

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

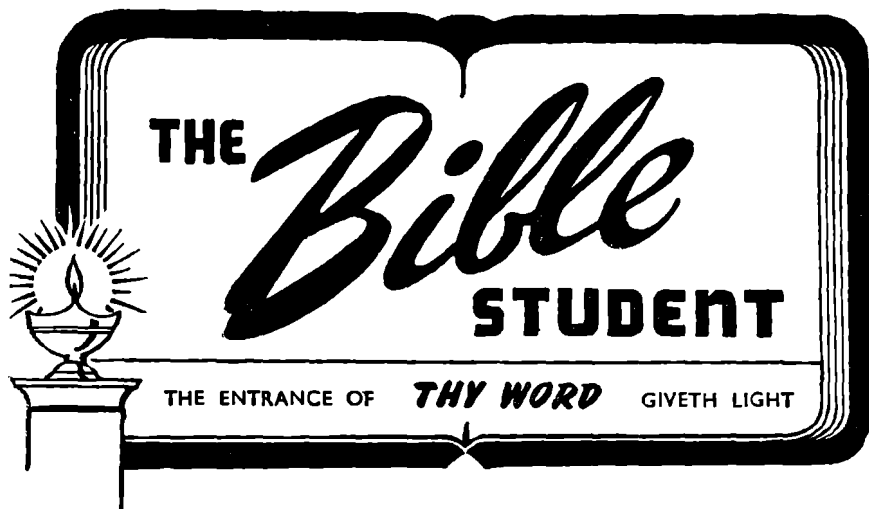
<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Bible Student* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bible-student_01.php



New Series
Vol. XXIII. No. 2

APRIL
1952

CONTENTS

PAUL'S LETTER TO PHILEMON	49
THE WISDOM LITERATURE OF THE BIBLE	57
THE THEOPHANIES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT'	60
NOTES ON HEBREWS	68
THE HEBREW PSALTER	75
SEVEN OLD TESTAMENT FEASTS	81
'JESUS CHRIST' AND 'CHRIST JESUS'	88
PURPOSE, POWER AND PURITY	91

Editor: A. McDONALD REDWOOD

The Bible Student

Editor: A. McDONALD REDWOOD

NEW SERIES

APRIL 1952

VOL. XXIII No. 2

PAUL'S LETTER TO PHILEMON

By THE EDITOR

This epistle is the third shortest in the New Testament; a perfect gem from the same man who wrote the masterly letter to the Romans, the exquisite one to the Philippians, that strong legal treatise to the Galatians, and far more besides. One wonders whether the average Christian today ever turns to *study* it carefully, even though occasionally he may read it as he reads through the New Testament. It will abundantly repay all the study given to it.

Its Spiritual Values

There are three main values in this letter which call for careful consideration. The *first* is the illustration it provides of how a renegade youth was restored not only to Christ, but to a life of true usefulness in His service, by careful and loving guidance in the right way.

The *second* value is the way it illustrates the Christian principles which should govern the relationship of master and servant; more especially where both are members of the one body of Christ, His true followers. It assumes the full recognition of the inalienable rights, spiritual and temporal, belonging to both: and that both are equally responsible to their common Lord to fulfill their respective stewardships according to His revealed will, in order to please Him in all things. Moreover, that in pleasing Him, they will serve each other in the highest possible sense and find true joy in doing so.

The *third* value is to be found in the *example* it provides of the apostle's manner and spirit of winning Philemon's fullest fellowship for the restoration of Onesimus to favour and usefulness once more. There are abiding lessons in it, therefore, for all of us, whatever our sphere in life.

An Analysis

It is not easy to analyse what is, to all intents and purposes, a 'Love Letter'; but the following will prove useful.

Prologue	vs.	1- 9
(a) Greeting,		1- 3
(b) Thanksgiving,		4- 7
(c) Appeal,		8- 9
Primary Object	vs.	10-19
(a) The Past,		10-11
(b) The Present,		12-14
(c) The Future,		15-19
Epilogue	vs.	20-25
(a) Appeal,		20-22
(b) Salutations,		23-24
(c) Benediction,		25

Notes on the Main Divisions

Our purpose here is not a detailed study, but a general survey of the main points and the lessons they teach us.

I. *The Persons concerned.*

(a) *Philemon*, to whom the letter is addressed, would appear to have been a man of some wealth and standing, a convert to Christianity through the instrumentality of Paul himself. (v. 19). We may fairly assume that he was a native of Colossae and resided there with his wife and son, *Archippus*. We know nothing more about him than is given in this brief letter, but that little reveals that he and his household had a very warm place in the apostle's heart—more so, perhaps, since the conversion of *Onesimus*.

