



The Baptist Standard Bearer, Inc.

NUMBER ONE IRON OAKS DRIVE • PARIS, ARKANSAS 72855

COMMENTARIES

EXPOSITION OF THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

PHILEMON

by John Gill

*Thou hast given a standard to them that fear thee;
that it may be displayed because of the truth*
— Psalm 60:4

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PHILEMON

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF PHILEMON

This epistle was written by the Apostle Paul, when a prisoner at Rome, as appears from its inscription and subscription; and seems to have been written at the same time, in the year 60, and sent by the same hand, as the epistle to the Colossians; seeing the same persons were with the apostle at the writing of both, and send their Christian salutations in the one, as in the other; compare (~~5023~~ Philemon 1:23,24) with (~~5040~~ Colossians 4:10,12,14) and Archippus, the minister in Colosse, is made mention of in both, (~~5002~~ Philemon 1:2 ~~5047~~ Colossians 4:17) and it is very probable that Philemon, to whom it was written, was a Colossian, since Onesimus, his servant, on whose account, and by whom it was sent, is said to be one of the Colossians, (~~5049~~ Colossians 4:9). Philemon is said to be one of the seventy disciples, and afterwards Bishop of Gaza; (see Gill on "~~2001~~ Luke 10:1"). The occasion of the epistle was this; Philemon's servant, Onesimus, having either embezzled his master's goods, or robbed him, ran away from him, and fled to Rome, where the apostle was a prisoner in chains in his own hired house, under the custody of a soldier, and where he received all that came, and preached the Gospel to them, (~~4230~~ Acts 28:30) and among those that went to hear him, this fugitive servant was one, and was converted under his ministry; and who not only received the grace of God, but had such gifts bestowed on him as qualified him to be a preacher of the word. Now the design of this epistle is to reconcile Philemon to his servant, and to entreat him to receive him again, not only as a servant, but as a brother in Christ; and the most proper and prudent methods and arguments are used to engage him to it. The epistle, though it is a familiar one, and short, is very instructive; it shows great humility in the apostle, and that he did not think it below him to be concerned in doing such an office as to reconcile a master to his servant, and which is worthy of imitation; as also it teaches the right that masters have over their servants, which is not lost by their becoming Christians, and even ministers of the Gospel; and that recompense should be made unto them for injuries done

by them: it likewise displays the riches of the grace of God, in the conversion of such a vile creature: and the wonderful providence of God in overruling that which was sinful in itself, running away from his master, to the greatest good, even the conversion of him; and is an instance of surprising grace: and from hence may be learned, that there is salvation in Christ for the chief of sinners; and that the conversion of them is not to be despaired of. The authority of this epistle was not questioned by the ancient writers, and stands always in their catalogues of the canon of the Scripture; and Marcion the heretic, who either rejected, or changed, or mutilated the rest of the epistles, could not lay his hands on this, because of the brevity of it, as Tertullian ^{f1} and Jerom ^{f2} observe.

PHILEMON

INTRODUCTION TO PHILEMON 1

This epistle has an inscription, salutation, and preface, the same with others, which are in (^{<5000>}Philemon 1:1-4), the principal view of it is to persuade Philemon to receive his servant Onesimus; the arguments used are taken from the general character he had for love to the saints, and people of God, and therefore it was hoped he would act up to it in this instance, (^{<5005>}Philemon 1:5-7), from the consideration of the person who made the suit to him, who could have used authority, but chose rather to entreat him in love; and also of his age, and the condition in which he was, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, (^{<5008>}Philemon 1:8,9) from the spiritual relation Onesimus was in to the apostle, who had begotten him in his bonds, (^{<5010>}Philemon 1:10) from the present usefulness of him, both to Philemon and the apostle, who before was useless, (^{<5011>}Philemon 1:11), from the strong affection the apostle had for him, being as his own bowels, (^{<5012>}Philemon 1:12) from his unwillingness to do anything without his consent, though he could have detained him upon the foot of equity and justice, to have served him in his stead, (^{<5013>}Philemon 1:13,14), from the overruling providence of God, which had so ordered it, that he should depart from him for a time, that he might be received for ever, (^{<5015>}Philemon 1:15) from the character under which he could now be received, not as a servant, but as a beloved brother, (^{<5016>}Philemon 1:16) from the partnership and association in which the apostle and Philemon were, (^{<5017>}Philemon 1:17) from the assurance he gave him of repaying him whatever his servant owed him, and making good whatever he had injured him in, (^{<5018>}Philemon 1:18,19) and from that pleasure, delight, and refreshment he should have, should he receive him, (^{<5019>}Philemon 1:20). And, upon the whole, the apostle expresses his confidence that he would grant his request, obey his commands, and even do more than he had mentioned to him, (^{<5021>}Philemon 1:21). And then gives him some hope of his being delivered from prison, through the prayers of Philemon, and others, and of seeing him shortly; and therefore desires he would prepare a lodging for him, (^{<5022>}Philemon 1:22) and closes with the salutations of several friends to him, mentioned by name, with their characters,

(^{<50123>}Philemon 1:23,24) and with his own common salutation, (^{<50125>}Philemon 1:25).

