

PHILEMON

- I. Paul's greetings to Philemon, his family, and the church (vv. 1-3).**
- II. Paul's commendation of Philemon (vv. 4-7).**
- III. Paul's appeal to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus (vv. 8-21).**
- IV. Paul's plan to visit Philemon (v. 22).**
- V. Paul's concluding salutations and prayer (vv. 23-25).**

The Epistle of Paul the Apostle
to
Philemon
Tuesday Bible Class – October 2, 2001

Intro: Paul's letter to Philemon is one of five one-chapter books in the Bible. One is in the OT, and four are in the NT. They are Obadiah, Philemon, 2 John, 3 John, and Jude.

Philemon is one of Paul's Prison Epistles, written during the time of his first imprisonment in Rome. The others are Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians which we have already studied.

Philemon is a companion epistle with Paul's letter to the church at Colosse. Philemon was a Colossian, and a member of the church at Colosse. Paul's letter to Philemon was written at the same time as his epistle to the Colossian church, and delivered to Philemon by Tychicus and Onesimus when they took the Colossian letter to the church in that city. A. T. Robertson, in his very valuable work, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, said that Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus was delivered at the same time.

This means that Philemon is one of Paul's Prison Epistles written in Rome. The year was probably 63 A.D.

The epistle has to do with Onesimus who was Philemon's slave. He had run away from Philemon, had gone to Rome, and somehow, in the providence of God, he had come into contact with the Apostle Paul, and had been saved. He apparently had been with Paul long enough for Paul to be satisfied that Onesimus had really been saved. He would have loved to keep Onesimus with him, but felt that it was only right that Onesimus should go back to Philemon who was his master and get things straightened out with him.

This one-chapter epistle gives us a very valuable look into the heart of the Apostle Paul. And it gives support to what Paul wrote to the church at Corinth which he said, "Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). It has also provided guidance for many who have been saved, and have had problems in their lives before they were saved which had to be made right after they were saved. And in it we have an amazing picture of the Gospel itself which I want to point out to you as we study the epistle. And in portraying the Gospel, the Apostle Paul is certainly a type of our Lord Jesus Christ. Luther's famous comment about this epistle "we are all the Lord's Onesimi." Onesimus did not deserve salvation, but neither did we! And so in the story of Onesimus, and in the lives of each one of us, we see that we all are simply sinners saved by the marvelous grace of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The outline of the epistle is very easy to see:

- 1) Paul's greetings to Philemon, his family, and the church (vv. 1-3).
- 2) Paul's commendation of Philemon (vv. 4-7).
- 3) Paul's appeal to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus (vv. 8-21).
- 4) Paul's plan to visit Philemon (v. 22).
- 5) Paul's concluding salutations and prayer (vv. 23-25).

Adam Clark has this important statement in his commentary of Philemon:

It may be thought strange that a short letter, written entirely on a private subject, without reference to the proof or defense of any doctrine of the Gospel, should, by the general consent of the church of God, from the highest Christian antiquity, have been received into the sacred canon, not only as a genuine production of Paul, but as a piece designed by the Holy Spirit for the edification of the church.

However, such is the fact; and we may add, that this very piece was held so sacred that even the ancient heretics did not attempt to impugn its authenticity or corrupt its matter, while making dangerously free with the four gospels, and all the other letters!

By this last statement they felt free to attack all four of the Gospels and all of the other NT epistles, but left this

epistle alone.

One explanation for this may be that involved in this letter was the subject of slavery although the Apostle Paul made no attempt to deal with it. But the other is that the Apostle Paul's attitude toward Philemon in all of this was one of the deepest humility and the most loving spirit. Who could possibly find anything to criticize in that?

Let me add a part of Matthew Henry's introductory comment about this epistle. He said,
 This epistle to Philemon is placed 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 indicted it, saw would, in its kind, be very instructive and useful in the churches (Vol. VI, p. 877).

But then he added several other comments which will help us to appreciate more the significance of this the shortest of all of Paul's epistles.

For example, Matthew Henry pointed out that in this epistle we see "the goodness and mercy of God to a poor wandering sinner, bring him by His gracious providence under the means, and making them effectual to his conversion." And then he quoted Isa. 65:1 which applied to Onesimus where the Lord said, "I am sought of them that asked not for me; I am found of them that sought me not." Clearly this is an instance of God seeking a sinner and drawing that sinner to Himself. So the epistle to Philemon is a great illustration of the doctrine of election, and of God seeking a sinner who was not seeking for Him.

Another point that Matthew Henry made is that we have here a marvelous illustration of the bond of love that develops between one truly saved and the person that the Lord used to bring him to Christ. Paul called Onesimus, "my son" (v. 10), and he really wanted to keep Onesimus with him, but felt that he should send him back to Onesimus. And for Onesimus to be willing to go was an indication of how much he wanted to please the Apostle Paul, and the Lord. For the Apostle Paul to exercise such great concern for Onesimus, was in itself a testimony of how the grace of God had filled the heart of Paul.

Matthew Henry also reminds us that it is quite miraculous that such a short epistle has been preserved for us. But this is an indication that as short as it is (and 2 and 3 John are even shorter), we must believe that Philemon falls into the category of the way Paul described the Word of God, Holy Scripture, in 2 Tim. 3:16 and 17.

And then Matthew Henry recognized, as I have already mentioned, that in this epistle we have a beautiful picture of the Gospel which we will see as we go along.

So we are coming to a very delightful portion of Scripture, one which had a great deal of value for us as we are always seeking how we can bring greater glory to the Lord by the lives we live and by the words that we speak.

But now let us turn to the epistle. Our first point is:

I. PAUL'S GREETINGS TO PHILEMON, HIS FAMILY, AND THE CHURCH (Ph. 1-3).

1:1 Paul did not have a doctrine to defend, or special teaching to do (except by his example), and so he called himself, not an apostle, but "a prisoner of Jesus Christ." As far as his circumstances were concerned, he was a prisoner of Rome, but in his heart he looked beyond the Roman government and even Caesar, and recognized that he was where he was *by the will of God!* It was not the Lord had turned away from him, or that others had sidetracked him. He recognized the hand of the Lord in his circumstances, as we always should,

and so his heart was at peace. Paul referred to himself the same way in verse 9 and spoke of his “bonds,” his chains, in verse 10. And he certainly had reason to believe that he was where he was by the will of God and of Jesus Christ, because of the encounter he had with Onesimus, the runaway slave, whom he had led to the Savior.

Paul was also gracious to his fellow servants. Timothy was with him in Rome, and Paul spoke lovingly of him as “the” brother, that is, his own brother in the Lord, and Philemon’s brother in the Lord as well. So this was a family epistle, the family of God. And it was to be about another brother, Onesimus, who had recently been born in the family. All we know of Philemon is in this epistle, and so we don’t know if he and Timothy had actually met each other, or not.

1:2 It was characteristic when writing letters in those days to begin with the one writing the letter, and then to address the one to whom the letter was being sent. It went primarily to Philemon, but also to Apphia, whom we suppose was his wife, and Archippus, who probably was his son, and who may have been at that time the pastor of the church at Colosse. Paul obviously loved Philemon and Apphia because he called both of them “beloved.” He called Philemon his “fellow laborer,” and Archippus his “fellow soldier.” Both of these terms showed that they were greatly involved in the work of the Lord. The church at Colosse met in their home, which would suggest that it was not very large numerically, but from Paul’s letter to the church we know that it was a strong, growing church, and that they were experiencing the blessing of the Lord.

