if his duty lies in a certain line his fault also lies in a certain line, namely, the neglecting of that duty. So if God overrules sin for good, as he sometimes does, it is none the less sin. It is sin just as much as ever, only there is so much the more glory to the wonderful wisdom and grace of God who, out of evil, brings forth good, and so does what only omnipotent wisdom can perform. Onesimus is not excused, then, for having embezzled his master's goods nor for having left him without right; he still is a transgressor, but God's grace is glorified.

Remember, too, that this must be noticed—that when Onesimus left his master he was performing an action the results of which, in all probability, would have been ruinous to him. He was living as a trusted dependent beneath the roof of a kind master, who had a church in his house. If I read the epistle rightly, he had a godly mistress and a godly master, and he had an opportunity of learning the Gospel continually; but this reckless young blade, very likely, could not bear it, so away he went, and threw away the opportunities of salvation. Now, had it come to pass that he had joined in the insurrections of the slaves which took place frequently

about that time, as he in all probability would have done had not grace prevented, he would have been put to death as others had been. He would have had short shrift in Rome: half suspect a man and off with his head was the rule towards slaves and vagabonds. Onesimus was just the very man that would have been likely to be hurried to death and to eternal destruction. He had put his head, as it were, between the lion's jaws by what he had done. When a young man suddenly leaves home and goes to London, we know what it means. When his friends do not know where he is, and he does not want them to know, we are aware, within a little, where he is and what he is at. What Onesimus was doing I do not know, but he was certainly doing his best to ruin himself. His course, therefore, is to be judged, as far as he is concerned, by what it was likely to bring him to; and though it did not bring him to it, that was no credit to him, but all the honor of it is due to the overruling power of God.

See how God overruled all. Thus had the Lord purposed. Nobody shall be able to touch the heart of Onesimus but Paul. Onesimus is living at Colosse; Paul cannot come there, he is in prison. It is needful, then, that Onesimus should be got to Paul. Suppose the kindness of Philemon's heart had prompted him to say to Onesimus, "I want you to go to Rome, and find Paul out and hear him." This naughty servant would have said, "I am not going to risk my life to hear a sermon. If I go with the money you are sending to Paul, or with the letter, I shall deliver it, but I want none of his preaching." Sometimes, you know, when people are brought to hear a preacher with the view of their being converted, if they have any idea of it, it is about the very last thing likely to happen, because they go there resolved to be fireproof, and so the preaching does not come home to them: and it would probably have been just so with Onesimus. No, no, he was not to be won in that way, he must be taken to Rome another way. How shall it be done? Well, the devil shall do it, not knowing that he will be losing a willing servant thereby. The devil tempts Onesimus to steal. Onesimus does it, and when he has stolen he is afraid of being discovered, and so he makes tracks for Rome as quickly as he can, and gets down among the back slums, and there he feels what the prodigal felt—a hungry belly, and that is one of the best preachers in the world to some people: their conscience is reached in that way. Being very hungry, not knowing what to do, and no man giving anything to him, he thinks whether there is anybody in Rome that would take pity on him. He does not know anybody in Rome at all, and is likely to starve.

Perhaps one morning there was a Christian woman—I should not wonder—who was going to hear Paul, and she saw this poor man sitting crouched up on the steps of a temple, and she went to him and spoke about his soul. "Soul," said he, "I care nothing about that, but my body would thank you for something to eat. I am starving." She replied, "Come with me, then," and she gave him bread, and then she said, "I do this for Jesus Christ's sake." "Jesus Christ!" he said, "I have heard of him. I used to hear of him over at Colosse." "Whom did you hear speak about him?" the woman would ask. "Why, a short man with weak eyes, a great preacher, named Paul, who used to come to my master's house." "Why, I am going to hear him preach," the woman would say, "will you hear him again. He always had a kind word to say to the poor." So he goes in and pushes his way among the soldiers, and Paul's Master incites Paul to speak the right word.

It may have been so, or it may have been the other way—that not knowing anybody else at all, he thought, "Well, there is Paul, I know. He is here a prisoner, and I will go down and see what prison he is in." He goes down to the Praetorium and finds him there, tells him of his extreme poverty, and Paul talks to him, and then he confesses the wrong he has done, and Paul, after teaching him a little while, says, "Now, you must go back and make amends to your master for the wrong you have done." It may have been either of these ways; at any rate, the Lord must have Onesimus in Rome to hear Paul, and the sin of Onesimus, though perfectly voluntary on his part, so that God had no hand in it, is yet overruled by a mysterious providence to bring him where the Gospel shall be blest to his soul.

Now, I want to speak to some of you Christian people about this matter. Have you a son who has left home? Is he a willful, wayward young man, who has gone away because he could not bear the restraints of a Christian family? It is a sad thing it should be so—a very sad thing, but do not despond or even have a thought of despair about him. You do not know where he is, but God does; and you cannot follow him, but the Spirit of God can. He is taking a voyage to Shanghai. Ah, there may be a Paul at Shanghai who is to be the means of his salvation, and as that Paul is not in England, your son must go there. Is it to Australia that he is going? There may be a word spoken there by the blessing of God to your son which is the only word which ever will reach him. I cannot speak it; nobody in London can speak it; but the man there will; and God, therefore, is letting him go away in all his willfulness and folly that he may be brought under the means of grace, which will prove effectual to his salvation. The worst thing that can happen to a young man is sometimes the best thing that can happen to him. I have sometimes thought when I have seen young men of position and wealth taking to racing and all sorts of dissipation, "Well, it is a dreadfully bad thing, but they may as well get through their money as quickly as ever they can, and then when they have got down to beggary they will be like the young gentleman in the parable who left his father." When he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land and he began to be in want, and he said, "I will arise and go to my father." Perhaps the disease that follows vice—perhaps the poverty that comes like an armed man after extravagance and debauch—is but love in another form, sent to compel the sinner to come to himself and consider his ways and seek an ever-merciful God.

Onesimus might have stopped at home, and he might never have been a thief, but he might have been lost through self-

righteousness. But now his sin is visible. The rogue has displayed the depravity of his heart, and now it is that he comes under Paul's eye and Paul's prayer, and becomes converted. Do not, I pray you, ever despair of man or woman or child because you see their sin upon the surface of their character. On the contrary, say to yourself, "This is placed where I can see it, that I may pray about it. It is thrown out under my eye that I may now concern myself to bring this poor soul to Jesus Christ, the mighty Savior, who can save the most forlorn sinner." Look at it in the light of earnest, active benevolence, and rouse yourselves to conquer it. Our duty is to hope on and to pray on. It may be, perhaps, that "he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him forever." Perhaps the boy has been so wayward that his sin may come to a crisis, and a new heart may be given him. Perhaps your daughter's evil has been developed that now the Lord may convince her of sin and bring her to the Savior's feet. At any rate, if the case be ever so bad, hope in God, and pray on.

Thirdly our text may be viewed as AN EXAMPLE OF RELATIONS IMPROVED.

"He therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him forever; not now as a servant ... but a brother beloved, especially to me, but how much more unto thee?" You know we are a long while learning great truths. Perhaps Philemon had not quite found out that it was wrong for him to have a slave. Some men who were very good in their time did not know it. John Newton did not know that he was doing wrong in the slave trade, and George Whitefield, when he left slaves to the orphanage at Savannah, which had been willed to him, did not think for a moment that he was doing anything more than if he had been dealing with horses, or gold and silver. Public sentiment was not enlightened, although the Gospel has always struck at the very root of slavery. The essence of the Gospel is that we are to do to others as we would that others should do to us, and nobody would wish to be another man's slave, and therefore he has no right to have another man as his slave. Perhaps, when Onesimus ran away and came back again, this letter of Paul may have opened Philemon's eyes a little as to his own position. No doubt he may have been an excellent master, and have trusted his servant, and not treated him as a slave at all, but perhaps he had not regarded him as a brother; and now Onesimus has come back he will be a better servant, but Philemon will be a better master, and a slave-holder no longer. He will regard his former servant as a brother in Christ.

Now, this is what the grace of God does when it comes into a family. It does not alter the relations; it does not give the child a right to be pert, and forget that he is to be obedient to his parents; it does not give the father a right to lord it over his children without wisdom and love, for it tells him that he is not to provoke his children to anger, lest they be discouraged; it does not give the servant the right to be a master, neither does it take away from the master his position, or allow him to exaggerate his authority, but all round it softens and sweetens. Rowland Hill used to say that he would not give a half penny for a man's piety if his dog and his cat were not better off after he was converted. There was much weight in that remark. Everything in the house goes better when grace oils the wheels. The mistress is, perhaps, rather sharp, quick, tart; well, she gets a little sugar into her constitution when she receives the grace of God. The servant may be apt to loiter, be late up of a morning, very slovenly, fond of a gossip at the door; but, if she is truly converted, all that kind of thing ends. She is conscientious, and attends to her duty as she ought. The master, perhaps—well, he is the master, and you know it. But when he is a truly Christian man—he has a gentleness, a suavity, a considerateness about him. The husband is the head of the wife, but when renewed by grace he is not at all the head of the wife as some husbands are. The wife also keeps her place, and seeks, by all gentleness and wisdom to make the house as happy as she can. I do not believe in your religion, if it belongs to the Tabernacle, and the prayer-meeting, and not to your home. The best religion in the world is that which smiles at the table, works at the sewing-machine, and is amiable in the drawing-room. Give me the religion which shines boots, and does them well; cooks the food, and cooks it so that it can be eaten; measures out yards of calico, and does not make them half-an-inch short; sells a hundred yards of an article, and does not label ninety a hundred, as many tradespeople do. That is the true Christianity which affects the whole of life.

If we are truly Christians we shall be changed in all our relationships to our fellow men, and hence we shall regard those whom we call our inferiors with quite a different eye. Do let us think of others, especially of those whom Christ loves even as he does us. Philemon might have said, "No, no, I don't take you back, Mr. Onesimus, not I. Once bitten, twice shy, sir. I never ride a broken-kneed horse. You stole my money; I am not going to have you back again." I have heard that style of talk, have not you? Did you ever feel like it? If you have, go home and pray to God to get such a feeling out of you, for it is bad stuff to have in your soul. You cannot take it to heaven. When the Lord Jesus Christ has forgiven you so freely, are you to take your servant by the throat and say, "Pay me what thou owest?" God forbid that we should continue in such a temper. Be pitiful, easily entreated, ready to forgive. It is a deal better that you should suffer a wrong than do a wrong: much better that you should overlook a fault which you might have noticed, than notice a fault which you ought to have overlooked.

