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COMMENTARY

Barnes' Notes on the Bible
Volume 15 -
Philemon
By A. Barnes

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THE EPISTLE OF PAUL TO PHILEMON

INTRODUCTION

SECTION 1. THE HISTORY OF PHILEMON

On Philemon, to whom this Epistle was addressed, almost nothing more is known than can be ascertained from the Epistle itself. It is short, and of a private character; but it is a bright and beautiful gem in the volume of inspiration.

From ^{<5049>}Colossians 4:9, it may be inferred that the person to whom it was addressed was an inhabitant of Colossae, since Onesimus, concerning whom this Epistle was written, is there mentioned as “one of them.” See the notes on that verse; compare the ingenious remarks of Paley, Hor. Paul., on Colossians, No. IV. He is said by Calmet and Michaelis to have been wealthy; but this cannot be determined with certainty, though it is not improbable. The only circumstances which seem to indicate this, are, that Onesimus had been his “servant,” from which it has been inferred that he was an owner of slaves; and that he appears to have been accustomed to show hospitality to strangers, or, as Michaelis expresses it, “traveling Christians;” see ^{<5012>}Philemon 1:22 of the Epistle. But these circumstances are not sufficient to determine that he was a man of property. There is no evidence, as we shall see, that he was a slave-holder; and Christians in moderate circumstances were accustomed to show hospitality to their brethren. Besides, it is not said in ^{<5012>}Philemon 1:22 that he was accustomed to show general hospitality; but Paul merely asks him to provide for him a lodging. It is probable that he had been accustomed to remain with him when he was in Colossae.

It is quite clear that he had been converted under the ministry of the apostle himself. This appears from what is said in ^{<5019>}Philemon 1:19: “I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self.” This cannot be understood otherwise than as implying that he had been converted under his preaching, unless the apostle, on some former occasion, had been the

means of saving his life, of which there is no evidence. Indeed, it is manifest, from the general tone of the Epistle, that Philemon had been converted by the labors of the author. It is just such a letter as it would be natural and proper to write on such a supposition; it is not one which the apostle would have been likely to write to any one who did not sustain such a relation to him. But where and when he was converted, is unknown. It is possible that Paul may have met with him at Ephesus; but it is much more probable that he had himself been at Colossae, and that Philemon was one of his converts there. See the introduction to the Epistle to the Colossians.

It is evident from the Epistle that Paul regarded him as a sincere Christian; as a man of strict integrity; as one who could be depended on to do right. Thus (^{<5005>}Philemon 1:5-7), he says that he had heard of his “love and faith toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints;” thus he confidently asks him to provide for him a lodging when he should come (^{<5002>}Philemon 1:22); and thus he expresses the assured belief that he would do what was right towards one who had been his servant, who, having been formerly unfaithful, was now converted, and, in the estimation of the apostle, was worthy of the confidence and affection of his former master.

In regard to his rank in the Christian church, nothing whatever is known. Paul calls him (Philemon 1:1) his “fellow-laborer;” but this appellation is so general, that it determines nothing in regard to the manner in which he co-operated with him in promoting religion. It is a term which might be applied to any active Christian, whether a preacher, an elder, a deacon, or a private member of the church. It would seem clear, however, that he was not a traveling preacher, for he had a home in Colossae (^{<5000>}Philemon 1:2,22); and the presumption is, that he was an active and benevolent member of the church, who did not sustain any office. There are many private members of the churches, to whom all that is said of Philemon in the Epistle would apply. Yet there have been various conjectures in regard to the office which he held. Hoffmann (Introduction ad Lection. Ephesians ad Colossenses, 18) supposes that he was bishop of Colossae; Michaelis supposes that he was a deacon in the church; but of either of these, there is no evidence whatever.

Nothing is known of his age, his profession, or of the time and circumstances of his death. Neither is it certainly known what effect this Epistle had on him, or whether he again received Onesimus under his roof.

It may be presumed, however, that such a letter, addressed to such a man, would not fail of its object.

SECTION 2. THE OCCASION UPON WHICH THE EPISTLE WAS WRITTEN

This can be learned only from the Epistle itself, and there the circumstances are so marked as to make a mistake impossible.

(1) Philemon had had a servant of the name of Onesimus. Of the character of this servant, before Paul became acquainted with him, nothing more is known than that he had been “unprofitable” to Philemon (^{<5011>}Philemon 1:11), and that he had probably done him some wrong, either by taking his property, or by the fact that he had escaped from him; ^{<5018>}Philemon 1:18. It is not necessary to suppose that he was a slave: for all that is implied of necessity in the word which is employed to designate his condition in ^{<5016>}Philemon 1:16 (**δουλος**) ^{<1401>}, and all that is stated of him in the Epistle, would be met by the supposition that he was bound to Philemon, either by his parents or guardians, or that he had bound himself to render voluntary service; see the notes at ^{<5016>}Philemon 1:16.

(2) For some cause, this servant had fled from his master, and had gone to Rome. The cause of his escaping is unknown. It may be that he had purloined the property of his master, and dreaded detection; or that he had, by his base conduct in some other way, exposed himself to punishment; or that he merely desired freedom from oppression; or that he disregarded the bonds into which he himself, or his parents or guardians, had entered, and had therefore escaped. Nothing can be inferred about his condition, or his relation to Philemon, from the fact that he ran away. It is perhaps quite as common for apprentices to run away, as it is for slaves; and they who enter into voluntary bonds to render service to another, do not always regard them.

(3) In some way, when at Rome, this servant had found out the apostle Paul, and had been converted by his instrumentality. Paul says (^{<5010>}Philemon 1:10) that he had “begotten him in his bonds” — **εν** ^{<172>}**τοις** ^{<358>}**δεσμοις** ^{<119>}**μου** ^{<345>}; which seems to imply that Onesimus had come to him, and not that Paul had searched him out. It does not appear that Paul, when a prisoner at Rome, was allowed to go at large (compare ^{<431>}Acts 28:30), though he was permitted to receive all who came to him. Why Onesimus came to the apostle, is not known. It may have been

because he was in want, and Paul was the only one in Rome whom he had ever seen; or it may have been because his mind had become distressed on account of sin, and he sought him out to obtain spiritual counsel. Conjecture on these points is useless, where there is not even a hint that can serve as a clew to find out the truth.

(4) From some cause, equally unknown, Onesimus, when converted, was desirous of returning to his former master. It is commonly assumed that his returning again was at the instigation of the apostle, and that this furnishes an instance of his belief that runaway slaves should be sent back to their masters. But, besides that there is no certain evidence that he ever was a slave, there is as little proof that he returned at the instigation of Paul, or that his return was not wholly voluntary on his part. For the only expression which the apostle uses on this subject (^{<5012>}Philemon 1:12), “whom I have sent again” — **ανεπεμψα** ^{<375>} — does not necessarily imply that he even proposed it to him, still less that he commanded it. It is a word of such general import, that it would be employed on the supposition that Onesimus desired to return, and that Paul, who had a strong wish to retain him, to aid him in the same way that Philemon himself would do if he were with him (compare ^{<5013>}Philemon 1:13), had, on the whole, concluded to part with him, and to send him again, with a letter, to his friend Philemon. It is just such language as he would have used of Timothy, Titus, or Epaphroditus, if employed on an important embassy at the request of the apostle; compare ^{<4306>}Luke 7:6,10,19; 20:13; ^{<4405>}Acts 10:5; 15:22; ^{<4017>}1 Corinthians 4:17; ^{<4008>}2 Corinthians 9:3; ^{<4062>}Ephesians 6:22; ^{<3669>}Philippians 2:19,23,25,28; ^{<5182>}1 Thessalonians 3:2,5; ^{<5182>}Titus 3:12, for a similar use of the word “send” (**πεμπω**) ^{<3992>}. There is nothing in the statement which forbids us to suppose that Onesimus was himself disposed to return to Philemon, and that Paul “sent” him at his own request. To this, Onesimus might have been inclined from many causes. He may have repented that he left his master, and had forsaken the comforts which he had enjoyed under his roof. It is no uncommon thing for a runaway apprentice, or servant, when he has seen and felt the misery of being among strangers and in want, to wish himself well back again in the house of his master. Or he may have felt that he had wronged his master in some way (compare the notes at ^{<5018>}Philemon 1:18), and, being now converted, was desirous of repairing the wrong. Or he may have had friends and kindred in Colossae whom he was desirous of seeing again. Since any one of these, or of many other supposable causes, may have induced him to desire to return to his master,

it should not be assumed that Paul sent him against his will, and thence be inferred that he was in favor of sending back runaway slaves to their masters AGAINST their will. There are many points to be proved, which cannot be proved, to make that a legitimate inference; see the notes at ⁵⁰¹²Philemon 1:12.