1:3 And then we have Paul’s characteristic greeting, which we have recognized before is also a prayer. The way this greeting is repeated so regularly in Paul’s letters, shows how extremely important it was. Every day, every believer, stands in constant need of grace and peace.

“Grace” is a wish, a hope, but especially a prayer for all of the needful blessings of God. Being characterized by grace, there is always the need to recognize that none of them are deserved. And also, being identified as “grace,” there is a strengthening that always accompanies the blessing of the Lord.

“Grace” results in “peace.” Peace does not mean that our circumstances will always be peaceful, but it indicates that whatever our outward circumstances may be, our hearts can be peaceful. It is often a peace that surpasses our understanding. It comes from casting all of our care upon the Lord. Learning to know the Lord better, brings rest to our souls. Remember His word which are recorded in Matthew 11:28-30, “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy . . .”

Notice that the text does not say, “from God and from our Lord Jesus Christ,” but from God and the Lord Jesus Christ.” This has led some expositors to say that God is the Source of these blessings, but the Lord Jesus Christ is the Channel through Whom the blessings come to us. Whatever the Apostle Paul may have had in mind, we can see that coming from “God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” the supply of grace and peace can never be exhausted.

Now we come to our second point:

II. PAUL’S COMMENDATION OF PHILEMON (Ph. 4-7).

1:4 Whatever good is in us, and whatever good is done by us, God is the Source of it all, and to Him belongs all of the praise. And Paul knew, as Philemon probably knew also, that the good that is in us and the good that is done by us, is often given in answer to prayer – either our Lord’s prayers for us as He makes intercession for us, or our prayers for each other. We can see from Paul’s epistles that prayer was very

important to Him, and that he gave much time each day to prayer. Many of us in Paul's circumstances as he wrote this letter, would be thinking in terms of who was praying for us. But Paul was faithful in praying for others even though he was in chains. I have often wondered, thinking of him as being chained to a Roman soldier, if he prayed audibly while that soldier would have been listening. It wouldn't surprise me if he did, but we can't say for sure. We know that he prayed, but whether it was audibly or silently, we cannot say. But we are sure that he prayed, that he always prayed. And when he prayed, he mentioned people *by name*!

"Always" does not mean that he was only praying for Philemon, but that he constantly remembered him in prayer.

1:5 But what moved him to pray for Philemon. I am sure that if he heard the Philemon was sick, or that he was facing some particular problem, the Apostle Paul would immediately pray for Philemon. And unfortunately that is often typical of what causes us to pray for people. And I am not saying that we shouldn't pray when people have special needs. But with Paul, when he saw and knew of believers who were walking with the Lord, who were showing their love for the Lord by their obedience to the Word, people who also had a special love for the people of God, these were conditions that moved Paul to pray, even though it may have been mainly, as here, with thanksgiving. We aren't thankful to the Lord enough for all of the believers we know who day by day are seeking to please the Lord, and who faithfully maintain a good testimony to the goodness and grace of God. Here is an important lesson for us in our praying. Pray for special needs, but don't wait for special needs before you pray. When you see a child of God who really loves the Lord, who is really trusting Him, who really believes the Word of God, and who love the Lord's people and loves to be with them, then go to the Lord and give Him thanks. But don't hesitate to tell other believers when they are an encouragement to you by their love and by their faith.

Now one reason we need to pray for people who are living godly lives, is because they are the very people who are going to be singled out for opposition by the Enemy of our souls. Where the Lord is working, the Devil will be working too. And so that is where we need to focus our prayers. We aren't as thankful as we should be, nor are we as prayerful as we should be. Let Paul be our example in this very vital matter.

These are two very important characteristics that we need to look for in our own lives as well as in the lives of others. They are the marks of a true Christian. Do you remember how Paul referred to these in his letter to the church at Colosse. He began his letter to the church in much the same way that he began this letter to Philemon. See Col. 1:3-4. There he specified that their faith was in Christ Jesus, and that their love was for "all the saints." Here in Philemon he did not distinguish between faith and love that way. Obviously we are taught to trust the Lord and to love His people, but we are also taught to love the Lord and to trust His people who are walking with Him. Even in this epistle Paul indicated how he was trusting Philemon to do the right thing toward Onesimus. Look at verses 7 and 21 as examples of what I am saying. We don't trust each other like we trust the Lord because there is definitely a limit, a great limit, as to what we can do for each other. But we need to trust one another and to love one another. That is when we are enjoying true fellowship in the Lord, and that is what blessed the heart of the Apostle Paul.

But now notice that verses 6 and 7 are a continuation of verse 5.

1:6 The word which is translated "communication" is the Greek word for *fellowship* which is κοινωνία. And there is in that word the idea of sharing, or communicating, or participating with each other. We are having fellowship with each other when you share with me your joy in the Lord, or the blessings you have been receiving from the Lord, and I do the same with you. In fellowship there is a giving and a receiving. Here Paul used the word for the *sharing of our faith*.

Usually when we speak of sharing our faith, we are thinking about our testimony to people in the world who are not Christians. But Paul seems to be using it here of sharing our faith with other believers in Christ. That is, we are to talk about the Lord and His Word, to mention all of the good things that we have in Christ, and to do it in an effective way. The only way it can be effective is by the blessing of the Lord.

We often speak of having fellowship just because we are with other Christians. But we may use the time to talk about what is going on in the world, or about the weather, or about the Ducks or the Beavers. There is nothing wrong with any of that, *but that is not Christian fellowship even though we are talking to other Christians. We are having fellowship when we talk about the Lord, when we talk about His Word, when we talk about what we have in Christ. And we do it with the hope that it will all be spiritually profitable for us, that we will grow in the Lord as a result. That is what fellowship is.*

Paul felt that Philemon was already doing this, and he indicated as much by what he had to say in verse 7.

1:7 Paul himself had been encouraged (“great joy and consolation”) by his love, his love for the Lord, and his love for the people of God. Why? Because “the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.”

For “bowels” Lenski used the word *viscera*. That word speaks of the inner organs of the body. And he gave this word of explanation. He said that the Greeks made the lungs, heart, and liver the seat of the feelings as we now speak of the heart. And he added that “bowels” is not a good translation because that word to us means the intestines. So when you come to this word “bowels,” substitute “heart” for it. And by “heart” we do not mean that organ that is pumping in our bodies, but our inner man, that which Paul had in mind when he wrote in 2 Cor. 4:16 that “though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day.” What we see when we look at each other is the body that we live in, our earthly tabernacle, where we live. You can’t see the real me, and I can’t see the real you. That is our inward self. When we die we are going to leave these bodies behind until the resurrection. Then we will be reunited with them, but they will be glorified, no longer subject to death, made like the Lord Jesus.

While our physical bodies are becoming weaker and weaker, if we are really walking with the Lord, the inward man is being renewed day by day. Here in Philemon Paul spoke of it as being “refreshed.” What does that mean? It is what happens to our bodies when we have a good, restful night of sleep. We may go to bed tired, but we wake up with our strength renewed. And we say that we had a refreshing night of sleep.

The verse that comes to my mind when I think of spiritual refreshment is Isa. 40:31. Reading from verse 28 in that chapter, this is what we have:

28 Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding.
 29 He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength.
 30 Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall:
 31 But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint (Isa. 40:28-31).

This is what the Apostle Paul particularly loved about Philemon. He was a refresher of the saints, not of their bodies, but of their hearts, of their souls. And how did he do this? It was by speaking to the Lord’s people about the Lord, about His Word, and about all of His wonderful works. What Philemon wanted to do was to leave the people of God spiritually better than they were when he met them.