Ver. 1. *Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, &c.*] Not made a prisoner by Christ, though he was apprehended, laid hold on, and detained by Christ as a prisoner of hope, at his conversion; but this is not intended here: but he was a prisoner at Rome for the sake of Christ, on account of professing him, and preaching in his name; his bonds were for the sake of the Gospel of Christ; and therefore they are in this epistle called the bonds of the Gospel. He was not a prisoner for any capital crime, and therefore had no reason to be ashamed of his chain, nor was he; but rather gloried in it, as his taking this title and character to himself, and prefixing it to this epistle shows; and which he chooses to make use of rather than that of a servant of God, or an apostle of Christ, as he elsewhere does, that he might not by constraint, or authority, but by love, move the pity and compassion of Philemon to grant his request, and receive his servant; which, should he deny, would be to add affliction to his bonds: and that this is his view in the choice of this character, is manifest from (^{<50108>}Philemon 1:8,9)

and Timothy our brother, not according to the flesh, or as being of the same country, for he was the countryman of neither of them; nor only on account of his being a regenerate than, born of God, a child of God, and of the same family; but chiefly because he was of the same function, was a minister of the Gospel: him the apostle joins with himself in the epistle, and so in the request, because he might be well known to Philemon, and be much respected by him; and to show that they were united in this affair, and both desired this favour of him; hoping that by their joint application it would be obtained:

unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellow labourer: the name of Philemon is Greek; there was a Greek poet of this name, and a Greek historian that Pliny made use of in compiling his history: there is indeed mention made in the Jewish writings^{f3}, of a Rabbi whose name was *wmyl p*, “Philemo”; but this our Philemon seems to have been an inhabitant of Colosse, and rather to have been a Gentile than a Jew; he was a rich and hospitable man, and greatly respected, and therefore here called, “our dearly beloved”; that is, dearly beloved by the apostle and Timothy, not only as being a believer, but as being also generous and useful in his station, and likewise as he was a minister of the Gospel; for so the next phrase, “and fellow labourer”, seems to import; for though such are

sometimes said to be labourers and fellow helpers with the apostle, who assisted in carrying on the interest of Christ, with their purses, and prayers, and private conversation; yet as it is used in this same epistle, of such who were in the work of the ministry, (⁵⁰²⁴Philemon 1:24) it is very probable it is so to be understood here: and now though these expressions of affection and respect were without dissimulation; nor were they mere compliments; yet the intention of them was to work upon the mind of Philemon, to reconcile him to his servant; suggesting, that as he had an interest in the affections of the apostle and others, this would be a means of establishing it, and would be acting agreeably to his character, as a minister of the Gospel.

Ver. 2. *And to our beloved Apphia*, &c.] The Alexandrian copy reads, “to sister Apphia”; and the Vulgate Latin version, “to the beloved sister Apphia”; for this is a woman's name; and it is thought that she was the wife of Philemon, since she is placed next to him, and before Archippus, a minister of the word; and very prudently is she wrote to, and justly commended, in order to engage her to use her interest with her husband to receive his servant again, who otherwise might have stood against it, and been a very great hinderance to a reconciliation: this clause is wanting in the Ethiopic version:

and Archippus our fellow soldier; that this Archippus was a preacher of the Gospel at Colosse is manifest from (⁵⁰⁴⁷Colossians 4:17) wherefore the apostle styles him a fellow soldier; for though this character belongs to private Christians, who are enlisted as volunteers under Christ, the Captain of salvation, and fight under his banners, against sin, Satan, and the world, being accoutred with the whole armour of God, and are more than conquerors through Christ that has loved them; yet it very eminently belongs to the ministers of the Gospel, who are more especially called upon, to endure hardness, as good soldiers of Christ; to war a good warfare, to fight the good fight of faith; and besides the above enemies common to all believers, to engage with false teachers, and earnestly contend for the faith of the Gospel, that so it may continue with the saints. Now this man was in the same company, and in the same service, engaged in the same common cause, against the same enemies, and under the same Captain, and was expecting the same crown of immortality and glory, and therefore he calls him his fellow soldier; and he wisely inscribes his epistle to him, that he might make use of the interest he had in Philemon, and his wife, to bring this matter to bear, the apostle writes about:

and to the church in thy house: not in the house of Archippus, but in the house of Philemon; and designs not the church at Colosse, as though it met at his house; but his own family, which for the great piety and religion which were among them, and for the good order and decorum in which they were kept, were like a church of themselves; and here again the apostle acts the wise part, in order to gain his point, by taking notice of them, who might some of them have been injured or affronted by Onesimus, when with them; and so entertained some resentment against him, and might put a bar in the way of his reception into the family again.