***Let love through all your actions run,
And all your words be kind,***

is said in the little hymn which we used to learn when we were children. We should practice it now, and—

Live like the blessed virgin's son,

That meek and lowly child.

God grant we may, of his infinite grace.

If the mysterious providence of God was to be seen in Onesimus getting to Rome, I wonder whether there is any providence of God in some of you being here now! It is possible. Such things do happen. People come here that never meant to come. The last thing in the world they would have believed if anybody had said it is that they would be here, yet here they are. With all manner of twists and turns they have gone about, but they have gotten here somehow. I do pray you, then, consider this question with your own heart. "Does not God mean to bless me? Has he not brought me here on purpose that this night I may yield my heart to Jesus as Onesimus did?" My dear friend, if you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, you shall have immediate pardon for all sin, and shall be saved. The Lord has brought you here in his infinite wisdom to hear that, and I hope that he has also brought you here that you might accept it, and so go your way altogether changed. Some three years ago I was talking with an aged minister, and he began fumbling about in his waistcoat pocket, but he was a long while before he found what he wanted. At last he brought out a letter that was well nigh worn to pieces, and he said, "God Almighty bless you! God Almighty bless you!" And I said, "Friend, what is it?" He said, "I had a son. I thought he would be the stay of my old age, but he disgraced himself, and he went away from me, and I could not tell where he went, only he said he was going to America. He took a ticket to sail for America from the London Docks, but he did not go on the particular day that he expected." This aged minister asked me to read the letter, and I read it, and it was like this—"Father, I am here in America. I have found a situation, and God has prospered me. I write to ask your forgiveness for the thousand wrongs that I have done you, and the grief I have caused you, for, blessed be God, I have found the Savior. I have joined the church of God here, and hope to spend my life in God's service. It happened thus: I did not sail for America the day I expected. I went down to the Tabernacle to see what it was like, and God met with me. Mr. Spurgeon said, 'Perhaps there is a runaway son here. The Lord call him by his grace. And he did.'" "Now," said he, as he folded up the letter and put it in his pocket, "that son of mine is dead, and he is in heaven, and I love you, and I shall do so as long as I live, because you were the means of bringing him to Christ." Is there a similar character here now? I feel persuaded there is—somebody of the same sort; and in the name of God I charge him to take the warning that I give him from this pulpit. I dare you to go out of this place as you came in. Oh, young man the Lord in mercy gives you another opportunity of turning from the error of your ways, and I pray you now here—as you now are—lift your eye to heaven, and say, "God be merciful to me a sinner," and he will be so. Then go home to your father and tell him what the grace of God has done for you, and wonder at the love which brought you here to bring you to Christ.

Dear friend, if there is nothing mysterious about it, yet here we are. We are where the Gospel is preached, and that brings responsibility upon us. If a man is lost, it is better for him to be lost without hearing the Gospel, than to be lost as some of you will be if you perish under the sound of a clear, earnest enunciation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. How long halt some of you between two opinions? "Have I been so long time with you," says Christ, "and yet hast thou not known me?" All this teaching and preaching and invitation, and yet do you not turn?

***O God, do thou the sinner turn,
Convince him of his lost estate.***

Let him linger no longer, lest he linger till he rue his fatal choice too late. God bless you, for Christ's sake.

PHILEMON **James Hastings**

- 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:—Philemon 1:1.

OUR only source of information about Philemon in the New Testament is the short letter addressed to him by St. Paul. He was most probably a native of Colossæ (cf. Philem. 1 with Col. 4:17); and in Theodoret's time his house was pointed out in that city. Tradition speaks of him as bishop of Colossæ; and the Menœa of November 22 record his martyrdom there, by stoning, in company with Apphia, Archippus, and Onesimus, in the reign of Nero. In the case of such facts as these, local tradition may generally be regarded as trustworthy; and here it falls in with the documentary evidence, for the idea that Philemon was of Laodicea is a mere guess. From the letter, brief as it is, we gain a vivid impression of the character of the man to whom it was written.

I - THE MAN

1. In the city of Colossæ, in the beautiful basin of the Lycus in Phrygia, there lived a rich citizen named Philemon This

man, as we gather from the Epistle, had been brought by St. Paul himself to the knowledge of Christ; and as St. Paul had never visited the churches of the district in which Colossæ was (Col. 2:1), we must conclude that the rich Phrygian burgher had been converted by the Apostle at Ephesus during a visit which he paid to that capital.

Like Epaphras he had visited Ephesus from Colossæ, had listened to St. Paul's message during the three years' ministry in that city, and may well have found his spiritual birthplace in the "school of Tyrannus" where the Apostle taught.

The wife of Philemon, we find from the second verse of the Epistle, was named Apphia, and as St. Paul mentions immediately afterwards in the same verse the name Archippus, it is highly probable that this third personage was no other than their son. Chrysostom indeed speaks of Archippus as a friend of the house, and Theodoret supposes him to have been a Christian teacher receiving the hospitality of Philemon; but these suppositions are not so natural. It seems more probable that Archippus, as a young Christian and the son of Philemon, should have been entrusted (in the absence of Epaphras, who had gone to Rome to see St. Paul) with the care of the Church at Colossæ, and that it was in order to make him feel the responsibility resting upon him that in the Epistle to the Colossians St. Paul wrote these words: "Say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it."

A fourth member in the family group is the most interesting to us, as we know more of his romantic story. Philemon had in his employ a worthless slave called Onesimus. His name means literally "profitable," but he belied his name, for a more unprofitable piece of property could hardly be imagined. He robbed his master, escaped from Colossæ, and fled to Rome. But though lost to his old home, God's eye was upon him, and somehow or other he came under St. Paul's influence, and was converted to Christ. "Whom," says the Apostle, "I have begotten in my bonds."

2. St. Paul thought very highly of Philemon. He calls him his beloved fellow-worker.

(1) The virtue which in an especial manner St. Paul ascribes to Philemon is hospitality. Such a characteristic might be inferred from the fact that the Church met in his house. There was no small measure of hospitality in that arrangement. Unless that Church was very unlike most others, there would be some rather disagreeable people in it, some very ignorant, some of very uncultivated manners; and probably a considerable proportion of them were slaves. But Philemon cordially welcomed them all in his faith toward the Lord Jesus, and his love to all saints. He appears to have been a man well to do in the world, and there is good reason to suppose that he was generous in his bounty to the poor. "Their bowels were refreshed" by him. They found in him a sympathizing friend, whose religion consisted mainly in doing good to such as were in need. He was not a Jew; he had not been instructed and trained in those Old Testament Scriptures which extol so highly the virtue of almsgiving; he had not been brought up among people accustomed to kind actions. He was a Gentile; he had never before his conversion to Christ had any idea of hospitality or kindness beyond the extension of them to intimate friends. And the change wrought in him by his conversion must have led some of his heathen neighbours to reflection, and must have been a better and more moving testimony to the gospel than anything Philemon could have preached, however eloquent he might have been.

¶ W. B. Brash writes of his father: He invited the strangers and the outcasts to meals, and my mother made ready for the feast. She always lived on the eve of domestic surprises, for it was ever impossible to tell how many and whom my father would bring in with him. He had read that little noted parable of our Lord, in which He speaks about asking to meals those who can never invite you to their tables; and having grasped its meaning, such was his childlike faith that he dared to apply it. Often we were sent out, unknown to our many and varied visitors, to replenish the insufficient larder. Sometimes my mother would protest, "You should have told me that you intended to bring six in to supper"; and yet she cherished in her heart nothing but pride in her generous husband, and hoped that he would never reform. How delighted we are that he never did, and that to the end of his days he was unrepentably hospitable. He was greatly pleased by the remark of a friend, who said, "Your house is the easiest to get into and the hardest to get out of that I know." This consciously played a part in his ministry, for hospitality was to him as true to the gospel as preaching.

(2) Philemon was an active member of the Church. The private abodes of Christians were probably the places in which the Christian churches of that age most frequently met. The Church of Colossæ met in the house of Philemon, the Church of Laodicea in the house of Nymphas, the Church of Philippi in the house of Lydia, the Church of Rome in the house of Aquila and Priscilla. Those whose houses were thrown open for such a purpose were probably the wealthier members of the Church, or members who for some other reason occupied rather extensive premises. It is worthy of notice that there is no example of any building being dedicated to the sole purpose of Christian worship before the third century. The climate of those countries in which the gospel was then preached did not demand such buildings, and the number of Christians in each place was small. When they were too numerous to be accommodated in one house, they probably met in several. Perhaps the disadvantages were great, the inconveniences many, but the Church continued for more than two hundred years to get on without any edifice of a public character consecrated to its work.

Here we see something of Philemon's value as a fellow-worker, which quite agrees with St. Paul's description of him. Perhaps he

could not preach, could not even trust himself to make audible prayer in the assembling of the Church, but he threw open to the Church the doors of his house.

If you cannot on the ocean
Sail among the swiftest fleet,
Rocking on the highest billows,
Laughing at the storms you meet,
You can stand among the sailors,
Anchored yet within the bay,
You can lend a hand to help them,
As they launch their boats away.

If you are too weak to journey,
Up the mountain steep and high,
You can stand within the valley,
While the multitudes go by.
You can chant in happy measure,
As they slowly pass along;
Though they may forget the singer,
They will not forget the song.

II - THE LETTER

1. With one exception, all the Epistles of St. Paul which we possess belong, so to speak, to his official correspondence

They were written as a part of his ordinary work, enabling him to keep in touch with the churches under his charge.

But there is, as has been said, a remarkable exception to the general rule. In one instance, that of the Epistle to Philemon, we have a letter which does not belong to the official correspondence of the Apostle, but is entirely personal and private. It contains no doctrinal instruction or spiritual exhortation; it is wholly taken up with a request of a very delicate kind—a request arising out of a particular circumstance. The other Epistles were intended to be read aloud to the churches, and St. Paul, we may think, would not have been greatly surprised at their being used still in this way many years after his death. But he would have been astonished indeed to know that this private letter of his, intended only for the eye of its recipient, would be preserved through nineteen centuries and included in the Church's lectionary. In fact, such writers as Chrysostom and Jerome had to defend the canonicity of the Epistle to Philemon against those who argued that a private letter of this sort had no place in the Bible.