This is what John Newton must have had in mind when he penned the word of that hymn,

How sweet the Name of Jesus sounds In a believer's ear!
It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds, And drives away his fear.

It makes the wounded spirit whole, And calms the troubled breast,
'Tis manna to the hungry soul, and to the weary rest.

Dear Name! The Rock on which I build, My Shield and Hiding place,
My never-failing Treasury filled With boundless stores of grace;

Jesus, my Shepherd, Brother, Friend, My Prophet, Priest, and King,
My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End, Accept the praise I bring.

Weak is the effort of my heart, And cold my warmest thought;
But when I see Thee as Thou art, I'll praise Thee as I ought.

Till then I would Thy love proclaim With every fleeting breath;
And may the music of Thy Name Refresh my soul in death.

What an example to us is the Apostle Paul! But Philemon was equally an example and an inspiration. Let's spend our time together talking about the Lord. Then we will be refreshed, and we will be like Philemon was, a refresher of the saints.

But now we move on to our next point.

October 8, 2001

III. PAUL'S APPEAL TO PHILEMON ON BEHALF OF ONESIMUS (Ph. 8-21).

This is the main part of the epistle.

Now let's make sure that we understand who each person is in this section. First, of course, is the Apostle Paul, the writer of this epistle. Second, the epistle was written to Philemon, who lived in Colosse. He was a member of the Colossian church, a wealthy man and an owner of at least one bondservant, or slave, and that slave's name was Onesimus. The Apostle Paul and Philemon had been friends for some time, and it was the Apostle Paul who had led Philemon to Christ. Onesimus had been an unprofitable slave, and he had run away from Philemon, had probably taken some of Philemon's money with him. Onesimus had gone to Rome where the Apostle Paul was a prisoner, and in some way that is not made clear in the epistle, he had met the Apostle Paul. Paul had given the Gospel to Onesimus, and Onesimus was genuinely saved. Onesimus had stayed with the Apostle Paul long enough for Paul to be sure that he had truly been saved. However, he only felt that it was right for Onesimus to go back to Philemon and make things right with him. Paul was sending Tychicus to Colosse with the Colossian epistle, and so Onesimus went with him carrying this epistle addressed to Philemon.

Slavery was a part of life in OT times, but the slave was protected under the Mosaic Law. However, here in Philemon, we are not dealing with a Jew, but a Gentile, and so it will be worthwhile for us to re-read both in Colossians and Ephesians what the Apostle Paul had to say about both slaves and masters.

Please turn to Colossians 3, and we will read verses 3:22 to 4:1. (Read.) Now turn to Ephesians 6, and let us read verses 5 through 9. (Read.) See also 1 Timothy 6:1-2. (Read.) And then we need to go to Titus 2:9-10.

(Read.)

Earlier the Apostle Paul had addressed this subject in 1 Corinthians. We find what he had to say to bondslaves in 1 Corinthians 7:20-24.

These passages do not indicate that the Apostle Paul supported slavery, but they do show that he was not a political activist. He believed, as he said in Romans 13, that believers should be subject to the laws of the government under which they live, and under those laws to show that God's grace is sufficient for us regardless of what our circumstances might be. Even in sending Onesimus back to Philemon, Paul did not say that he was obligated by law to go back (although he was), but that going back was the right thing to do before the Lord. It is interesting to note that the Apostle Paul was following the Lord in this. The Lord was not political in the way He lived, nor in His teaching. He believed in pleasing God whatever our circumstances might be. If slaves were offered their freedom, or if they could purchase it, that, of course, would be acceptable before God.

So I hope that this helps us to understand the situation that Onesimus faced, but also what Philemon faced as a Christian slave holder. Many slaves lived very difficult lives because of the cruelty of their masters, but generally the relationships between masters and slaves were good. We have a bad taste in our mouths where slavery is concerned because of the very cruel treatment that many slaves in our country experienced before the Civil War.

Perhaps not all of you know that slavery, and the slave trade, is the background out of which John Newton wrote the hymn, Amazing Grace. Newton was a slave trader before he was saved. Though his own many sins he eventually became the slave of a Negro woman. She used to feed him by throwing bread under her table, and making him go after them like a dog would. He had been raised in a Christian home, but never was saved. But after he was saved, he wrote those words, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me . . ." I often wonder what performers are thinking, if they are thinking at all, when they say the words of that great hymn. And even though none of us has been a slave, or a slave trader, yet we can sing "Amazing Grace" just as truly as John Newton could sing it.

But with this background on slavery, let us get started in this third division of the epistle.

1:8 The word "wherefore," or it could also be translated, *therefore*, is a word that looks back at verses 4 through 7. It means that since Philemon was the kind of person which Paul had described in those verses, he had no hesitation in coming right out and telling Philemon what he must do. He knew that Philemon would not be offended with him if that were the approach he would take. And he knew that Philemon would do whatever Paul told him to do. Also, being "bold in Christ" means that Paul knew what Philemon ought to do. Probably if Paul were speaking today to Philemon, he would say something like this: "I know what you ought to do because it is very clear in the Word."

Now there are some people (and I am talking about people who profess to be Christians) who won't do what you tell them to do even though they can read in black and white in the Bible what they should. You talk to some people and they always have some excuse as to why they are not going to do what is clearly revealed in the Word of God. Philemon did not need the authoritative declaration of an apostle to get him to do what was right before God. For Paul to speak to him as a friend was all that it would take to get Philemon to take Onesimus back.

I think we can all see that what Paul was talking about was true forgiveness! It may have been that Onesimus may have used up a lot of those seventy times seven that the Lord spoke about in Matt. 18:21-22. Peter asked

the Lord a question, and the Lord gave him this answer:

21 Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?

22 Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.

Luke records a time when the Lord was speaking about forgiveness, and how all of the apostles responded. I am reading to you from Luke 17, verses 3-5:

3 Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him.

4 And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.

5 And the apostles said unto the Lord, Increase our faith (Luke 17:3-5).

Lenski said in his commentary that for the Apostle Paul to approach Philemon in this way was the highest compliment that “can be accorded to any Christian” (Vol. IX, p. 959). He wouldn’t have to argue with Philemon, and show him some evidence beyond Scripture. To show Philemon what was the will of God, was enough. You could depend upon him to do it! And so Paul was not commanding Philemon to do what he ought to do, but he was urging him to do it. Calvin said that Paul was dealing with a man in Philemon who was “an obedient man.” Authority may be exercised when dealing with one who resists the truth, “but there is no need of commanding those who willingly obey” (Vol. XXI, p. 353).

The word “convenient” means *that which was his duty to do, that which a person ought to do, befitting, proper, or that which is to be expected of a child of God.* We show who we are and what we are by what we do.

And so Paul followed another course which he stated in verse 9.

1:9 Rather than commanding Philemon, he urged him to do what he knew in his own heart he should do.

Often as we look to the Lord for the grace to do His will, it is a great encouragement to be given support from someone whose relationship to the Lord we admire. And the way in which Paul referred to himself in this verse would also have been a great encouragement to Philemon.

Philemon knew that Paul was “an obedient man.” He had lived many years in the most careful obedience to the will of God. And it was his refusal to do anything else that had landed him in a Roman jail. That is what Paul was emphasizing when called himself “such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.”