Ver. 3. *Grace to you and peace, from God,* &c.] Which is the same form of salutation used in the other epistles; (see Gill on “~~4007~~Romans 1:7”) for though this epistle is but a very small one, yet it is introduced in the same form as the larger epistles are; and has an inscription in the former verse, a salutation in this, and a preface in the three following.

Ver. 4. *I thank my God,* &c.] Meaning on account, of Philemon, for the grace bestowed upon him, thereafter mentioned; (see Gill on “~~4008~~Romans 1:8”) making other saints, (~~4009~~Romans 1:9 ~~4016~~Ephesians 1:16 ~~4003~~Philippians 1:3,4 ~~4005~~Colossians 1:3 ~~4002~~1 Thessalonians 1:2), the apostle was a man much in prayer, frequent at the throne of grace; and he prayed not for himself only, but for all the saints, for all the churches and ministers of the Gospel; whom he not only bore upon his mind and heart, but made mention of them, it may be by name; however, he remembered them, and put up petitions, with thanksgivings, for them; and so he did for Philemon; and which he takes notice of with the same view as before: the word, “always”, is so placed in the original text, as to be put either to his thanks to God, or his prayers, and may be true of both; the Syriac and Arabic versions join it to the former; and the Vulgate Latin and the Ethiopic versions place it to the latter.

Ver. 5. *Hearing of thy love and faith,* &c.] Those two spring from the free favour and love of God, and are the pure gifts of his grace; and therefore thanks are to be given for them to God; nor are they to be ascribed to the power and will of man; they are the fruits of the Spirit of God; and are the principal ingredients in sanctification, which is entirely his work; and they are in all regenerate persons; and are the evidences of regeneration; by which it is known that men are passed from death to life; and they always go together, and are inseparable from each other: there cannot be true faith where love is wanting, for faith works by love; and there cannot be real

love, where there is not faith; they only love the saints aright, who love them in the faith, and because of it; and these graces are visible, and to be known by their fruits, whereby they come to be heard of, and talked of, as these in Philemon were. Faith in the heart is confessed by the mouth; and love, both to Christ and to his people, shows itself, as well as faith, in works of righteousness. Sometimes faith is put before love, it being a leading grace, and the great receiver of all the blessings of grace; and here love is placed before faith, because of its being more excellent on account of its continuance and duration; or there may be no design at all in it; but rather, as sometimes one, and sometimes another is mentioned first, it shows that they are upon an equal foot, and both have their proper place and usefulness; the objects of them follow:

which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints; which are either to be considered as equally objects of the same grace, or as distinct ones; that is, either that Christ is the object both of faith and love, and the saints are the object both of faith and love; or else these graces are to be distinguished by their respective objects; as that faith is toward Christ, and love toward all the saints: that Christ is both the object of faith and love is certain; nor is there any difficulty to consider him as such; faith is equally to be exercised on him, as on God the Father; and he is indeed the immediate object of faith, and by whom men believe in God; and he is to be loved, and is loved by his people above all things, and at all times, and in sincerity: and that the saints are the objects of the love of all truly gracious souls, is a plain case; but the greater difficulty is, how they should be the objects of their faith; and yet there are instances of this, (^{<1245>}Exodus 14:31 ^{<411>}2 Chronicles 20:20) and indeed, true love believes all things, and hopes all things, (^{<437>}1 Corinthians 13:7). But it seems better to divide these objects according to the different graces, and to consider faith as being towards our Lord Jesus; which is a looking towards Christ, a moving towards him, a laying hold upon him, and embracing him, a staying and leaning on him, a living upon him, and walking in him; and which in Philemon might be a strong one, as well as unfeigned, and operative: and love may be considered as being toward all saints; for though all men are, in a sense, to be loved, and kindness to be shown to them, and that even to enemies, yet more especially the saints; who are set apart by God the Father, whose sins are expiated by the blood of Christ, and who are internally sanctified by the Spirit, and are enabled to live soberly and righteously: and all of these are the objects of love, whether rich or poor,

greater or lesser believers, of meaner or larger abilities; for they are all equally loved by God, redeemed by Christ, and regenerated by his Spirit; are justified by his righteousness, are all the children and heirs of God, and are called in one hope of their calling; and love to them should be unfeigned, fervent, active, and laborious, and as Christ has loved us; and such was Philemon's love, as well as it was universal and this distribution of these graces to their respective objects may be confirmed from a parallel place in (^{<5000>}Colossians 1:4) which epistle was written and sent at the same time with this.

