Philemon - Commentaries by William Kelly

Notes on Philemon, Philemon: Introduction

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

But peculiarities there could not but be in a document so distinct from the governing instructions given to Paul's fellow-laborers in their general work of superintendence. For the subject-matter before us is the opposite side of gracious care, in a matter of domestic life. Divine love actively applies itself, in a manner essentially its own, to the case of a runaway slave from Colossi who had been brought to God through the apostle daring his first imprisonment in Rome. For the date of this Epistle is at least as certain as that of the Second to Timothy, which was the latest of the apostle's writings, just before his imminent death that closed his second imprisonment in the great metropolis: a date, as all know, far more defined than that of the First Epistle to Timothy or of the letter to Titus. It was written, generally speaking, about the same time as those to the Ephesians and to the Colossians, as well as to the Philippians.

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

The simple believer may wonder that it should be necessary to insist on what is so plain an inference from Col. 4:9, 17 compared with our Epistle, that Philemon, and Onesimus of course, as well as Archippus, resided in Colossi. Yet Grotius (Annott. in V. et N. Test. in loco) will have it that Philemon was not only an inhabitant of Ephesus, but an elder or bishop of the church there. And of late Wieseler contends that Philemon and the others belonged to Laodicea! Is it worth while to expose the feeble and false reasoning put forth in support of such strange suppositions? It is probable indeed, as the apostle had not visited Colossi or Laodicea before he wrote his Epistle to the former (ch. 2:1), that Philemon may have heard and received the truth at Ephesus (Acts 19:10); he was certainly indebted to the apostle for his conversion (Philem. 1:19). But "fellow-worker" is much too general a word to bear the construction that Philemon was set apart to the charge either of presbyter or of deacon. He labored in the truth, he cared for the saints; and the apostle owned him as his joint-workman, just as later still the apostle John acknowledged Gains (3rd Epistle 5-8) on grounds at least as broad. Whatever the character of his work, it is undefined in an Epistle which from its nature does not set forth official distinction for the apostle himself, nor for Archippus, though we know from Col. 4:17 that the latter had a distinct ministry in the Lord which he was exhorted to fulfill. In our Epistle however the Holy Spirit for the wisest and best reasons would have all to be on the footing of grace.

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

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

It has been termed "the polite Epistle," I cannot say with great propriety, though it be quite true that those who pique themselves most on their nice sense of honor and courtesy, of tact and courage, prudence and friendship, purity and tenderness, must feel themselves in the presence of what exceeds not their experience only but their ideal. It is not "the gentleman" that stands revealed in the Epistle, but "the Christian"; and this not in theory or exhortation only but in living reality; that we, having the same Christ and the same Spirit, may by grace make the same divine word good ourselves, and so commend this scripture all the more to others. It is in all round the exercise of divine life, which the Holy Spirit promotes, growing out of a mere domestic question calculated without Christ to provoke anger, or to be condoned in condescending good nature and self-complacency.

Doddridge seems to have been the first to suggest the comparison of Pliny the younger's letter to Sabinianus (9:21), not merely the brief sequel of thanks which Alford cites (9:24): models, both of them, of fine natural sentiments expressed with beauty, terseness and force, as became a refined Roman of ability and rank writing to conciliate an intimate friend with his freedman who had offended and been discarded. In the heathen, as we might expect, nothing rises above self; in the Christian it is the love of Christ drawn out on behalf of one brought to God from the depths of sin and wretchedness, whose conscience prompted a return to his master armed with authority to punish his delinquency; but that master a Christian dear to the apostle not only for other things but for his habitually gracious bearing to the saints. Him Paul therefore would not only guard from the impulses of nature and from the jealous exercise of legal rights as a man of the world, but would lead into the communion of Christ's love in a case where it was readily liable to be overlooked. He would have him show "the kindness of God," like the man after God's heart in the O. T. to the family of his enemy, where a ground of love and truth presented itself. And was there not a better ground here, where by sovereign grace Onesimus was in Christ as truly as Philemon? And did not Philemon rejoice to have the opportunity of being "an imitator of God"; as the apostle was about that time inculcating on the Ephesian faithful to walk in love, even as Christ also loved and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for an odor of a sweet smell? How he pleads like Christ our Advocate in the face of sin on our part will appear in the details of the Epistle.