(b) *Apphia* was *Philemon's* wife. It has been asserted that she was a 'deaconess' in the local assembly, but of this there is no proof. There is also a legend that she was martyred with her husband at Colossae.

(c) *Archippus* is generally understood to have been the son of this godly couple. The apostle's reference to him in Col. 4:17, implies that he was recognised as a worker in the church at Colossae, exercising pastoral care of the congregation and a minister of the Word of God. The Greek word *diaconia* used in Colossians

to describe this, 'in itself has no necessary reference to an "ordained" ministry' however (Moule). At the same time the context would suggest that he was a leader, and a very important one too, though others might well have been associated with him.

(d) *Onesimus* was a slave in the household. Evidently he had run away to Rome, and there had come into contact with Paul. As a result of hearing the Gospel, in all probability from the apostle himself (v. 10) in prison, he had become a 'slave of Jesus Christ', and a 'faithful and beloved brother in the Lord' (Col. 4:9). We know nothing more about him, although there are references to him in the so-called Ignatian Epistles, which Lightfoot and others reject as spurious.

Putting these various personal references together we get the picture of a household and family of godly believers, followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, each exerting an extended influence because of their devotion and character. In this respect they provide a beautiful example in this modern age of so-called 'greater enlightenment', but of tragically decadent morality.

II. *The Prologue* introduces the main subject of the Letter. Note the gracious spirit of the writer as he proceeds to deal with a difficult and delicate personal matter, for his heart's strings now hold in a common bond two parties, the household and the runaway, who must be brought together again, not in the old bonds but in the new bonds of a common Saviour and Lord. We shall look at three aspects of the theme, without too much detail.

(a) The apostle's affectionate *greetings* to those whom he truly loved. In these he includes the greetings of Timothy, who was with him in Rome, no doubt well known to Philemon also. Here is no fulsome display of mere sentiment, but the simple expression of a strong yet tender heart; a beautiful combination of dignity of spirit and humbleness of mind. Let us beware of using mere phraseology which is not founded in actual truth and in the grace and love of Christ.

Incidental (almost) is the reference to '*the church in thy house*'; which again reminds us that ornate buildings, tall spires, and elaborate ceremonial are not in any sense essential to right worship. The actual *reality* is found in the words of Christ, '*wherever two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst*'. The New Testament is quite simple and clear in revealing

that it is the power and presence of the Living Lord, only true Head of the church, and the Holy Spirit's pervasive presence and guidance that are the essentials in any gathering of saints for true worship. If need be, *could* there be such a gathering of 'the church' in *thy* house? On such gatherings there will always be present '*grace and peace from God the Father*' (v. 2; cf. Col. 1:2; 4:15).

(b) *Thanksgiving*, mingled with *prayer*, follows (cf. Rom. 1:8; 1 Cor. 1:4; Phil. 1:3). Take a little time to look at three phases of such prayer and thanksgiving as here indicated, each complementary of the others. First, prayer is an established *habit* of the apostle; he is 'always' at it (v. 4; cf. the R.V.—which is endorsed by Lightfoot, Alford, *et al*). Then secondly, it was the '*hearing*' of the love and faith' of that household that so stimulated and encouraged him to pray. The Greek implies 'a *process of hearing*'. As Moule puts it: 'The subject (of that family's and church's affairs and state) was continually present in the conversation of Paul and his companions.' They were thus held in continual remembrance. It is pertinent to ask: how many a missionary and mission field are the subject of your prayers? How it would gladden and encourage them to know that you *were* praying! Thirdly, there is also a further incentive to such an exercised heart—Philemon had sent a 'love gift' to the needy saints (and possibly to Paul also) in Rome (vs. 6, 7). Hence the apostle prays, 'that the communication ('fellowship', R.V.) of thy faith may become *effectual*'—i.e., *operative*, by demonstrating to both the recipients, and to others who might hear of it, how the power and grace of God were working in Philemon's witness and life, to the glory of Christ (see R.V. of v. 6—'*unto* Christ'). 'The servant is so to live that not only shall he be seen to be beneficent, but his beneficence shall be seen to be due to Another, Whose he is' (Moule).

