

THE EPISTLE OF PAUL TO

PHILEMON

Commentary by **A. R. FAUSSETT**

INTRODUCTION

The testimonies to its authenticity are — ORIGEN [*Homily 19, on Jeremiah*, vol. 1., p. 185, *Edition Huetius*], cites it as the letter of Paul to Philemon concerning Onesimus; TERTULLIAN [*Against Marcion*, 5.21]: “The brevity of this Epistle is the sole cause of its escaping the falsifying hands of Marcion.” EUSEBIUS [*Ecclesiastical History*, 3.25], mentions it among “the universally acknowledged Epistles of the canon”; JEROME [*Commentary on Philemon*, vol. iv., p. 442], argues for it against those who objected to its canonicity on the ground of its subject being beneath an apostle to write about. IGNATIUS [*Epistle to the Ephesians*, 2; *Epistle to the Magnesians*, 12], seems to allude to ^{<5012>}Philemon 1:20. Compare *Epistle to Polycarp* [1 and 6]. Its brevity is the cause of its not being often quoted by the Fathers. PALEY [*Horae Paulinae*], has shown striking proofs of its authenticity in the undesigned coincidences between it and the Epistle to the Colossians.

PLACE AND TIME OF WRITING. — This Epistle is closely linked with the Epistle to the Colossians. Both were carried by the same bearer, Onesimus (with whom, however, Tychicus is joined in the Epistle to the Colossians), ^{<5049>}Colossians 4:9. The persons sending salutations are the same, except one, Jesus called *Justus* (^{<5041>}Colossians 4:11). In both alike Archippus is addressed (^{<5029>}Philippians 2:2 ^{<5047>}Colossians 4:17). Paul and Timothy stand in the headings of both. And in both Paul appears as a prisoner (^{<5029>}Philippians 2:9 ^{<5048>}Colossians 4:18). Hence it follows, it was written at the same time and place as the Epistle to the Colossians (which was about the same time as the Epistle to the Ephesians), namely, at Rome, during Paul’s first imprisonment, A.D. 61 or 62.

OBJECT. — Onesimus, of Colosse (“one of you,” ^{<S00B>}Colossians 4:9), slave of Philemon, had fled from his master to Rome, after having probably defrauded him (^{<S01B>}Philippians 2:18). He there was converted to Christianity by Paul, and being induced by him to return to his master, he was furnished with this Epistle, recommending him to Philemon’s favorable reception, as being now no longer a mere servant, but also a brother in Christ. Paul ends by requesting Philemon to prepare him a lodging, as he trusted soon to be set free and visit Colosse. This Epistle is addressed also to Apphia, supposed from its domestic subject to have been Philemon’s wife, and Archippus (a minister of the Colossian Church, ^{<S007>}Colossians 4:17), for the same reason, supposed to be a near relative.

Onesimus in the *Apostolical Canons* [73], is said to have been emancipated by his master. The *Apostolical Constitutions* [7.46] state that he was consecrated by Paul, bishop of Berea, in Macedonia, and that he was martyred at Rome. IGNATIUS [*Epistle to the Ephesians*, 1], speaks of him as bishop of the Ephesians.

STYLE. — It has been happily termed, from its graceful and delicate urbanity, “the polite Epistle.” Yet there is nothing of insincere compliment, miscalled politeness by the world. It is manly and straightforward, without misrepresentation or suppression of facts; at the same time it is most captivately persuasive. ALFORD quotes LUTHER’S eloquent description, “This Epistle showeth a right, noble, lovely example of Christian love. Here we see how St. Paul layeth himself out for the poor Onesimus, and with all his means pleadeth his cause with his master, and so setteth himself as if he were Onesimus, and had himself done wrong to Philemon. Yet all this doeth he, not with force, as if he had right thereto, but he stripped himself of his right, and thus enforceth Philemon to forego his right also. Even as Christ did for us with God the Father, thus also doth St. Paul for Onesimus with Philemon: for Christ also stripped Himself of His right, and by love and humility enforced [?] the Father to lay aside His wrath and power, and to take us to His grace for the sake of Christ, who lovingly pleadeth our cause, and with all His heart layeth Himself out for us; for we are all His Onesimi, to my thinking.”

PHILEMON 1:1-25.

ADDRESS. THANKSGIVING FOR PHILEMON'S LOVE AND FAITH. INTERCESSION FOR ONESIMUS. CONCLUDING REQUEST AND SALUTATIONS.

This Epistle affords a specimen of the highest wisdom as to the manner in which Christians ought to manage social affairs on more exalted principles.

1. prisoner of Jesus Christ — one whom Christ's cause has made a prisoner (compare "in the bonds of the Gospel," (^{<small>S001B</small>} Philemon 1:13). He does not call himself, as in other Epistles, "Paul an apostle," as he is writing familiarly, not authoritatively.

our ... fellow laborer — in building up the Church at Colosse, while we were at Ephesus. See my *Introduction to Colossians*.

