

THE AGES DIGITAL LIBRARY COMMENTARY

COMMENTARY ON THE WHOLE BIBLE

Philemon

by Matthew Henry

To the Students of the Words, Works and Ways of God:

Welcome to the AGES Digital Library. We trust your experience with this and other volumes in the Library fulfills our motto and vision which is our commitment to you:

MAKING THE WORDS OF THE WISE
AVAILABLE TO ALL — INEXPENSIVELY.

*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: New
Modern Edition Database* Copyright © 1991, 1994 by
Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. Used by Permission.
All Rights Reserved

AGES Software, Rio, WI USA
Version 2.0 © 2006

AN EXPOSITION, WITH PRACTICAL OBSERVATIONS, OF

THE EPISTLE OF ST. PAUL TO

PHILEMON

This epistle to Philemon is placed the last of those with the name of Paul to them, perhaps because the shortest, and of an argument peculiar and different from all the others; yet such as the Spirit of God, who indited it, saw would, in its kind, be very instructive and useful in the churches. The occasion of it was this: — Philemon, one of note and probably a minister in the church of Colosse, a city of Phrygia, had a servant named *Onesimus*, who, having purloined his goods, ran away from him, and in his rambles came to Rome, where Paul was then a prisoner for the gospel, and, providentially coming under his preaching there, was, by the blessing of God, converted by him, after which he ministered awhile to the apostle in bonds, and might have been further useful to him, but, understanding him to be another man's servant, Paul would not, without his consent, detain him, but sends him back with this letter-commendatory, wherein he earnestly sues for his pardon and kind reception.

Before we enter on the exposition, such general things as follow may be taken notice of from the epistle and what relates to it; namely,

I. The goodness and mercy of God to a poor wandering sinner, bringing him by his gracious providence under the means, and making them effectual to his conversion. Thus came he to be *sought of him that asked not for him, and to be found of him that sought him not,* ²⁴¹¹Isaiah 65:1.

II. The great and endeared affection between a true convert and him whom God used to be the instrument of his conversion. Paul regards this poor fugitive now as his son in the faith, and terms him his *own bowels*; and Onesimus readily serves Paul in prison, and would gladly have continued to do so, would duty have permitted; but, being another's servant, he must return and submit himself to his master, and be at his disposal.

III. The tender and good spirit of this blessed apostle Paul. With what earnestness does he concern himself for the poor slave! Being now, through his preaching, reconciled to God, he labours for reconciliation between him and his master. How pathetic a letter does he here write in his behalf! Scarcely any argument is forgotten that could possibly be used in the case; and all are pressed with such force that, had it been the greatest favour to himself that he was asking, he could not have used more.

IV. The remarkable providence of God in preserving such a short writing as this, that might be thought of little concern to the church, being not only a letter to a particular person (as those to Timothy, and Titus, and Gaius, and the elect lady, likewise were), but of a private personal matter, namely, the receiving of a poor fugitive servant into the favour and family of his injured master. What in this is there that concerns the common salvation? And yet over this has there been a special divine care, it being given (as the other scriptures were) by *inspiration of God*, and in some sort, as they are, *profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness*. God would have extant a proof and instance of his rich and free grace for the encouragement and comfort of the meanest and vilest of sinners, looking to him for mercy and forgiveness; and for instruction to ministers and others not to despise any, much less to judge them as to their final state, as if they were utter cast-aways, but rather to attempt their conversion, hoping they may be saved; likewise how to behave towards them. Joy must be on earth, as well as there is in heaven, over one sinner who repenteth. Such must now be loved, and helped, and confirmed in good, and furthered in it; and, in their outward concerns, their comfort and welfare must be consulted and promoted as much as possible. And, on their part, they must be humble and grateful, acknowledging God and his instruments in what good they have received, ready to all suitable returns, making what reparation they can in case of injuries, and living a life of thankfulness and obedience. To such purposes may this epistle have been written and preserved. And perhaps,

V. There may be something further in all this; at least, by way of allusion, it is applicable to the mediation and intercession of Christ for poor sinners. We, like Onesimus, were revolvers from God's service, and had injured him in his rights. Jesus Christ finds us, and by his grace works a change in us, and then intercedes for us with the Father, that we may be received into

his favour and family again, and past offences may be forgiven; and we are sure that the *Father heareth him always*. There is no reason to doubt but Paul prevailed with Philemon to forgive and receive Onesimus: and more reason have we to be confident that the intercession of Christ with the Father is prevalent for the acceptance of all whose case he takes in hand and recommends to him. From these general observations we come to the epistle itself.

In this epistle we have,

- I. The preface (v. 1-7).
- II. The substance and body of it (v. 8-21). And then the conclusion (v. 22 to the end.)

~~500~~ PHILEMON 1:1-7

GRATITUDE ON PHILEMON'S BEHALF

I. In the first two verses of the preface we have the persons from and to whom it is written, with some annexed note or title, implying somewhat of argument to the purpose of the letter.

1. The persons writing: Paul, the principal, who calls himself *a prisoner of Jesus Christ*, that is, for Jesus Christ. To be a prisoner simply is no comfort nor honour; but such as Paul was, *for the faith and preaching of the gospel*, this was true glory, and proper to move Philemon upon the request made to him by such a one. A petition from one suffering for Christ and his gospel would surely be tenderly regarded by a believer and minister of Christ, especially when strengthened too with the concurrence of Timothy, one eminent in the church, sometimes called by Paul *his son in the faith*, but now, it is likely, grown more in years, he styles him *his brother*. What could be denied to two such petitioners? Paul is not slight in serving a poor convert; he gets all the additional help he can in it.