¶ Jerome tells us that the Epistle to Philemon was rejected by many writers. From the absence of any approach to doctrinal teaching in this Epistle, they concluded that it was not by St. Paul, or that, if it was his, it did not belong to the canon, since it contained nothing by which the Church might be edified. This decision arose out of a narrow view of the canon, and the primitive Church, as a whole, did not ratify the verdict. Preserved at first as a precious relic in the family of Philemon, this apostolic document was subsequently placed among the archives of the Church at Colosse, in the house of one of its elders. We find the first mention of it, as forming part of the Pauline collection, in the writings of Marcion, son of the Bishop of Sinope in Pontus, who about the year 140 went to Rome from Asia Minor. Soon after this it finds a definite place in the Canon of Muratori, in the fragment found at Milan in the middle of the last century, which dates from about the year 170, and contains a list of the writings received and publicly read at that time in one of the Western churches, either that of Italy, or more probably that of Africa.

We observe, moreover, that the Epistle to Philemon formed part of the Western canon, included in the old Latin translation, usually called Itala, and that in the Church most remote from this, the Church of Syria, it also found a place in the authorized translation of the Scriptures, the Peshito, in the latter part of the second century.

2. In many ways this document is of interest and value.

It throws fresh light upon the character of the Apostle who wrote it, as well as incidentally upon the character of the man to whom it was written. It is almost as great a credit to Philemon as it is to St. Paul. What a tribute, only to have had such a letter addressed to one! A man's nature, it has been said, is shown as much by the letters which he receives as by those which he writes. And St. Paul, with his swift perception of character, with his adaptability to become all things to all men, would have used the tender language of this Epistle, appealing to the highest motives, only in the case of one with whom, as he felt sure, this line of argument would prevail. It was simply the sweetness and loving-kindness of Philemon's nature that encouraged St. Paul to address him with these

persuasions, and to trust that he would do what was right and loving in this difficulty.

¶ There is a letter of the younger Pliny's (a generation later than St. Paul), the 21st in the ninth book of his Letters, written to his friend Sabinian, asking him to forgive an offending freedman. Its subject is akin to that of our Epistle, and the two have often been compared. It reads as follows:

"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 chid 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."

It is a graceful, kindly letter, written by a man whose character is the ideal of his age and class; the cultured and thoughtful Roman gentleman of the mildest period of the Empire. Yet the writer seems somewhat conscious of his own epistolary felicity, and his argument for the offender is much more condescending than sympathetic. His heart has not the depth of Paul's, nor are his motives those of the Gospel, which taught Paul to clasp Onesimus in his arms, and to commend him to Philemon, as a friend in God for immortality. From the merely literary view-point, a perfect freedom of style, along with a delicate tact of manner, easily gives the letter to Philemon the palm over that to Sabinian.

3. The letter also shows the spirit in which St. Paul faced one of the most difficult social problems of his time.

And, if for no other reason, its inclusion in the New Testament is justified by the fact that it gives us an example of applied Christianity. Elsewhere St. Paul lays down for others the principles of Christian conduct; here, all unconsciously, he shows how he himself translated them into practice. Our religion should influence each detail of our daily life. How it swayed St. Paul in so small a matter as the writing of a friendly note is apparent from the Epistle to Philemon.

Lo! this one preached with fervent tongue;
The world went forth to hear;
Upon his burning words they hung,
Intent, with ravished ear.

Like other lives the life he led,
Men spake no word of blame:
And yet, unblest, unprofited,
The world went on the same.

Another came, and lived, and wrought,
His heart all drawn above;
By deeds, and not by words, he taught
Self-sacrificing love.

No eager crowds his preaching drew;
Yet one by one they came;
The secret of his power they knew,
And caught the sacred flame.

And all around, as morning light
Steals on with silent wing,
The world became more pure and bright
And life a holier thing.

Ah! Pastor, is thy heart full sore
At all this sin and strife?

Feed with the Word, but ah! far more
Feed with a holy life.

III - THE REQUEST

1. The sole and simple object of this letter to Philemon is to entreat him to receive back his fugitive slave, now a Christian; to forgo all such penalties and claims as he might otherwise justly have enforced against the runaway; to blot out the past, and to admit this former servant into the new relation of friend and fellow-worker in the cause they now had equally at heart. On the mere statement of the facts, any one can see how difficult and delicate a task St. Paul was undertaking; for Philemon had clearly suffered a wrong. The legalized relations between master and servant had been violated by that servant—for what cause, or with what circumstances of excuse, we are not told; and in addition to the loss of the slave's services, there had been other outstanding debts due from slave to master. At least St. Paul seems to hint at something of the kind in verse 18: "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account." The master, Philemon, had unquestionably a grievance; for had he been in the first instance to blame, had he been a hard or unjust master, we can have no doubt that the Apostle would have rebuked as boldly as he here pleads and exhorts; and nothing had occurred in the interval that had elapsed to heal or to remove this grievance. But the offending servant had undergone a change through becoming the disciple of St. Paul—a change which transformed him as a man. This change had given him so new and sacred a relation to the Apostle that the latter calls it by the most endearing of all relations: "I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds."

¶ O My Saviour Christ, Christ my Saviour! who will grant that I may die rather than again offend Thee! Christ my Saviour, O my Saviour! Lord, let a new manner of life prove that a new spirit hath descended on me; for true penitence is new life, and true praise unremitting penitence, and the observation of a perpetual Sabbath from sin, its occasions, fuel, and danger. For as penitence destroys old sins, so do new sins destroy penitence.

2. It is difficult for us to realize adequately the degradation of Onesimus' position. In the eyes of the ancient world a slave was a mere chattel, outside the ordinary rules of humanity. "Any act is lawful towards a slave," wrote Seneca, and history supplies us with ample evidence that this maxim was generally accepted as a matter of course, even by the most enlightened pagans. Cruelty of the most repulsive kind was viewed as the merely normal and ordinary treatment of a slave: while the precepts of the Rabbis on this point scarcely differed from the laws of paganism. Onesimus, however, was not merely a slave, but a criminal slave, who had robbed his master and escaped. If he were caught, a quite normal penalty would be crucifixion. In any case he would be put to the torture and branded as a runaway with a red-hot iron. Such, then, was the miserable creature who came to St. Paul. And never did the Apostle show more clearly the fulness with which he had received his Master's teaching than by his kindness towards Onesimus. There was no pride of Roman citizenship, there was no shrinking from this criminal outcast. Underneath the degraded and sin-stained exterior, St. Paul saw the possibilities of goodness; he showed the love which believeth all things, the Divine optimism so perfectly exemplified by Christ. He preached the gospel to this wretched slave; he taught him to hate sin instead of merely dreading sin's consequence; he baptized him—and the slave became a member of the Body of Christ and the Apostle's "dear son." For St. Paul's confidence was well founded. The better qualities of Onesimus were still alive, and, quickened by Divine grace, they transformed his character.

¶ For disobedience, in short for anything which in the private court of the dominica potestas was a crime in his master's eyes, the slave might be privately executed, with any and every cruelty. In the reign of Augustus, the noon of Roman culture, one Vedius Pollio, a friend of the Emperor's, was used to throw offending slaves into his fish-pond, to feed his huge electric eels (*murænae*). He was one day entertaining Augustus at table, when the cupbearer broke a crystal goblet, and was forthwith sentenced to the eels. The poor fellow threw himself at the Prince's feet, begging, not to be forgiven, but to be killed in some other way; and Augustus, shocked and angered, ordered the man's emancipation (*mitti jussit*), and had Pollio's crystals all broken before him, and his horrible pool filled up; but he did not discard his friend. "If," says Horace (*Satires*, I. iii. 80), "a man is thought mad who crucifies his slave for having filched something from ... the table, how much more mad must he be who cuts his friend for a trifling offence!" In brief, the slave in Roman law is a thing, not a person. He has no rights, not even of marriage. To seek his good is in no respect the duty of his master, any more than it is now the duty of an owner to improve his fields for their own sake.

3. Perhaps some one will say: But surely Philemon was the greater wrongdoer of the two? What right had he, a Christian, to have any slaves at all? And why does St. Paul not bluntly tell him he was dishonouring his Lord in keeping in bondage any man for whom Christ died?

This is a fair question, and the answer is very interesting. It opens up the whole relation of Christianity to social institutions. The Lord Jesus and His Apostles lived in a time when the institutions of social order were intertwined with grave injustice. Yet they never utter a word that could fairly be construed as an attack on social order or as in the accepted sense inciting to revolution. They saw

concubinage, they saw tyranny, they saw slavery. But they denounced none of these things. What they did was, they undermined them. They enunciated new principles of a new social order which was certain in the end to make the older one obsolete and to displace it. Christianity did not attempt all at once to abolish an institution which was so deep rooted as slavery in Roman social life, however inconsistent it was with the religion of the Incarnation. Indeed, the revelation of the brotherhood of men in Christ made it especially necessary to emphasize (as the Apostle did) the fact that social differences were not thereby obliterated. Even if (which is doubtful) St. Paul was so much in advance of his age as to have grasped the idea that no man has a right to own another, to have proclaimed the iniquity of slavery to a world which was not prepared for it would have exposed society to the frightful dangers of a *bellum servile*, on the one hand, and would, on the other, have done more to arouse the hostility of the Roman imperial authorities than any other proclamation could have effected. Christians had to show at the very outset that Christianity was not inconsistent with good citizenship, and that the reforms which it hoped to promote in social life would not be imposed violently from without, but would be the outcome of the development of the national conscience, in which the seed of the gospel was to grow and fructify, secretly but surely, as the leaven spreads in the meal.

¶ Dolling, writing of the evils of overcrowding, concludes: But when statesmen have spoken their last word the Christian has still a word to speak. Create within the respectable poor the longing for all these things; stir the soul till it is utterly discontented with and abhors its present surroundings; make the father and mother realize that all duty to their children is impossible as things are. The task seems well-nigh impossible. The truth is we have not got the vigour of body or the keenness of mind to care about these things. We have always lived in them; we feel we cannot alter them. And nothing but Christian enthusiasm can alter them—ay, Christian enthusiasm could alter even the loafer and his slum. And so, while we must do our best to insist upon present legislation being put into force and future legislation being created, Christianity must labour on in making the heart and conscience of the man right, and then he will insist upon an environment which will be possible for himself and his fellows.

4. Here is the secret of the gospel's power to destroy slavery, that it teaches the slave-owner to regard his slave as his brother—his brother in Christ. So far as this doctrine was recognized by the slave-owner—and the acceptance of the gospel was an impossibility without the acceptance of this principle—so far as this principle was accepted, slavery, of course and of necessity, ceased to exist. The slave-owner's bondsmen became his brethren.

¶ Lowell labours to open the eyes of his readers to the eternal sanctities of love, and to make them share with him in that comprehensive passion of brotherhood to which nothing is common or unclean, nothing in all nature too small to have its divine meaning and mission.

