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**COMMENTARY**

**DARBY'S SYNOPSIS OF THE  
BOOKS OF THE BIBLE  
PART 2: NEW TESTAMENT**

*by John Nelson Darby*

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## John Nelson Darby, 1800-1882

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## PHILEMON

The very beautiful and interesting epistle to Philemon does not require much comment; it is an expression of the love which works by the Spirit within the assembly of God in all the circumstances of individual life.

Written for the purpose of awakening in Philemon sentiments which certain events had a tendency to extinguish in his heart, this epistle is suited to produce those feelings in the reader more than to be the object of explanation.

It is a fine picture of the way in which the tenderness and the strength of the love of God, working in the heart, occupies itself with every detail wherein that love might be wounded, or that might be an occasion for its growth and manifestation. In this point of view the epistle is as important as beautiful; for this development of tender and delicate consideration in the midst of the apostle's gigantic labors, and of the immense truths that formed the basis of relationship between all creatures and God in Christ, gives a very peculiar character to Christianity and shows its divine nature; since He who reveals the most profound truths, and puts them in their right place in the circle of divine thought, does so as speaking of a known thing, as communicating His own thoughts; and can (being the Spirit of the God of love) fill the heart with considerations which love only can suggest, with a dignity which manifests their source, and with a delicacy of application which shows that, whatever be the grandeur of His thoughts, He is at liberty to consider everything.

When the human mind is occupied with elevated subjects, it feels their weight, and bends under the load; it is absorbed; it has to abstract itself, to fix its attention. God reveals His own thoughts; and, vast as they may be to the human mind, they flow with the clearness and connectedness that is natural to them, when He communicates them by His chosen instruments. The latter are free to love; for the God who employs them and inspires them is love. It is a more essential part of their task to present Him thus, than even to speak of the deep things. Accordingly, when they are moved by that love, the character of Him who sends them is demonstrated as that

of the God who is the source of love, by a perfect consideration for others, and the most delicate attention to those things which their hearts would feel.

Moreover this love develops itself in relationships formed by the Holy Ghost Himself, between the members of the body of Christ, that is to say, between men. Springing from a divine source, and always fed by it, christian affections assume the form of human regard, which, by exhibiting love and the opposite of selfishness, bear the stamp of their origin. Love, free from self, can and does think of all that concerns others and understands what will affect them.

### PHILEMON

Onesimus, a fugitive slave, had been converted by means of Paul in his bonds. Philemon, a rich man or at least one of easy fortune, received the assembly in his house (his wife being also converted), and in his measure labored himself in the Lord's work. Archippus was a servant of the Lord, who ministered in the assembly, perhaps an evangelist; at any rate he took part in the conflicts of the gospel, and was thus associated with Philemon and the assembly.

The apostle, in sending Onesimus back, addresses the whole assembly. This is the reason that we have here, "grace and peace," without the addition of "mercy," as when individuals only are addressed by the apostles. His appeal on behalf of Onesimus is to Philemon; but the whole assembly is to interest itself in this beloved slave, who was become a child of God. Their christian hearts would be a support and a guarantee for the conduct of Philemon; although the apostle expects pardon and kindness for Onesimus from the love of Philemon himself as a servant of God.

Paul (as was his custom) recognises all the good that was in Philemon, and uses it as a motive to Philemon himself, that he might let the feelings of grace flow out freely, in spite of anything that the return of Onesimus might excite in the flesh or any displeasure that Satan might try to re-awaken in him. The apostle would have that which he desired for Onesimus to be Philemon's own act. The enfranchisement of his former slave, or even his kind reception as a brother, would have quite a different bearing in that case, than if it had arisen from a command on the apostle's

part; for christian affection and the bonds of love were in question. He gives due weight to the right he had to command, but only in order to abandon it, and to give more force to his request; and at the same time he suggests that the communion of Philemon's faith with the whole assembly of God and with the apostle — that is, the way in which his faith connected him, in the activities of christian love, with the assembly of God and those appointed by him to labor in it, and with the Lord Himself — which had already shown itself so honorably in Philemon, would have its full development in the acknowledgement of all the apostle's rights over his heart.

In verse 6 we must read “every good thing which is in us.”

It is beautiful to see the mixture of affection for Onesimus — which shows itself in an anxiety that makes him plead every motive which could act on the heart of Philemon — with the christian feeling that inspired him with full confidence in the kindly affections of this faithful and excellent brother. The return of his fugitive slave was indeed likely to stir up something in his natural heart; the apostle interposes his letter on behalf of his dear child in the faith, born in the time of his captivity. God had interposed the work of His grace, which ought to act on the heart of Philemon, producing altogether new relationships with Onesimus. The apostle beseeches him to receive his former slave as a brother, but it is evident (v. 12), although Paul wished it to be the spontaneous act of the master whom Onesimus had wronged, that the apostle expected the enfranchisement of the latter. Be that as it may, he takes everything upon himself for his dear son. According to grace Onesimus was more profitable to Philemon, as well as to Paul, than formerly, when the flesh had made him an unfaithful and valueless servant; and this he should rejoice in (v. 11). Paul alludes to the name of “Onesimus,” which means “profitable.” Finally, he reminds Philemon that he was indebted to him for his own salvation — for his life as a Christian.

Paul at this moment was a prisoner at Rome. God had brought Onesimus there (whither all resorted) to lead him to salvation and the knowledge of the Lord, in order that we should be instructed, and that Onesimus should have a new position in the christian assembly.\* It was apparently towards

the end of the apostle's imprisonment. He hopes at least soon to be released and tells Philemon to prepare him a lodging.

[\* It seems to me, from the way in which the apostle speaks, that he even thought Onesimus would be an instrument of God in the assembly, useful in the Lord's service. He would have retained him to minister to himself in the bonds of the gospel; but he respects his connection with Philemon. It was also much better for the soul of Onesimus that he should submit himself where he had done wrong; and if he was to be free, that he should receive his freedom from the love of Philemon.]

We find the names again in the epistle to the Colossians. There the apostle says, "Onesimus, who is one of you"; so that, if it be the same, he was of Colosse. It seems likely, because there is Archippus also, who is exhorted to take heed to his ministry. If it be so, the fact that he speaks thus of Onesimus to the Christians at Colosse is another proof of his loving care for this new convert. He lays him thus upon the hearts of the assembly, sending his letter by him and Tychicus. In the epistle to the Ephesians there are no salutations; but the same Tychicus is its bearer. Timothy is joined with Paul in the address of the epistle to the Colossians, as well as in this to Philemon. It was not so in the epistle to the Ephesians; but in that to the Philippians, to whom the apostle hoped to send Timothy ere long, their two names are again united.

I do not draw any conclusions from these last details; but they furnish ground for inquiry into details. Each of the four epistles was written during the apostle's captivity at Rome, and when he was expecting to be delivered from that captivity.

Finally, that which we have especially to remark in the epistle to Philemon is the love which, in the intimate center of this circle (guarded all round by an unparalleled development of doctrine) reigned and bore fruit, and bound the members of Christ together, and spread the savor of grace over all the relationships in which men could stand towards each other, occupying itself about all the details of life with a perfect propriety, and with the recognition of every right that can exist among men and of all that the human heart can feel.