2. The persons written to are *Philemon and Apphia*, and with them Archippus, and the church in Philemon's house. Philemon, the master of Onesimus, was the principal, to whom the letter is inscribed, the head of the family, in whom were the authority and power of taking in or shutting out, and whose property Onesimus was: with him therefore chiefly lay the business. *To Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellow-labourer; a good*

man he was, and probably a minister, and on both accounts dearly beloved by Paul. *A lover of good men* is one property of a good minister (⁵⁰¹⁸Titus 1:8), and especially must such love those who labour with them in the work of the gospel, and who are faithful therein. The general calling as Christians knits those together who are Christian; but, when conjunction in the special calling as ministers is added, this will be further endearing. Paul, in the highest degree of ministry, not only calls Timothy, an evangelist, his brother, but Philemon, an ordinary pastor, his dearly beloved fellow-labourer — an example of humility and condescension, and of all affectionate regards, even in those that are highest in the church, towards others that are labourers in the same special heavenly calling. With Philemon Apphia is joined, probably his yoke-fellow; and, having a concern in the domestic affairs, the apostle directs to her likewise. She was a party offended and injured by Onesimus, and therefore proper to be taken notice of in a letter for reconciliation and forgiveness. Justice and prudence would direct Paul to this express notice of her, who might be helpful in furthering the good ends of his writing. She is set before Archippus, as more concerned and having more interest. A kind conjunction there is in domestic matters between husband and wife, whose interests are one, and whose affections and actings must correspond. These are the principal parties written to. The less principal are, *Archippus, and the church in Philemon's house*. Archippus was a minister in the church of Colosse, Philemon's friend, and probably co-pastor with him; Paul might think him one whom Philemon would advise with, and who might be capable of furthering the good work of peace-making and forgiveness, and therefore might judge fit to put him in the inscription of the letter, with the adjunct of *fellow-soldier*. He had called Philemon his *fellow-labourer*. Ministers must look on themselves as labourers and soldiers, who must therefore take pains, and endure hardship; they must stand on their guard, and make good their post; must look on one another as fellow-labourers, and fellow-soldiers, who must stand together, and strengthen one another's hands and hearts in any work of their holy function and calling: they need see to it that they be provided with spiritual weapons, and skill to use them; as labourers they must minister the word, and sacraments, and discipline, and watch over souls, *as those that must give an account of them*; and, as soldiers, they must fight the Lord's battles, and not entangle themselves in the things of this life, but attend to the pleasing of him who hath chosen them to be soldiers, ⁵⁰¹⁹2 Timothy 2:4. To those it is added, *And to the church in thy house*, his whole family, in which the worship of

God was kept up, so that he had, as it were, a church in his house. Observe,

(1.) Families which generally may be most pious and orderly may yet have one or other in them impious and wicked. This was the aggravation of Onesimus's sin, that it was where he might and should have learned better; it is likely that he was secret in him misconduct, till his flight discovered him. Hearts are unknown but to God, till overt acts discover them.

(2.) This one evil servant did not hinder Philemon's house from being called and counted a church, for the religious worship and order that were kept up in it; and such should all families be — nurseries of religion, societies where God is called on, his word is read, his sabbaths are observed, and the members are instructed in the knowledge of him and of their duty to him, neglect of which is followed with ignorance and all corruption. Wicked families are nurseries for hell, as good ones are for heaven.

(3.) Masters and others of the family may not think it enough to be good, singly and severally in their personal capacities, but they must be socially so; as here Philemon's house was a church; and Paul, for some concern that all might have in this matter of Onesimus, directs to them all, that their affection as well as Philemon's might return to him, and that in their way and place they might further, and not hinder, the reconciliation wished and sought. Desirable it is that all in a family be well affected towards one another, for furthering their particular welfare and for the common good and benefit of all. On such accounts might it be that Paul inscribed his letter here so generally, that all might be the more ready to own and receive this poor convert, and to behave affectionately towards him. Next to this inscription is,

II. The apostle's salutation of those named by him (v. 3): *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.* This is the token in every epistle; so the apostle writes. He is a hearty well-wisher to all his friends, and wishes for them the best things; not gold, nor silver, nor any earthly good, in the first or chief place, but *grace and peace from God in Christ*; he cannot give them himself, but he prays for them from him who can bestow them. *Grace*, the free favour and good-will of God, the spring and fountain of all blessings; *and peace*, all good, as the fruit and effect of that grace. *To you*, that is, be bestowed on you, and continued

to you, with the comfortable feeling and sense of it in yourselves. *From God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.* The Holy Spirit also is understood, though not named; for all acts towards the creatures of the whole Trinity: from the Father, who is our Father in Christ, the first in order of acting as of subsisting; and from Christ, his favour and good-will as God, and the fruits of it through him as Mediator, God-man. It is in the beloved that we are accepted, and through him we have peace and all good things, who is, with the Father and Spirit, to be looked to and blessed and praised for all, and to be owned, not only as Jesus and Christ, but as Lord also. In ^{<4734>}2 Corinthians 13:14 the apostle's benediction is full: *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all, Amen.* Observe, Spiritual blessings are first and especially to be sought for ourselves and others. The favour of God and peace with him, as in itself it is the best and most desirable good, so is it the cause of all other, and what puts sweetness into every mercy and can make happy even in the want of all earthly things. *Though there be no herd in the stall, and the labour of the olive fail, yet may such rejoice in the Lord, and joy in the God of their salvation,* ^{<3875>}Habakkuk 3:17, 18. *There are many that say, Who will show us any good? But, if God lift up the light of his countenance, this will put more joy and gladness into the heart than all worldly increase,* ^{<4046>}Psalm 4:6, 7. And ^{<4065>}Numbers 6:26, *The Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.* In this is summarily all good, and from this one fountain, God the Father, Son, and Spirit, all comes. After this salutation of the apostle to Philemon, and his friends and family, for better making way still for his suit to him,