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

Notes on Philemon, Philemon 8-16

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

"Wherefore, having much boldness to enjoin thee what is befitting, for love's sake I rather entreat, being such a one as Paul aged and now also prisoner of Christ Jesus. I entreat thee for my child whom I begot in bonds,1 Onesimus, the once unprofitable to thee but now profitable both2 to thee and to me; whom I send back to thee,3 in person,4 that is, my bowels; whom I could wish to have kept with myself, that for thee he might minister to me in the bonds of the gospel. But without thy mind I would do nothing, that thy good might not be as of necessity but of willingness. For perhaps he was therefore parted for a time that thou mightest have him forever, no longer as a bondman, but above a bondman, a brother beloved, specially to me but how much rather to thee, both in [the] flesh and in [the] Lord" (ver. 8-16).

It is one of the peculiar and mightiest characteristics of the gospel with which the apostle here makes the appeal: the assertion of a title, true, just, and indisputable, which he none the less foregoes in order to have full and free scope for grace in the one appealed to. So Christ lived, moved, and had His being here below; so did He most impressively lead His own into that mind which they are called evermore by faith to possess and represent every day. Hear Him (Matt. 17) anticipating Peter, who had been quick to assure the half-shekel collectors of his Master's readiness to pay like a staunch Jew. "What thinkest thou, Simon? The kings of the earth, from whom do they receive custom or tribute? from their sons or from strangers? And when he said, From strangers, Jesus said, Therefore are the sons free. But lest we cause them to stumble, go thou to the sea, and cast a hook, and take up the fish that first cometh up; and when thou hast opened his mouth, thou shalt find a stater (== a shekel): that take and give to them for Me and for thee."

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

How blessedly the practical fruit appears in our Lord! He leads on Peter from Jewish thoughts into His mind ere long to stamp him in word and deed. By his confession "the sons" of the king "are free;" and Son He confessedly was in His own right, as we become by grace through His redemption brought to His Father and our Father, His God and our God. This lifts the Christian therefore above all thoughts Jewish or Gentile. "But lest we cause them to stumble, go" &c. And thereon follows a most strikingly suitable miracle attesting His divine power, as His anticipation of Peter did His divine knowledge: a fish obeys its Creator and furnishes in its mouth the precise sum required of those under the law, which Peter was to pay for the Master as well as for himself It is grace in every way flowing from infinite glory, but this in the humiliation and obedience of a man, for the present insisting on none of His rights, but associating believers in His own relationship as far as this could be, as well as in His lowly ways here below.

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

But if he speaks thus touchingly on behalf of Onesimus, he does not refrain from allowing his altogether unsatisfactory past conduct,: "Onesimus, that was once to thee unprofitable, but now to thee and to me profitable." He had found the Lord; he was brought to God, and was His child, not merely Paul's. What more could Philemon ask as a guarantee of serviceableness? If he thought of himself as an injured master, on the one hand, and on the other of the ingratitude and every other wrong of Onesimus, irritation might be natural, as well as justice

and a warning pleaded; but if the grace that is in Christ Jesus could not but be recalled by the apostle's words to Philemon, was he to be in unison with Christ or discordant? This question, though not formally asked, could not really be evaded. The Christian is here to reflect Christ. This is to be his daily walk, his greatest business.

Not that the apostle had forgotten the title of the master over his slave: "Whom I send back to thee" (ver. 11). Our idiom can hardly bear "I sent"; so in ver. 19 we must say, "I write." It is the epistolary aorist, as they call it, the writer going on to the time of reading. Philemon was thus reinstated; Onesimus returned to his master; the apostle sent him back. He did not write a letter to secure terms for the slave beforehand, nor to make a bargain with the master. If this could scarce be according to the law, still less would it answer to the grace and truth that came by Jesus Christ. He sends Onesimus back "in person, that is, mine own bowels," or my very heart! Is not this the mind of heaven? Yea, rather it is to live Christ. Wondrous to say, heaven looked down to Christ on earth to find such a display of love for the worthless as heaven itself could not furnish. And now it was for Philemon to prove the ground of his heart and the simplicity of his faith. Love me, love my dog, say men. The apostle says of Onesimus, He is my very heart. I Could such an one be a light object to Philemon? Assuredly Christ, the unchanging One, changes all things; and the ignoble things of the world, and the despised did God choose, and the things that are not, that He might bring to naught the things that are; so that no flesh should boast before God. "But of Him are ye in Christ Jesus Who was made to us wisdom from God, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption." If the gospel be true, as there was no difference in that all sinned, so there is none in the great salvation. Onesimus, Philemon, Paul are alike blessed perfectly. Was Philemon insensible to grace so unspeakable, so unthinkable, yet most real and sure?