Paul was not “aged” as we count age today. He was probably in his early sixties, but this was the word which was used of men who were over fifty-six years of age. When Paul held the coats of those who stoned Stephen, it is said in Acts 7:58 that he was *a young man*. But the word used there spoke of a man who was in his thirties. So we can say that for approximately thirty years, the Apostle Paul had walked with the Lord, and for that reason alone his advice would have been considered very, very valuable to Philemon, and to anyone else who was concerned about doing the will of God. It seems very likely that the Lord Jesus, John the Apostle, the Apostle Paul, and we know for sure about John the Baptist – that they were all born about the same time. And so Paul, rather than commanding Philemon as to what he should do, he appealed to him on the basis of love, their mutual love for the Lord, and their personal love for each other.

What an example Paul is to us here! We ought always to seek to get people to do the will of God from their hearts instead of just doing what we think that they should do. Paul was putting the matter between them on the highest possible plane.

However, up to this point the Apostle Paul had not told Philemon the purpose of his letter. But that would come in the next verse.

1:10 He was speaking of one whom he called, “my son, Onesimus.” Calvin wrote, “Here it is of importance to consider how deep is his condescension, when he gives the name of ‘son’ to a slave, a runaway, and a thief” (XXI, 353). And Lenski pointed out that the Greek is too strong just to be translated, “my son.” It should be *my own son*. Any father who is deserving of the name takes special delight in saying of a son or a daughter, “He,” or “she, is my very own son, my very own daughter.” When you think of who Paul was, and then who Onesimus had been, Philemon would hardly have expected to read the words, “my own son” in between “I” and “Onesimus.” It shows how humble the Apostle Paul was. But perhaps Paul was thinking about himself and how unworthy he was that the Lord had ever saved him.

“Whom I have begotten in my bonds.” Paul had probably given a lot of thought as to why he had been placed in a Roman prison when he could have been continuing his travels throughout the Empire, preaching the Gospel, and bringing people to Christ. But here he had one answer. He probably would never have had the opportunity to speak to Onesimus when Onesimus would have had a listening ear except in his confinement. Paul does not say how, or where, they met, but it must have been that Onesimus had come to him because Paul could not have gone to Onesimus. Anyway, they met, and Paul had witnessed to Onesimus about the Savior, and the Lord drew this runaway slave to Himself. And his whole life was changed. No amount of self-reformation could have changed him. The wisdom of the world, the philosophies of men, or the psychologists of the day could not have worked such a change in Onesimus. Only the Gospel can change sinners into saints. And Paul knew that religion does not change the human heart because the Jews’ religion had not changed his. But Onesimus had experienced a new birth. He was a new Onesimus, old things had passed away, and all things for him had become new. Only Christ can do that. This is what salvation is!

Paul spoke to the believers in the Corinthian church along this line. Listen to his words found in 1 Corinthians 4:15:

For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel.

Listen again to some very wise words from John Calvin:

When he says that Onesimus has been *begotten by him*, this must be understood to mean, that it was done by his ministry, and not by his power. To renew a soul of man and form it anew to the image of God—is not a human work, and it is of this spiritual regeneration that he now speaks. Yet because the soul is regenerated by faith, and “faith is by hearing,” (Rom. x. 17) on that account he who administers the doctrine holds the place of a parent. Moreover, because the word of God preached by man is the seed of eternal life, we need not wonder that he from whose mouth we receive that seed is called a father. Yet, at the same time, we must believe that, while the ministry of a man is efficacious in regenerating the soul, yet, strictly speaking, God himself regenerates by the power of his Spirit. These modes of expression, therefore, do not imply any opposition between God and man, but only show what God does by means of men (XXI, 353, 354).

“In my bonds,” *i.e., my chains*. Paul recognized the sovereign hand of God in placing him where he was so that he might reach Onesimus with the Gospel.

Let us always look for the hand of God even in, or especially in, the hard places of our lives, because He always has purposes for putting us where we are and for doing to us what He has done. Even in these tragic days in which we are living, days of great uncertainty as to what is going to happen next, let us look for the hand of the Lord. He is in charge. It looks like the terrorists have things going their way, but God still holds us in His hand, and we are in these circumstances to be His useful instruments in the lives of others. This may not be the

only purpose, but it is one great purpose. We can say very truthfully that Onesimus is in heaven today because the Lord put the Apostle Paul in a Roman jail. He was truly “a prisoner of Jesus Christ” as he said in verse 1 of this epistle.

“Whom I have begotten” in the Greek text is not in the perfect tense, but in the aorist, which as Bishop Moule said is a work that was finished in the past. We need to grow after we are born, and that takes time, but the time of our salvation is a work done at a point in time in the past, a work which can never be undone.

Spurgeon made a very significant statement concerning the salvation of Onesimus which we cannot afford to overlook when we think of the work of God in the salvation of anyone, but it is especially evident in the case of Onesimus, a runaway slave. This is what Spurgeon said:

Let us look at Onesimus as AN INSTANCE OF DIVINE GRACE.

We see the grace of God in his *election*. He was a slave. In those days slaves were very ignorant, untaught, and degraded. Being barbarously used, they were for the most part themselves sunk in the lowest barbarism, neither did their masters attempt to raise them out of it; it is possible that Philemon's attempt to do good to Onesimus may have been irksome to the man, and he may therefore have fled from his house. His master's prayers, warnings, and Christian regulations may have been disagreeable to him, and therefore he ran away. He wronged his master, which he could scarcely have done if he had not been treated as a confidential servant to some extent. Possibly the unusual kindness of Philemon, and the trust reposed in him may have been too much for his untrained nature. We know not what he stole, but evidently he had taken something, for the apostle says, “If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account.” He ran away from Colosse, therefore, and thinking that he would be less likely to be discovered by the ministers of justice, he sought the city of Rome, which was then as large as the city of London now is, and perhaps larger. There in those back slums, such as the Jews' quarter in Rome now is, Onesimus would go and hide; or amongst those gangs of thieves which infested the imperial city, he would not be known or heard of any more, so he thought; and he could live the free and easy life of a thief. Yet, mark you, the Lord looked out of heaven with an eye of love, and set that eye on Onesimus.

Were there no free men, that God must elect a slave? Were there no faithful servants, that he must choose one who had embezzled his master's money? Were there none of the educated and polite, that he must needs look upon a barbarian? Were there none among the moral and the excellent, that infinite love should fix itself upon this degraded being, who was now mixed up with the very scum of society? And what the scum of society was in old Rome I should not like to think, for the upper classes were about as brutalized in their general habits as we can very well conceive; and what the lowest scum of all must have been, none of us can tell. Onesimus was part and parcel of the dregs of a sink of sin. Read Paul's first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, if you can, and you will see in what a horrible state the heathen world was at that time, and Onesimus was among the worst of the worst; and yet eternal love, which passed by kings and princes, and left Pharisees and Sadducees, philosophers and magi, to stumble in the dark as they chose, fixed its eye upon this poor benighted creature that he might be made a vessel to honor, fit for the Master's use (Vol. 21, pp. 686,687).

1:11 The words “unprofitable” and “profitable” describe Onesimus before he was saved and after he was saved. When the Lord Jesus saves us, He does not leave us like we were. We are not yet perfect, but neither are we like we used to be. The NASB uses the word “useless” and “useful.” The NIV uses these same two words. However, the Greek word expresses even more than that. It indicates that Onesimus was detrimental to Onesimus. It is not that he was not helpful, but his influence was negative. Philemon would have been much better off without him, and Paul knew that. But it is a known fact that when the Lord saves anyone, man or woman, they *always, without exception*, become better than they were, not perfect, but always better!