(5) Whatever were the reasons why Onesimus desired to return to Philemon, it is clear that he was apprehensive of some trouble if he went back. What those reasons were, it is impossible now to determine with absolute certainty, but it is not difficult to conjecture what they may have been, and any of the following will account for his apprehensions — either:

(a) that he had done his master wrong by the mere act of leaving him, depriving him of valuable services which he was bound to render; or

(b) that he may have felt that the mere act of running away had injured the character of his master, for such an act always implies that there is something in the dealings of a master which makes it desirable to leave him; or

(c) that he had in some way injured him in respect to property, by taking that which did not belong to him, ⁵⁰¹⁸Philemon 1:18; or

(d) that he owed his master, and he may have inferred from his leaving him that he meant to defraud him, ⁵⁰¹⁸Philemon 1:18; or

(e) that the laws of Phrygia were such that Onesimus apprehended that if he returned, even penitent, it would be judged by his master necessary to punish him, in order to deter others from committing a similar offence.

The laws of Phrygia, it is said, allowed the master to punish a slave without applying to a magistrate. See Macknight. It should be said also that the Phrygians were a severe people (Curtius, Lib. v. c. 1), and it is not improbable that, from the customs there, Onesimus may have apprehended harsh treatment if he returned. — It is not proper to assume that any one of these was certainly the reason why he feared to return, for this cannot be absolutely determined. We should not take it for granted that he had defrauded his master — for that is not necessarily implied in what is said in ⁵⁰¹⁸Philemon 1:18, and we should not impute crimes to men without proof; nor should we take it for granted that he feared to be punished as a runaway slave — for that cannot be proved; but someone or more of these

reasons doubtless operated to make him apprehensive that if he returned he would meet with, at least, a cold reception.

(6) To induce his master to receive him kindly again, was the main object of this courteous and kind Epistle. For a view of the arguments upon which he urges this, see the Analysis of the Epistle. The arguments are such, that we should suppose they could not be resisted, and we may presume, without impropriety, that they had the desired effect upon the mind of Philemon — but of that we have no certain evidence.

SECTION 3. THE TIME AND PLACE OF WRITING THE EPISTLE

There can be no doubt that this letter was written from Rome about the time when the Epistle to the Colossians was written; compare the introduction to that Epistle. The circumstances which conduct to this conclusion are such as the following:

- (1) Paul at the time when it was written was a prisoner; ^{<5000>}Philemon 1:1. “Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ;” ^{<5010>}Philemon 1:10. “Whom I have begotten in my bonds;” compare ^{<5020>}Philemon 1:23. “Epaphras, my fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus.”
- (2) It was written when he had hopes of obtaining his liberty, or when he had such a prospect of it that he could ask Philemon, with confidence, to “prepare him a lodging;” ^{<5022>}Philemon 1:22.
- (3) Timothy was with him at the time when it was written (^{<5000>}Philemon 1:1), and we know that Paul desired him to come to him to Rome when he was a prisoner there as soon as possible; ^{<5040>}2 Timothy 4:9. “Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me.”
- (4) We know that Onesimus was actually sent by Paul to Colossae while he was a prisoner at Rome, and it would be morally certain that, under the circumstances of the case, he would send the letter to his master at that time. No other instance is mentioned in which he sent him to Colossae, and the evidence is as certain as the nature of the case admits, that that was the time when the Epistle was written; see ^{<5040>}Colossians 4:9.
- (5) The same persons are mentioned in the salutations in the two Epistles, at least they are so far the same as to make it probable that the Epistles were written at the same time, for it is not very probable that the same

persons would in another place, and on another occasion, have been with the apostle. Thus, Aristarchus, Mark, Epaphras, Luke, and Demas, join in the salutations both to the church at Colossae and to Philemon. Probably at no other time in the life of Paul were all these persons with him, than when he was a prisoner at Rome. These considerations make it clear that the Epistle was written while Paul was a prisoner at Rome and at about the same time with the Epistle to the Colossians. If so, it was about A.D. 62.

SECTION 4. THE CHARACTER OF THIS EPISTLE

This letter is almost wholly of a private character, and yet there is scarcely any portion of the New Testament of equal length which is of more value. It is exquisitely beautiful and delicate. It is a model of courtesy and politeness. It presents the character of the author in a most amiable light, and shows what true religion will produce in causing genuine refinement of thought and language. It is gentle and persuasive, and yet the argument is one that we should suppose would have been, and probably was, irresistible. It is very easy to conceive that the task which the apostle undertook to perform was one which it would be difficult to accomplish — that of reconciling an offended master to a runaway servant. And yet it is done with so much kindness, persuasiveness, gentleness, and true affection, that, as the letter was read, it is easy to imagine that all the hostility of the master was disarmed, and we can almost see him desiring to embrace him who bore it, not now as a servant, but as a Christian brother; ⁵⁰¹¹⁶ Philemon 1:16

“It is impossible,” says Doddridge, “to read over this admirable Epistle without being touched with the delicacy of sentiment, and the masterly address, that appear in every part of it. We see here, in a most striking light, how perfectly consistent true politeness is, — not only with all the warmth and sincerity of a friend, but even with the dignity of the Christian and the Apostle. And if this letter were to be considered in no other view than as a mere human composition, it must be allowed to be a master-piece in its kind. As an illustration of this remark, it may not be improper to compare it with an epistle of Pliny, that seems to have been written on a similar occasion (Lib. ix. Let. 21); which, though penned by one that was reckoned to excel in the epistolary style, though it has undoubtedly many beauties, yet must be acknowledged by every impartial reader vastly inferior to this animated composition of the apostle.”

As a specimen of the courtesy and politeness which the Christian ought to practice at all times, as well as furnishing many valuable lessons on Christian duty (see the remarks at the close), it deserves a place in the volume of inspiration; and a material chasm would be produced in the instructions which are needful for us, if it were withdrawn from the sacred canon.

THE EPISTLE OF PAUL TO PHILEMON

ANALYSIS OF THE EPISTLE

The Epistle embraces the following subjects:

I. The salutation; ^{<5000>}Philemon 1:1-3.

II. A mention of the excellent account which the apostle had heard of Philemon, and the occasion which he had for thankfulness on his behalf; ^{<5000>}Philemon 1:4-7.

(a) He always remembered him in his prayers; ^{<5000>}Philemon 1:4.

(b) He had heard of his faith and love, and of his kindness toward those who bore the Christian name; ^{<5000>}Philemon 1:5.

(c) He desired that his goodness in making others, in common with him, partakers of the expression of his faith, might be even more effective in securing the proper acknowledgment of it wherever it might be known; ^{<5000>}Philemon 1:6.

(d) He says that he had great joy and consolation from the happiness which he had conferred on Christians who needed his aid; ^{<5000>}Philemon 1:7.

III. The main subject of the Epistle — the desire that he would receive his servant Onesimus again, and the arguments to persuade him to do it; ^{<5000>}Philemon 1:8-21.

(1) He places it on the ground of entreaty, not of command. He might, in virtue of his apostolic office, enjoin many things on him, and possibly this, yet he chooses to place it entirely on other grounds, and to make it a matter of personal friendship; ^{<5000>}Philemon 1:8.

(2) Particular reasons why he should do it:

(a) For love's sake — love to Paul — now an old man, and in prison on account of their common religion; ^{<5000>}Philemon 1:9.

- (b)** Paul regarded Onesimus as his own son, and asked that he might be received and treated as such; ^{<5010>}Philemon 1:10.
- (c)** He assures Philemon that, whatever he might have been formerly, he would now find him to be profitable to himself; ^{<5011>}Philemon 1:11.
- (d)** He assures him that Onesimus was especially dear to him, and that he would have been very useful to him in his circumstances, but that he did not think it proper to retain him with him without the consent of Philemon. Onesimus, therefore, was not sent back as a worthless vagabond, and Philemon, in receiving him, might be sure that he was receiving one who Paul believed was fitted to be eminently useful; ^{<5012>}Philemon 1:12-14.
- (e)** He suggests to Philemon that probably it was so arranged by divine Providence, that Onesimus should depart in order that he might receive him again in a far more tender and endearing relation, not as a servant, but as a Christian brother; ^{<5015>}Philemon 1:15,16
- (f)** He appeals to the personal friendship of Philemon, and asks that if he regarded him as a participator with him in the hopes of the gospel, or as a fellow-laborer in a common cause, he would receive him as he would himself; ^{<5017>}Philemon 1:17.
- (g)** He says that he would himself become security for Onesimus if he owed Philemon anything, or had in any way wronged him; ^{<5018>}Philemon 1:18,19.
- (h)** He concludes the argument by referring to the happiness which it would give him if Philemon would receive his former servant again; and with the expression of his conviction that he would do more than he asked in the matter, and then asks that, while he showed favor to Onesimus, he would also prepare a lodging for him, for he hoped soon to be with him; ^{<5022>}Philemon 1:20-22. Perhaps by this last suggestion he hoped also to do much to favor the cause of Onesimus — for Philemon could hardly turn him away when he expected that Paul himself would soon be with him. Such an argument would be likely to be effectual in the case. We do not like to deny the request which a friend makes in a letter, if we expect soon to see the writer himself. It would be much more easy to do it if we had no expectations of seeing him very soon.