Ver. 6. *That the communication of thy faith, &c.*] The grace of faith itself cannot be communicated from one to another; a believing parent cannot communicate it to his children, nor a master to his servants, nor a minister to his hearers; but an account of it, of its actings and exercises, of the joy of it, and of the peace a soul is filled with through believing, may be given to the mutual comfort and edification of saints; and it may be shown forth to others by the fruits of it, works of righteousness: but here it seems to design acts of beneficence, communicating to the necessities of others, as flowing from faith; and these words are to be connected with (^{<5000>}Philemon 1:4) as a part of the apostle's prayers, as what is contained in the preceding verse is the matter of his thanksgiving. And his prayer is, that such a communication of good things, which springs from faith,

may be effectual; to answer some very good purposes, the good of others, and the service of the interest of Christ, and the glory of God; or, as the Vulgate Latin version reads, only by the change of one letter, that it “may be evident”; to which the Syriac version seems to incline, rendering it, that it “may be fruitful in works”; or show itself in fruits of righteousness, in works of mercy and kindness; and the apostle's sense is, that it might be more and more so:

by the acknowledging of every good thing that is in you in Christ Jesus; the meaning is, that every good thing that is in the saints, or among them, should be acknowledged to come to them in and through Christ Jesus, in whom all fulness of grace dwells, and from whom all is imparted; and that every good thing that is communicated, or done in faith, which is effectual to any good purpose, should be owned as done by the grace and strength of Christ, and be done to his saints, as if done to himself, and be directed to his glory: the phrase, “in you”, respects not Philemon only, but Apphia,

Archippus, and the church in Philemon's house; the Arabic version reads, in us.

Ver. 7. *For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, &c.*] In the expressions and acts of it to the poor saints; for which reason the apostle gives thanks for it before; and it is a pleasure and comfort to an ingenuous mind, though it is not in his power to do good to the poor saints himself, to see that others have both abilities, and a heart to relieve them:

because the bowels of the saints are, refreshed by thee, brother; meaning, not only that their bellies were filled with food, for the phrase is used in (^{500D}Philemon 1:20) where that cannot be intended; but their hearts were filled with gladness, the load upon their spirits, the pressures upon their minds were removed, and they had an inward pleasure in their souls, and rest, refreshment, and comfort, through the liberal communications of Philemon to them; who did what he did cheerfully, that so it did their souls good, as well as their bodies; and in doing which, he acted the part of a brother in Christ.

Ver. 8. *Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ, &c.*] Or use much freedom of speech in the name of Christ, as an ambassador of his, and great authority as his apostle, which was given him for edification:

to enjoin thee that which is convenient; which became him as a believer in Christ, and a minister of the Gospel; which was his duty, and was obligatory upon him, agreeable to the doctrines of Christ; who taught men to love their enemies, to be reconciled to their brethren, that had offended them, especially when they repented; and therefore it was fit and proper that he should receive his servant again, since God had called him by his grace, and given him repentance for his sins: upon this foot the apostle could have commanded him, as he did in other cases, (³⁸⁶2 Thessalonians 3:6,12), but he chose not to address him in an authoritative way, but by way of entreaty, as follows.

Ver. 9. *Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, &c.*] Either for the sake of the great love which the apostle bore to Philemon, being, as he calls him, his dearly beloved, he took this method; or because of Philemon's great love to all the saints before mentioned, he was encouraged to proceed in this manner, hoping on that account to have success; or it may be, it was for the sake of that love with which God had loved him, and which he puts him in mind of, to engage him to grant his request; that seeing God the

Father had loved him, and chosen him in Christ; and Christ had loved him, and redeemed him by his blood; and the Holy Spirit had loved him, and sanctified him by his grace, that therefore he would receive his servant again for the sake of this love; who also was the object of it; (see ~~<5150>~~Romans 15:30). The Alexandrian copy reads, “for”, or “through necessity”, as if necessity obliged him to this request.

Being such an one as Paul the aged; or “the elder”; meaning either in office, which he might mention with this view, that his request might have the greater weight and influence; or else in years, and which he might observe partly to move compassion in Philemon, and that he might not grieve him in his old age, as he would, should he deny his request; and partly to suggest to him, that the advice he was about to give him, to receive his servant, did not come from a raw young man, but from one well stricken in years, with whom were wisdom and understanding; and therefore not to be treated with neglect or contempt: how old the apostle was at this time, is not certain; he could not be less than sixty years of age, or he would not have called himself an old man; for no man was so called by the Jews, but he that was at the age of sixty ^{f4}. Some editions of the Vulgate Latin version, as that of the London Polyglot Bible, read, “seeing thou art such an one as Paul the aged”; as if Philemon was an old man, as the apostle was, and therefore he would not lay his commands upon him, as an ancient man might upon a young man, but rather entreat him as equal to him in years: but then it follows, which does not appear to be true of Philemon, or that he was in the like case,

and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ; which is observed with the same view as in (~~<5000>~~Philemon 1:1). (See Gill on “~~<5000>~~Philemon 1:1”).