¶ A touching little story is told of Tolstoy; he moves out one day, and meets a poor peasant; and being asked to give a coin, puts his hand in his pocket but finds it empty; then with compassionate love he looks into the eyes of the peasant and says: "Brother! I am sorry I have nothing to give." And the poor peasant tells Tolstoy: "Say not, you have nothing: you have given me much: you called me brother!"

¶ While running along the road with hoop and stick, Catherine Booth saw a drunkard being dragged to the lock-up by a constable. A jeering mob was hooting the unfortunate culprit. His utter loneliness appealed powerfully to her. It seemed that he had not a friend in the world. Quick as lightning Catherine sprang to his side, and marched down the street with him, determined that he should feel that there was at least one heart that sympathized with him, whether it might be for his fault or his misfortune that he was suffering.

5. What happened to Onesimus we cannot know certainly. Tradition, as usual, has been active in filling the void places of history, and has woven much legend around his name, but we know nothing certainly. We may, however, agree with Bishop Lightfoot, that "it is reasonable to suppose that Philemon would not belie the Apostle's hopes; that he would receive the slave as a brother; that he would even go beyond the express terms of the Apostle's petition and emancipate the penitent."

But even if he did not go so far, he and Onesimus were in a new relationship—master and man they might still continue, but above that there was a common bond of brotherhood, of disciples and followers of Jesus the Saviour of men. If they lived together for years as master and man, how would their days be spent? Onesimus would go about his work, and Philemon would still be the gentleman employing him, but they would daily talk to each other of Jesus their crucified Lord, of Paul the Apostle, of the judgment to come, of the future home in store for the servants of God. They would join in worship together; they would comfort each other on the pilgrimage of life; and when one of them came to his journey's end, the other would close his eyes in the sure and certain hope of a resurrection to eternal life, where they should meet again.

Oh from the hush and dying of the splendour
Take thou a patience and a comfort then!
Oh let thine eyes be satisfied and tender
Knowing the common brotherhood of men!

Children of God! and each as he is straying
Lights on his fellow with a soft surprise,
Hearkens, perchance, the whisper of his praying,
Catches the human answer of his eyes.

Then having met they speak and they remember
All are one family, their sire is one,
Cheers them with June and slays them with December,
Portions to each the shadow and the sun.

Therefore His children hold to one another,
Speak of a hope and tarry till the end,
Strong in the bond of sister and of brother,
Safe in the fellowship of friend and friend.

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Paul's Letter to Philemon

[George Muller](#)

Notes of an Exposition of the Epistle to Philemon, delivered in Bethesda Chapel, Bristol, Lord's-day Evening, March 2nd, 1873.

THE occasion which gave rise to this letter was this: Philemon, who resided at Colosse (for this is plainly to be seen by the last chapter of the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians. The letter to the church at Colosse was written at the same time with this letter to Philemon. Onesimus and another brother were the bearers of the letter to the church at Colosse, and of this private letter to Philemon),—Philemon, who resided at Colosse, had a slave by the name of Onesimus, and this slave in his ungodly state ran away from his master Philemon, and in the providence of God, as we say, he comes to Rome. Rome was the greatest place in the whole world at that time. In all probability this slave said to himself, "If I could get to Rome, what prospects there would be before me." This may have occurred to his mind after he left his master. He wanders on from Asia Minor to Rome with bright prospects before him. "Oh, what pleasures I shall have in Rome; what sights I shall see in Rome; what companionship I shall meet with in Rome!" No doubt some such thoughts passed through his mind. And what happened in Rome? He was converted. So God allows men to go their own way; so God allows men to follow the desires of their own heart, and if they could they would yet farther and farther run away from Him. But God says, "Thus far shalt thou go, and no farther." Many have gone to London and to other places, not to get good for the soul, but in the service of the devil; but God there laid hold on them, in the very way which they least thought of, and converted them.

Again, Onesimus might have come to Rome and never seen Paul. He might have spent fifty years in Rome, and never seen Paul;

but God has purposes of grace and mercy towards him, and in His good providence orders it that he may fall in with Paul, that he must become acquainted with this Paul. And who was Paul at this time in Rome? Not a great man in the eyes of the world. Truly a great man in one sense, and yet in the greatest obscurity in another sense. Paul was at this time a prisoner for the gospel's sake. Paul did not walk about in the market place, the Forum, where the great and wealthy of the capital met together. He was in prison, with a soldier watching him, and yet God so orders it that this runaway slave must fall in with Paul and that Paul shall become a blessed instrument in the hands of God of converting his soul. How full of encouragement this should be to us all! Some have dear ones who are far from Christ, fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, and other relatives, and many of them are apparently getting farther and farther from God, and caring less and less about the things of God, and more and more about the things of this world. Go on, beloved in Christ, believingly, patiently bringing their cases before the Lord, and you will yet have the joy of finding out that your prayers have not been in vain. There is every reason to believe that Philemon, the godly master of this slave, was concerned about his spiritual welfare; but all seems lost when this slave runs away, and yet God follows him, and lays hold on him at the very time when you and I would least have thought he would have been brought to the Lord.

Let us read and meditate on this letter to Philemon.

Philemon 1:1. "Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved and fellow-labourer." He regarded this Philemon as one who laboured with him in the gospel. He speaks of him and treats him as a fellow-labourer.

Philemon 1:2. "And to our beloved Apphia (the wife of Philemon), and to Archippus our fellow-soldier (this Archippus was a brother who laboured in the word and doctrine at Colosse), and to the church in thy house." The house of Archippus was the meeting place of the church, for at that time it was not so that there were churches and chapels built, but they met in private houses or in some places which were fitted up for the purpose. We have an instance of this in the 20th chapter of the Acts, where Paul was preaching in an upper chamber. It was not the aim of the disciples to have costly places, to resemble the temple at Jerusalem. The first hundred and twenty met in an upper room. So here the church at Colosse had for its meeting place the house of Philemon.

Philemon 1:3. "Grace to you." You observe how this comes in in the various letters addressed to the churches, and there must be a reason for it. It is not a common phrase which is brought in. The reason seems to be this: we have to be reminded that grace has been bestowed upon us by God through Christ Jesus, and that He is willing to bestow more and more blessing. And so also we have to be reminded continually of the fact that we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. I am now only speaking to those who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, who having passed sentence on themselves, and having condemned themselves in the sight of God as guilty sinners, are trusting in the atoning death of the Lord Jesus Christ, as the one ground of acceptance before God.

Philemon 1:4–7. "I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers, hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints; that the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother."

This is what the Apostle Paul writes with regard to the spiritual state of Philemon, and a high commendation it is a most blessed man of God he was; and yet one says, He had slaves! Yes; he had slaves. But then we have always to keep this before us, that the having slaves at that time was not connected with such awful cruelty as the slavery of modern days. Many of these people were idolaters, and there were many things connected with slavery which were quite wrong. Yet ordinarily speaking, we have no reason to believe that there were the cruelties of slave-holders of modern days. In most of these instances where we read the word servant it means slave, those who belonged to the master; but in not one single instance is there a hint given how wicked you are, how cruel and abominable your conduct. If the love of Christ constrained them to set all free, the apostles would have rejoiced in it; and when these slaves had the opportunity of becoming free, they were to accept it thankfully and not reject it.

The apostle Paul commends Philemon on account of the blessed state spiritually in which he was. He says "I thank my God," and this particularly with reference to the 5th verse, "hearing of thy love and faith." This was a subject for praise and thanksgiving in the heart of Paul with regard to Philemon. This is rather a remarkable expression, "faith and love towards the saints." You can see what that means, that he had love; but what is the meaning of this, that he had faith towards the saints? Did you ever think of this? It is deeply important that we seek to search into the meaning of what we read in the Divine testimony. The meaning of it is evidently this:—looking upon them with faith, seeing in them that they are the children of God, treating them as such, as the children of God. Whenever we are enabled to look on one another as the children of God, whenever we are enabled to see Christ in one another, that is exercising faith towards one another. He also prayed that God would help him further, and from this we should gather instruction, that as Paul prayed for Philemon we should pray for each other. This was the subject of his prayer,—“that the communication of thy faith may become effectual, by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.” This in other words means,—My dear Philemon, I pray that thou, having received faith, might go on; that this might energize thee, might become effectual in thee, and give thee yet further and further strength to acknowledge everything that is good in any of the saints. And he adds to his praise this in the 7th verse: "For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints

are refreshed by thee, brother.” What a high commendation of this dear man! Evidently he was one in a position of comparative wealth and prosperity, and he says “we have great joy” because on account of the holy, godly walk of this blessed man of God, Philemon, the hearts of the saints were refreshed.

Do we the children of God aim after this, viz., that we become a spiritual refreshment to the saints, that the saints are refreshed by our godly life? After this we have to aim. Giving way to our natural tendencies, to our temper, and to other things which are hateful to God, we do not strengthen the hands of our fellow disciples; but when we seek to do those things which are according to the mind of God, we strengthen each other’s hands in God. In bringing glory to God, we also help on the life and deportment of other children of God. Just as it is with regard to any army; if one regiment acquits itself well, the other regiments are strengthened thereby; and if one regiment turns its back on the enemy, the other regiments are weakened thereby. So is it with the Church of God.

Ver. 8–14. “Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient, yet for love’s sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ. I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds: which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me: whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels; whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel: but without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.”

Exquisite statement this, and of the deepest moment. Briefly it was just this:—Onesimus was converted; Paul a prisoner for the gospel in bonds. What a comfort this good man would have been in waiting upon him! He longed to have on to wait on him, Paul might have said,—This Onesimus is my son in the faith, and therefore I shall just act as I have a right to act; I will just keep him, and let him wait on me. He might have said,—I am an apostle, and for the gospel’s sake am here in prison, and it is all right and fit that my child in the faith should wait on me. Not thus, not thus. This was not the mind of Christ, and this blessed man of God sought to act according to the mind of Christ. He might have said,—I am an aged servant of Christ, an aged apostle, and I have laboured more abundantly than any of them; and as this runaway slave has been converted through me, it is all right that I should have him to wait on me. Not thus, because this would be by constraint. He would not know whether it was done willingly and cheerfully on the part of Philemon. He desired that this man of God might do what he did cheerfully, willingly. Oh, how deeply important it is to keep this before us! The principle is just this. Suppose any one said,—Now I am in great need, and such and such a one is my brother in Christ, and such and such a one has plenty of money, and he ought to give to me because I am a poor brother; he is bound by the word of God to do it, and I have a right just to demand it of him. Is this the mind of Christ? It is the mind of the flesh, and not the mind of Christ. You never find such an instance on the part of a man of God in the epistles or the gospels. Quite true that he who hath this world’s goods, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion, cannot have the love of God in him; but it is also true on the other hand that it is ill becoming that a poor brother should insist on it. The apostle Paul could have insisted on his rights, but he did not do so.