III. He expresses the singular and affection he had for him, by thanksgiving and prayer to God in his behalf, and the great joy for the many good things he knew and heard to be in him, v. 4-7. The apostle's thanksgiving and prayer for Philemon are here set forth by the object, circumstance, and matter of them, with the way whereby much of the knowledge of Philemon's goodness came to him.

1. Here is the object of Paul's praises and prayers for Philemon: *I thank my God, making mention of thee in my prayers,* v. 4. Observe,

(1.) God is the author of all the good that is in any, or that is done by them. *From me is thy fruit found,* ^{<3448>}Hosea 14:8. To him therefore is all the praise due. ^{<1393>}1 Chronicles 29:13, 14, *But [or for] who am I, and what is*

my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly after this sort? For all things come of thee, both wherewith to offer, and the will and heart to do it. On this account (says he) we thank thee our God, and praise thy glorious name.

(2.) It is the privilege of good men that their praises and prayers they come to God as their God: *Our God, we thank thee*, said David; and *I thank my God*, said Paul.

(3.) Our prayers and praises should be offered up to God, not for ourselves only, but for others also. Private addresses should not be altogether with a private spirit, minding our own things only, but others must be remembered by us. We must be affected with joy and thankfulness for any good in them, or done by them, or bestowed on them, as far as is known to us, and seek for them what they need. In this lies no little part of the communion of saints. Paul, in his private thanksgivings and prayers, was often particular in remembering his friends: *I thank my God, making mention of thee in my prayers*; sometimes it may be by name, or at least having them particularly in his thoughts; and God knows who is meant, though not named. This is a means of exercising love, and obtaining good for others. *Strive with me, by your prayers to God for me*, said the apostle: and what he desired for himself he surely practised on behalf of others; so should all. *Pray one for another*, says James, 5:16.

2. Here is the circumstance: *Always making mention of thee. Always* — usually, not once or twice only, but frequently. So must we remember Christian friends much and often, as their case may need, bearing them in our thoughts and upon our hearts before our God.

3. Here is the matter both of his praises and prayers, in reference to Philemon.

(1.) Of his praises.

[1.] He thanks God for the love which he heard Philemon had towards the Lord Jesus. He is to be loved as God superlatively, as his divine perfections require; and as related to us, the Lord, and our Lord, our Maker, Redeemer, and Saviour, who loved us, and gave himself for us. Paul thanks God for what he heard of this, the signal marks and expressions of it in Philemon.

[2.] For his faith in Christ also. Love to Christ, and faith in him, are prime Christian graces, for which there is great ground of praise to God, where he has blessed any with them, as ^{<40B>}Romans 1:8, *I thank my God because your faith is published throughout the world*; and, in reference to the Colossians (^{<50B>}Colossians 1:3, 4), *We give thanks to God since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus*. This is a saving grace, and the very principle of Christian life and of all good works.

[3.] He praises God likewise for Philemon's love to all the saints. These two must go together; for he who *loveth him that begat must and will love those also that are begotten of him*. The apostle joins them in that (^{<50B>}Colossians 1:3, 4), *We give thanks to God since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which you have to all the saints*. These bear the image of Christ, which will be loved by every Christian. Different sentiments and ways in what is not essential will not make a difference of affection as to the truth, though difference in the degrees of love will be according as more or less of that image is discerned. Mere external differences are nothing here. Paul calls a poor converted slave *his bowels*. We must love, as God does, all saints. Paul thanked God for the good that was not only in the churches, but in the particular persons he wrote to, and though this too was known to him merely by report: *Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast towards the Lord Jesus, and towards all saints*. This was what he enquired after concerning his friends, the truth, and growth, and fruitfulness of their graces, their faith in Christ, and love to him and to all the saints. Love to saints, if it be sincere, will be catholic and universal love towards all saints; but faith and love, though in the heart they are hidden things, are known by the effects of them. Therefore,

(2.) The apostle joins prayer with his praises, that the fruits of Philemon's faith and love might be more and more conspicuous, so as that the communication of them might constrain others to the acknowledgment of all the good things that were in him and in his house towards Christ Jesus; that their *light might so shine before men that they, seeing their good works, might be stirred up to imitate them, and to glorify their Father who is in heaven*. Good works must be done, not of vain-glory to be seen, yet such as may be seen to God's glory and the good of men.

4. He adds a reason, both of his prayer and his praises (v. 7): *For "we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother*. The good thou hast done and still doest is

abundant matter of joy and comfort to me and others, who therefore desire you may continue and abound in such good fruits more and more, to God's honour and the credit of religion. *The administration of this service not only supplieth the want of the saints, but is abundant also by many thanksgivings unto God,*” ~~4002~~ 2 Corinthians 9:12.