Philemon might have had a hard time believing this at first if it had not been the Apostle Paul who was writing this. Paul said that Onesimus had been taken out of the negative column and put into the positive column. He had made things even better for the Apostle Paul. Again, we don't know *how*, but it was obviously the truth. And so Paul was sending Onesimus back to Philemon, not the problem that he had been to Philemon before, but so Philemon could see that Onesimus was truly a trophy of the grace of God who would now be useful to his master.

I feel sure that there must have been a period of time between the time when Onesimus was saved and the time when Paul wrote this letter. I had to be that Paul had seen the changes in Onesimus' life, changes that remained. He was truly a possessor of everlasting life, not just a professor. What we need to see are genuine works of grace in human hearts, and we can't hurry that work. And so we need to present the Gospel and urge people to turn to the Savior, but then wait to see if God has done a work in that person's soul. Too many people in our day have been forced in some way to say that they were accepting Christ. Perhaps they have even prayed a prayer in which they were trusting Christ. But as time goes on it becomes apparent that there has been no change at all. Paul did not deal with Onesimus that way. He gave him the Gospel, perhaps more than once, answered any questions he had, but then committed him to the Lord Who alone can do the saving work.

We must assume that Paul had taught Onesimus the truth that he had written out in the letter to the church at Colosse, and that Paul had placed special emphasis on how a servant should serve his master. All of this teaching would have been new to Onesimus, and it would have been impossible for him to do it until the Lord had come into his life.

Concerning the change that had taken place in Onesimus' life, and needs to take place in anyone's life who is truly saved, Spurgeon quoted Rowland Hill who "used to say that he would not give a halfpenny for a man's piety if his dog and his cat were not better off after he was converted" (Vol. 21, p. 694). Not only should a servant be a better servant, but a master should be a better master. A husband should be a better husband, and a wife should be a better wife. A son or a daughter should be more obedient to parents, and happier about helping with the chores around the house that need to be done. Spurgeon himself said, "Everything in the house goes better when grace oils the wheels" (*Ibid.*) And then he added, "I do not believe in your religion, dear friend, if it belongs to the Tabernacle, and the prayer-meeting, and not in your home" (*Ibid.*). All of this serves to back up what Paul wrote in 2 Cor. 5:17.

But let us read on in Paul's appeal to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus.

1:12 The word "receive" does not appear here in all of the MSS, but it does in some. And I want you to see that it does appear two other times in the epistle. You can see it in verse 15, and again in verse 17. Here in verse 12 it is simply receive him. In verse 15 it is "receive him for ever." And in verse 17, "receive him as myself," meaning, *receive him as you would receive me*.

At this point I want to introduce a part of this epistle to Philemon which many expositors have seen. And it is that in this epistle we have a wonderful illustration of the Gospel. Onesimus represents you and me, unprofitable sinners. Philemon is a type of God, the Father. Paul is a type of Christ. And just as Paul was both a mediator and intercessor, as well as a savior in a lesser way than our Lord is, he stood between Onesimus and Philemon, as Christ is our Mediator with God. And as a result of the mediation of Paul, he asked Philemon to accept Onesimus back, and to accept him for ever, and to accept him as he would have accepted the Apostle Paul, so our Lord by His death and intercessory work pleads with God to accept us, to accept us forever, and to accept us as God the Father accepts Christ. And there is more to the picture which we will pick up as we go along, but I want you to see the picture as the Spirit of God has been pleased to illustrate us in this epistle.

We as Christians talk often of our receiving Christ, and it is a miracle of God's grace that we have done that when so many are not interested at all in even hearing about Him. But the greater miracle is that He will receive us, and it is just as miraculous that He keeps us.

Those two verses on salvation in John 6 that we all love, while not using the word *receive*, yet clearly speak of our reception by Him. I am speaking of John 6:37 and John 6:44:

37 All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.

44 No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day.

Not only does the Father receive us, but He has given us to His Son, and He will never cast us out. And not only does the Father receive us, but He actually draws us to Christ. He receives us before we receive Him, but we do receive Him. The Gospel gets more wonderful to all of us the longer we know the Lord, doesn't it?

The NASB renders this twelfth verse like this: "And I have sent him back to you in person, that is, *sending* my very heart." Remember that we had that word "bowels" in verse 7, and I pointed out then that the Greeks used a word which referred to the heart, lungs, and liver, which the KJ translators gave the word "bowels." But that is not a good translation because the "bowels" are the intestines. What the word really means is *the inner man*, the real you. And so "heart" is a good word to use here. Sending Onesimus back to Philemon was like sending a part of his heart to Philemon, so great was Paul's love for Onesimus. It was really like Paul was giving Philemon a part of his heart. And this could not but move the heart of Philemon, however disgusted he may have been with Onesimus for what he had done to him. But the full passion of the Apostle Paul had been aroused by what God had done to Onesimus in saving him.

Now verse 13.

1:13 Paul really wanted to keep Onesimus with himself because he had been such a great help and blessing to the Apostle. And his thought was, not that Philemon should serve him, but that Philemon might let Onesimus serve Paul for him since Philemon would have wanted to help Paul in any way that he could.

By "the bonds of the Gospel," the Apostle Paul was again recognizing not only that he was in prison as a "prisoner of Jesus Christ," but that he was there because of the Gospel, and to continue to minister the Gospel. He was a prisoner of war, but was to continue on active duty. And he knew that Onesimus would be a great help to him in every way. So he would have been "profitable" to the Apostle Paul in his ministry, definitely not a detriment, but a positive instrument of good. And then, after Paul had been set free, he would have sent Onesimus back to Philemon.

1:14 But he knew that he did not have the right to do that. Onesimus belonged to Philemon, and Paul did not want to put Philemon in a position where he might have felt obligated to do something that he did not really want to do. But Paul expressed this in such a way that Philemon would not feel that he should send Onesimus back to him. Paul at first wanted him, but then decided that his place was with his master, Philemon. So Paul very graciously closed the door against the possibility that Onesimus might return to him.

1:15 Again Paul was made to recognize the hand of the Lord in all that had taken place concerning Onesimus. It was in the mind of Onesimus that he would set himself free so that he could do what he wanted to do. But it was in the heart of God that through his rebellion he would providentially be brought into contact with the Apostle Paul, and saved. Then he would go back to Philemon transformed in heart and turned completely around as Philemon's servant. The Lord is continually surprising us by making even the wrath of men to praise Him.

October 9, 2001

“He departed” - That was Onesimus’ sin. “For a season” - This was the purpose of God. “That thou [Philemon] shouldest receive him for ever” - This was the grace of God.

Matthew Henry’s comment on this verse is worth remembering:

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, and 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 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 [or turned, my comment], he now returns to his master, who will have more service and a better hold on him than ever—by conscience of his duty and faithfulness in it to his life’s end; his interest [*i.e.*, Philemon’s] therefore it will be now to receive him. So God often brings gain to his people out of their losses (VI, 883).

Taking words that Joseph said regarding what his brothers did to him in selling him into slavery in Egypt: “Ye thought evil against me: but God meant it unto good” (Gen. 50:20). Onesimus did evil against Philemon, but God meant it for good.

1:16 “Not now as a servant” does not mean that Paul was telling Philemon to set Onesimus free. What he did mean was that he was not coming back *just as a servant*, but more than a servant. He was coming back as a brother in Christ. He left clothed in his sin; he was returning covered in the righteousness of God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

And yet in another sense Onesimus came back *a free man* – not free as to his position in society, but free as to his relationship with sin. Sin had formerly mastered Onesimus; now by the saving grace of Christ he was no longer a slave of sin, but freed from the tyranny of sin and so able to live a new life.