“Which in time past was to thee unprofitable.”

This brings out the character of Onesimus: a good-for-nothing man, a bad fellow.

Philemon had lost nothing.

“But now profitable to thee and to me.” Because a child of God, a brother in Christ a member of the body. That brings out another deeply important principle. There is no child of God but what is of some good. One might say,—Here is a very ignorant person, cannot put two letters together; what good is such an one to the Church of Christ? If in no other way, to afford opportunity for the exercise of grace on the part of others. Here is one helplessly confined to his bed year after year. That individual can pray, that individual can yet manifest the mind of Christ to such an one who comes to see him. And suppose none of these things were so, yet they give the opportunity to those who are in health and strength to show love to such an one. We should always look on one another as precious in the night of Christ. Our natural tendency is this: to see the old Adam in one another, to see the failings and shortcomings in one another; and the result is misery to one another and dishonour to God. O beloved in Christ, let us aim after it to see Christ in one another. Onesimus was profitable to the chief of the apostles; just think of this. He could not be a useless one, because he was a member of the body of Christ, and Christ can have no member of His body who is altogether useless.

“Thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels.” Philemon was to receive him as if Paul himself came to him. And oh, how would Paul have been received? O beloved brother Paul, how glad I am to see thee again here, he would say, falling on his neck and kissing him many times. Now Paul says,—Just as thou wouldest have received me, if I were to come, so, beloved Philemon, receive this runaway slave, because he is thy brother in Christ, and thou wilt have to spend a happy eternity with him.

“But without thy mind would I do nothing.” But I must first know that this pleases thee, that thou art satisfied with it, that this is according to thy wish and will. How deeply important to keep this before us in the Divine life, that we manifest the mind of Christ. Just as that blessed One sought not to please Himself, but to be the servant of others, so have we to imitate that blessed One.

“For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever.” “For over,” never to be separated any more. And that brings before us the precious truth that the disciples of the Lord Jesus are bound together for eternity, are knit together for eternity. And that you see is so precious. There may come separation by distance, there may come separation by death; ah, but it is only the appearance. We are bound together in the bonds of love, not for time only, but for eternity. All the poor sinners who rest on the atoning death of the Lord Jesus form one holy, happy, blessed family for eternity, and there will be no separation for eternity. Do we belong to that family? Do we believe in the Lord Jesus? How many among us belong to the heavenly family? How many are decided yet? Put this to yourselves, you dear youngmen, you dear girls from the Orphan Houses, and all here present.

Oh, the blessedness of belonging to the heavenly family! Oh, the blessedness of belonging to the members of Christ! Then let come what may—one in Christ, and one in Christ for ever!

PHILEMON 1:16

Doesn't Paul approve of the institution of slavery?

Norman Geisler

PROBLEM: The Apostle Paul seems to favor the institution of human slavery by sending a runaway slave, Onesimus, back to his owner. But slavery is unethical. It is a violation of the principles of human freedom and dignity.

SOLUTION: Slavery is unethical and unbiblical and neither Paul's actions nor his writings approve of this debasing form of treatment. In fact, it was the application of biblical principles that ultimately led to the overthrow of slavery. Several important facts should be noted in this connection.

First, from the very beginning, God declared that all humans participate in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). The apostle reaffirmed this, declaring, “we are the offspring of God” (Acts 17:29), and He “has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth” (Acts 17:26).

Second, in spite of the fact that slavery was countenanced in the semitic cultures of the day, the law demanded that slaves eventually be set free (Ex. 21:2; Lev. 25:40). Likewise, servants had to be treated with respect (Ex. 21:20, 26).

Third, Israel, itself in slavery in Egypt, was constantly reminded by God of this (Deut. 5:15), and their emancipation became the model for the liberation of all slaves (cf. Lev. 25:40).

Fourth, in the NT, Paul declared that in Christianity “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). All social classes are broken down in Christ; we are all equal before God.

Fifth, the NT explicitly forbids the evil system of this world that traded the “bodies and souls of men” (Rev. 18:13). Slave trade is so repugnant to God that He pronounces His final judgment on the evil system that perpetrated it (Rev. 17–18).

Sixth, when Paul urges, “Servants, be obedient to those who are your masters” (Eph. 6:5; cf. Col. 3:22), he is not thereby approving of the institution of slavery, but simply alluding to the de facto situation in his day. Rather, he is instructing them to be good employees, just as believers should be today, but he was not thereby commending slavery.

Seventh, a closer look at Philemon reveals that Paul did not perpetuate slavery, but actually undermined it, for he urged Philemon, Onesimus' owner, to treat him as “a beloved brother” Philemon 1:16). So, by emphasizing the inherent equality of all human beings, both by creation and redemption, the Bible laid down the very moral principles that were used to overthrow slavery and help restore the dignity and freedom of all persons of whatever color or ethnic group. ([When Critics Ask](#))

Onesimus Profitless and Profitable

Robert Neighbour

Onesimus, Profitless and Profitable

- Onesimus in Colosse (Col. 4:9).
- Onesimus Running Away (Philem. 1:15).
- Onesimus in Rome (Philem. 1:1).
- Onesimus in Jail (Philem. 1:13).
- Onesimus and Paul (Philem. 1:10).
- Onesimus Saved but Serving (Philem. 1:10,13).

- Onesimus Sent Back to Colosse (Philem. 1:12).

The little Book of Philemon is so full of grace, and so abounding in the outworkings of grace that it holds a unique place in the Word of God. There is much written between the lines, which we have in part brought out for consideration and profit.

Notice some of the sparkling sentences in Paul's Letter to Philemon, as well as some of the blessings which grace reveals.

1. The glories of a Christian home as seen in verses 1-3.
2. The communication of faith and the consolation of love, as seen in verses 4-7.
3. The transforming power of saving grace, shown in verses 8-16.
4. The doctrine of substitution as magnified in verses 17, 18.
5. Our debt to those who lead us to the Lord and who teach us in the things of God (see vss. 19, 20).
6. The blessedness of the fellowship of saints (see vss. 22-24).
7. The grace of Christ exemplified in the Christian's daily walk (see vs. 25).

Onesimus in Colosse

"With Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you" (Col. 4:9).

That Onesimus lived in the home of Philemon and that he was a servant there, we cannot doubt. He could not have been sent back to Philemon, if he had never dwelt there.

Let us seek, then, to study somewhat of the conditions which were about the servant Onesimus as he dwelt in Colosse.

1. He served a man who was a faithful servant of God. It is most refreshing to read some of the things said and to consider some of the things inferred about Philemon.

(1) Philemon had a church in his house (see Philemon 1:2). This of course gave Onesimus every opportunity to hear the Gospel. He had, beyond a doubt, heard the Apostle Paul, for Paul had preached of the unsearchable riches of Christ Jesus in the home of Philemon. Thus, Onesimus did not lack a good preacher. He was not hellward bound because he had no warning of the wages of sin, nor because he had no knowledge of the way of life.

(2) Philemon faithfully labored for God. Philemon was no drone, lazily wending his way Heavenward. He was a "fellowlabourer" with Paul. He "served his generation." He "abounded in the work of the Lord." If Onesimus was bent toward sin, it was not due to his environment, nor to his master's example.

(3) Philemon was a man dearly beloved (see Philemon 1:1). We know Paul did not love a man who was living in sin. Paul did not love a man who professed to be pious, but was, in fact, a hypocrite.

So, Onesimus must have been in the home of one who manifested all the tender mercies that are in Christ Jesus. A man whose very life glowed with the life of his Lord.

(4) Philemon was a man whose household knew the Lord. In Philemon 1:2 we read of "Apphia the sister, and of Archippus the fellowsoldier." These two must have composed the immediate household of this man of God, because they are addressed so intimately with him. Perhaps they were his wife and son.

Accordingly, Onesimus passed in and out before those who truly served the Lord. The atmosphere around him was spiritual. What more could he have wished?

(5) Philemon was a man who manifested all of those characteristics which glorify the Lord and magnify His grace. Verses 4-6: "I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers, hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints; that the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus."

What a wonderful array of graces we have before us!

1. A love and faith toward the Lord Jesus.
2. A love and faith toward all the saints.
3. Every good thing which is in us toward Christ.
4. Encouragement in his love.
5. The hearts of the saints refreshed.

As we see it, there are few, if any characters in the New Testament that more fully lived out the Divine life than this very Philemon. He was a man in whom all the Christian graces bloomed in fullest fragrance.

Now what have we? A servant, named Onesimus, living in the home of such a man, yet this same Onesimus repudiated all his benefits, and ran away with his master's goods. This forever gives the lie to that oft-repeated phrase that "environment will save us." Some man of the world wants to find out the cause of sin; and after much toil and expense, he discovers that sin is due to unhappy surroundings and that righteousness will follow from a better environment.

What consummate folly. Do better tenements mean better men?

Is there no such thing as sin among the elite? Perhaps sin in the homes on Fifth Avenue may be more polished and refined (if sin can be refined), but sin is everywhere heinous sin. What we need is to be "born again."

Onesimus Running Away

"For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever" (Philemon 1:15).

The details are lacking. Only the imagination can supply them. We suppose that Onesimus went off as most thieves go — by night and by stealth. He did not take the time to tell Philemon and Apphia and Archippus "good-by."

1. He ran away. He went as a villain goes. Is this not just what the sinner is doing? He is going away from God. He is leaving behind his back all that is worth the while. He is bidding farewell to home and Heaven and God.

The prodigal son took his father's goods and went into a far country. Are not all sinners in the far country? They are strangers to the covenants of promise, without hope, and without God in the world.

2. He ran away with his master's goods. He took with him that which was not his own. He went out a thief. In verse 18 Paul wrote: "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account."

Can this same charge be laid at the feet of all the ungodly? Certainly. They too are wasting their Master's goods. Every good and perfect gift which they possess proceeds from the Father of lights.

What has any one that he did not receive? The gifts of mind and of body are from the Lord. The very power to make money is given from God. "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof."

When a sinner runs away from God, he runs away a thief, a villain. He is robbing God of His goods.

3. He wasted his master's goods. How do we know? It is always thus. Onesimus did not take his master's goods that he might increase them and return them with interest. He took them that he might have his "fling." He took them that he might squander them upon himself. He had no consideration for Philemon whatsoever. Had he sought the good of Philemon, he would have remained at home.