Ver. 10. *I beseech thee for my son Onesimus*, &c.] Now he comes to the request itself, and mentions by name the person on whose account he makes it, and whom he calls his son; not merely because of his affection to him, but because he really was his spiritual father; he had been the happy instrument of his conversion, and he was his son according to the common faith, or in a spiritual sense: hence it follows,

whom I have begotten in my bonds: which is to be understood of a begetting again, or of regeneration; not as if the apostle was the efficient cause of it, as the nature of it shows, it being expressed by men's being born from above; by their being quickened, when dead in trespasses and sins; by being made new creatures, and transformed in the renewing of

their minds; by Christ being formed in them, and by a partaking of the divine nature; and who is sufficient for these things? besides it is expressly denied to be of man, but is always ascribed to God, Father, Son, and Spirit; but as being the instrument and means of it, through the preaching of the Gospel, the word of truth, by which God of his own will, and by the power of his grace, regenerated this person; and this is said to be done “in his bonds”: by which it appears, that the word of God was not bound, but had a free course, and was glorified, and the bonds of the apostle were the means of the spread of it; and that it was attended with great power, to the conversion of souls: and this circumstance is mentioned to engage Philemon to regard the entreaty of the apostle; he had been the instrument of begetting many souls to Christ; but this man was begotten by him in his bonds, when he was a prisoner, and so was peculiarly dear to him.

Ver. 11. *Which in time past was to thee unprofitable*, &c.] Yea, injurious and hurtful; one that was an eye servant, that loitered away his time, and set an ill example to fellow servants; and not only so, but embezzled his master's goods, and robbed him, and run away from him. So every man, in his state of unregeneracy, is an unprofitable man, (^{<RB12>}Romans 3:12) unprofitable to God, to men, and to themselves; their sins will not profit them, though they may promise them liberty and pleasure; nor will their riches, should they lose their own souls: nor their own righteousness, in the business of justification and salvation; nor even an outward profession of religion: yea, they are not only said to be unprofitable, but are represented as good for nothing; hence they are compared to dishonourable and unserviceable vessels; to briars and thorns, and the earth which brings them; to the salt that has lost its savour, and is fit neither for the land, nor for the dunghill; to rotten figs, to chaff, and dross of metals: yea, they are hurtful and injurious to themselves, on whom they bring ruin and destruction; to others, to wicked men, whom they more and more corrupt, and harden in sin; and to good men, whom they grieve; and also to the interest and glory of God, whose laws they transgress, and against whom they sin, affront his justice, and provoke the eyes of his glory.

But now profitable to thee and to me; that is, he was now likely to be so, to be profitable to Philemon, as a servant, and to the apostle as a ministering brother. Some think there is in this an allusion to his name Onesimus, which signifies “profitable”; before he did not answer to his name, but now he was a true Onesimus, really a profitable person; grace, of an unprofitable man, makes a profitable one. Such an one is profitable to

himself; his godliness is gain unto him, it having both the promise of this life, and of that which is to come; and he is profitable to others, if he has gifts qualifying him for the public work of the ministry, as Onesimus seems to have had; then he is made and becomes very useful to many for conviction, conversion, comfort, and edification; and if only a private believer, he is often profitable to others, by relating the work of God upon his soul; he is serviceable to the interest of Christ, for the support of the ministry, and supply of the poor; he is useful by his good examples, and prayers, in the neighbourhood, town, city, or nation, in which he dwells. This argument from profit, the apostle knew would be an engaging one.

Ver. 12. *Whom I have sent again*, &c.] From Rome to Colosse, or to Philemon, wherever he was, along with this epistle:

thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels; meaning his son, who, in a spiritual sense, came out of his bowels, to whom he stood in the relation of a spiritual father; so the Syriac version renders it, as my son, so receive him; (see ^{<0159>}Genesis 15:4 ^{<0161>}2 Samuel 16:11) and for whom he had a most strong affection, and tender regard; his bowels yearned for him, and he suggests by this expression, that should he reject him, it would give him the utmost pain and uneasiness; and he should be obliged to cry out as the Prophet Jeremy did, “my bowels, my bowels, I am pained at the very heart”; (^{<0409>}Jeremiah 4:19) wherefore he entreats him to receive him again into his house and family, into his service, and into his heart and affections, where the apostle had received him.