~~5008~~ PHILEMON 1:8-25

THE APOSTLE'S PLEA FOR ONESIMUS

We have here,

I. The main business of the epistle, which was to plead with Philemon on behalf of Onesimus, that he would receive him and be reconciled to him. Many arguments Paul urges for this purpose, v. 8-21. The

1st Argument is taken from what was before noted, and is carried in the illative *wherefore*: “Seeing so much good is reported of thee and found in thee, especially thy love to all saints, now let me see it on a fresh and further occasion; *refresh the bowels of Onesimus and mine also*, in forgiving and receiving him, who is now a convert, and so a saint indeed, and meet for thy favour and love.” Observe, A disposition to do good, together with past instances and expressions of it, is a good handle to take hold of for pressing to more. “*Be not weary of well-doing*, go on as thou art able, and as new objects and occasions occur, to do the same still.” The

2nd Argument is from the authority of him that was now making this request to him: *I might be very bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient*, v. 8. The apostles had under Christ great power in the church over the ordinary ministers, as well as the members of it, for edification; they might require of them what was fit, and were therein to be obeyed, which Philemon should consider. This was a matter within the compass of the apostle's power to require, though he would not in this instance act up to it. Observe, Ministers, whatever their power be in the church, are to use prudence in the exercise of it; they may not unseasonably, nor further than is requisite, put it forth; in all they must use godly wisdom and discretion. Wherefore this may be a

3rd Argument, Waiving the authority which yet he had to require, he chooses to entreat it of him (v. 9): *Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee*. Observe, It is no disparagement for those who have power to be condescending, and sometimes even to beseech, where, in strictness of right, they might command; so does Paul here, though an apostle: he entreats where he might enjoin, he argues from love rather than authority, which doubtless must carry engaging influence with it. And especially, which may be a

4th Argument, When any circumstance of the person pleading gives additional force to his petition, as here: *Being such a one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ*. Years bespeak respect; and the motions of such, in things lawful and fit, should be received with regard. The request of an aged apostle, and now suffering for Christ and his gospel, should be tenderly considered. "If thou wilt do any thing for a poor aged prisoner, to comfort me in my bonds, and make my chain lighter, grant me this which I desire: hereby in a manner you will do honour to Christ in the person of an aged suffering servant of his, which doubtless he will take as done to himself." He makes also a

5th Argument, From the spiritual relation now between Onesimus and himself: *I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds*, v. 10. "Though of right and in a civil respect he by thy servant, yet in a spiritual sense he is now a son to me, God having made me the instrument of his conversion, even here, where I am a prisoner for Christ's sake." Thus does God sometimes honour and comfort his suffering servants, not only working good in themselves by their sufferings, exercising and improving thereby their own graces, but making them a means of much spiritual good to others, either of their conversion, as of Onesimus here, or of their confirmation and strengthening, as ^{<small>Rom}Philippians 1:14, *Many brethren, waxing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word of the Lord without fear*. When God's servants are bound, yet his word and Spirit are not bound; spiritual children may then be born to them. The apostle lays an emphasis here: *My son, whom I have begotten in my bonds*; he was dear to him, and he hoped would be so to Philemon, under this consideration. Prison-mercies are sweet and much set by. Paul makes an argument to Philemon from this dear relation that now was between Onesimus and him, his son begotten in his bonds. And a

6th Argument is from Philemon's own interest: *Who in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me*, v. 11. Observe,

(1.) Unsanctified persons are unprofitable persons; they answer not the great end of their being and relations. Grace makes good for somewhat: *"In time past unprofitable, but now profitable*, inclined and fitted to be so, and will be so to thee, his master, if thou receive him, as he has since his conversion been here to me, ministering to me in my confinement." There seems an allusion to the name Onesimus, which signifies *profitable*. Now he will answer to his name. It may be noted also how the apostle speaks in this matter, not as Onesimus's former case and conduct might warrant; he had wronged his master, and ran away from him, and lived as if he were his own and not his; yet as God covers the sins of penitents, forgives and does not upbraid, so should men. How tenderly does Paul here speak! Not that Onesimus's sin was small, nor that he would have any, much less himself, to take it so; but having been humbled for it, and doubtless taken shame to himself on account thereof, the apostle now would not sink his spirit by continuing to load and burden him therewith, but speaks thus tenderly when he is pleading with Philemon not to make severe reflections on his servant's misconduct, but to forgive.

(2.) What happy changes conversion makes — of evil good! of unprofitable useful! Religious servants are a treasure in a family. Such will make conscience of their time and trusts, promoting the interests of those whom they serve, and managing all they can for the best. This then is the argument here urged: "It will now be for thy advantage to receive him: thus changed, as he is, thou mayest expect him to be a dutiful and faithful servant, though in time past he was not so." Whereupon,

7th Argument, He urges Philemon from the strong affection that he had to Onesimus. He had mentioned the spiritual relation before, *My son begotten in my bonds*; and now he signifies how dear he was to him: *Thou therefore receive him, that is my own bowels*, v. 12. "I love him as I do myself, and have sent him back to thee for this end, that thou shouldst receive him; do it therefore for my sake, receive him as one thus dear to me." Observe, Even good men may sometimes need great earnestness and entreaty to lay their passions, let go their resentments, and forgive those who have injured and offended them. Some have thought it to look this way, when Paul is so pathetic and earnest, mustering up so many pleas and arguments to gain what he requests. Philemon, a Phrygian, might perhaps

be naturally of a rough and difficult temper, and thence need no little pains in touching all the springs that might move him to forgiveness and reconciliation; but rather should we strive to be like God, who is *slow to anger, ready to forgive, and abundant in pardons*. And again, an