The Apostle Paul mentioned this very thing in the passage in 1 Corinthians 7 which we read a short time ago when he was telling those who were bondslaves in Corinth and had been saved. I read those verses again:

21 Art thou called being a servant? care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather.

22 For he that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord's freeman: likewise also he that is called, being free, is Christ's servant (1 Cor 7:21-22).

We have the Lord’s words on this subject in John 8:31-32:

31 Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed;

32 And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free (John 8:31-32).

We are not free *to* sin, but free *from* sin. And the Apostle Paul issued this warning to the Galatian churches, and to all believers for all time to come:

Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage (Gal 5:1).

And then he added in the thirteenth verse of that same chapter:

For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another (Gal 5:13).

And so we can do as Paul exhorted the Roman believers to do:

11 Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

12 Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof.

13 Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God.

14 For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace (Rom 6: 11-14).

Another good verse having to do with sin and the people of God, is Psalm 119:11: "Thy Word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against Thee."

So Onesimus went back to Philemon, still a slave as to his status in society, but a man who had been delivered from the sinful condition of his old nature. He was a brother in Christ to Paul, and a dear brother, and Paul expected that Onesimus would be even dearer to his master, Philemon.

October 15, 2001

1:17 In this verse the Apostle Paul made the strongest appeal that it was possible for him to make, and made Philemon's acceptance of Onesimus equal to the acceptance that he, Paul himself, had with Philemon. In verse 1 he had called Philemon "our dearly beloved, and fellowlaborer." Both words expressed the strong relationship that he and Philemon had with each other. Here he appealed to Philemon on the basis of that relationship.

"If thou count me a partner" – Robertson says that the 'if' introduced a first class condition, by which he meant that Paul assumed that this was how Philemon felt about him. So it would support adding the thought, *as I assume you do*, to the *if* clause. So the thought is this: "If you count me a partner, *as I assume you do*, . . ."

The word "count" is the translation of the Greek verb, ἔχω, which means *to have*, or *to hold*. So Paul was saying, "If you hold that you consider me to have the relationship with you as a partner, as I assume that you do . . ." Now we must look at the word "partner." I think of Dr. Mitchell when I read this word "partner." That is what he used to call me. Our offices were joined by a short hallway in which there was a restroom, so he could come into my office, or I could go to his without going into the outer hallway. And many times he would knock at my door, and then stick his head into the room, and say, "Partner, can you come over into my office for a little while? I need your prayers." And, of course, I never turned him down. I was honored that he would ask me to pray with him.

Well, the word "partner" is one of the family of words that is related to the noun, κοινωνία. The Greek word for "partner" is κοινωνός. So, while "partner" is a good translation, for Christians it means *one who has true Christian fellowship* with the one to whom he is speaking, or, as in this case, writing. We all have fellowship as believers, but it is probably the case that most believers have a few with whom they have special fellowship. And that is what the Apostle Paul had in mind when he said that Philemon looked upon him as a "partner."

Paul was asking Philemon to "receive him as myself," *i.e.*, to receive him as he would have received the Apostle Paul. This is not just the ordinary word for *receive* (λαμβάνω), but προσλαμβάνω, *to receive to one's self*. Evidence that Philemon was really receiving Onesimus back, would be shown if Philemon personally would welcome Onesimus, instead of letting another servant do it, or even some member of Philemon's family.

This would have been unheard of for a master to welcome a slave, and a runaway slave at that, who had robbed him and probably in other ways had shown himself to be unfaithful. It would have taken a lot of grace for Philemon to grant this request of Paul.

1:18 Here Paul demonstrated that he would not only ask Philemon to do the unusual as a Christian, but that he, Paul, was willing to do more than he really was obligated to do. This letter served as a promissory note that he would assume any debt which Onesimus owed Philemon.

This “if” is another first class condition, which recognizes that Onesimus did owe Philemon something, and probably a great deal. Paul knew that Onesimus owed Philemon something. Whether or not he knew *how much*, we cannot say for sure, but it would not have been strange at all if Onesimus had opened his heart to Paul, and told him the whole story of his flight from Philemon.

When Paul used the word “wronged,” he used the word ἀδικέω, which can be interpreted as *committing a crime*. If Philemon had been of the mind to do so, he could have had Onesimus charged with a crime, and made him pay in terms of a prison term. So this emphasizes the seriousness of what Philemon had done. Paul was not minimizing that in the least. So he stated it as it was. But he softened his words in the following statement.

“Or oweth thee ought” – Robertson said that this was a “delicate way of putting the stealing.” Under the law a thief was required to pay four times as much as he had stolen. But probably both Onesimus and Philemon were Gentiles, so that would not have operated under Jewish law.

But you can see that the Apostle Paul wanted Philemon to “receive” Onesimus even before the debt was paid. That is grace! And yet God has done that for all of us. He received us while our debt was still standing. We all can sing that wonderful old hymn

O to grace how great a debtor Daily I’m constrained to be;
Let Thy grace now, like a fetter, Bind my wand’ring heart to Thee.

1:19 This is a very strong statement because Paul’s eyesight was so bad that he usually had someone else be his amanuensis, or secretary. But here, at least, the Apostle Paul took the pen in hand and wrote, “I Paul have written with mine own hand, I will repay it.” Lenski thought that Paul had written the whole letter, and he may have been right.

Paul did this once before. It was when he wrote to the Galatian churches about their legalism. We read in Gal. 6:11, “Ye see how large a letter,” or, *with what large letters*, “I have written unto you with mine own hand.” For Paul to do the writing, or even a part of it, showed how deeply concerned he was about what he was writing.

Then Paul went on to remind Philemon of how much he owed the Apostle Paul. What he was probably referring to was that Paul had not only led Onesimus to Christ, but he had also led Philemon to Christ. Lenski suggested that this may have been in Ephesus because we know that when Paul wrote this letter and the letter to the Colossian church, he had never been in Colosse. Although we know that the Lord is the One Who does the saving work, yet we are always inclined to feel indebted to the person, or persons, who led us to Christ. We have trouble thanking them for their part in what the Lord has done, and perhaps Philemon had said more than once, “How can I ever repay you for what you have done for me?” Paul would not have felt that Philemon needed to do anything for him, except possibly to pray for him, because the glory all belongs to the Lord. Nevertheless the feeling of our indebtedness was there.

Let us not overlook the fact that what Paul was seeking to do, was to get the Philemon to accept Onesimus into fellowship with himself so that no cloud at all would cover that relationship. But Matthew Henry pointed out from all that the Apostle Paul had to say to Philemon, that we must be careful not to minimize the wrong, or the sin, which a sinner has committed against God. Or, for that matter, that he has sinned against his master, as was the case with Onesimus.

Let me quote again from Matthew Henry:

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.

1:20 Here we see the heart of the Apostle Paul. Lenski said, “A nobler sentence has seldom been written” (Vol. IX, p. 971). It takes many different things to make different people happy. But Paul indicated here that that which would make him supremely happy would be to see these two men, master and bondservant, united together in the Lord. When Paul used the verb “refresh” here, it is the same word that he had used back in verse 7, ἀναπαύω. This is the verb also that our Lord used in Matt. 11:29 where it is written that He said, 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls (Matt. 11:29).

