



Paul's Letter to Philemon

A Sermon by George Müller of Bristol

Notes of an Exposition of the Epistle to Philemon, delivered by George Müller 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.

Ver. 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.

Ver. 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.

Ver. 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.

Ver. 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 slaveholders 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 one 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 an 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 anyone 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 sight 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 ever,” 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 young men, 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!



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