8th Argument is from the apostle's denying himself in sending back Onesimus: though he might have presumed upon Philemon's leave to detain him longer, yet he would not, v. 13, 14. Paul was now in prison, and wanted a friend or servant to act for him, and assist him, for which he found Onesimus fit and ready, and therefore would have detained him to minister to him, instead of Philemon himself, whom if he had requested to have come to him in person for such purpose, he might have presumed he would not have refused; much less might he have reckoned that he would be unwilling his servant should do this in his stead; yet he would not take this liberty, though his circumstances needed it: *I have sent him back to thee, that any good office of thine to me might not be of necessity, but willingly*. Observe, Good deeds are most acceptable to God and man when done with most freedom. And Paul herein, notwithstanding his apostolical power, would show what regard he had to civil rights, which Christianity does by no means supersede or weaken, but rather confirm and strengthen. Onesimus, he knew, was Philemon's servant, and therefore without his consent not to be detained from him. In his unconverted state he had violated that right, and withdrawn himself, to his master's injury; but, now that he had seen his sin and repented, he was willing and desirous to return to his duty, and Paul would not hinder this, but rather further it. He might indeed have presumed on Philemon's willingness; but, notwithstanding his need, he would deny himself rather than take that way. And he further urges,

9th Argument, That such a change was now wrought in Onesimus that Philemon needed not fear his ever running from him, or injuring him any more: *For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever*, v. 15. There are those of whom Solomon says, *If thou deliver them, thou must do it again* (²⁰⁰⁹Proverbs 19:19); but the change wrought in Onesimus was such that he would never again need one thus to intercede for him. Charity would so hope and judge, yea, so it would be; yet the apostle speaks cautiously, that none might be bold to make another such experiment in expectation of a like gracious issue. Observe,

(1.) In matters that may be wrested to ill, ministers must speak warily, that kind providences of God towards sinners be not abused to encouragements to sin, or abatements of just abhorrence of it: *Perhaps he therefore departed from thee for a season*, etc.

(2.) How tenderly still the sins of penitents are spoken of; he calls it a *departure for a season*, instead of giving it the term that it deserved. As overruled and ordered by God, it was a *departure*; but in itself, and in respect of the disposition and manner of the act, it was a *criminal going away*. When we speak of the nature of any sin or offence against God, the evil of it is not to be lessened; but in the person of a penitent sinner, as God covers it, so must we: "*He departed for a season, that thou shouldst receive him for ever, that upon conversion he may return, and be a faithful and useful servant to thee as long as he lives.*" *Bray a fool in a mortar, yet will not his folly depart from him*. But it is not so with true penitents: they will not return to folly.

(3.) Observe the wisdom, and goodness, and power of God, in causing that to end so happily which was begun and carried on for some time so wickedly, thus regarding a poor vassal, one of such low rank and condition and so little regarded by men, working so good and great a change in him who was so far gone in evil ways, who had wronged a master so good, had run from a family so pious, from the means of grace, the church in his house, that he should be led into the way of salvation who had fled from it, and find means made effectual at Rome who had been hardened under them at Colosse. What riches are here of divine grace! None so low, nor mean, nor vile, as utterly to be despaired of. God can meet with them when running from him; can make means effectual at one time and place, which have not been so at another. So was it in this instance of Onesimus; having returned to God, he now returns to his master, who will have more service and better hold of him than ever — by conscience of his duty and faithfulness in it to his life's end; his interest therefore it will be now to receive him. So God often brings gain to his people out of their losses. And, besides interest, a

10th Argument is taken from the capacity under which Onesimus now would return, and must be received by Philemon (v. 16): "*Not now as a servant* (that is, not merely or so much), *but above a servant* (in a spiritual respect), *a brother beloved*, one to be owned as a brother in Christ, and to be beloved as such, upon account of this holy change that is wrought in

him, and one therefore who will be useful unto thee upon better principles and in a better manner than before, who will love and promote the best things in thy family, be a blessing in it, and help to keep up the church that is in thy house.” Observe,

(1.) There is a spiritual brotherhood between all true believers, however distinguished in civil and outward respects; they are all children of the same heavenly Father, have a right to the same spiritual privileges and benefits, must love and do all good offices to and for one another as brethren, though still in the same rank, and degree, and station, wherein they were called. Christianity does not annul nor confound the respective civil duties, but strengthens the obligation to them, and directs to a right discharge of them.

(2.) Religious servants are more than mere ordinary servants; they have grace in their hearts, and have found grace in God's sight, and so will in the sight of religious masters. ~~1916~~ Psalm 101:6, *Mine eyes are upon the faithful of the land, that they may dwell with me. He that walketh in a perfect way, he shall serve me.* “Onesimus having now become such, receive and regard him as one that is partaker of the same common faith, and so *a brother beloved, specially to me* who have been the instrument of his conversion.” Good ministers love not so much according to the outward good which they receive as the spiritual good which they do. Paul called Onesimus his *own bowels*, and other converts his *joy and crown*. “*A brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more to thee, both in the flesh and in the Lord; by a double tie therefore (both civil and religious) thy servant: thy property, one of thy house and family, and now, in a spiritual respect, thy brother in Christ, which heightens the engagement. He is God's servant and thine too; here are more ties than he is under to me. How readily therefore should he be received and loved by thee, as one of thy family and one of the true faith, one of thy house and one of the church in thy house!*” This argument is strengthened by another, the