So Paul was seeking “joy” and “rest,” or peace, in his heart. And that could only be if Philemon and Onesimus were totally reconciled. From verse 7 we would take it that Philemon was the kind of a Christian who acted in such a way in every circumstance that the hearts of his fellow-believers were at rest in the Lord. What a testimony to the spiritual character of Philemon. Too often our stubbornness and self-will cause unrest of heart among the people of God. But that was not true of Philemon. And Paul was assured in his own heart that Philemon would not be a disappointment to him in this present situation. And he said so in the next verse.

Let us remember that whenever there is a child of God who refuses to do the will of God, it spreads gloom and discouragement to other believers. But when there is obedience, this is what brings joy and peace to those who truly know the Lord.

As I have said before, Paul always wanted to leave his fellow-believers better than he met them. And this verse is an indication that he wanted them to do the same for him.

1:21 When Paul took up his pen to write this letter, or called someone in to dictate it to them so that they could write it, he was confident, fully confident, that Philemon would obey the Lord, that is, that he would do what was pleasing to the Lord – not because he felt forced to do so, but because he wanted to, and not just outwardly, but he knew that Philemon would be obedient to the Lord *from the heart!* And so he said, “Knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.” And we can be assured that Philemon did just that! Don’t you wish you knew what all Philemon did as he received Onesimus. Probably he did it before he even

read this epistle. He may have embraced him. Perhaps he even gave a dinner like the father of the prodigal son did when his son came back home. Possibly Onesimus' clothing was soiled or even worn out from all of the running he had done, and so Philemon outfitted him with some new clothes. What we know is that everything was changed from what it had been before. Philemon undoubtedly said something like this: "Have you heard that Onesimus is back with me? But he is a new Onesimus, a changed Onesimus, and I am so glad to have him back at home. He will be with us as we gather together on the Lord's Day because now he understands what we are doing when we get together, and he wants to worship the Lord like we do, and he wants to go on learning about the Lord just like he was doing when the Apostle Paul taught him. It must have been the happiest day of their lives not only for Philemon and Onesimus, but also for Apphia, and Archippus, as well as for all of the believers who met in their home. And when Paul heard about what had happened, it was a day that the Apostle Paul would never forget.

October 22, 2001

Some believe that the Apostle Paul was appealing to Philemon to give Onesimus his freedom. But it seems to me that this would be out of character with the rest of his appeal. He did not have to set Onesimus free (to manumit) in order to do everything that the Apostle Paul hoped that he would do.

This ends the portion of Paul's letter which contained his appeal to Philemon. Sidlow Baxter quoted G. G. Findlay who said, "In every note and syllable this note betrays Paul's personality. Nothing more genuine was ever written." He also quoted Dean Alford who wrote extensively on the entire NT. This is what Dean Alford had to say:

It (the letter) was preserved in the family to which it was addressed, and read first, no doubt, as a precious apostolic message of love and blessing, in the church which assembled in Philemon's house. Then copies of it became multiplied, and from Colosse it spread through the church universal. It is quoted as early as the second century, and has ever, except with some few who question everything, remained an undoubted portion of the writings of St. Paul.

We would have been able to see the great spiritual stature of the Apostle Paul if we could have known him personally, but since that is impossible, we can become intimately acquainted with him through his epistles.

But now let me go on to say just a word about the fourth division of this epistle which I have called,

IV. PAUL'S PLAN TO VISIT PHILEMON (Col. 1:22).

Let me refer to a passage in Paul's letter to the Philippians which he wrote at the same time he wrote this letter to Philemon, and which applies to what he wrote to Philemon here in verse 22. This is his comment to the Philippians:

21 For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

22 But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour: yet what I shall choose I wot not.

23 For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better:

24 Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you.

25 And having this confidence, I know that I shall abide and continue with you all for your furtherance and joy of faith;

26 That your rejoicing may be more abundant in Jesus Christ for me by my coming to you again
(Phil. 1:21-26).

Paul was convinced that he was going to be released from prison to resume his ministry. How he learned this, he has not told us, and so it is meaningless for us to speculate about this. But the important part of his state-

ment to the Philippian church with regard to *the purpose of his remaining*, is what we need to pay special attention to. And we see this in verses 25 and 26 which I will re-read:

25 And having this confidence, I know that I shall abide and continue with you all for your furtherance and joy of faith;

26 That your rejoicing may be more abundant in Jesus Christ for me by my coming to you again (Phil. 1:25-26).

Paul's mission in the world was twofold, and he never lost sight of what it was. First, to preach the Gospel to those who did not know the Lord. And he enjoyed great blessing throughout the Roman Empire in doing this especially among the Gentiles. But, secondly, he had a mission to the church, and this he stated in verses 25 and 26 (underlined). (Re-read.)

We all need to remember why we are here. It is not just so we can enjoy ourselves and do a lot of things that we have always wanted to do, or so we can purchase some things that we have always wanted to have. How different was Paul from King Hezekiah in the OT. He cried and prayed when he was told that he was to prepare to die. As a result of his prayer, the Lord gave him another fifteen years. But what did he do with them. The event in his life that is especially remembered during that time was that he entertained some visitors from Babylon and he showed them all of the treasure of his house. When Isaiah found out what he had done, he told Hezekiah that the day would come when those Babylonians would come back to get what they had seen. Do you remember what he said to Isaiah? He said, "Good is the word of the Lord which thou hast spoken . . . For there shall be peace and truth in my days" (Isa. 39:8). *It would have been far better if Hezekiah had died of the illness which he had before the Lord gave him the fifteen added years!*

So for all of us, with a special emphasis upon those of us who are getting up in years, it is important for us to remember *why we are still here!* It is so we can continue to tell others about our Savior, and so we, too, can help each other to grow in the Lord and to increase in our ability to rejoice in Christ Jesus!

This would have been Paul's desire to go to Philippi again, and to go to Colosse again. Surely he would have been glad to see those cities again, but his main purpose was that he might minister to the believers in those places for their growth in the Lord and their joy in the Lord, and along the way to be able to tell more Gentiles and Jews about the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. We may retire from the work we have done throughout our lives, *but we are never to retire from living for the Lord and serving Him!*

I was interested to discover that Sidlow Baxter believed that the reason Philemon appears after Titus, and not immediately following the epistle to the Colossians as you might think it would be, was because it should be considered as one of the Pastoral Epistles. And, as I have thought that over, I believe that he was right. He was writing as a Pastor when he wrote this epistle, not as the pastor of some local church, but as a shepherd to the people of God. There are times when pastors, and other elders, need a pastor, and that is why he was writing.

Note how Paul was depending upon their prayers so that his hope to visit them might become a reality.

Now for the last point in this letter:

V. PAUL'S CONCLUDING SALUTATIONS AND PRAYER (Col. 1:23-25).

A. The Salutations (vv. 23-24)

We have discussed this word before. It means to take another person in our arms. So the men Paul mentioned here were sending their love in Christ to Philemon and his family, as well as to Onesimus. It means *to greet, to*

wish them well.

1. Epaphras (v. 23).

He mentioned five men. And the first was Epaphras. He is mentioned only 3 times in the Bible, twice in Paul's letter to the Colossians (Col. 1:7; 4:12), and here in Philemon 23.

He was, like Paul, not just a prisoner of Rome, but Paul's "fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus." Colossians 1:7 tells us that he had been to the Colossian believers "a faithful minister of Christ." Paul considered him to be his "dear fellow-servant." This means that they both served the same Master.