Ver. 13. *Whom I would have retained with me*, &c.] At Rome, where the apostle was a prisoner:

that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the Gospel; the apostle was in bonds, not for any crime, for any immorality he had been guilty of, but for the sake of the Gospel, for professing and preaching that; for this he was an ambassador in bonds, as he elsewhere says, (^{<0401>}Ephesians 6:20). Now he would have kept Onesimus with him, either to have waited upon him, in his bonds, and to have provided for him the necessaries of life; or to have assisted him in the ministration of the word, in the room of Philemon, who, had he been there, would have been employed in such service; so that if the apostle had retained him, he would have been acting not for himself, but in the room of his master, and doing what he should have done, had he been on the spot. This the apostle observes to prevent an objection that might have been made; that since

Onesimus was become so profitable to him, why did he send him back? why did he not keep him for his own service? this he obviates and removes, by signifying he should have done it, but for the following reason.

Ver. 14. *But without thy mind would I do nothing*, &c.] Which shows great modesty and humility in the apostle, that though as such he had an authority, which he could have used, as well as had understanding and judgment how to have used it without consulting Philemon, or having his sense of this affair, yet chose to consult him: and it also shows the strict regard the apostle had to equity and justice, that he would do nothing with another man's servant without his consent; he would not seem to alienate, or engross another man's right and property, whatever power he might have, as an apostle, to have retained Onesimus as a minister to him.

That thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly; that is, that his goodness in forgiving his servant, and renouncing all claim and property in him, and admitting him to continue in the service of the apostle, might not look like a forced thing; but that it might appear to be a voluntary action, when he should of himself return him, after he had been thus sent to him, and received by him.

Ver. 15. *For perhaps he therefore departed for a season*, &c.] The apostle in this clause seems to soften this business of Onesimus in running away from his master; he calls it not a running away, but a departure, an absence from him, and that but for a little while; and suggests that the hand of God might be in it; that there was an overruling providence that attended it, such as was in Joseph's going down into Egypt; and that this separation of Onesimus from his master, for a short time, was in order that they should come together again, and never part more, as follows:

that thou shouldest receive him for ever; or during life, referring to the law in ⁽¹²⁰⁶⁾Exodus 21:6) or to all eternity, since they were in the same spiritual relation, partakers of the same grace, and had a right to the same heavenly inheritance, and should be together with Christ for evermore.

Ver. 16. *Not now as a servant*, &c.] That is, not only as a servant, for a servant he was, and was to be received as such; his call by grace had not dissolved the civil relation that was between him and his master, though it had added to it something that was above it, and greater than it:

but above a servant; in a higher condition, as the Arabic version renders it, than a servant; not barely considered in that relation, but as being in one much preferable to it:

a brother beloved, specially to me; a brother in Christ, and to be beloved on that account, as he was especially by the apostle, who had been the instrument of his conversion; (see ^{510D}Colossians 4:9).

But how much more unto thee, both in the flesh and in the Lord? both in a natural and civil sense, as being of the same nation and country, and as being part of his family, his servant, and now become an useful and profitable one; and, in a spiritual sense, being in the Lord, belonging to the Lord Jesus, to that family which is named of him, being a fellow citizen with the saints, and of the household of God, and therefore must be doubly dear to him.

Ver. 17. *If thou count me therefore a partner, &c.*] A companion and friend, who reckon each other's affairs and interest their own: the word answers to **rbx**, a word often used in Talmudic writings, for an associate of the doctors or wise men: here it may mean also a partner both in grace, and in the ministry; one that shared in the same gifts and graces of the Spirit of God, and one that was to be a partaker of the inheritance with the saints in light: now if Philemon reckoned the apostle such an one, as he doubtless did, as being engaged in the same common cause, and a partaker of the same common faith, and interested in the same common salvation; then he entreats him on account of Onesimus, in the following manner,

receive him as myself; intimating, that he was as dear to him as himself; that he loved him as his own soul; and that he should take whatever respect and affection were shown to him as done to himself; and that he would have him receive him into his house, his heart and affections, as he would receive him the apostle himself, should he come to him.

Ver. 18. *If he hath wronged thee, &c.*] By squandering away his time, spoiling his work, or corrupting his fellow servants:

or oweth thee ought; by embezzling his master's goods, robbing him of his money, and running away from his service:

put that on mine account; Signifying that he would be answerable for all, and make good all debts and damages.

Ver. 19. *I Paul have written it, with mine own hand,* &c.] Meaning either this epistle, which being short, he used no amanuensis, but wrote it all himself, and which might be taken as an engagement to do what he promised; or else a bill, a promissory note, written with his own hand, which he sent along with Onesimus, by which he laid himself under obligation to give Philemon full satisfaction in every thing, in which he had been injured by his servant; adding,