11th Argument, From the communion of saints: *If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself*, v. 17. There is a fellowship among saints; they have interest one in another, and must love and act accordingly. “Now show thy love to me, and the interest I have in thee, by loving and receiving one so near and dear to me, even as myself; own and treat him as thou wouldst me, with a like ready and true, though perhaps not equal, affection.” But why such concern and earnestness for a servant,

a slave, and such a one as had misbehaved? *Answer*, Onesimus being now penitent, it was doubtless to encourage him, and to support him against the fears he might have in returning to a master whom he had so much abused and wronged, to keep him from sinking into despondency and dejection, and encourage him to his duty. Wise and good ministers will have great and tender care of young converts, to encourage and hearten them what they can to and in their duty. *Objection*, But Onesimus had wronged as well as offended his master. The answer to this makes a

12th Argument, A promise of satisfaction to Philemon: *If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought*, etc., v. 18, 19. Here are three things:

(1.) A confession of Onesimus's debt to Philemon: *If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought*. It is not an *if* of doubting, but of illation and concession; *seeing he hath wronged thee*, and thereby has become indebted to thee; such an *if* as ^{<311>}Colossians 3:1 and ^{<312>}2 Peter 2:4, etc. Observe, True penitents will be ingenuous in owning their faults, as doubtless Onesimus had been to Paul, upon his being awakened and being brought to repentance; and especially is this to be done in cases of injury to others. Onesimus by Paul owns the wrong. And,

(2.) Paul here engages for satisfaction: *Put that on my account; I Paul have written it with my own hand, I will repay it*. Observe,

[1.] The communion of saints does not destroy distinction of property: Onesimus, now converted, and become a brother beloved, is yet Philemon's servant still, and indebted to him for wrongs that he had done, and not to be discharged but by free and voluntary remission, or on reparation made by himself, or some other in his behalf, which part, rather than fail, the apostle undertakes for him.

[2.] Suretiship is not in all cases unlawful, but in some is a good and merciful undertaking. Only know the person and case, be not *surety for a stranger* (^{<313>}Proverbs 11:15), and go not beyond ability; help thy friend thou mayest, as far as will comport with justice and prudence. And how happy for us that Christ would be made the surety of a better covenant (^{<314>}Hebrews 7:22), that he would be made *sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him!* And,

[3.] Formal securities by writing, as well as by word and promise, may be required and given. Persons die, and words may be forgotten or mistaken;

writing better preserves right and peace, and has been in use with good persons, as well as others, in all ages, ^{<4619>}Jeremiah 32:9, etc.; ^{<4616>}Luke 16:5-7. It was much that Paul, who lived on contributions himself, would undertake to make good all loss by an evil servant to his master; but hereby he expresses his real and great affection for Onesimus, and his full belief of the sincerity of his conversion: and he might have hope that, notwithstanding this generous offer, Philemon would not insist on it, but freely remit all, considering,

(3.) The reason of things between him and Philemon: “*Albeit, I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thy own self besides; thou wilt remember, without my reminding thee, that thou are on other accounts more in debt to me than this comes to.*” Modesty in self-praises is true praise. The apostle glances at the benefits he had conferred on Philemon: “*That thou art any thing in grace and acceptation with God, or enjoyest any thing in a right and comfortable manner, it is, under God, owing to my ministry. I have been the instrument in his hand of all that spiritual good to thee; and what thy obligation to me on this account is I leave to thee to consider. Thy forgiving a pecuniary debt to a poor penitent for my sake and at my request, and which, however, I now take upon myself to answer, thy remitting it to him, or to me, now his surety, thou wilt confess, is not so great a thing; here is more *per contra: Thou owest to me even thy ownself besides.*” Observe, How great the endearments are between ministers and those towards whom their endeavours have been blessed to their conversion or spiritual edification! *If it had been possible* (said Paul to the Galatians), *you would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me,* ^{<4615>}Galatians 4:15. On the other hand he calls them his *children, of whom he travailed again, till Christ was formed in them*, that is, the likeness of Christ more fully. So ^{<5018>}1 Thessalonians 2:8, *We were willing to have imparted to you not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because you were dear unto us.* By way of allusion, this may illustrate Christ's undertaking for us. We had revolted from God, and by sin had wronged him, but Christ undertakes to make satisfaction, *the just for the unjust, that he might bring us unto God.* “If the sinner owes thee aught, put it upon my account, I will pay the debt; let his iniquity be laid on me, I will bear the penalty.” Further, a*

13th Argument is from the joy and comfort the apostle hereby would have on Philemon's own account, as well as on Onesimus's in such a seasonable and acceptable fruit of Philemon's faith and obedience: *Yea, brother, let*


me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord, v. 20. Philemon was Paul's son in the faith, yet he entreats him as a brother; Onesimus a poor slave, yet he solicits for him as if he were seeking some great thing for himself. How pathetic is he! “*Yea, brother, or O my brother* (it is an adverb of wishing or desiring), *let me have joy of thee in the Lord*. Thou knowest that I am now a prisoner of the Lord, for his sake and cause, and need all the comfort and support that my friends in Christ can give me: now this will be a joy to me, I shall *have joy of thee in the Lord*, as seeing such an evidence and fruit of thy own Christian faith and love, and on Onesimus's account, who hereby will be relieved and encouraged.” Observe,

(1.) Christians should do the things that may rejoice the hearts of one another, both people and minister reciprocally, and ministers of their brethren. From the world they expect trouble; and where may they look for comfort and joy but in one another?