IV. The Epistle closes with affectionate salutations from certain persons who were with Paul, and who were probably well known to Philemon, and with the customary benediction; ^{<5012>}Philemon 1:23-25.

Philemon 1:1. *Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ* A prisoner at Rome in the cause of Jesus Christ; Notes, ^{<4901>}Ephesians 3:1; ^{<5002>}2 Timothy 1:8.

And Timothy our brother Timothy, it seems, had come to him agreeably to his request; ^{<5049>}2 Timothy 4:9. Paul not unfrequently joins his name with his own in his epistles; ^{<5001>}2 Corinthians 1:1; ^{<5001>}Philippians 1:1; ^{<5001>}Colossians 1:1; ^{<5001>}1 Thessalonians 1:1; ^{<5001>}2 Thessalonians 1:1. As Timothy was of that region of country, and as he had accompanied Paul in his travels, he was doubtless acquainted with Philemon.

Unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellow-labourer See Introduction, Section 1. The word rendered “fellow-laborer” (^{<4904>}συνεργω), does not determine what office he held, if he held any, or in what respects he was a fellow-laborer with Paul. It means a co-worker, or helper, and doubtless here means that he was a helper or fellow-worker in the great cause to which Paul had devoted his life, but whether as a preacher, or deacon, or a private Christian, can not be ascertained. It is commonly, in the New Testament, applied to ministers of the gospel, though by no means exclusively, and in several instances it cannot be determined whether it denotes ministers of the gospel, or those who furthered the cause of religion, and cooperated with the apostle in some other way than preaching. See the following places, which are the only ones where it occurs in the New Testament; ^{<5161>}Romans 16:3,9,21; ^{<4919>}1 Corinthians 3:9; ^{<5024>}2 Corinthians 1:24; 8:23; ^{<5045>}Philippians 2:25; 4:3; ^{<5041>}Colossians 4:11; ^{<5119>}1 Thessalonians 3:2; ^{<5024>}Philemon 1:24; ^{<6008>}3 John 1:8.

^{<5001>}**Philemon 1:2.** *And to our beloved Apphia* This was a female (Greek ^{<27>}αγαπητη), and was probably the wife of Philemon.

And Archippus our fellow-soldier See the notes at ^{<5047>}Colossians 4:17. It has been supposed that he was a son of Philemon, and this would appear not to be improbable, as he was one of his family. On the term “fellow-soldier,” see the notes at ^{<5045>}Philippians 2:25. It is applied here to one who was a minister of the gospel, and who is spoken of in connection with Paul as enlisted under the banners of the Captain of salvation, and waging a warfare with the wickedness of the world; compare the notes at ^{<5113>}2

Timothy 2:3,4. That Archippus was a minister of the gospel, is clear from ^{<5007>}Colossians 4:17.

And to the church in thy house Either the church that commonly met in his house, or more probably that was composed of his own family; compare the notes at ^{<5165>}Romans 16:5.

^{<5003>}**Philemon 1:3.** *Grace to you, and peace ...* See if the notes at ^{<5007>}Romans 1:7.

^{<5004>}**Philemon 1:4.** *I thank my God* That is, for what I hear of you.

Making mention of thee always in my prayers See a similar declaration respecting the church at Ephesus, ^{<4016>}Ephesians 1:16. It would appear from this that Paul, in his private devotions, was in the habit of mentioning churches and individuals by name. It would seem, also, that though he was a prisoner, yet he somehow found opportunity for secret devotion. And it would appear further, that, though encompassed with many cares and sorrows, and about to be put on trial for his life, he did not forget to remember a Christian brother though far distant from him, and to bear him on his heart before the throne of grace. To remember with affectionate concern these churches and individuals, as he did, Paul must have been a man of much prayer.

^{<5005>}**Philemon 1:5.** *Hearing of thy love and faith* Either by Onesimus, who, after his conversion, would be disposed to state all that he knew that was favorable of Philemon, or hearing it by some other persons who had come from Colosse to Rome. The faith which is mentioned here refers to the Lord Jesus; the love, to the saints. The order in the Greek is indeed the same as in our version, but it is not unusual by synthesis, or uniting two or more things together, to arrange words in that manner. Thus ^{<4022>}Matthew 12:22, “The blind and dumb both spake and saw;” that is, the blind saw, and the dumb spake. The meaning is, that he had strong faith in the Lord Jesus, and ardent love toward all who were Christians. See a similar declaration in ^{<5004>}Colossians 1:4.

^{<5006>}**Philemon 1:6.** *That the communication of thy faith* That is, this was a subject of prayer on the part of the apostle, that the “communication of his faith” might receive from all the proper acknowledgment of the good which he did in the Christian cause. The phrase translated “communication of thy faith,” means the making of thy faith common to others; that is,

enabling others to partake of the fruits of it, to wit, by good deeds. On the meaning of the word here rendered “communication” (**κοινωνία** ^{<284>}), see the notes at ^{<489>}Ephesians 3:9; compare ^{<101>}Philippians 2:1; 3:10. Calvin has well expressed the sense of this passage. “It is to be observed that the apostle here does not proceed in the commendation of Philemon, but rather expresses what he desires for him from the Lord. These words are connected with those in which he says that he remembered him in his prayers. What, therefore, did he desire for Philemon? That his faith, expressing itself by good fruits, might be shown to be true and not vain. For he calls that the communication of his faith when it does not remain inoperative within, but bears itself forth to benefit men by its proper effects. For although faith has its proper seat in the heart, yet it communicates itself to men by good works.” The meaning is, that he desired that Philemon would so make common the proper fruits of faith by his good deeds toward others, that all might acknowledge it to be genuine and efficacious.

May become effectual Greek, “May be energetic” (**ενεργής** ^{<1756>}); may become operative, active, effective.

By the acknowledging That is, so as to secure from others the proper recognition of the existence of faith in your heart. In other words, so that others may see that you are truly pious, and understand to what extent you have faith.

Of every good thing which is in you Of every good principle, and of every benevolent trait, which is in your character. That is, the proper outward expression of his faith in Christ, by doing good to others, would be a development of the benevolence which existed in his heart.

In Christ Jesus Or “toward (**εἰς** ^{<1519>}) Christ Jesus.” The goodness in his heart had respect to the Lord Jesus as its proper object, but would be made manifest by his kindness to men. The truth which is taught in this passage, therefore, is, that when faith exists in the heart, it is very desirable that it should impart its proper fruits toward others in such a way that all may see that it is operative, and may recognize its power; or in other words, it is desirable that when true religion exists it should be fairly developed, that its possessor may be acknowledged to be under its influence. We should wish that he may have all the credit and honor which the goodness of his heart is entitled to. Paul supposed that a case had now occurred in which an

opportunity was furnished to Philemon to show the world how much he was governed by the faith of the gospel.

Philemon 1:7. *For we have great joy and consolation in thy love* In thy love toward Christians. The word here rendered “joy” (χαριν ^{<5485>}), properly means grace. A large number of manuscripts, however, instead of this word, have χαραν ^{<5479>}, Charan, joy. See Wetstein. This reading has been adopted by Griesbach, Tittman, and Hahn.

Because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother For your kindness to them. The word “bowels” here probably means minds, hearts, for it is used in the Scriptures to denote the affections. The sense is, that the kindness which he had shown to Christians had done much to make them happy. On the word refreshed, see ^{<4073>}2 Corinthians 7:13; ^{<5116>}2 Timothy 1:16.

Philemon 1:8. *Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ* Though I might have much boldness as an apostle of Christ. He means that he was invested with authority by the Lord Jesus, and would have a right, as an apostle, to enjoin what ought to be done in the case which he is about to lay before him; compare ^{<5116>}1 Thessalonians 2:6,7.

To enjoin thee that which is convenient To command what is proper to be done. The word “convenient” here (το ^{<5588>} ανηκον ^{<433>}), means that which would be fit or proper in the case; compare the notes at ^{<4074>}Ephesians 5:4. The apostle implies here that what he was about to ask, was proper to be done in the circumstances, but he does not put it on that ground, but rather asks it as a personal layout. It is usually not best to command a thing to be done if we can as well secure it by asking it as a favor; compare ^{<2008>}Daniel 1:8,11,12.

Philemon 1:9. *Yet for love’s sake* For the love which you bear me, and for the common cause.

I rather beseech thee Rather than command thee.