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

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

Thus could the apostle interpret the otherwise unworthy escapade of Onesimus; and yet he adds a delicate "perhaps" if he might, as he trusted, carry along Philemon with himself. Some of us know the brutality of Roman or Greek masters in such cases; and it has not been at all peculiar to those places and times. But the Christian may and ought to see things in the light and love and interests of Christ. Thus he does not even say that Onesimus departed, but "perhaps for this reason he was parted for a time, that thou mightest have him fully () forever." And truly the Christian tie is not temporary but everlasting. Had Onesimus served ever so faithfully and without the least interval of desertion, after all a heathen could have no link with a Christian beyond the things that perish. But in the admirable grace of God, the poor heathen slave had, in his separation from the household to which he belonged, heard the voice of Christ and returned, that Philemon might have him as never before, no longer as a bondman (though bondman he was and he would be the last to dispute the fact), but above a bondman through the Son of God Who became a bondman to make him His freedman, yea a brother beloved, as Paul assured and Philemon would rejoice to learn: a brother beloved, specially to me, says the apostle, whom God employed in that work of His love for eternity, yet now and here to be testified, that others may heed the same call, and, if believing, enter into the same blessing. For there are open arms on Christ's part, and God is glorified thereby, and heaven rejoices therein, whatever be the scorn and enmity of a lost race rushing away from God heedlessly, under the guidance of a rebel mightier than themselves, whose power and wiles are the deadlier the more they are ignored.

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

How blessed is that grace of God, which in the cross condemned sin far more deeply than law ever did or could, yet has reached to us in our lowest state to seat us far above princes, yea, or principalities and powers; for by the Spirit we are one with Christ Himself on the throne of God. Yet is it the only principle that has power to keep everything in its place, after having put them there. The grace that conciliates a runaway slave with his master is the same, which, only in a deeper form and way, conciliates a sinner with God through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. It is grace too which maintains love amidst and above all provocations and injuries. It is grace which hinders salvation from turning to pride of heart and licentiousness of walk. Without it man would pervert the gospel into a cloak of maliciousness and make the church of God a scene of democratic leveling and socialistic robbery.

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

Notes on Philemon, Philemon 17-25

The courtesy of the apostle's appeal is as striking as the deep ground of grace on which all is based, as ought to be in the dealings of saints one with another. The circumstances of the case we have seen enhanced this. For on the one hand the wrong done by Onesimus was great and manifest, and denied by none, least of all by himself or the blessed apostle. On the other hand, grace had wrought savingly and therefore with fruit of righteousness and peace in the returned runaway. God had intervened after the offense, not merely giving repentance and remission of sins through His Son, but as ever along with that boon the positive gift of eternal life and of the Holy Spirit. As one who had believed in God, and been justified by His grace, Onesimus came to place himself unreservedly in his master's hands, animated and strengthened doubtless to this by the apostolic instrument of divine blessing, who was no less jealous that divine grace might work as fully and freely in Philemon's heart. Believing masters and bondmen are alike debtors to grace, alike responsible to see to it that they pay diligent attention to good works. And the best of all works is to answer practically in spirit, word and deed, to the gracious Master of us all, whether free or bond.

To represent Christ's goodness aright in his ways is the daily problem that each Christian has to solve. Does it not demand grace every hour? Unquestionably; but did not His love provide for every need from the start? "Of His fullness we all received, and grace for grace." But is not present and continual dependence needed? Beyond doubt: else the gift of abounding grace would make us independent of God, the greatest dishonor of Christ, the deepest shame of a Christian. Through Christ we have got and possess () the access by faith into this grace wherein we stand. It is a constant place of favor before Him as children of God, in pointed contrast with the most favored sons, not of Adam merely, but of Israel under the law with its necessary effect of bondage gendering fear of condemnation and death; but the fullness of grace possessed and known is only the more to draw out the clinging to grace, and wither up self-confidence, for every duty, for every call of love, hour by hour. Hence the word is, Thou therefore, my child (as the apostle impressed on another blessed by his means), be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 2:1). It is there for us, but we always need to wait on Him for it. Dependence on and confidence in Him are the sinews of obedience. Otherwise we fail and have none justly to blame but ourselves for slighting that grace to which we owe everything boast, if indeed we may boast save in Christ and His cross, its deepest proof and most wondrous display.