(c) Next we have the apostle's *approach* to his main purpose in writing (vs. 8, 9). He has a request to make but there are two different ways of making it; which shall he choose? Verse 8 gives the first (see R.V.)—'Wherefore, though I have *all boldness in Christ to enjoin thee* that which is befitting'. The actual request is for nothing less than the full restoration of the erring slave to his former place, now not only as servant but as 'a brother beloved' (see the following verses). In making this

request he could use '*boldness*', the Greek of which implies 'out-spokenness', i.e., the freedom belonging to one 'in authority' as an apostle 'in Christ', who could '*enjoin*', or command, Philemon what was wanted. Both phrases are strong, the second specially, as may be seen in the cognate noun in Titus 2:15, 'reprove with all *authority*'. But, he would not so assert his authority; rather, he would plead '*for love's sake*.' Some would read this as referring to Christian love in general, but the context and spirit of the appeal require a more personal and particular application, viz., the love that binds two friends in holy fellowship in Christ. The added personal note of verse 9 seems to endorse this view: 'I rather *besech, being such an one as Paul the aged and now also the prisoner of Christ Jesus*' (Cf. Phil. 4:2, 3). 'The appeal lies', says Moule, 'in the fact of the writer's "failing powers", worn in the Lord's service; and this would touch an equal as readily as a junior.' With this view we entirely agree: the whole context seems to us to convey the impression of a certain nobility yet humbleness of mind, acquired in the school of experience and suffering for Christ rather than anything else.* Here is a wonderful lesson and illustration from which we might all learn the art of conquest through *spiritual humility*; inflexible in essentials, flexible in unessentials.

III. *The Purpose of the Letter* (vs. 10-19). We can conveniently study the section in its three aspects (see Analysis).

(a) *The Past* (v. 10). Onesimus had belied his name, which means 'helpful' or 'profitable', and had become just the opposite. Now a new career had opened up before him since he met Paul in prison and had been 'begotten anew' in the truest sense of John 3:5-7. This conversion took place (and still takes place) 'through *the Gospel*' (1 Cor. 4:15). That is a very wonderful experience, but think of the other aspect for a moment, viz., the joy of being instrumental, as Paul was, of bringing such an experience to any life. Have you ever brought a soul to Christ? It is the privilege

* Lightfoot prefers the R.V. margin: 'Paul an *ambassador*, and now, etc.' He cites Eph. 6:20 in support. This would place an emphasis on his authority or dignity, as the Lord's envoy, even though in suffering. But it appears to us more in line with the whole attitude of the apostle as seen here to read the phrase as given in our notes which is also supported by Ellicott and Moule.

of *any* believer who lives in close touch with the Saviour and in obedience to the Holy Spirit's guidance and help.

(b) *The Present* (vs. 12-14). Onesimus' conversion did not, however, cancel out his moral and legal obligations. If anything, it brought them the more compellingly before him. What was he to do about it? The first step was to go back to the place and position he had left and make a fresh start. This time he would face up to them in a new strength and grace because of the new life in Christ Jesus into which he had come. Not only so, but his relation and responsibility to his master would be on a higher level, for both he and his master were subjects of the one Lord. Each in his own sphere would henceforth know the joy of following and serving the will of that common LORD.

Another related point worth studying here is the shining example set by Paul as he handles this difficult and delicate matter. He is anxious to do what is right in the highest interests of Onesimus, but he also must recognise equally Philemon's unquestionable claims (see vs. 13, 14). He begins by thankfully acknowledging Philemon's devotion and love to himself. And he might easily go a step further and *presume* on this by keeping Onesimus with him in Rome as his personal attendant: he greatly needed such help: and besides, it would be in the real interests of the Gospel to do so. Surely Philemon could hardly raise any serious objection to such a course? But brushing aside all such arguments, however 'right' or supposedly 'unobjectionable' they might seem, he adopts the sound principle, '*without thy mind I would do nothing*' (v. 14). The last clause of that verse is also worth emphasising, for it expresses the truly Christian spirit and principle: 'that thy goodness . . . *be of free will*', not a forced or grudging consent. Here is a matter of practical importance which we do well to take to heart in dealing with fellow believers.