Being such an one as Paul the aged πρεσβυτης ^{<4246>} — an old man. We have no means of ascertaining the exact age of Paul at this time, and I do not recollect that he ever alludes to his age, though he often does to his infirmities, in any place except here. Doddridge supposes that at the time when Stephen was stoned, when he is called “a young man” (νεανιας ^{<3494>},

<4078> Acts 7:58), he was 24 years of age, in which case he would now have been about 53. Chrysostom supposes that he may have been 35 years old at the time of his conversion, which would have made him about 63 at this time. The difficulty of determining with any degree of accuracy the age of the apostle at this time, arises from the indefinite nature of the word used by Luke, <4078> Acts 7:58, and rendered “a young man.” That word, like the corresponding word **νεανισκος** <3495>, was applied to men in the vigor of manhood up to the age of 40 years. Robinson, Lex. Phavorinus says a man is called **νεανισκος** <3495>, a young man, until he is 28; and **πρεσβυτης** <4246>, presbytes, from 49 until he is 56. Varro says that a man is young (“juvenis”), until he is 45, and aged at 60. Whitby. These periods of time, however, are very indefinite, but it will accord well with the usual meaning of the words to suppose that Paul was in the neighborhood of 30 when he was converted, and that he was now not far from 60. We are to remember also, that the constitution of Paul may have been much broken by his labors, his perils, and his trials. Not advanced probably to the usual limit of human life, he may have had all the characteristics of a very aged man; compare the note of Benson. The argument here is, that we feel that it is proper, as far as we can, to grant the request of an old man. Paul thus felt that it was reasonable to suppose that Philemon would not refuse to gratify the wishes of an aged servant of Christ, who had spent the vigor of his life in the service of their common Master. It should be a very strong case when we refuse to gratify the wishes of an aged Christian in anything, especially if he has rendered important services to the church and the world.

And now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ In the cause of Jesus Christ; or a prisoner for endeavoring to make him known to the world; compare the notes at <4081> Ephesians 3:1; 4:1; 6:20; <5040> Colossians 4:10. The argument here is, that it might be presumed that Philemon would not refuse the request of one who was suffering in prison on account of their common religion. For such a prisoner we should be ready to do all that we can to mitigate the sorrows of his confinement, and to make his condition comfortable.

<5010> **Philemon 1:10.** *I beseech thee for my son Onesimus* That is, my son in the gospel; one to whom I sustain the relation of a spiritual father; compare the notes at <5008> 1 Timothy 1:2. The address and tact of Paul here are worthy of particular observation. Any other mode of bringing the case before the mind of Philemon might have repelled him. If he had simply said,

“I beseech thee for Onesimus;” or, “I beseech thee for thy servant Onesimus,” he would at once have reverted to his former conduct, and remembered all his ingratitude and disobedience. But the phrase “my son,” makes the way easy for the mention of his name, for he had already found the way to his heart before his eye lighted on his name, by the mention of the relation which he sustained to himself. Who could refuse to such a man as Paul — a laborious servant of Christ — an aged man, exhausted with his many sufferings and toils — and a prisoner — a request which he made for one whom he regarded as his son? It may be added, that the delicate address of the apostle in introducing the subject, is better seen in the original than in our translation. In the original, the name Onesimus is reserved to come in last in the sentence. The order of the Greek is this:

“I entreat thee concerning a son of mine, whom I have begotten in my bonds — Onesimus.”

Here the name is not suggested, until he had mentioned that he sustained to him the relation of a son, and also until he had added that his conversion was the fruit of his labors while he was a prisoner. Then, when the name of Onesimus is mentioned, it would occur to Philemon not primarily as the name of an ungrateful and disobedient servant, but as the interesting case of one converted by the labors of his own friend in prison. Was there ever more delicacy evinced in preparing the way for disarming one of prejudice, and carrying an appeal to his heart?

Whom I have begotten in my bonds Who has been converted by my efforts while I have been a prisoner. On the phrase “whom I have begotten,” see ^{<4045>}1 Corinthians 4:15. Nothing is said of the way in which he had become acquainted with Onesimus, or why he had put himself under the teaching of Paul; see the introduction, Section 2. See (3) below.

^{<5011>}**Philemon 1:11.** *Which in time past was to thee unprofitable* Either because he was indolent; because he had wronged him (compare the notes at ^{<5018>}Philemon 1:18), or because he had run away from him. It is possible that there may be an allusion here to the meaning of the name “Onesimus,” which denotes “profitable” (from **ονινημι** ^{<3685>}, future **ονησω**, to be useful, to be profitable, to help), and that Paul means to say that he had hitherto not well answered to the meaning of his own name, but that now he would be found to do so.

But now profitable to thee The Greek here is *ευχρηστον* ^{<2173>}, but the meaning is about the same as that of the word Onesimus. It denotes very useful. In ^{<5021>}2 Timothy 2:21, it is rendered “meet for use;” in ^{<5041>}2 Timothy 4:11, and here, profitable. It does not elsewhere occur in the New Testament.

And to me Paul had doubtless found him useful to him as Christian brother in his bonds, and it is easy to conceive that, in his circumstances, he would greatly desire to retain him with him.

^{<5042>}**Philemon 1:12.** *Whom I have sent again* That is, to Philemon. This was, doubtless, at his own request, for:

(1) there is not the slightest evidence that he COMPELLED him, or even urged him to go. The language is just such as would have been used on the supposition either that he requested him to go and bear a letter to Colosse, or that Onesimus desired to go, and that Paul sent him agreeably to his request; compare ^{<5045>}Philippians 2:25.

“Yet I suppose it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother, and companion in labor,” etc.;

^{<5047>}Colossians 4:7,8.

“All my state shall Tychicus declare unto you, who is a beloved brother, and a faithful minister and fellow-servant in the Lord: whom I have sent unto you for the same purpose, that he might know your estate,” etc.

But Epaphroditus and Tychicus were not sent against their own will — nor is there any more reason to think that Onesimus was; see the introduction, Section 2. See (4) below.

(2) Paul had no power to send Onesimus back to his master unless he chose to go. He had no civil authority; he had no guard to accompany him; he could entrust him to no sheriff to convey him from place to place, and he had no means of controlling him, if he chose to go to any other place than Colosse. He could indeed have sent him away from himself; he could have told him to go to Colossae, but his power ended there. Onesimus then could have gone where he pleased. But there is no evidence that Paul even told him to go to Colossae against his own inclination, or that he would have sent him away at all unless he had himself requested it.

(3) There may have been many reasons why Onesimus desired to return to Colosse, and no one can prove that he did not express that desire to Paul, and that his “sending” him was not in consequence of such a request. He may have had friends and relatives there; or, being now converted, he may have been sensible that he had wronged his former master, and that he ought to return and repair the wrong; or he may have been poor, and a stranger in Rome, and may have been greatly disappointed in what he had expected to find there when he left Philemon, and may have desired to return to the comparative comforts of his former condition.

(4) It may be added, therefore,

(a) that this passage should not be adduced to prove that we ought to send back runaway slaves to their former masters against their own consent; or to justify the laws which require magistrates to do it; or to show that they who have escaped should be arrested and forcibly detained; or to justify any sort of influence over a runaway slave to induce him to return to his former master. There is not the least evidence that any of these things occurred in the case before us, and if this instance is ever appealed to, it should be to justify what Paul did — and nothing else.

(b) The passage shows that it is right to aid a servant of any kind to return to his master, if he desires it. It is right to give him a “letter,” and to plead earnestly for his favorable reception if he has in any way wronged his master — for Paul did this. On the same principle it would be right to give him pecuniary assistance to enable him to return — for there may be cases where one who has fled from servitude might wish to return. There may be instances where one has had a kind master, with whom he would feel that on the whole he could be more happy than in his present circumstances. Such cases, however, are exceedingly rare. Or there may be instances where one may have relatives that are in the neighborhood or in the family of his former master, and the desire to be with them may be so strong that on the whole he would choose to be a servant as he was before, rather than to remain as he is now. In all such cases it is right to render aid — for the example of the apostle Paul goes to sustain this. But it goes no further. So far as appears, he neither advised Onesimus to return, nor did he compel him; nor did he say one word to influence him to do it; — nor did he mean or expect that he would be a slave when he should have been received again by his master; see the notes at ⁵⁷⁰¹⁶Philemon 1:16.

Thou, therefore, receive him, that is, mine own bowels There is great delicacy also in this expression. If he had merely said “receive him,” Philemon might have thought only of him as he formerly was. Paul, therefore, adds, “that is, mine own bowels” — “one whom I so tenderly love that he seems to carry my heart with him wherever he goes.” — Doddridge.

^{<50113>}**Philemon 1:13.** *Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead* “That he might render me the service which I know you would if you were here.” The Greek is: “for thee” (ὕπερ ^{<5228>} σου ^{<4675>}); that is, what he should do for Paul might be regarded as done by Philemon himself.

He might have ministered unto me He might have rendered me assistance (δικονη ^{<1247>}); to wit, in such a way as one who was in bonds would need.