2. Apphia — the *Latin*, "Appia"; either the wife or some close relative of Philemon. She and Archippus, if they had not belonged to his family, would not have been included with Philemon in the address of a letter on a domestic matter.

Archippus — a minister of the Colossian Church (^{<small>S001B</small>} Colossians 4:17).

fellow soldier — (^{<small>S001B</small>} 2 Timothy 2:3).

church in thy house — In the absence of a regular church building, the houses of particular saints were used for that purpose. Observe Paul's tact in associating with Philemon those associated by kindred or Christian brotherhood with his *house*, and not going beyond it.

4. always — joined by ALFORD with, "I thank my God."

5. Hearing — the ground of his thanksgiving. It is a delicate mark of authenticity, that he says "hearing" as to churches and persons whom he had not seen or *then* visited. Now Colosse, Philemon's place of residence, he had never yet seen. Yet ^{<small>S001B</small>} Philemon 1:19 here implies that Philemon was his convert. Philemon, doubtless, was converted at Ephesus, or in some other place where he met Paul.

love and faith — The theological order is first *faith* then *love*, the fruit of faith. But he purposely puts Philemon's *love* in the first place, as it is to an act of love that he is exhorting him.

toward ... toward — different *Greek* words: “towards” ... “unto.” *Towards* implies simply direction; *unto*, to the advantage of.

6. That — The aim of my thanksgiving and prayers for thee is, *in order that the*, etc.

the communication of thy faith — *the imparting of it and its fruits* (namely, acts of love and beneficence: as ^{<5836>}Hebrews 13:16, “to communicate,” that is, to impart a share) *to others*; or, *the liberality to others flowing from thy faith* (so the *Greek* is translated, “liberal distribution,” ^{<4093>}2 Corinthians 9:13).

effectual by — *Greek*, “in”; the element in which his liberality had place, that is, may be *proved by acts in*, etc.

acknowledging — *Greek*, “the thorough knowledge,” that is, the experimental or practical *recognition*.

of every good thing which is in you — The oldest manuscripts read, “which is in US,” that is, the practical recognition of every grace which is in us *Christians*, in so far as we realize the Christian character. In short, that thy faith may by acts be proved to be “a faith which worketh by love.”

in Christ Jesus — rather as *Greek*, “unto Christ Jesus,” that is, to the glory of Christ Jesus. Two of the oldest manuscripts omit “Jesus.” This verse answers to ^{<5006>}Philemon 1:5, “thy love and faith toward all saints”; Paul never ceases to mention him in his prayers, *in order that* his faith may still further show its power in his relation to others, by exhibiting every grace which is in Christians to the glory of Christ. Thus he paves the way for the request in behalf of Onesimus.

7. For — a reason for the prayer, ^{<5006>}Philemon 1:4-6.

we have — *Greek*, “we had.”

joy and consolation — joined in ^{<4006>}2 Corinthians 7:4.

saints are refreshed by thee — His house was open to them.

brother — put last, to conciliate his favorable attention to the request which follows.

8. Wherefore — Because of my love to thee, I prefer to “*beseech*,” rather than “enjoin,” or *authoritatively command*.

I might ... enjoin — in virtue of the obligation to *obedience* which Philemon lay under to Paul, as having been converted through his instrumentality.

in Christ — the element in which his boldness has place.

9. for love’s sake — mine to thee, and (what ought to be) thine to Onesimus. Or, that Christian love of which thou showest so bright an example (⁵⁰⁰⁹Philemon 1:7).

being such an one — Explain, *Being such a one* as thou knowest me to be, namely,

Paul — the founder of so many churches, and an apostle of Christ, and thy father in the faith.

the aged — a circumstance calculated to secure thy respect for anything I request.

and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ — the strongest claim I have on thy regard: if for no other reason, at least in consideration of this, through commiseration gratify me.

10. I beseech thee — emphatically repeated from ⁵⁰⁰⁹Philemon 1:9. In the *Greek*, the name “Onesimus” is skilfully put last, he puts first a favorable description of him before he mentions the name that had fallen into so bad repute with Philemon. “I beseech thee for my son, whom I have begotten in my bonds, Onesimus.” Scripture does not sanction slavery, but at the same time does not begin a political crusade against it. It sets forth *principles of love* to our fellow men which were sure (as they have done) in due time to undermine and overthrow it, without violently convulsing the then existing political fabric, by stirring up slaves against their masters.

11. Which ... was ... unprofitable — belying his name Onesimus, which means “profitable.” Not only was he “unprofitable,” but positively injurious, having “wronged” his master. Paul uses a mild expression.

now profitable — Without godliness a man has no station. *Profitable* in spiritual, as well as in *temporal* things.

12. mine own bowels — as dear to me as my own heart [ALFORD]. Compare ^{<S017>}Philemon 1:17, “as myself.” The object of my most intense affection as that of a parent for a child.

13. I — emphatical. I for my part. Since *I* had such implicit trust in him as to desire to keep him with me for his services, *thou* mayest.