(2.) Fruits of faith and obedience in people are the minister's greatest joy, especially the more of love appears in them to Christ and his members, forgiving injuries, showing compassion, being merciful as their heavenly Father is merciful. “*Refresh my bowels in the Lord*. It is not any carnal selfish respect I am actuated by, but what is pleasing to Christ, and that he may have honour therein.” Observe,

[1.] The Lord's honour and service are a Christian's chief aim in all things. And,

[2.] It is meat and drink to a good minister to see people ready and zealous in what is good, especially in acts of charity and beneficence, as occasions occur, forgiving injuries, remitting somewhat of their right, and the like. And, once more, his last, which is the

14th Argument, Lies in the good hope and opinion which he expresses of Philemon: *Having confidence in thy obedience, I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say*, v. 21. Good thoughts and expectations of us more strongly move and engage us to do the things expected from us. The apostle knew Philemon to be a good man, and was thence persuaded of his readiness to do good, and that not in a scanty and niggardly manner, but with a free and liberal hand. Observe, Good persons will be ready for good works, and not narrow and pinching, but abundant in them.  Isaiah 32:8, *The liberal deviseth liberal things*. The

Macedonians first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to his apostles by the will of God, to do what good they could with what they had, according as occasions offered.

Thus far is the substance and body of the epistle. We have,

II. The conclusion, where,

1. He signifies his good hope of deliverance, through their prayers, and that shortly he might see them, desiring Philemon to make provision for him: *But withal prepare me also a lodging; for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you*, v. 22. *But withal*, or *moreover*. He comes to another thing, yet, as may seem, not without some eye to the matter which he had been upon, that might be furthered by this intimation that he hoped he should himself soon follow, and know the effect of his epistle, which Philemon would therefore be the more stirred up to see might be to his satisfaction. Now here is,

(1.) The thing requested: *Prepare me also a lodging*; under this all necessities for a stranger are included. He wills Philemon to do it, intending to be his guest, as most to his purpose. Observe, Hospitality is a great Christian duty, especially in ministers, and towards ministers, such as the apostle was, coming out of such dangers and sufferings for Christ and his gospel. Who would not show the utmost of affectionate regards to such a one? It is an honourable title that he gives Gaius (^{4:16}Romans 16:23), *My host, and of the whole church*. Onesiphorus is also affectionately remembered by the apostle on this account (^{2:16}2 Timothy 1:16, 18), *The Lord give mercy to the house of Onesiphorus; for he oft refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain; and in how many things he ministered to me at Ephesus, thou knowest*.

(2.) Here is the ground of the apostle's request: *For I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you*. He did not know how God might deal with him, but the benefit of prayer he had often found, and hoped he should again, for deliverance, and liberty to come to them. Observe,

[1.] Our dependence is on God for life and liberty and opportunity of service; all is by divine pleasure.

[2.] When abridged of these or any other mercies, our trust and hope must be in God, without fainting or succumbing, while our case is depending. But yet,

[3.] Trust must be with the use of means, prayer especially, though no other should be at hand; this hath unlocked heaven and opened prison-doors. *The fervent effectual prayer of the righteous availeth much.*

[4.] Prayer of people for ministers, especially when they are in distress and danger, is their great duty; ministers need and request it. Paul, though an apostle, did so with much earnestness, ^{<B50>}Romans 15:30; ^{<C11>}2 Corinthians 1:11; ^{<A68>}Ephesians 6:18, 19; ^{<S15>}1 Thessalonians 5:25. The least may in this way be helpful to the greatest. Yet,

[5.] Though prayer obtains, yet it does not merit the things obtained: they are God's gift, and Christ's purchase. *I trust that through your prayers, charisthesomai hymin — I shall be freely bestowed on you.* What God gives, he will yet be sought to for, that mercies may be valued the more, and known whence they come, and God may have the praise. Minister's lives and labours are for the people's good; the office was set up for them; *he gave gifts for men, apostles, etc.* ^{<A68>}Ephesians 4:8, 11, 12. Their gifts, and labours, and lives, all are for their benefit. ^{<A62>}1 Corinthians 3:21, 22, *All things are yours, Apollos, Cephas, etc.*

[6.] In praying for faithful ministers, people in effect pray for themselves: *"I trust I shall be given unto you, for your service, and comfort, and edification in Christ."* See ^{<A65>}2 Corinthians 4:15.

[7.] Observe the humility of the apostle; his liberty, should he have it, he would own to be through their prayers, as well as, or more than, his own; he mentions them only through the high thoughts he had of the prayers of many, and the regard God would show to his praying people. Thus of the first thing in the apostle's conclusion.

2. he sends salutations from one who was his fellow-prisoner, and four more who were his fellow-labourers, v. 23, 24. Saluting is wishing health and peace. Christianity is no enemy to courtesy, but enjoins it, ^{<A68>}1 Peter 3:8. It is a mere expression of love and respect, and a means of preserving and nourishing them. *There salute thee Epaphras, my fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus.* he was of Colosse, and so countryman and fellow-citizen with Philemon; by office he seems to have been an evangelist, who laboured among the Colossians (if he was not the first converter of them), for whom he had special affection. *Our dear fellow-servant* (said St. Paul), *and for you a faithful minister of Christ* (^{<S10>}Colossians 1:7), and (^{<S10>}Colossians 4:12, 13), *A servant of Christ, always labouring for you in*