^{<50114>}**Philemon 1:14.** *But without thy mind would I do nothing* Nothing in the matter referred to. He would not retain Onesimus in his service, much as he needed his assistance, without the cordial consent of Philemon. He would not give him occasion for hard feeling or complaint, as if Paul had induced him to leave his master, or as if he persuaded him to remain with him when he wished to return — or as if he kept him away from him when he owed him or had wronged him. All that is said here is entirely consistent with the supposition that Onesimus was disposed to return to his master, and with the supposition that Paul did not compel or urge him to do it. For it is probable that if Onesimus had proposed to return, it would have been easy for Paul to have retained him with him. He might have represented his own want of a friend. He might have appealed to his gratitude on account of his efforts for his conversion. He might have shown him that he was under no moral obligation to go back. He might have refused to give him this letter, and might have so represented to him the dangers of the way, and the probability of a harsh reception, as effectually to have dissuaded him from such a purpose. But, in that case, it is clear that this might have caused hard feeling in the bosom of Philemon, and rather than do that he preferred to let him return to his master, and to plead for him that he might have a kind reception. It is, therefore, by no means necessary to suppose that Paul felt that Onesimus was under obligation to return, or that he was disposed to compel him, or that Onesimus was not inclined to return voluntarily; but all the circumstances of the case are met by the supposition that, if Paul retained him, Philemon might conceive that he had injured him.

Suppose, as seems to have been the case, that Onesimus “owed” Philemon (^{<5018>}Philemon 1:18), and then suppose that Paul had chosen to retain him with himself, and had dissuaded him from returning to him, would not Philemon have had reason to complain of it? There was, therefore, on every account, great propriety in his saying that he did not wish to use any influence over him to retain him with him when he purposed to return to Colosse, and that he felt that it would be wrong for him to keep him, much as he needed him, without the consent of Philemon. Nor is it necessary, by what is said here, to suppose that Onesimus was a slave, and that Paul believed that Philemon had a right to him and to his services as such. All that he says here would be met by the supposition that he was a hired servant, and would be in fact equally proper even on the supposition that he was an apprentice. In either case, he would feel that he gave just ground of complaint on the part of Philemon if, when Onesimus desired to return, he used any influence to dissuade him from it, and to retain him with himself. It would have been a violation of the rule requiring us to do to others as we would wish them to do unto us, and Paul therefore felt unwilling, much as he needed the services of Onesimus, to make use of any influence to retain him with him without the consent of his master.

That thy benefit The favor which I might receive from thee by having the services of Onesimus. If Onesimus should remain with him and assist him, he would feel that the benefit which would be conferred by his services would be in fact bestowed by Philemon, for he had a right to the service of Onesimus, and, while Paul enjoyed it, he would be deprived of it. The word rendered “benefit” here — **αγαθον** ^{<18>} — means good, and the sense is, “the good which you would do me;” to wit, by the service of Onesimus.

Should not be as it were of necessity As it would be if Paul should detain Onesimus with him without affording Philemon an opportunity of expressing his assent. Paul would even then have felt that he was in fact receiving a “good” at the expense of Philemon, but it would not be a voluntary favor on his part.

But willingly As it would be if he had given his consent that Onesimus should remain with him.

^{<5015>}**Philemon 1:15.** *For perhaps he therefore departed for a season* Perhaps on this account, or for this reason — **δια** ^{<123>} **τουτο** ^{<124>} — he left you for a little time. Greek, “for an hour” — **προς** ^{<4314>} **ωραν** ^{<5610>}. The

meaning is, that it was possible that this was permitted in the Providence of God in order that Onesimus might be brought under the influence of the gospel, and be far more serviceable to Philemon as a Christian, than he could have been in his former relation to him. What appeared to Philemon, therefore, to be a calamity, and what seemed to him to be wrong on the part of Onesimus, might have been permitted to occur in order that he might receive a higher benefit. Such things are not uncommon in human affairs.

That thou shouldest receive him for ever That is, in the higher relation of a Christian friend and brother; that he might be united to thee in eternal affection; that he might not only be with thee in a far more endearing relation during the present life than he was before, but in the bonds of love in a world that shall never end.

^{<5016>}**Philemon 1:16.** *Not now as a servant* The adverb rendered “not now” (**οὐκετι** ^{<5765>}), means “no more, no further, no longer.” It implies that he had been before in this condition, but was not to be now; compare ^{<4096>}Matthew 19:6, “They are no more twain.” They were once so, but they are not to be regarded as such now; ^{<4026>}Matthew 22:46,

“Neither durst any man, from that day forth ask him any more questions.”

They once did it, but now they did not dare to do it; ^{<4259>}Luke 15:19, “And am no more worthy to be called thy son,” though I once was; ^{<4066>}John 6:66, “And walked no more with him,” though they once did; see also ^{<3156>}John 11:54; 14:19; 17:11; ^{<4089>}Acts 8:39; ^{<4007>}Galatians 4:7; ^{<4029>}Ephesians 2:19. This passage then proves that he had been before a servant — **δουλος** ^{<1401>} — a slave. But still, it is not certain what kind of a servant he was. The word does not necessarily mean slave, nor can it be proved from this passage, or from any other part of the Epistle, that he was at any time a slave; see the notes at ^{<4065>}Ephesians 6:5, and ^{<5001>}1 Timothy 6:1. The word denotes servant of any kind, and it should never be assumed that those to whom it was applied were slaves. It is true that slavery existed in the heathen nations when the gospel was first preached, and it is doubtless true that many slaves were converted (compare the notes at ^{<4072>}1 Corinthians 7:21), but the mere use of the word does not necessarily prove that he to whom it is applied was a slave. If Onesimus was a slave, there is reason to think that he was of a most respectable character (compare the

notes at ^{<5049>}Colossians 4:9), and indeed all that is implied in the use of the term here, and all that is said of him, would be met by the supposition that he was a voluntary servant, and that he had been in fact intrusted with important business by Philemon. It would seem from ^{<5018>}Philemon 1:18 (“or oweth thee ought”), that he was in a condition which made it possible for him to hold property, or at least to be intrusted.

But above a servant, a brother beloved A Christian brother; compare the notes at ^{<5042>}1 Timothy 6:2. He was especially dear to Paul himself as a Christian, and he trusted that he would be so to Philemon.

Specially to me That is, I feel a special or particular interest in him, and affection for him. This he felt not only on account of the traits of character which he had evinced since his conversion, but because he had been converted under his instrumentality when he was a prisoner. A convert made in such circumstances would be particularly dear to one.

But how much more unto thee Why, it may be asked, would he then be particularly dear to Philemon? I answer, because

- (1) of the former relation which he sustained to him — a member of his own family, and bound to him by strong ties;
- (2) because he would receive him as a penitent, and would have joy in his returning from the error of his ways;
- (3) because he might expect him to remain long with him and be of advantage to him as a Christian brother; and
- (4) because he had voluntarily returned, and thus shown that he felt a strong attachment to his former master.

In the flesh This phrase is properly used in reference to any relation which may exist pertaining to the present world, as contradistinguished from that which is formed primarily by religion, and which would be expressed by the subjoined phrase, “in the Lord.” It might, in itself, refer to any natural relation of blood, or to any formed in business, or to any constituted by mere friendship, or to family alliance, or to any relation having its origin in voluntary or involuntary servitude. It is not necessary to suppose, in order to meet the full force of the expression, either that Onesimus had been a slave, or that he would continue to be regarded as such. Whatever relation of the kind, referred to above, may have existed between him and

Philemon, would be appropriately denoted by this phrase. The new and more interesting relation which they were now to sustain to each other, which was formed by religion, is expressed by the phrase “in the Lord.” In both these, Paul hoped that Onesimus would manifest the appropriate spirit of a Christian, and be worthy of his entire confidence.

In the Lord As a Christian. He will be greatly endeared to your heart as a consistent and worthy follower of the Lord Jesus. — On this important verse then, in relation to the use which is so often made of this Epistle by the advocates of slavery, to show that Paul sanctioned it, and that it is a duty to send back those who have escaped from their masters that they may again be held in bondage, we may remark that:

(1) there is no certain evidence that Onesimus was ever a slave at all. All the proof that he was, is to be found in the word **δουλος** ^{<1401>} — *doulos* — in this verse. But, as we have seen, the mere use of this word by no means proves that. All that is necessarily implied by it is that he was in some way the servant of Philemon — whether hired or bought cannot be shown.

(2) At all events, even supposing that he had been a slave, Paul did not mean that he should return as such, or to be regarded as such. He meant, whatever may have been his former relation, and whatever subsequent relation he may have sustained, that he should be regarded as a beloved Christian brother; that the leading conception in regard to him should be that he was a fellow-heir of salvation, a member of the same redeemed church, a candidate for the same heaven.

(3) Paul did not send him back in order that he might be a slave, or with a view that the shackles of servitude should be riveted on him. There is not the slightest evidence that he forced him to return, or that he advised him to do it, or even that he expressed a wish that he would; and when he did send him, it was not as a slave, but as a beloved brother in the Lord. It cannot be shown that the motive for sending him back was in the slightest degree that he should be a slave. No such thing is intimated, nor is any such thing necessary to be supposed in order to a fair interpretation of the passage.