What did the prodigal son do with his father's goods? He wasted them with riotous living. Or as the elder son put it: "He hath wasted thy substance (or, devoured thy living) with harlots."

What do twentieth century prodigals do? They cast their gifts to the winds. They scatter their blessings. They pollute their heritage. Onesimus in Rome

"Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer" (Philem. 1:1).

The fact that Paul was in prison in Rome, and the fact that the Letter addressed to Philemon was written from Rome throws a flood of light just here. Once more we can afford to use our imagination without doing violence.

1. What led Onesimus to Rome? Was he seeking Paul? Far from it. He was seeking two things.

(1) Rome was a good place in which to hide. Onesimus felt himself secure from the sleuths of law, 'mid the multitudes of the great city. There he would be hid as an atom among a mass of humanity.

The very first effect of sin is a desire to hide from God. Adam and Eve hid in the trees of the Garden. They sought to hide their nakedness with fig leaves. Achan sinned and sought to cover his tracks. He saw some silver and some gold, he coveted them, he took them, he hid them in his tent. Sin loves darkness rather than light.

(2) Rome was a good place in which to sin. In Rome Onesimus could find the food to satisfy his lustful desires. In Rome everything was wide open. The ban was removed. In Rome sin reigned in all that was base and vile.

The lights of Broadway and the glare of Coney attract many a young life to New York city and to hell. There is a drift from the country and the village to the big city. There is a drift from the home that holds us to sobriety and to God, toward the boarding house and the theater. The wicked seek that which permits license toward licentiousness.

2. What happened in Rome? It is not hard to tell. Easy come, easy go! Soon Onesimus, made popular for the time by his bag of

gold, was impoverished. His gold was gone. When Paul finally sent Onesimus back to Philemon, there was not a sou left with which the runaway slave could make good his theft. All had been lost in Rome.

Alas, how sin depletes us! We go out full, we come back empty. The prodigal son returned with no shoes on his feet. His clothes were his disgrace. How heavy are the wages of sin! The one who robbed Philemon was himself robbed. Satan robbed him of his all — his money, and his character, and almost his soul.

Onesimus in Jail

See also: Onesimus Saved but Serving His Term in Jail

"Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the Gospel** (Philemon 1:13).

In jail? Assuredly. How do we know? Because Paul would, for his own sake have retained him there, ever after his jail term was expired.

1. There was the arrest. The offense which put Onesimus in jail we do not know. It was one of many things. Perhaps with his money gone, Onesimus had sought to meet his needs by further robbery. Perhaps he had fallen in with some crooks and was caught with them. We do not know. What we do know is that he was lodged in jail.

"Too bad," you say. Not at all. It was the best thing that could have happened. As long as Onesimus was at large he would not stop to think. As long as Onesimus had plenty of illy-gotten gain, he had no thought of God.

It was when the prodigal had spent his all that he thought of home. It was when the woman had wasted all her living on the physicians and was none better, that she turned to Christ.

Our Lord has often heard the prisoner's groan. And He heeds their cry, when it is genuine. He opens prisons bars and sets the prisoner free.

2. There was the meeting with Paul. Perhaps as Onesimus was dragged down the corridor of the Roman jail he was seen and recognized by Paul.

The Apostle had more or less liberty among the prisoners at Rome. He soon discovered in the jail, the servant of his own beloved Philemon.

At first we can imagine the terror that struck the heart of Onesimus as he was accosted by Paul. In his inner soul he cried, "Discovered at the last!" It was bad enough to be cast into jail upon some trivial offense. It was worse to be discovered by Paul, and perhaps, reported by him as a runaway slave from Colosse.

But matters were not so bad after all. Paul did not "blow on him." He sought his good. Somewhere alone he talked it all over with this evil youth. With tears Onesimus told his story — told it all, in truth. Paul knew the servant was sincere.

It is always so. Sin will out. It may be covered for a while, but it must soon be known.

Whither can a sinner fly that God will not see him? If he ascends into Heaven God is there. If he digs down into the pit, even there will God find him out. Perhaps not now, but if not now, surely by and by it will be known.

Psalm 139:7-12: "Whither shall I go from Thy Spirit? or whither shall I flee from Thy presence? If I ascend up into Heaven, Thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, Thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall Thy hand lead me, and Thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to Thee."

Onesimus and Paul

See also: Onesimus Saved but Serving His Term in Jail, The Practice of Soul-Winning

"I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds" (Philemon 1:10).

What glory rings out in the word's: "Whom I have begotten in my bonds." Paul did not say, "Whom I have begotten in his bonds." He left out. the fact that Onesimus had been bound, and held forth the fact of his own imprisonment. Paul knew that in his own incarceration, there was resting on him the glory of the Lord, and he was not ashamed. As to Onesimus, he had suffered the due reward of his deeds, and Paul was ashamed for him.

Just how Onesimus was "begotten," we can readily surmise.

1. There were the groanings of Onesimus. He was contrite. He bemoaned his sad estate. He wept before the aged Paul. He told him how it happened — how his master trusted him, and how he could not forego the chance to run away with his pockets full of gold. He felt the burden of his woe — a woe made double by the presence of the man of God.

Is this not always the experience of the sinner when he comes to God? He is stricken by his sin. It is the sick who seek the physician, and it is the lost who come to God. Weeping will not save us, but a tear is a mighty fine telescope through which to see the Saviour.

2. There was the story of the Cross as told by Paul. Did Paul preach Christ to this runaway? He surely did. He preached Christ always, everywhere. How else could Paul bring peace to the man before him, stricken by his sins? Some might have tried to preach another gospel. Not so the tried and true Apostle of the faith. He knew that Onesimus could not himself recover from his fall. He knew the weakness of the sin-bent flesh.

Paul preached Christ. He preached Him crucified. He told the stricken youth how there was mercy with the Lord and abounding grace; how Christ had died for him, the Just for the unjust; how we are saved by faith. He must believe in Christ and trust His finished work.

He preached Christ risen. He told Onesimus that Christ was a Living Lord; that He had come forth a Victor from the grave; that He had ascended up-on high and was seated at the Father's side. He told him that the Risen Christ would give him power to live in victory; that sin need no more have dominion over him. He told him that the Lord would grip his hand and lead him on, o'er moor and crag and dangerous pitfall until his life was done.

He preached Christ coming again. He explained to Onesimus those great and blessed truths that are ours in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. How Christ would come from Heaven with a shout; how the redeemed, the living and the dead, would be caught up to meet the Lord; how we would all be changed and be clothed upon with bodies like unto the glorious body of our Lord; how we would reign with Christ a thousand years. He told him of the glorious Kingdom in the great eternal ages yet to come. He spoke of the city with its streets of pure gold, of its pearly gates, and of its walls of precious stones.

Onesimus Saved but Serving His Term in Jail

See also:

Onesimus in Jail

Onesimus and Paul

The Practice of Soul-Winning

"I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:

"Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the Gospel" (Philemon 1:10, 13).

1. Onesimus saved. What! Onesimus saved! And why not Onesimus? God's grace can reach the vilest of the vile. Onesimus is not the only sinner who had gone to the end of the ropes and who has been saved. "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isa. 1:18).

Who has sins which outreach the "red" and the "scarlet" of this precious verse?

Illustration: Tom Needham was saved. What? Tom saved! After all his prodigality? Yes. Tom Needham once showed me the cross a cruel captain had tattooed upon his arm, after he had been discovered as a stowaway on a ship bound for South American coasts. Tom told me how the captain had hated him; how he had been cast off the ship when in the sight of land; how he swam ashore and soon had found himself among some cannibal tribes; how the natives had determined to kill him and cook him for their meal; but how they were startled when they saw the "man upon the cross," tattooed on his arm. He said that was the first time he was saved by the cross; for the superstitious natives set him free.

Tom Needham told me how, after many years of sin, he had at last reached Boston and had dropped into the church where his brother George was preaching Christ. That night Tom was saved by the Cross, the second time. This time he trusted unto the saving of his soul. I heard Tom Needham preach. Yes, Tom was saved. So also was Onesimus.

2. Onesimus serving out his jail term. "Too bad," you say. Not at all. Our sins may be blotted out; but we must still feel the sting of the days when we went astray. Onesimus' conversion did not lessen the fact that he was under condemnation by a Roman court. The government did not recognize the power of the cleansing Blood.

This is all too true. Let some man who has wasted his physical strength in sin, receive the Lord. God at once counts him as righteous. The curse of his sin is gone. It is transferred to Christ's account. Yet, the body does not recognize the imputed righteousness of Christ. And one who has wrecked his body by his sin, must serve out his jail term. He must reap in his body, what he has sowed.

3. Onesimus serving Paul. After he was saved Onesimus never wearied in helping Paul. He ministered to his needs. He made himself so valuable to Paul that Paul would fain have kept him, had he followed his personal desires (see Philemon 1:13).

The saved always have joy in serving those who follow Christ. The saved always have joy in the fellowship with saints. Onesimus had a nearness and a oneness to Paul that he had never known with any, in the days of his sin.

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

Onesimus Sent Back to Colosse

"Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels" (Philem. 1:12).

There must have been a heart-to-heart talk between Paul and Onesimus about the latter's return to the place of his former servitude. It was not natural for Onesimus to want to return to Philemon. To be sure Philemon was a true and kind-hearted believer. Yet would he not be just? What else would he do than give Onesimus the full extent of the law? Onesimus had every reason to expect to be punished. He could not criticise even one so good as Philemon, for he deserved all that he might receive.

Paul knew, however, that whatever Philemon might do, there was but one course open to Onesimus. He could not continue, now he was free, to hide himself away from the man whom he had wronged. How could Onesimus serve Christ or Paul with happy heart with an unrighted wrong hovering over him? He must go back to Colosse and correct, so far as he could, his past.

The Book of Philemon is the Letter Onesimus took when he went back home. It was written by Paul, the aged prisoner. Let us at once imagine Onesimus as he neared his former master's house. All was in commotion. Some of the servants had seen the runaway, as he neared the door. They looked knowingly at one another as they said: "There he is — the man who ran away with his master's goods. The scoundrel! What madness brings him back again? Does he not know how he has been hunted everywhere? He is walking into a pretty 'net.'"

There was a knock at the door. A startled recognition by the one who opened it. Then the Letter from the hand of the lastwhile thief was carried to Philemon.

"O joy," said Philemon, "a Letter from Paul." "He is the man I love. For him I would gladly die, that he might live and still proclaim the message of free grace."

The Letter then was read: "Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellow labourer, and to our beloved Apphia, and 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" (Philemon 1:1-3).