I will repay it: this was not an ironical expression, nor a piece of vanity in the apostle; he spoke seriously, and heartily, and meant what he said; and though his circumstances were often so mean, that he was forced to work with his own hands to minister to his necessities; yet such was his interest in the churches, and such their obligation to him, on account of his personal and useful ministrations to them, that he could easily raise a sum of money among them, upon any emergent occasion; so that Philemon had a good surety and paymaster of the apostle: and this shows his great humility to be a bondsman for a servant, and to make good damages and debts brought on in a scandalous manner; as also that suretyship in some cases is lawful, though it ought to be cautiously, and for very good reasons, entered into: and this engagement of the apostle for Onesimus bears some resemblance with, and may serve to illustrate the suretyship of Christ, for his people, they, and Onesimus, being much in a like condition; as he was an unprofitable and run away servant, so they are all gone out of the way, and together become unprofitable; and Christ engaged with his Father to bring them back again, and set them before him; and by his sufferings and death has brought them nigh, which were afar off; as he had wronged his master and was indebted to him, so they have injured the law of God, affronted his justice, and incurred his displeasure; and having owed to him more than ten thousand talents, and having nothing to pay, Christ engaged to satisfy law and justice, to make reconciliation for them, and pay all their debts; all which he has accordingly done; their sins have been placed to his account, imputed to him, and charged upon him; and he has bore them, and the punishment due to them, and so has satisfied for them, and restored that which he took not away.

Albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides; having respect to his conversion, which he was the happy instrument of the apostle was his spiritual father, and he was his son, according to the common faith; he had been the instrument of saving his soul from death; he had been the means of that in the hand of God, which

all his riches, and the riches of his friends and relations, could never have procured: the salvation of his soul, his better part, was instrumentally owing to him, and so his whole self; and therefore, what favour might he not ask of him? and what was it he could, or should deny him? this the apostle introduces in a very artificial manner, and does not insist upon it, but suggests, that should he forgive the injuries and debts, he had took upon him to make satisfaction for, it would not be an equivalent to the debt he owed to him. From hence may be observed, how greatly obliged regenerated persons are to those, who have been the means and instruments of their conversion.

Ver. 20. *Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord, &c.*] Through the apostle was his spiritual father, having been the instrument of his conversion, yet he calls him his brother, as being a partaker of the same grace, and a minister of the same Gospel; and intimates to him, that should he grant his request, and receive his servant again, it would give him great joy and pleasure, and that not of a carnal, but of a spiritual kind, even joy in the Lord; he should rejoice in the presence of the Lord, and before him, concerning him; he should rejoice in his faith in the Lord, and love for him, and obedience to him; all which would be discovered in such a conduct: the Syriac version renders it, as an assurance to himself,

I shall be refreshed by thee in our Lord; not doubting but that he would gratify him in the thing he asked of him, which would be a refreshment to him; the Vulgate Latin version renders it, “may I enjoy thee in the Lord”: meaning not his company and presence, either in this world, or in the world to come; but that he might enjoy or receive the favour from him he had petitioned him for, for the Lord's sake; the Arabic version renders it, as a reason why he should do it, “I have been profitable to thee in the Lord”; confirming what he had said before, that he owed himself to him; he having been useful to him in bringing him to the knowledge of Christ, and faith in him; and the Ethiopic version refers it to a promise, “I will repay in our Lord”; in spiritual things in our Lord, if not in things temporal:

refresh my bowels in the Lord; or “in Christ”; as the Alexandrian copy, the Syriac and Ethiopic versions, read; and by his “bowels”, he either means Onesimus, as in (⁵⁰¹²Philemon 1:12) who, in a spiritual sense, came forth out of his bowels; or else himself, his soul, his spirit, his inward parts; and so the Ethiopic version renders it, “refresh my soul”; and the sense is, that he desired in the Lord, and for his sake, that he would receive Onesimus

again, which would give him an inward pleasure, and refresh his spirit; and indeed he intimates, that nothing could be more cheering and reviving to him.

Ver. 21. *Having confidence in thy obedience, &c.*] In his obedience of faith to Christ, and his Gospel; he having been made willing in the day of his power to serve him, as well as to be saved by him; and being constrained by his love, and the Spirit of Christ having wrought in him both to will and to do of his good pleasure:

I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say; the knowledge the apostle had of Philemon's cheerful obedience to Christ in all the parts of duty, encouraged him to write to him, on this head; believing that he would even do more than he had desired of him.

Ver. 22. *But withal prepare me also a lodging, &c.*] Not that the apostle expected or desired any grand apartment to be fitted up for him; a room with such furniture as the Shunamite provided for the man of God was sufficient for him, and what he would have been entirely contented with; but his view in this was, to let Philemon know that he hoped to be released from his bonds, and that he might expect to see him; and this he hinted to him, in order to stir him up to receive his servant sooner, and the more readily; who otherwise might have been indifferent to it, and negligent of it, thinking he should never see the apostle's face any more.