(4) It is clear that, even if Onesimus had been a slave before, it would have been contrary to the wishes of Paul that Philemon should now hold him as such. Paul wished him to regard him “not as a servant,” but as a “beloved brother.” If Philemon complied with his wishes, Onesimus was never

afterward regarded or treated as a slave. If he did so regard or treat him, it was contrary to the expressed intention of the apostle, and it is certain that he could never have shown this letter in justification of it. It cannot fail to strike any one that if Philemon followed the spirit of this Epistle, he would not consider Onesimus to be a slave, but if he sustained the relation of a servant at all, it would be as a voluntary member of his household, where, in all respects, he would be regarded and treated, not as a “chattel,” or a “thing,” but as a Christian brother.

(5) This passage, therefore, may be regarded as full proof that it is not right to send a slave back, against his will, to his former master, to be a slave. It is right to help one if he wishes to go back; to give him a letter to his master, as Paul did to Onesimus; to furnish him money to help him on his journey if he desires to return; and to commend him as a Christian brother, if he is such; but beyond that, the example of the apostle Paul does not go. It is perfectly clear that he would not have sent him back to be regarded and treated as a slave, but being able to commend him as a Christian, he was willing to do it, and he expected that he would be treated, not as a slave, but as a Christian. The case before us does not go at all to prove that Paul would have ever sent him back to be a chattel or a thing. If, with his own consent, and by his own wish, we can send a slave back to his master, to be treated as a Christian and as a man, the example of Paul may show that it would be right to do it, but it does not go beyond that.

(6) In confirmation of this, and as a guide in duty now, it may be observed, that Paul had been educated as a Hebrew; that he was thoroughly imbued with the doctrines of the Old Testament, and that one of the elementary principles of that system of religion was, that a runaway slave was in no circumstances to be returned by force to his former master.

“Thou shalt NOT deliver unto his master the servant that is escaped from his master unto thee;” ^{<6215>}Deuteronomy 23:15.

It cannot be supposed that, trained as he was in the principles of the Hebrew religion — of which this was a positive and unrepealed law, and imbued with the benevolent spirit of the gospel — a system so hostile to oppression, the apostle Paul would have constrained a slave who had escaped from bondage to return to servitude against his will.

(7) It may be added, that if the principles here acted on by Paul were carried out, slavery would speedily cease in the world. Very soon would it

come to an end if masters were to regard those whom they hold, “not as slaves,” but as beloved Christian brothers; not as chattels and things, but as the redeemed children of God. Thus regarding them, they would no longer feel that they might chain them, and task them, and sell them as property. They would feel that as Christians and as men, they were on a level with themselves, and that they who were made in the image of God, and who had been redeemed with the blood of his Son, “ought to be FREE.”

◀5017▶ Philemon 1:17. *If there count me therefore a partner* The word rendered “partner” (**κοινωνος** ^{◀2844▶}), means “a partaker, a companion.” The idea in the word is that of having something in common (**κοινος** ^{◀2839▶}) with any one — as common principles; common attachments; a common interest in an enterprise; common hopes. It may be applied to those who hold the same principles of religion, and who have the same hope of heaven, the same views of things, etc. Here the meaning is, that if Philemon regarded Paul as sharing with him in the principles and hopes of religion, or as a brother in the gospel so that he would receive him, he ought to receive Onesimus in the same way. He was actuated by the same principles, and had the same hopes, and had a claim to be received as a Christian brother. His receiving Onesimus would be interpreted by Paul as proof that he regarded him as a partaker of the hopes of the gospel, and as a companion and friend. For a plea in behalf of another, strongly resembling this, see Horace, Epis. Lib. 1, Ephesians 9.

◀5018▶ Philemon 1:18. *If he hath wronged thee* Either by escaping from you, or by failing to perform what he had agreed to, or by unfaithfulness when he was with you as a servant, or by taking your property when he went away. Any of these methods would meet all that is said here, and it is impossible to determine in which of them he had done Philemon wrong. It may be observed, however, that the apostle evinces much delicacy in this matter. He does not say that he had wronged him, but he makes a supposition that he might have done it. Doubtless, Philemon would suppose that he had done it, even if he had done no more than to escape from him, and, whatever Paul’s views of that might be, he says that even if it were so, he would wish him to set that over to his account. He took the blame on himself, and asked Philemon not to remember it against Onesimus.

Or oweth thee ought It appears from this, that Onesimus, whatever may have been his former condition, was capable of holding property, and of

contracting debts. It is possible that he might have borrowed money of Philemon, or he may have been regarded as a tenant, and may not have paid the rent of his farm, or the apostle may mean that he had owed him service which he had not performed. Conjecture is useless as to the way in which the debt had been contracted.

Put that on mine account Reckon, or impute that to me — **εμοι** ^{<1698>} **ελλογα** ^{<1677>}. This word occurs nowhere else in the New Testament, except in ^{<8513>}Romans 5:13, where it is rendered imputed. See the notes at that passage. It means to “reckon;” to put to one’s account, to wit, what properly belongs to him, or what he assumes. It never implies that that is to be charged on one which does not properly belong to him, either as his own act, or as that which he has assumed. In this case, it would have been manifestly unjust for Philemon to charge the wrong which Onesimus had done, or what he owed him, to the apostle Paul without his consent; and it cannot be inferred from what Paul says here that it would have been right to do so. The steps in the case were these:

- (1) Onesimus, not Paul, had done the wrong.
- (2) Paul was not guilty of it, or blameworthy for it, and never in any way, or by any process, could be made to be, or conceived to be. It would be true forever that Onesimus and not he had done the wrong.
- (3) Paul assumed the debt and the wrong to himself. He was willing, by putting himself in the place of Onesimus, to bear the consequences, and to have Onesimus treated as if he had not done it. When he had voluntarily assumed it, it was right to treat him as if he had done so; that is, to hold him responsible. A man may assume a debt if he pleases, and then he may be held answerable for it.
- (4) If he had not assumed this himself, it never could have been right for Philemon to charge it on him. No possible supposition could make it right. No agency which he had in the conversion of Onesimus; no friendship which he had for him; no favor which he had shown him, could make it right. The consent, the concurrence on the part of Paul was absolutely necessary in order that he should be in any way responsible for what Onesimus had done.
- (5) The same principle prevails in imputation everywhere.
- (a) What we have done is chargeable upon us.

(b) If we have not done a thing, or have not assumed it by a voluntary act, it is not right to charge it upon us.

(c) God reckons things as they are.

The Saviour voluntarily assumed the place of man, and God reckoned, or considered it so. He did not hold him guilty or blameworthy in the case; but as he had voluntarily taken the place of the sinner, he was treated as if he had been a sinner. God, in like manner, does not charge on man crimes of which he is not guilty. He does not hold him to be blameworthy, or ill-deserving for the sin of Adam, or any other sin but his own. He reckons things as they are. Adam sinned, and he alone was held to be blameworthy or ill-deserving for the act. By a divine constitution (compare the notes at [Romans 5:12](#), following), he had appointed that if he sinned, the consequences or results should pass over and terminate on his posterity — as the consequences of the sin of the drunkard pass over and terminate on his sons, and God reckons this to be so — and treats the race accordingly. He never reckons those to be guilty who are not guilty; or those to be ill-deserving who are not ill-deserving; nor does he punish one for what another has done. When Paul, therefore, voluntarily assumed a debt or an obligation, what he did should not be urged as an argument to prove that it would be right for God to charge on all the posterity of Adam the sin of their first father, or to hold them guilty for an offence committed ages before they had an existence. The case should be adduced to demonstrate one point only — that when a man assumes a debt, or voluntarily takes a wrong done upon himself, it is right to hold him responsible for it.

(See the subject of imputation discussed in the supplementary notes, [Romans 5:12,19](#); [2 Corinthians 5:19,21](#); [Galatians 3:13](#).)

Philemon 1:19. *I Paul have written it with mine own hand* It has been inferred from this, that Paul wrote this entire Epistle with his own hand, though this was contrary to his usual practice; compare the notes at [Romans 16:22](#); [1 Corinthians 16:21](#); [Galatians 6:11](#). He undoubtedly meant to refer to this as a mark of special favor toward Philemon, and as furnishing security that he would certainly be bound for what he had promised.

I will repay it I will be security for it. It is not probable that Paul supposed that Philemon would rigidly exact it from him, but if he did, he would feel himself bound to pay it.

Albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides Paul had doubtless been the means of the conversion of Philemon, and whatever hope he cherished of eternal life, was to be traced to his instrumentality. Paul says that this was equivalent to his owing himself to him. His very life — his eternal welfare — was to be traced to his labors. What he asked now of him was a small matter compared with this, and he seems to have supposed — what was probably true — that for this consideration, Philemon would not think of exacting of him what he had voluntarily obligated himself to obey.

^{<502>}**Philemon 1:20.** *Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord* “By showing me this favor in receiving my friend and brother as I request.” The phrase “in the Lord,” here seems to mean that, if this request was granted, he would recognize the hand of the Lord in it, and would receive it as a favor from him.