"What precious greetings," said Philemon. "It is just like Paul. He is so thoughtful and so filled with love. He always shows forth the graces of our blessed Lord." "But, I must read on:" "I thank my God making mention of thee always in my prayers, hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints; that the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother" (Philemon 1:4-7).

"Poor me," said Philemon, "that Paul should so highly esteem my little gifts of love, and my meager care for saints. I wish that I could do the half that he has done. I would that I might have encouraged many more of God's stricken children on their weary way. The little I have done is not the half of what I wish that I might do. But again, I must read on:" "Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient, yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ. I beseech thee for my child Onesimus whom I have begotten in my bonds" (Philemon 1:8-10).

"What! 'Tis Onesimus at the door. He brings this message from the man I love. And well it is for him he does. Did he not run away with my gold, after I had befriended him in many ways? Did he not trample under foot the precious Blood, and do despite to God's great grace? He oft had heard the story of the Cross, but he spurned it. He deserves the fullest limit of the law. But what is this? I read: 'begotten in my bonds.' Oh, now I understand it all — Onesimus is saved. 'Tis his new faith that brings him back again. He seeks to righten what he wronged. But let me read some more: 'Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to

thee and to me: whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels: 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 would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly. For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldst receive him for ever; not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?" (Philemon 1:11-16).

"What wonderful words are these. 'No more a servant, but a brother now, beloved.' So Paul Would have me place the thief above the pale he held e'er yet he ran away. Paul wants me to welcome him as in his stead. Welcome him into the heart of my own home again. Yet it is just what grace can do. I know full well that if the thief is saved he is no more a thief. He is 'born again' and made anew. Were he still a thief he would not stand without at my door."

"Tell Onesimus to come in." cried out Philemon. "My dear young man, I gladly welcome thee. I give thee the hand of fellowship in Christ. I have no fear of thy betraying yet again my sacred trust. Thou art received, no longer as a bond servant, but as a brother of my beloved Paul and as a servant of my precious Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Thou art welcomed home again!"

"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. 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" (see Philemon 1:17-21).

"For A Season... Forever"

Vance Havner

Philemon 1:15KJV

You need not hurry through the little Epistle to Philemon just because it is short. Here is one of the "choicest gifts wrapped in smallest packages."

This morning I have been intrigued with the fifteenth verse. You remember that Onesimus had robbed his master and had run away. In Rome he met Paul and became a Christian. Paul sent him back to Philemon, his master, with this letter interceding for his reinstatement. As he piles up his arguments in favor of the new Onesimus, he says, "For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldst receive him forever."

Now, Onesimus should not have robbed his master and he should not have run away. Such behavior as that is not to be defended in any day or generation. And yet, in the providence of God, it led to his meeting Paul and becoming a Christian, so that he who left home a rebellious slave returned a regenerated servant. It was the best thing that could have happened, both for Onesimus and Philemon. Even as a business proposition it was a bargain, for Paul offered to make up the theft, and Onesimus certainly would be a better workman saved than unsaved.

I have no theory to propound nor am I venturing into an ethical dissertation. I am not even interested in discussing the directive and permissive will of God as applied to this case. I do observe that Onesimus departed "for a season" that he might be received back "forever." At least, Paul says "perhaps." And I find in it an illustration of what I have often noticed in the ways of Providence, which are past our finding out. How often have dark chapters in our lives which, viewed alone, caused us grief and pain turned out, in the long view, to spell the difference between "for a season" and "forever." I do not mean that we may ever do evil that good may come of it. But I do perceive that in the hands of the destiny that shapes our ends, rough-hew them as we may, the believer finds one day that all things have worked together for good to the called according to His purpose.

I cannot explain it. If I could, it wouldn't be worth writing about. All that I know about it is that God who makes the wrath of men to praise Him is so much stronger than the devil that He can turn the designs of the prince of darkness against the designer himself. Satan overstepped himself when Onesimus ran away. He may have caused him to run away, but God saw to it that he went to Rome and met Paul. For Onesimus was one of the called according to God's purpose, and no trick of the devil can outwit that purpose.

Perhaps as you read, you can testify to the truth of this, for you have seen it work in your own life. I think of ten lone, lean years in my own past, when I was confused and bewildered and quite out of His blessed will. Now, I should not have been in such a state, and often since I have wondered why someone or something did not jolt me out of it earlier. And yet—and yet—as I look back now, I perceive that I learned some lessons from it that I should never have known otherwise. I do not justify that careless course by the lessons it taught me. And yet I insist that Satan shall not have it all his way, there is a redeeming feature, even in those runaway

years. Perhaps I "departed for a season" that I should return to remain forever.

Remember, I did not set out to explain it. I can only rejoice in the compass of God's unfailing purpose, in that love that did not let me go. And some day, by a better light, we shall perceive that even those pages that caused us shame and tears His Eternal Grace has bound into the volume and that He, who having begun a good work will always perform it, has seen that even when we departed for a season we should return, to be received forever

PROFITABLE PROBLEMS

Philemon 1:15

John Butler

"Perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him forever" (Philemon 1:15).

When troubles come, they often come for our profit. We do not see the profit at the time of the trouble but eventually we will see the profit. Paul is writing his friend, Philemon, about this truth in regards to the run-away servant/slave Onesimus. He suggests in this text that the problem of having a servant run away would be more than compensated by the fact of the change in Onesimus.

FIRST—THE PROBLEM OF ONESIMUS

"Departed for a season." Onesimus was a slave/servant of Philemon, and ran away. This would be very disconcerting to Philemon who doubtless treated Philemon well (Paul spoke so highly of Philemon, it is hard to believe he treated his servants poorly). Onesimus ran into Paul after he had run away and the Apostle Paul led him to the Lord and then sent him back to Philemon. In eternity Onesimus would thank God for running into Paul and he would have a favorable perspective on his running away. He obviously did not listen to anything Philemon had to say to him about the Gospel, but Paul got through to him. Being saved Onesimus helped Paul a lot (Philemon 1:13) then Paul sent him back to Philemon. Paul would not profit at the expense of another's great loss. It appears from Paul comments that Onesimus was not a good slave when he ran away (Philemon 1:11) which is the character of those who do things like that. It is generally the poor (in character) employee who performs the worst, which is why they never do well in their jobs.

SECOND—THE PROFIT IN ONESIMUS

"That thou shouldest receive him forever." This tells Philemon the profit from his problem. Two obvious things are mentioned here.

- The salvation of Onesimus. Onesimus ran into Paul and was converted. This does not justify his fleeing his duty, but it shows that in spite of problems profit will come. It also shows that "Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee" (Psalm 76:10). Onesimus was going to flee his responsibility to Philemon but all it did was result in his conversion. God will not be thwarted in his purposes by the sin of man. God will make the sin of man accomplish His purpose if He has to. So one of the blessings (profit) from this running away was the conversion of Onesimus.
- The service of Onesimus. "Receive him forever." Reading between the lines one perceives that Onesimus, who was not a good servant/slave of Philemon, would after his conversion change. Going back to Philemon was proof that Onesimus had changed and further proof would be in his service and the season ("forever") of his service. So the trouble/trial that Philemon went through because of Onesimus would result in a blessing for Philemon and not the curse that it appeared to be. Our troubles can be the same. (Sermon Starters, Volume 1)

INSTRUCTIVE GREETING

Philemon 1:1

John Butler

"Paul a prisoner of Jesus Christ and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer" (Philemon 1:1).

The opening verses of Paul's epistles are full of instruction. This opening of the one chapter book of Philemon is no exception. Though a small book it is large in instruction from the very beginning.

FIRST—THE PRISONER

“Paul a prisoner of Jesus Christ.” The persecution of the Gospel and the perspective of trial are in this phrase.

- Persecution of the Gospel. “Prisoner of Jesus Christ.” Paul was one of the godliest men ever to walk on the face of the earth. He was the greatest missionary and evangelist of the church, yet the world was so out of sync with God that they put Paul in prison for his promoting Christ. A sinful world is no friend of the Gospel. Many are the attacks upon the people who embrace the Gospel/Christ, not because these people are bad, but because the attackers/persecutors are bad. They were so bad they even crucified our Lord. Paul was in prison because of his loyalty to Jesus Christ. This really condemns our world.
- Perspective of trials. “Of Jesus Christ.” Paul did not say he was in prison because of his persecutors. Saying he was a prisoner of Jesus Christ was not an indictment upon Christ but it showed Paul’s perspective of trials. In Philippians 1:12 Paul summarizes it all by telling his readers that all his troubles were simply God’s way of spreading the Gospel. We need Paul’s perspective of our troubles. God allows them when they will providentially advance His cause.

SECOND—THE PROSELYTE

“And Timothy our brother” Timothy was a convert of Paul. He was also a loyal associate of Paul. His prominence in Paul’s life is attested by the two epistles Paul wrote to Timothy which are part of the ‘pastoral epistle’ section of the New Testament. The last epistle to Timothy is considered by many to be the last epistle Paul wrote before he was beheaded by Nero’s orders.

THIRD—THE PHILANTHROPIST

“Unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer.” Philemon was a great supporter of Paul’s ministry. We need more Philemon’s in the work of the Lord. God endows with wealth so we can help His work. Philemon illustrated this principle well. He is given two great compliments in our text.

- Affection. “Beloved.” Philemon would not be hard to love. Some saints are very difficult to love because they are not very loving. Philemon was loved because he loved the Lord and the Lord’s servants. So Paul called Philemon “beloved.” Whom we love has much to do with our character.
- Associate. “Fellowlabourer.” In spite of his wealth, Philemon was not afraid to roll up his sleeves and go to work for the cause of the Gospel. We need more workers like that in the Gospel vineyards. (Sermon Starters, Volume 5)

WE ARE MADE FOR FELLOWSHIP

Philemon 1:7,20

Robert Morgan

We’re in the middle of our studies on the Purpose-Driven Life, and the thesis of these sermons is that God had made us on purpose for a purpose; and in fact, there are five great purposes for which we’re made. We looked at the first one last week. We’re made to worship God and to bring Him pleasure. Today we’re coming to the second great purpose. We’re made to fellowship with Christians and to bring pleasure to one another.

I’ve said many times over the years that there are days and nights when I come to church weary and worried and tired; and just the sight of some of you—my brothers and sisters in Christ—refreshes me. I looked up the word “refresh” in the dictionary; it means to restore strength and animation to, to freshen up, to restore, to replenish. And that’s one of the reasons God made us and one of our purposes in life—to be part of a family and to refresh and restore one another.

I looked up this word “refresh” and found that it occurs 18 times in the Bible. I’d like to lead us through a few of these passages because they are so encouraging and motivating to me.