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

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

And what did not Philemon feel, when he heard words which we may readily conceive he had never had addressed to him, as no occasion had occurred to draw them forth, though the same love was always there? It was not a magnate but a slave, once worthless and guilty, now the everlasting object of the love of Christ which stirred the depths of the apostle's heart, who in his turn would kindle the holiest affections of Philemon as never before. Yet to be Paul's imitator as he was of Christ had evidently been the saintly ambition of Philemon hitherto; and Paul would have it fired with fresh zeal now. "If thou holdest me [not an imitator only, great as this honor was, but] a partner." What! Philemon reckon the great apostle partner with him! It was even so he read with his own eyes and from the apostle's own hand. It hung, it is true, on his receiving Onesimus, nay far more than this, on his receiving Onesimus as Paul! "Receive him as me.", O the wonders of grace! Receive the repentant runaway slave as the apostle! Yet if grace had its way, could it be adequately otherwise? What men, still worthless and children of wrath, falsely claim throughout Christendom to the shame of faith, the gospel, and Christ Himself given, Onesimus was in truth a child of God and a member of Christ. This the others are not, by any scriptural judgment however charitable, though they may be tares in the kingdom of heaven; for certainly they are not wheat. And charity would not bolster up false hopes, but warn them of judgment while preaching to them the grace of God in Christ if peradventure they might believe and be saved ere it be too late.

The poorest Christian, once the most depraved or guilty of men, is in Christ no less than the greatest of apostles. Of one as much as another is it written by another apostle: "Herein is love made perfect with us, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because even as He is, even so are we in this world" (1 John 4:17). It is not sentiment nor exaggeration, but the wondrous yet sober and certain truth. Onesimus even then was in virtue of God's love in Christ perfected, as Christ Himself in His eyes, and therefore to the eye and heart of faith. So it was with Paul; and so he would have it with Philemon.

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

How without effort the apostle breathes and speaks nothing but grace, and grace reigning through righteousness! "If he wronged or owed thee aught, put this to my account." Would Philemon answer in a spirit of law or grace? Were he indeed as merciless as the servant in the parable which closes Matt. 18, Paul stands forth with repeated personal emphasis in the spirit of substitution: "I Paul write with mine own hand, I will repay." But he will not let Philemon go even here without a loving (certainly not a Parthian) arrow, however effectual, "That I say not to thee, how thou owest besides even thyself to me," Here was a debt indeed, which Philemon would be the last to forget or to underestimate. And if the apostle had not reminded him before, as may well be doubted, he does not fail to allude now to good purpose however passingly. Even to say a word was more than enough for the heart of so good a man, in presence of a debt that never could be paid. What in comparison was any bad debt on the score of the poor slave? Philemon owed, gladly owed, himself to Paul. And all this is wound up by the touching close of this appeal: "Yea, brother, let me have profit of thee in [the] Lord: refresh my bowels in Christ." As he began so tellingly with "brother" in ver. 7, so not less does he reiterate it here in ver. 20. It was not in vain for Philemon; it was earnest love, not condescension. The gain that he yearned after was Philemon's yet more than his own, without telling him so. Grace on his part in presence of the present need and all past provocation would be the most balmy refreshment to the wounds and sufferings of the aged apostle. Selfishness was excluded. All he sought was in the Lord—in Christ. Then the quality is never strained, and the blessing threefold. May we know, enjoy, and manifest it, for whom these undying words of God are given which were primarily addressed to Philemon and those concerned.

There is a beautiful supplement, by no means unconnected in purpose with the direct appeal now concluded, which we do well to ponder. “Having confidence of thine obedience I write to thee, knowing that thou wilt do even beyond what I say. But withal prepare me also a lodging; for I hope that through your prayers I shall be granted to you” (ver. 21, 22). Comparing this with Col. 4:9 where Onesimus is introduced to the Colossian brethren in the most formal manner as “the faithful and beloved brother who is [one] of you,” I think he is not mistaken who infers that the apostle looked for more in the transformed bondman than a simple saint; and that he was therefore the more urgent for a new triumph of grace in Philemon, not only in taking back to his heart the wrong-doer, but in setting him free. Bondage could not annul that liberty wherewith Christ delivers; but if called to serve the Lord, in the gospel for instance, the circumstances of slavery must hinder activity not a little. The apostle does but hint at more than he said: Philemon, as well as the rest, and not least Apphia, would easily see more and correctly; for love divine love at least gives sharp discerning eyes. The apostle’s announced visit too would not hinder all be desired for Onesimus, uttered or unexpressed. The lodging might be outside or within the house of Philemon, the language being purposely vague, the intent that nothing should be by constraint, but of a willing mind. The prayers of the saints then are sought as ever; for the apostle says no more than “I hope.” Prayers would help on more than his coming.

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

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

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

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

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