I would have retained — different *Greek* from the “would,” ^{<S014>}Philemon 1:14, “I could have *wished*,” “I was *minded*” here; but “I was not *willing*,” ^{<S014>}Philemon 1:14.

in thy stead — that he might supply in your place all the services to me which you, if you were here, would render in virtue of the love you bear to me (^{<S019>}Philemon 1:19).

bonds of the gospel — my bonds endured for the Gospel’s sake (^{<S009>}Philemon 1:9).

14. without thy mind — that is, consent.

should not be as — “should not appear as a matter of necessity, but of free will.” Had Paul kept Onesimus, however willing to gratify Paul Philemon might be, he would have no opportunity given him of showing he was so, his leave not having been asked.

15. perhaps — speaking in human fashion, yet as one believing that God’s Providence probably (for we cannot dogmatically define the hidden purposes of God in providence) overruled the past evil to ultimately greater good to him. This thought would soften Philemon’s indignation at Onesimus’ past offense. So Joseph in ^{<045>}Genesis 45:5.

departed — literally, “was parted from thee”; a softening term for “ran away,” to mitigate Philemon’s wrath.

receive him — *Greek*, “have him for thyself in full possession” (see on ^{<5018>}Philippians 4:18). The same *Greek* as in ^{<4101>}Matthew 6:2.

for ever — in this life and in that to come (compare ^{<1211>}Exodus 21:6). Onesimus’ time of absence, however long, was but a short “hour” (so *Greek*) compared with the everlasting devotion henceforth binding him to his master.

16. No longer as a mere servant or slave (though still he is that), but above a servant, so that thou shalt derive from him not merely the services of a slave, but higher benefits: a *servant* “in the flesh,” he is a *brother* “in the Lord.”

beloved, specially to me — who am his spiritual father, and who have experienced his faithful attentions. Lest Philemon should dislike Onesimus being called “brother,” Paul first recognizes him as a brother, being the spiritual son of the same God.

much more unto thee — to whom he stands in so much nearer and more lasting relation.

17. a partner — in the Christian fellowship of faith, hope, and love.

receive him as myself — resuming “receive him that is mine own bowels.”

18. *Greek*, “But it (thou art not inclined to ‘receive him’ because) he hath wronged thee”; a milder term than “robbed thee.” Onesimus seems to have confessed some such act to Paul.

put that on mine account — I am ready to make good the loss to thee if required. The latter parts of ^{<5018>}Philemon 1:19,21, imply that he did not expect Philemon would probably demand it.

19. with mine own hand — not employing an amanuensis, as in other Epistles: a special compliment to Philemon which he ought to show his appreciation of by granting Paul’s request. Contrast ^{<5018>}Colossians 4:18, which shows that the Epistle to the Colossian Church, accompanying this Epistle, had only its closing “salutation” written by Paul’s own hand.

albeit, etc. — literally, “that I may not say ... not to say,” etc.

thou owest ... even thine own self — not merely thy possessions. For to my instrumentality thou owest thy salvation. So the debt which “he oweth thee” being transferred upon me (I making myself responsible for it) is cancelled.

20. let me — “me” is emphatic: “Let *me* have profit (so *Greek* ‘for joy,’ *onainen*, referring to the name *Onesimus*, ‘profitable’) from *thee*, as *thou* shouldst have had from Onesimus”; for “thou owest thine ownself to me.”

in the Lord — not in worldly gain, but in thine increase in the graces of the Lord’s Spirit [ALFORD].

my bowels — my heart. Gratify my feelings by granting this request.

in the Lord — The oldest manuscripts read, “*in Christ*,” the element or sphere in which this act of Christian love naturally ought to have place.

21. Having confidence in thy obedience — to my apostolic authority, if I were to “enjoin” it (^{<500B>}Philemon 1:8), which I do not, preferring to beseech thee for it as a favor (^{<500B>}Philemon 1:9).

thou will also do more — towards Onesimus: hinting at his possible manumission by Philemon, *besides*, being kindly received.

22. This prospect of Paul’s visiting Colosse would tend to secure a kindly reception for Onesimus, as Paul would know in person how he had been treated.

your ... you — referring to Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the Church in Philemon’s house. The same expectation is expressed by him, ^{<18B>}Philippians 2:23,24, written in the same imprisonment.

23. The same persons send salutations in the accompanying Epistle, except that “Jesus Justus” is not mentioned here.

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner — He had been sent by the Colossian Church to inquire after, and minister to, Paul, and possibly was cast into *prison* by the Roman authorities on suspicion. However, he is not mentioned as a *prisoner* in ^{<501D>}Colossians 4:12, so that “fellow prisoner” here may mean merely one who was a faithful companion to Paul in his imprisonment, and by his society put himself in the position of a prisoner.

So also “Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner,” ^{<5041}Colossians 4:10, may mean. Benson conjectures the meaning to be that on some *former* occasion these two were Paul’s “fellow prisoners,” *not at the time*.

25. be with your spirit — (^{<4038}Galatians 6:18 ^{<5022}2 Timothy 4:22).