- Genesis 18:3-5. In this passage, Abraham is sitting in the door of his tent during the heat of the day, and three men pass by. Abraham rose and ran to them, and this is what he said: “My Lord, if I have now found favor in Your sight, do not pass on by Your servant. Please let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. And I will bring a morsel of bread that you may refresh your hearts.” Do you remember in Genesis 12, God had told Abraham, “I will bless you and I will make you a blessing”? I think Abraham lived with the awareness that he was blessed by God to be a blessing to others, to be someone who brought refreshment to fellow pilgrims. We need to think the same about ourselves.
- 1 Samuel 16:23. This is a difficult passage, but in essence, it tells us that King Saul suffered from depression, but David had the ability to sing and play for him and to bring refreshment to his heart. The passage says: “And so it was, whenever the spirit from God was upon Saul, that David would take a harp and play it with his hand. Then Saul would become refreshed and well, and the distressing spirit would depart from him.” Every one of us occasionally suffers from discouragement, depression, or anxious care.

How often someone has come alongside me and refreshed me in such times.

- Proverbs 11:25 in the NIV says: "A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed."
- Acts 3:19 tells us that our ability to be refreshed depends on our own spiritual condition. Peter said, "Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord."
- Romans 15:32 is Paul's personal message to the Romans regarding his projected trip to see them. He said that he longed "... to come to you with joy by the will of God and...be refreshed together with you."
- 1 Corinthians 16:17-18: "I am glad about the coming of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, for what was lacking on your part they supplied. For they refreshed my spirit and yours."
- 2 Corinthians 7:13 is about Paul's troubleshooter, Titus: "Therefore we have been comforted in your comfort. And we rejoiced exceedingly more for the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all."
- 2 Timothy 1:16 is a beautiful tribute: "The Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain."
- Philemon 7 and 20 are my favorites, and this will be our primary text today...

"I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgement of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.... Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.

We are made and placed on this earth to build others up, to refresh them, and to be a part of the family of believers known as the church. So today I'd like to speak on the subject: "How to be a refreshing person." That is, how do we refresh others? The secrets are found right here in this paragraph.

Philemon was a wealthy landowner whose servant Onesimus had robbed him and run away. As the story unfolds we find that Onesimus had arrived in Rome where he had met the Apostle Paul and been converted. Paul was now sending Onesimus back to Philemon with this letter. I'm not going to get into the Onesimus part of the story today. I'm just intrigued with the way that Paul describes Philemon when he writes to him, and there are several characteristics and character qualities to notice.

Jesus in our Hearts

First, to be refreshing we've got to have Jesus in our hearts. Notice verse 4: I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus.

Why was this man refreshing to others? He had love toward Jesus Christ and he had faith toward Jesus Christ. He had love and faith toward Jesus Christ. Now let's think about that for a moment.

He loved Jesus. Now here's what I think. When someone genuinely loves Jesus and develops a lifetime of fellowship with him, it affects that person's countenance. It shows on their face. It gives softness to the face that refreshes others.

This passage also says about Philemon that he had faith toward Jesus Christ. Now here's what I think. When someone genuinely trusts Jesus and develops a lifetime of confidence in Him, it shows up on their face. It gives strength to the face that inspires confidence in others.

If we had Philemon as a member of our church, I think we'd see on his face a softness and a strength that would be refreshing to us. His very presence would refresh us because of what we could read on his face. His love for Jesus would give him a soft expression and his faith in Christ would give him an expression of strength.

Proverbs 15:30 says, "A cheerful look brings joy to the heart, and good news gives health to the bones."

I read recently about a doctor named Rosenow—I think it was Dr. (Edward) Rosenow—who devoted his life to medical research. He once was asked what led him to this as his life's task, and he told this story. He grew up on an isolated farm in Northern Wisconsin, and as a boy he had an unforgettable experience when his brother became dangerously ill. The nearest doctor was sent for, and when he came to the house, Dr. Rosenow, then only a boy, followed the doctor into his brother's room, and hid behind a sofa to observe. What he saw determined his career. The doctor poured out medicine to give to the patient, and then he turned and said to his parents, "Have no fear, he is going to get well." The light that came into his parents' faces was wonderful to behold, and so deeply impressed him that then and there the boy behind the sofa determined that he would do something that would cause light to appear in people's faces.

I think Philemon wanted to light up the faces of others, and it was his love and faith in Jesus Christ that did it. If you want to be refreshing, others need to see it in your face and that requires love and faith in Jesus Christ.

Others in our Hearts

Second, we've got to have others in our hearts—love and faith toward all the saints. Notice these verses again: I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints.

Love and faith toward all the saints. Here was a man who loved the church and he believed in the church. In fact, he hosted the church. Verse 2 tells us that the local church in that community met in his house.

Steven Mosley is a Christian writer who tells a story about this in one of his books. Back in 1972, Campus Crusade had a huge conference in Dallas called Explo 72. It was sort of the pinnacle of the Jesus Movement, and some of my friends were there though I didn't go. But Steven Mosley went with about 50 college kids from Illinois. Afterward, they boarded their old yellow used school bus to drive home. They broke down in Tulsa. Most of the kids bought tickets with Greyhound and headed home, but Steven and four others stayed to try to get the bus fixed. They spent almost all their money, but the old bus just wouldn't run.

On Sunday night, they were standing around on the hot asphalt, not certain what to do. They were a motley looking crew—long haired Jesus hippies with torn jeans. But they noticed a little Baptist church across the street, and, not knowing what else to do, they crossed over and entered as people were arriving for the evening service. As it turned out, the people of the church were eager to help, especially a man named John Reed who had a friend who was a mechanic. "Why, we'll have 'er runnin' in no time," he said. "Ralph can fix most anything."

John and Evelyn Reed put all the kids up in their house, fed them, and the next day the men worked on the bus. By Tuesday morning they were ready to roll. Evelyn fed them a huge breakfast of biscuits and scrambled eggs, and they loaded up and started off with their bus. They only made it two blocks when it broke down again.

Back they went to the Reed's. This time, the bus took two days fix, but the Reeds remained gracious, and on Wednesday night everyone went to prayer meeting together. Thursday morning they pulled out again. This time they made it a mile before they had to call John Reed. "Well, I'll be," he said, "How far did you all get this time?"

Here they all came again, piling into the Reeds house while more work was done on the bus. Friday morning they started out again. This time they made it to the outskirts of Tulsa before breaking down. Back they came to the Reeds' house. They finally made a permanent exit on Saturday.

I want to read you what Steven Mosley said about that experience: "One guy in our group was black. The neighbors could not quite conceal their distress that someone like him was sleeping in their midst. But John told me quietly he was proud to be sheltering the young man. We had popped uninvited out of a war-protesting, drug-and-sex-infested university environment into their Okie land of country music and the flag. We had absolutely nothing in common except Jesus. But that was enough. Mom and Papa Reed always treated us as a blessing-- extra toothbrushes, sleeping bags, dirty socks and all."

That's what it means to be in a family—to be in a church family and to have one another in our hearts.

The Lost in Our Hearts

We have Jesus in our hearts, we have one another in our hearts, and third, we have the lost in our hearts. Look at verse 6: ...that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.

The NIV says: I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.

Jesus said, "They will know you are Christians by your love." When the world around us sees us loving each other, being in a family for which we were made, it will impress them with the reality of Jesus Christ.

Recently I read a new biography of Charles Spurgeon, the famous British preacher of the Victorian era. When he was a teenager—before he became a Christian—he attended agricultural college in Maidstone, England, with the idea of becoming a farmer. The next year, he dropped out and enrolled in another school in Newmarket to study Latin and Greek. He was trying to find his purpose

in life. It was at the Newmarket school that he met someone who had a long-lasting impact on him. It was this person's influence that eventually paved the way, as it were, for him to become a Christian and a minister and a theologian. It wasn't the headmaster of the school. It wasn't a teacher or professor. It wasn't a classmate or friend. It was the school's cook, an elderly woman named Mary King. She invited young Charles to church and he started attending her church, and it was from talks with her that he learned biblical truths he had never known before. Years later, when Mary King retired to Ipswich, Spurgeon—then a world-famous pastor—supplemented her income from his own pocket.

I wish I could meet Mary King. She understood evangelism and she understood the body of Christ—and she had a lost boy in her heart.

Joy in our Hearts

Finally, if we're going to be refreshing to others, we've got to have joy and consolation in our hearts. Verse 7 says: For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother. And verse 20 says: Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.

This is such an interesting phrase. Has anyone ever said anything like that to you? Has anyone ever come up to you and said, "Brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord"? Notice that phrase: Brother, let me have joy. Let me have joy from you. Make me happy!"

Now in the context, Paul is wanting Philemon to forgive his slave Onesimus, and, in fact, to stop treating him like a slave and to accept him as a brother. Onesimus was now a Christian. He had fled away as a slave, but now he was returning as a brother. Look at verses 15ff: For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother.

Now, Philemon, if you will forget all about being a master and treat Onesimus like the brother that he now is in the family of God you will make me happy. You will let me have joy from you in the Lord. You will refresh my heart.

When we do what God calls us to do and we obey the Scriptures, the joy of our lives overflows to others and it refreshes the hearts of the saints.

I read an article recently that reported on a survey which said that people who live in the same house as someone exhibiting signs of depression die 7 years sooner than the average. Not the depressed person—but those living in the same house as the depressed person. It's hard to live in the same house with someone suffering from depression. But how wonderful it is to live with those whose hearts overflow with the joy of Jesus. It brightens our lives.

And that's what's so special about the church of Jesus Christ. We aren't perfect; but we have love and faith toward Jesus Christ in our hearts and on our faces; we have a love for one another in our hearts; we have the lost in our hearts, and we have the joy, joy, joy, joy down in our hearts. Down in our hearts to stay.

And people like that refresh others.

Someone sent me an e-mail that said: I had a "drug" problem when I was a young person and a teenager. I was "drug" to church on Sunday morning. I was "drug" to church on Sunday night. I was "drug" to church on Wednesday night. I was "drug" to Sunday School every week. I was "drug" to Vacation Bible School. I was "drug" to the family altar to read the Bible and pray. I was "drug" to the woodshed when I disobeyed my parents. Those "drugs" are still in my veins, and I don't think I'll ever kick the habit.

Well, I don't ever want to kick the habit of church. The Psalmist said, "I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord." I often need to be refreshed, and I want to refresh others. Let's get a good dose of Jesus in our heart. Let's get one another in our hearts. Let's get the lost in our hearts. And let's get the joy of Jesus down in our hearts. And let's never kick the habit!