Refresh my bowels in the Lord The “bowels,” in the Scriptures, are uniformly spoken of as the seat of the affections — meaning commonly the upper viscera, embracing the heart and the lungs; compare the notes at ^{<362>}Isaiah 16:11. The reason is, that in any deep emotion this part of our frame is peculiarly affected, or we feel it there. Compare Robinson’s Lex. on the word *σπλαγγχον* ^{<468>} See this illustrated at length in Sir Charles Bell’s “Anatomy of Expression,” p. 85, following Ed. London, 1844. The idea here is, that Paul had such a tender affection for Onesimus as to give him great concern and uneasiness. The word rendered “refresh” — *αναπαυσον* ^{<373>} — means “to give rest to, to give repose, to free from sorrow or care;” and the sense is, that by receiving Onesimus, Philemon would cause the deep and anxious feelings of Paul to cease, and he would be calm and happy; compare the notes at ^{<500>}Philemon 1:7.

^{<502>}**Philemon 1:21.** *Having confidence in thy obedience* That you would comply with all my expressed desires.

I wrote unto thee “I have written to you;” to wit, in this Epistle.

Knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say In all the respects which he had mentioned — in receiving Onesimus, and in his kind treatment of him.

He had asked a great favor of him, but he knew that he would go even beyond what he had asked.

Philemon 1:22. *But withal* Or, at the same time — ἅμα ^{<261>}. While you are granting this favor, do me also another by preparing a lodging for me.

Prepare me also a lodging Philemon had been accustomed to show kindness to the saints (^{<5005>}Philemon 1:5), and not improbably Paul had before shared his hospitality. The word rendered “lodging” (ξενία) ^{<3578>}, means, properly, guest-right, hospitality, entertainment; and then, a place for a guest; compare ^{<4823>}Acts 28:23.

For I trust Paul had some hope of being released — an event which probably occurred; see the notes at ^{<5025>}Philippians 1:25; 2:23,24; compare the introduction to 2 Timothy.

Through your prayers Notes, ^{<4011>}2 Corinthians 1:11. He expected release in answer to the petitions of those who loved him, and the cause in which he was engaged; compare the notes at ^{<4125>}Acts 12:5.

I shall be given unto you I shall be permitted to return to you, as a favor — χάρισθησομαι ^{<5483>}. Paul had no doubt thus Philemon would so regard it, and he had no apprehension that his abiding with him would be considered as a burden.

Philemon 1:23. *There salute thee Epaphras* The same persons who are here mentioned as greeting Philemon, are mentioned in the close of the Epistle to the Colossians — furnishing a high degree of evidence that Philemon resided at Colosse. Epaphras was a member of the church there; the notes at ^{<5042>}Colossians 4:12.

My fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus In the cause of Christ; Notes, ^{<5001>}Philemon 1:1. The circumstance of his being a prisoner is not mentioned in the parallel place in the Epistle to the Colossians, but nothing is more probable.

Philemon 1:24. *Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, and Lucas* see the notes at the Epistle to the Colossians, ^{<5040>}Colossians 4:10,14.

Philemon 1:25. *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ ...* Notes, ^{<5022>}2 Timothy 4:22.

The subscription to the Epistle is of no authority, but in this case is undoubtedly correct. Compare the remarks at the close of 1 Corinthians, and Titus.

REMARKS ON PHILEMON

Having now passed through with the exposition of this Epistle, it may be proper to copy, for comparison with it, one of the most beautiful specimens of epistolary composition to be found in profane literature, an epistle of Pliny, written on a similar occasion, and having a strong resemblance to this. As a matter of taste, it is of importance to show that the sacred writers do not fall behind the most favorable specimens of literary composition to be found in uninspired writings. The epistle of Pliny was directed to his friend Sabinianus, in behalf of his manumitted slave who had offended him, and who was consequently cast out of his favor. It is in the following words:

C. Plinius Sabiniano, S. (in Latin)

Libertus tuus, cui succensere te dixeras, venit ad me, advolutusque pedibus meis, tanquam tuis, haesit: flevit muitum, multum rogavit, maltum etiam tacuit: in summa, fecit mihi fidem poenitentiae Vere credo emendatum, quia deliquisse sentit. Irasceris scio; et irasceris merito, id quoque scio: sed tune praecipua mansuetudinis laus, cure irae causa justissima est. Amasti hominem; et spero amabis: interim sufficit ut exorari te sinas. Licebit rursus irasci, si meruerit; quod exoratus excusatius facies.

Remitte aliquid adolescentiae ipsius; remitte lachrymis; remitte indulgentiae tuae; ne torseris illum, ne torseris etiam te. Torqueris enim cum tam lenis irasceris. Vereor, ne videar non rogare, sed cogere, si precibus ejus meas junxero. Jungam tamen tanto plenius et effusius quanto ipsum acrius severiusque corripui, destricte minatus, nunquam me postea rogaturum. Hoc illi, quem terreri oportebat; tibi non idem. Nam fortasse iterum rogabo, impetrabo irerum: sit mode tale, ut rogare me, ut praestare te, deceat. Vale. Epistolar. Lib. ix. Ephesians 21.

Caius Pliny to Sabinianus, health (English translation)

‘Thy freed man, with whom thou didst say thou wert incensed, came to me, and having thrown himself at my feet, grasped them as

if they had been thine. He wept much; pleaded much; and yet pleaded more by his silence. In short, he fully convinced me that he was a penitent. I do sincerely believe that he is reformed, because he perceives that he has done wrong. I know that thou art incensed against him; and I know also that thou art justly so; but then clemency has its chief praise when there is the greatest cause for anger. Thou hast loved the man; and I hope that thou wilt love him again. In the meantime, it may suffice that thou dost suffer thyself to be entreated for him. It will be right for thee again to be offended if he deserves it: because, having allowed thyself to be entreated, you will do it with greater propriety.

‘Forgive something for his youth; forgive on account of his tears; forgive on account of thine own kindness: do not torment him; do not torment thyself — for thou wilt be tormented when thou, who art of so gentle a disposition, dost suffer thyself to be angry. I fear, if I should unite my prayers to his, that I should seem not to ask, but to compel. Yet I will write them, and the more largely and earnestly, too, as I have sharply and severely reprovèd him; solemnly threatening him, should he offend again, never more to intercede for him. This I said to him, because it was necessary to alarm him; but I will not say the same to thee. For perhaps I may again entreat thee, and again obtain, if now that shall be done which it is fit that I should ask and you concede. Farewell.’

Those who compare these two epistles, much as they may admire that of Pliny as a literary composition and as adapted to secure the end which he had in view, will coincide with the remark of Doddridge, that it is much inferior to the letter of Paul. There is less courtesy — though there is much; there is less that is touching and tender — though there is much force in the pleading; and there is much less that is affecting in the manner of the appeal than in the Epistle of the apostle.

The Epistle to Philemon, though the shortest that Paul wrote, and though pertaining to a private matter in which the church at large could not be expected to have any direct interest, is nevertheless a most interesting portion of the New Testament, and furnishes some invaluable lessons for the church.

1. It is a model of courtesy. It shows that the apostle was a man of refined sensibility, and had a delicate perception of what was due in friendship, and

what was required by true politeness. There are turns of thought in this Epistle which no one would employ who was not thoroughly under the influence of true courtesy of feeling, and who had not an exquisite sense of what was proper in intercourse with a Christian gentleman.

2. The Epistle shows that he had great tact in argument, and great skill in selecting just such things as would be adapted to secure the end in view. It would be hardly possible to accumulate, even in a letter of fiction, more circumstances which would be fitted to accomplish the object which he contemplated, that he has introduced into this short letter, or to arrange them in a way better fitted to secure the desired result. If we remember the state of mind in which it is reasonable to suppose Philemon was in regard to this runaway servant, and the little probability that a man in his circumstances would receive him with kindness again, it is impossible not to admire the address with which Paul approaches him. It is not difficult to imagine in what state of mind Philemon may have been, or the obstacles which it was necessary to surmount in order to induce him to receive Onesimus again — and especially to receive him as a Christian brother. If, as has been commonly supposed, Onesimus had been a slave; if he had run away from him; if he had been formerly intractable and disobedient; if he had wronged him by taking property with him that did not belong to him, or if he had owed him, and had run off without paying him, it is not difficult for any one to imagine how great was the difficulty to be overcome in his mind before the object of Paul could be accomplished. This will be felt to be especially so if we bear in remembrance the repugnance necessarily felt by a slaveholder to receive one who has been a slave as an equal in any respect, or to regard and treat such an one as a Christian brother on the same level with himself. Or if we suppose that Onesimus had been a voluntary servant in the employ of Philemon, and had failed to render the service which he had contracted to perform, or had embezzled property, or had gone off in debt, greatly irritating the mind of his master, the difficulty to be overcome before he received him again would be little less. In either case, it would be necessary to soothe his irritated feelings, and to inspire confidence in one who hitherto had evinced little claim to it, and to persuade him now to receive one who had shown that he was not to be trusted, as a Christian brother. If the Epistle be examined with reference to either of these suppositions, it will be found to be composed with the most finished tact and art.