For I trust, that through your prayers I shall be given you; to minister in the Gospel again among them: the apostle was a man of prayer himself, and he had a very great regard to the prayers of others, and often desired an interest in them; that he might perform his ministerial work as it should be; that he might have success in it; and that he might be delivered from the unbelieving Jews, and from wicked and unreasonable men; and he had some secret hope and trust in his own mind, that through the prayers of the saints he should be delivered from his bonds, and go up and down preaching the Gospel as heretofore: he doubtless was acquainted with the case of Peter, for whom prayer was made incessantly by the church, when in prison, and he had deliverance; however, he knew that the prayers of the saints availed much with God; but whether this hope and expectation of his were answered, is a matter of doubt and question: some think he was released, and went into several parts, and preached the Gospel, and then was taken up again, and committed to prison, and suffered under Nero, some years after; and others think not.

Ver. 23. *There salute thee Epaphras, &c.*] Who was a Colossian, and minister of the church at Colosse, and so might be well known to Philemon, who seems to have been of the same place and church; (see ~~<S1007>~~Colossians 1:7 ~~<S1042>~~4:12,13) his name is omitted in the Ethiopic version:

my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus; this good man, and minister of Christ, might have been sent by the Colossians, as Epaphroditus was by the Philippians, to the apostle at Rome, to pay him a visit, and comfort and assist him under his afflictions; and staying and preaching the Gospel there, was committed to prison, or was laid in bonds, as the apostle was, and upon the same account; namely, for the sake of Christ, and his Gospel. For by this time Nero began to persecute the Christians, which he did in the better and more moderate part of his reign; for among several things for which he is commended by the historian ^{f5}, this is one;

“Afficti suppliciiis Christiani, genus hominum superstitionis novae ac maleficae”; the Christians were punished, a sort of men of a new and bad religion:”

and Epaphras being at Rome, when this persecution broke out, was taken up and put in prison, as were also Aristarchus, (~~<S1040>~~Colossians 4:10) and Timothy, (~~<S8323>~~Hebrews 13:23).

Ver. 24. *Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, &c.*] Marcus was Barnabas's sister's son, the son of that Mary, in whose house the church met, and prayed for Peter when in prison; whose name was John Mark, whom Saul and Barnabas took along with them to Antioch, and from thence, in their travels, to other parts; but he leaving them at Pamphylia, was the occasion of a contention between Saul and Barnabas afterwards, when returned to Antioch; the latter insisting on his going with them again, and the former refusing it on account of his departure from them; which contention rose so high that they parted upon it, (~~<H1212>~~Acts 12:12,25 ~~<H1315>~~13:5,13 ~~<H1537>~~15:37-39) though after this the apostle was reconciled to him; he approving himself to be a faithful and useful minister of the Gospel; and therefore he desires Timothy to bring him along with him, (~~<S1041>~~2 Timothy 4:11) and if this epistle was written after that, he was now come to him; however, he was now with him, whether before or after: Aristarchus was a Macedonian of Thessalonica; or very likely the apostle had been the instrument of converting him there, and who followed him from thence, and attended him wherever he went; he was with him in the uproar raised by Demetrius at Ephesus, and accompanied him into Asia; went with him in his voyage to

Rome, and was now a fellow prisoner there, (~~4192~~ Acts 19:29 ~~4201~~ 20:4 ~~4210~~ 27:2 ~~51040~~ Colossians 4:10). Demas is the same with him who is mentioned in (~~51040~~ 2 Timothy 4:10) and if this epistle is later than that, it should seem that he was restored from his fall, and was returned to the apostle. Lucas is the same with Luke the Evangelist, the beloved physician, the brother whose praise was in all the churches, and a constant companion of the apostle, in his travels; and who wrote the book called, “The Acts of the Apostles”: these the apostle styles, “my fellow labourers”, being all ministers of the Gospel; and this shows the apostle's great humility, so to call them, when they were far from being on an equal foot with him in office, gifts, or usefulness: and the Christian salutations of these persons are sent to Philemon, with this view, to engage him the more to attend to the apostle's request, in which they all joined.

Ver. 25. *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.*]

Not with his spirit only, but with the spirit of Apphia and Archippus, to whom also the epistle was sent; and therefore the word is in the plural number; and the Syriac version adds pertinently enough, “my brethren”: the salutation is the same as in all the epistles; the form of it agrees with (~~4168~~ Galatians 6:18) the subscription of the epistle is,

written from Rome, to Philemon, by Onesimus, a servant; that is, it was written by the Apostle Paul when at Rome, and sent to Philemon by the hands of Onesimus, who was his servant, and upon whose account the letter was written.

FOOTNOTES

Ft1 -- Advers. Marcion. 50:5. c. 21.

Ft2 -- Proaem. in Philem.

Ft3 -- T. Bab. Sota, fol. 4. 1. & Menachot, fol. 37. 1. & Juchasin, fol. 101. 1. 108. 1. & 159. 2.

Ft4 -- Pirke Abot, c. 5. sect. 1.

Ft5 -- Suetonius in Vita Neronis, c. 16.