prayers. *I bear him record that he hath a great zeal for you*, etc. A very eminent person therefore this was, who, being at Rome, perhaps accompanying Paul, and labouring in the same work of preaching and propagating the gospel, was confined in the same prison, and for the same cause; both termed *prisoners in Christ Jesus*, intimating the ground of their imprisonment, not any crime or wickedness, but for the faith of Christ and their service to him. An honour it is to suffer shame for Christ's name. *My fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus* is mentioned as his glory and the apostle's comfort; not that he was a prisoner and so hindered from his work (this was matter of affliction), but that, seeing God thus permitted and called him to suffer, his providence so ordered it that they suffered together, and so had the benefit and comfort of one another's prayers, and help, it may be, in some things; this was a mercy. So God sometimes lightens the sufferings of his servants by the communion of saints, the sweet fellowship they have one with another in their bonds. Never more enjoyment of God have they found than when suffering together for God. So Paul and Silas, when their feet were fast in the stocks, had their tongues set at liberty, and their hearts tuned for the praises of God. — *Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellow-labourers*. The mention of these seems in a manner to interest them in the business of the latter. How ill would it look by denial of the request of it to slight so many worthy names as most of these, at least, were! *Marcus*, cousin of Barnabas, and son of Mary, who was so hospitable to the saints at Jerusalem (^{<5040>}Colossians 4:10, ^{<4122>}Acts 12:12), and whose house was the place of meeting for prayer and the worship of God. Though some failing seems to have been in him when Paul and he parted, yet in conjunction with Barnabas he went on with his work, and here Paul and he, we perceive, were reconciled, and differences forgotten, ^{<5041>}2 Timothy 4:11. He bids Mark to be brought to him, *for he is profitable to me for the ministry*, that is, of an evangelist. *Aristarchus* is mentioned with Marcus (^{<5040>}Colossians 4:10), and called there by Paul his fellow-prisoner; and speaking there of Marcus, sister's son to Barnabas, he adds, *Touching whom you received commandments; if he come unto you, receive him*: an evidence that he himself had received him, and was reconciled to him. Next is *Demas*, who hitherto, it seems, appeared not faulty, though he is censured (^{<5041>}2 Timothy 4:10) as having forsaken Paul, from *love of this present world*. But how far his forsaking was, whether total from his work and profession, or partial only, and whether he repented and returned to his duty, scripture is silent, and so much we be: no mark of disgrace lay on

him here, but he is joined with others who were faithful, as he is also in ^{<5044>}Colossians 4:14. *Lucas* is the last, that *beloved physician* and evangelist, who came to Rome, companion with Paul, ^{<5044>}Colossians 4:14; ^{<5041>}2 Timothy 4:11. He was Paul's associate in his greatest dangers, and his fellow-labourer. The ministry is not a matter of carnal ease nor pleasure, but of pains; if any are idle in it, they answer not their calling. Christ bids his disciples *pray the Lord of the harvest to send forth labourers*, not loiterers, *into his harvest*, ^{<4088>}Matthew 9:38. And the people are extorted to *know those that labour among them, and are over them in the Lord, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake*, ^{<5152>}1 Thessalonians 5:12, 13. *My fellow-labourers*, says the apostle: ministers must be helpers together of the truth; they serve the same Lord, in the same holy work and function, and are expectants of the same glorious reward; therefore they must be assistants to each other in furthering the interest of their great and common Master. Thus of the salutations, and then,

3. Here is the apostle's closing prayer and benediction, v. 25. Observe,

(1.) What is wished and prayed for: *Grace*, the free favour and love of God, together with the fruits and effects of it in all good things, for soul and body, for time and eternity. Observe, Grace is the best wish for ourselves and others; with this the apostle begins and ends.

(2.) From whom: *Our Lord Jesus Christ*, the Son of God, second Person in the Trinity, Lord by natural right, *by whom, and for whom, all things were created* (^{<5016>}Colossians 1:16, ^{<801>}John 1:1-3), *and who is heir of all things*, and, as God-man and Mediator, who purchased us, and to whom we are given by the Father. *Jesus*, the Saviour, ^{<4021>}Matthew 1:21. We were lost and undone; he recovers us, and repairs the ruin. He saves by merit, procuring pardon and life for us; and by power, rescuing us from sin, and Satan, and hell, and renewing us to the likeness, and bringing us to the enjoyment, of God: thus is he Jesus; and Christ, the Messiah or anointed, consecrated and fitted to be king, priest, and prophet, to his church. To all those offices were there anointings under the law with oil, and to them was the Saviour spiritually anointed with the Holy Ghost, ^{<4088>}Acts 10:38. In none but him were all these together and in such eminence. *He was anointed with the oil of gladness above his fellows*, ^{<981>}Psalms 45:7. This Lord Jesus Christ is ours by original title to us, by gospel offers and gift, his purchase of us, and our own acceptance of him, resignation to him, and mystical union with him: *Our Lord Jesus Christ*. Observe, All grace to us

is from Christ; he purchased, and he bestows it. *Of his fulness we all receive, and grace for grace,* ^{<416>}John 1:16. *He filleth all in all,* ^{<413>}Ephesians 1:23.

(3.) To whom: *Your spirit, meta tou pneumatos hymon,* not of Philemon only, but of all who were named in the inscription. *With your spirit,* that is, with you, the soul or spirit being the immediate seat of grace, whence it influences the whole man, and flows out in gracious and holy actings. All the house saluted are here joined in the closing benediction, the more to remind and quicken all to further the end of the epistle.

Amen is added, not only for strong and affectionate summing up the prayer and wish, *so let it be;* but as an expression of faith that it will be heard, *so shall it be.* And what need we more to make us happy than to have *the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ with our spirit?* This is the usual benediction, but it may be taken here to have some special respect also to the occasion; the grace of Christ with their spirits, Philemon's especially, would sweeten and mollify them, take off too deep and keen resentments of injuries, and dispose to forgive others as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven us.