3. This Epistle has been frequently appealed to by the friends and advocates of slavery as furnishing a support or apology for that institution. Indeed, it would seem to be regarded by the advocates of that system as so clear on the point, that all that they need to do is to name it as settling the whole matter in debate. The points which it is supposed by the advocates of that system to prove are two: first, that slavery is right — since it is assumed that Onesimus was a slave, and that Paul does not intimate to Philemon that the relation was contrary to the spirit of Christianity; and second, that it is our duty to send back a runaway slave to his master — since it is assumed that Paul did this in the case of Onesimus. — It cannot be denied that this view of the matter would be sustained by most of the commentaries on the Epistle, but it is time to inquire whether such an exposition is the true one, and whether this Epistle really gives countenance to slavery in respect to these points. In order to this, it is important to know exactly what was the state of the case in reference to these points — for in interpreting the New Testament it should not be assumed that anything is in favor of slavery, nor should anything be admitted to be in favor of it without applying the most rigid principles of interpretation — any more than in the case of profaneness, adultery, or any other sin. As the result of the examination of the Epistle, we are now prepared to inquire what countenance the Epistle gives to slavery in these respects, and whether it can be fairly appealed to either in justification of the system, or in showing that it is a duty to return a runaway slave against his consent to his former master. To make out these points from the Epistle, it would be necessary to demonstrate that Onesimus was certainly a slave; that Paul so treats the subject as to show that he approved of the institution; that he sent back Onesimus against his own will; that he returned him because he supposed he had done wrong by escaping from servitude; and that he meant that he should continue to be regarded as a slave, and held as a slave, after his return to Philemon. Now, in regard to these points, I would make the following remarks in view of the exposition which has been given of the Epistle:

(1) There is no positive evidence that Onesimus was a slave at all; see the notes at ⁵⁰¹⁶Philemon 1:16. Even if it should be admitted to be probable that he was, it would be necessary, in order that this Epistle should be adduced in favor of slavery, that that fact should be made out without any ground of doubt, or the argument is worthless. It is clear that the Epistle, under any circumstances, can be adduced in favor of slavery only so far as

it is certain that Onesimus was a slave. But that is not certain. It cannot be made to be certain. It should not be taken for granted. Either of the suppositions that he was bound to service until he was of age by a parent or guardian, or that he had voluntarily bound himself to service for wages, will meet all that is necessarily implied in the Epistle.

(2) There is not the least evidence that Paul used any force or even persuasion to induce him to return to his master. It cannot be proved from the Epistle that he even advised him to return. It is certain that he did not compel him to do it — for Paul had no power to do this, and no guard or civil officer accompanied Onesimus to secure him if he had chosen to escape. Every one of the circumstances mentioned in the Epistle will be met by the supposition that Onesimus desired to return, but that there were circumstances which made him apprehensive that if he did, he would not be kindly received, and that, at his request, Paul wrote the Epistle to induce Philemon to receive him kindly. Nothing more can be proved; nothing more is necessary to be believed, in order to a fair interpretation of the Epistle. Nothing is more natural than the supposition that when Onesimus was truly converted, he would desire to return to Philemon if he had in any way done him wrong. But to make it proper to adduce this Epistle to show that it is a duty to return a runaway slave to his master, even on the supposition that Onesimus was a slave, it is necessary to prove either that Paul advised him to return, or that he compelled him to do it against his will. No one doubts that it would be right to help one who had escaped from slavery, if, on any proper account, he should wish to go back to his former master: if he felt that he had wronged him, or if he had a wife and children in the neighborhood, or if he was satisfied that he could be more happy in his service than he could be elsewhere. To this point, and this only, this Epistle goes.

(3) There is no evidence that Paul meant that Onesimus should return as a slave, or with a view to be retained and treated as a slave. Even supposing he had been so formerly, there is not the slightest intimation in the Epistle that when he sent him back to his master, he meant that he should throw himself into the chains of bondage again. Nor is there the slightest evidence that if he had supposed that this would be the result, he would have even consented that he should return to his master. No man can take this Epistle and prove from it that Paul would have sent him at all, if he had supposed that the effect would be that he would be reduced to slavery, and held in bondage. If such had been his expectation, he would never have written

such a letter as this. The expression of such a desire would have found a place in the Epistle; or, at least, the Epistle would not have been so framed as almost of necessity to lead to a different result.

(4) There is very satisfactory evidence, besides this, that he did not mean that Onesimus should be regarded and treated by Philemon as a slave. It would be impossible for Philemon to comply with the wishes breathed forth in this letter, and meet exactly the desires of Paul in the case, and yet retain him as a slave, or regard him as property — as a “chattel “— as a “thing.” For

(a) if he had been formerly a slave; if this is the fair meaning of the word **δουλος** ^{<1401>} — *doulos* — then this is expressly declared. Thus, in ^{<5016>}Philemon 1:16, he is commanded to receive him “NOT now as a servant” — *ουκετι* ^{<3765>} *ὡς* ^{<5613>} *δουλον* ^{<1401>}. If he had been a slave before, he did not wish that he should be received as such now, or regarded as such any longer. How could Philemon comply with the wish of the apostle, and yet regard Onesimus as a slave? The very attempt to do it would be directly in the face of the expressed desire of Paul, and every moment he held him as such he would be disregarding his wishes.

(b) He desired him to receive and treat him, in all respects, as a Christian brother — as one redeemed — as a man: — “Above a servant, a brother beloved.” How could he do this, and yet regard and treat him as a slave? Is it treating one as a Christian brother to hold him as property; to deprive him of freedom; to consider him an article of merchandise; to exact his labor without compensation? Would the man himself who makes another a slave suppose that he was treated as a Christian brother, if he were reduced to that condition? Would he feel that his son was so regarded if he was made a slave? There are no ways of reconciling these things. It is impossible for a master to regard His slave as, in the proper and full sense of the phrase, “a Christian brother.” He may, indeed, esteem him highly as a Christian; he may treat him with kindness; he may show him many favors; but — he regards him also AS HIS SLAVE; and this fact makes a difference wide “as from the center thrice to the utmost pole” in his feelings toward him and other Christians. He is not on a level with them as a Christian. The notion of his being his slave mingles with all his feelings toward him, and gives a coloring to all his views of him. He cannot but feel, if he himself is under the influence of religion, that that slave, if he were treated in all respects as a Christian, would be as free as himself;

would have a right to his time, and skill, and liberty; would be permitted to form his own plans, and to enjoy the avails of his own labor; and would be secure from the possibility of being sold.

(c) Suppose now that Paul, after a short interval, had actually come to the residence of Philemon, as he expected to (⁵⁰¹²Philemon 1:22), and had found him regarding and treating Onesimus as a slave; would he have felt that Philemon had complied with his wishes? Did he ask this of him? Did he not request just the contrary? ⁵⁰¹⁶Philemon 1:16. Would it not be natural for him to say to him that he had NOT received him as he wished him to? And how would Philemon reply to this?

(5) The principles laid down in this Epistle would lead to the universal abolition of slavery. If all those who are now slaves were to become Christians, and their masters were to treat them “not as slaves, but as brethren beloved,” the period would not be far distant when slavery would cease. This probably will be admitted by all. But a state of things which would be destroyed by the widest prevalence of Christianity, is not right at any time. Christianity, in its highest influences, interferes with nothing that is good, and would annihilate nothing which is not wrong. That which is true, and best for the welfare of man, will survive when the true religion spreads all over the world; and to say, as is commonly admitted even by the advocates of slavery, that Christianity will ultimately destroy the system, is to say that it is now wrong — for Christianity destroys nothing which is in itself right, and which is desirable for the highest good of man. It will destroy intemperance, and idolatry, and superstition, and war — because they are evil and wrong — and only because they are so; and for the same reason, and that only, will it abolish slavery. When a man, therefore, admits that the gospel will ultimately destroy slavery, he at the same time admits that it is now an evil and a sin. The gospel is adapted and designed to put an end to the system. It did annihilate it in the Roman empire, and its tendency everywhere is to secure its final abolition. The system, therefore, is evil. It is opposed to the spirit of religion. It is destructive of the welfare of society. It is a violation of human rights. It is contrary to the will of God. The gospel everywhere teaches us to regard the slave “no longer as a slave, but as a brother;” and when this is secured, the system must speedily come to an end. For this, and for all its other anticipated influences, we should labor and pray that the gospel may be diffused as speedily as possible all over the world; that it may raise man everywhere from his

degradation, and invest every human being with the dignity of a freeman; that it

“may undo the heavy burden, break every yoke, and bid the oppressed go free.” ²⁸⁸⁶Isaiah 58:6.