Colossians 4:12 tells us that, although Epaphras was confined in Rome, he continued to pray for them. Paul called Epaphras' kind of prayer, a "laboring fervently." Those two words are the translation of one verb in the Greek. It is the verb ἀγωνίζομαι. It was used of a runner who was running a race, seeking to win a prize. It suggested a struggle. It meant that he was intent on accomplishing something by his prayer, and it was! He was praying that they might "stand perfect and complete in all the will of God." And in this he was contending with the Enemy of the souls of all men, the Devil. So praying to him was both work and a fight.

Here in v. 23 Paul called him, "My fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus." Lenski translated these words, *my fellow war captive*. But Lenski does not believe that Epaphras was a prisoner of Rome, that such an idea was not tenable, but that it was figurative of the battle that they were all facing. But I wonder. The language that Paul used of himself in v. 9 and here are very similar. However, in Col. 4:10 Aristarchus is mentioned as a "fellowprisoner," but not here. Perhaps they were like those of the household of Onesiphorus because, as Paul went on to say, "he oft refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chains" (2 Tim. 1:16). And so the meaning may be that Epaphras, too, was not ashamed to identify himself with Paul as a friend and fellowlaborer, so he might as well have been a prisoner. So the truth is that we cannot say for certain what it means that Epaphras was Paul's "fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus."

2. Marcus, or John Mark (v. 24).

He is mentioned in Col. 4:10 as "sister's son to Bamabas, (touching who ye received commandments; if he come unto you, receive him." Also in 2 Tim. 4:11, he is mentioned again. In that place the Apostle Paul said, "take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry." But you will remember that John Mark was with Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, but without any explanation we read in Acts 13:13b we are simply told that "John (Mark) departing from them returned to Jerusalem." As Paul and Barnabas were preparing to leave on their second missionary journey, we read this beginning with Acts 15:37:

37 And Barnabas determined to take with them John, whose surname was Mark.

38 But Paul thought not good to take him with them, who departed from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work.

39 And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus;

40 And Paul chose Silas, and departed, being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God (Acts 15:37-40).

But comparing these Scriptures we can see that a real change had been made in John Mark's heart so that he, like Onesimus, went from unprofitable to profitable. And you know that John Mark is the writer of the second Gospel in the NT. We don't often see things go this way, but the very mention of John Mark brought new feelings into the heart of the Apostle Paul.

3. Aristarchus (v. 24).

In the New Unger Dictionary we read this about Aristarchus:

ARISTAR'CHUS (a-ris-tar'kus; "the best ruler"). A native of Thessalonica and a faithful adherent of the apostle Paul in his labors. He became the companion of Paul on his third missionary tour, accompanying him to Ephesus, where he was seized and nearly killed in the tumult raised by the silversmiths under Demetrius (Acts 19:29), A.D. 59. He left that city accompanying Paul to Greece, then to Asia (20:4), and subsequently to Rome (27:2), . . . Tradition makes him to have suffered martyrdom in the time of Nero.

With Philemon 24 and Col. 4:10 Aristarchus is mentioned five times in the NT. He was faithful throughout his life.

4. Demas (v. 24).

Demas is mentioned in Col. 4: 14 as he is in Philemon 24, but this is a tragic story. Cf. 2 Tim. 4:10: "For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica." There is nothing in Scripture to indicate that he ever came back. Paul's statement here seems to have meant to be final. He evidently was Paul's Judas, and like those in John 6 concerning whom it is said in verse 66, "From that time many of His disciples went back, and walked no more with Him." That is, they, too, went away, and did not come back.

Two verses in particular in 1 John seem to point to Demas. The first is 1 John 2:19. The second is 1 John 2:15. And James also wrote concerning circumstances like those involving Demas. Cf. James 4:4,
Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God?
whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.

There have always been those who have become identified with the Lord and with His people, claiming to know Christ in salvation. But then something happens, and they show their true colors. When it happens, it always causes heartache in the hearts of the Lord's people, and sometimes, if people are not firmly grounded in the truth, it can give rise to false teaching, such as, that salvation can be lost. But the truth is that such people never have known the Lord. And there are some who never make a break with the church, but their lives fail to show any evidence of salvation.

The last man to be mentioned is:

5. Luke (v. 24).

Luke is called in Col. 4:14, "the beloved physician." He was with Paul in his first imprisonment, and also in his final imprisonment. Cf. 2 Tim. 4:11a, "Only Luke is with me."

Luke is the writer of the third Gospel, and also of the book of Acts. In what are sometimes called "the 'we,' or 'us,' passages" of Luke, we can tell that those are the passages when the writer of the book of Acts was with him. These begin in Acts 16:10 and stop at 16:17, indicating that Luke was with Paul on part of his second missionary journey. We pick it up again in Acts 20:5 and it continues until 21:18. Then we pick up these passages again in 27:1, and from that point on Luke was with the Apostle Paul all the way to Rome, including the shipwreck. Cf. Acts 28:2. The last of these passages is in 28:12-16.

So Luke had a large place in the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul, and he may have had even more than is included in the book of Acts. We are sure of this because of the mention of Luke in 2 Timothy 4:11 which was written shortly before, according to tradition, the Apostle Paul was martyred.

Paul was always very gracious toward his fellow workers, and thankful to the Lord for the part that they had in his ministry.

B. The prayer (v. 25).

The Apostle Paul concluded his letter to the churches of Galatia and his second letter to Timothy, that is, praying for the grace of the Lord, or the Lord Himself, to be with their spirits. Phil. 4:23 is very similar, but does not mention the human spirit.

Geoffrey Wilson says that after speaking to Philemon in the singular from verse 4 on, Paul reverted to the plural in this last verse of the epistle. He was evidently thinking in terms of the whole church which met in the house of Philemon. And this, of course, would include Philemon and his family.

Matthew Henry said that when the grace of God is in our spirits "it influences the whole man, and flows out in gracious and holy actings" (VI, 887). It is grace by which we have been saved. And we are to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is by the grace of God that we are what we are, and only by His grace. Grace means the undeserved favor of God, and grace is strength to endure and to rejoice as the trials of life come our way. Regardless of how deeply we have partaken of the grace of God, we can always partake of more.

As John Newton wrote in his most wonderful hymn, *Amazing Grace*,
 'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
 And grace will lead me home.

And it is always "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ." If it were not for Christ, we would never have known the true meaning of that marvelous word, "grace."

Conclusion

In a sermon Charles Simeon preached on the book of Philemon, he made this statement in conclusion. It is found in Vol. 19, pp. 129, 130:

Doubtless Onesimus would long remember his obligations to St. Paul. But what were they in comparison with what you owe to the Lord Jesus Christ? Think how you have cast off the yoke of Almighty God, and robbed him of all the service to which He was entitled, and gone to a distance from him, that you might live as "without God in the world. Think how the Lord Jesus Christ has instructed you, and brought you to the knowledge of salvation, and restored you to the favor of your offended God. Think how He has not merely offered to pay your debt, but has actually discharged it. Yes, "of him it was exacted," says the prophet (Isa. 53:7), "and He was made answerable." And He "laid down his own life a ransom for you." To His continual intercession too are you indebted for all that peace which is maintained between God and your soul. Will you not then be thankful to Him? Or rather, shall there be any bounds to your gratitude? Bless Him then, and bless His holy Name. And now endeavor to be "profitable to Him." Consecrate to Him all your faculties, and all your powers. Live for Him: die for Him, if need be: and begin now the song in which you shall, ere long, join all the choirs of heaven:

To Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and our Father, to Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen (Rev. 1:5-6).