(c) *The Future* (vs. 15-19). The argument now takes a new turn: Paul would view the whole episode from a higher level: Perhaps God had permitted this to happen, not only to bring about Onesimus' conversion, but that he might be restored to Philemon 'for ever', not now as a servant but as 'a brother beloved', both 'in the flesh and in the Lord'. A remarkable expression indeed, 'as if (remarks Moule) his "servitude" were now a sort of *kinship*' on the highest level (see e.g. Gal. 3:24). And yet such a relation-

ship cannot be 'exploited' by either party involved (1 Tim. 6: 1-2, R.V.). Each has reciprocal responsibilities to fulfill before the Lord. Hence, in the 18th verse Paul returns to yet another matter needing settlement: Not only had Onesimus run away, but apparently he had stolen from his master also. This cannot be passed over lightly, any more than his running away. Christianity is nothing if it is not ethical. We cannot doubt that Paul had talked this out with Onesimus himself, to bring home to him his wrong-doing. But he was now a penniless man; like the man in the parable, he had 'nothing to pay'. It is just here Paul steps in, having shewn Onesimus his duty to his master he now tells Philemon: '*I will repay; see, I put my name, Paul, to this; it shall be done*'—such is the true force of the Greek. Then the argument is rounded off in the latter part of v. 19, 'That I say not unto thee that *thou owest me even thine own self*'. He had been brought into salvation through Paul's instrumentality; 'under God the convert feels instinctively a moral indebtedness'. The Greek word here is *prosopheilō*, not just *opheilō* as in v. 18, and means 'to owe besides', or 'in addition'; on which Lightfoot remarks that here is a suppressed thought, which might be fully expressed as: 'I will repay it, though you cannot fairly claim repayment, for you owe me much more than Onesimus owes you, and over and above that, you owe me *yourself*'. Having thus 'freely received', it is now his privilege and joy to 'freely give' and forgive.

Cannot *we* also sing:

Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe;
Sin had left a crimson stain,
HE washed it white as snow.

IV. *The Epilogue* consists mainly of the final requests and salutations. It will be observed that in several points the Epilogue returns to the opening thoughts found in the Prologue, as a comparison of vs. 20-21 with vs. 8-9; of v. 22 with vs. 4-7; and of vs. 23-25 with vs. 1-3 will reveal.

Let us look briefly at verse 20, *Love's claims*; verse 21, *Faith's confidence*; verse 22, *Hope's confirmation*.

Love's claims are twofold—to be made happy; and to be refreshed in spirit. Instead of 'happy' the R.V. margin gives 'help', meaning satisfaction in regard to the whole object of the letter.

The weight of evidence, however, favours the former thought—'Let me *enjoy* thee' is Tyndale's version. Moule compares it to a 'God bless you, brother; he does not merely ask to be served, but to be made very happy.' To this Paul adds, 'refresh my heart in Christ' (see above v. 7). Nothing would refresh him so much as to hear that Onesimus had been reinstated. Have we not the privilege also of so refreshing the hearts of others?

Faith's confidence rests in Philemon's obedience—not the obedience of *duty* to superior authority, but of *love* to a brother beloved. Such 'obedience' is easy as we live closer to Christ Himself, who 'pleased not Himself'. So that Paul feels happy in going a step further: 'knowing that thou wilt do even *beyond what I say*.' He means Onesimus' reception into the household and family on the new basis of *freedom, forgiveness* and *love*. 'The word emancipation seems to be trembling on his lips, and yet he does not once utter it' (Lightfoot). The ground on which Paul appeals to Philemon is the same on which Christ appeals to us. 'Where Sinai failed, Calvary triumphs.' That is the note which calls up the worthiest responses of our heart.

Hope's confirmation—compare this again with vs. 4-7 above. In the earlier verses we have commendation, here expectation. The former speaks of Paul's prayers for Philemon, here it is Philemon's prayers for Paul. The apostle had his eye continually on the sovereign will of God, which raised him above the immediate and seemingly hopeless conditions he lived in. Hence he was confirmed in his faith that GOD would work in this particular matter in answer to *their* prayers. His release would thus be in the nature of a gracious *gift* from God to them and to him: this is the significance of the verb *charidomai*—'given as a favour from superior authority' (as in 1 Cor. 2:12; Rom. 8:32; it also occurs in Acts 3:14; 25:11, q.v.). The 'lodging' in Philemon's house would be the final confirmation of his hope—he did not say 'I know', for he did not believe that prayer is just a means of getting things from God as we want, but whereby we get to know and are moved to act in accordance with His will: the will of God is the ground of prayer, but faith enters into it as well. Paul's eye was not on Caesar's permission, but on God's decision. This is obvious also in the phrasing here and in verse 1. In the latter he calls himself 'the prisoner of Christ Jesus'; here (v. 23) it is '*in* Christ Jesus';

in both he ignores all mere *human* agencies: Christ was the 'Author' of his captivity, not Nero, and Christ was the true 'sphere' in whom his captivity was lived out daily—not just in the Roman prison walls. Such is the unspeakable peace of soul of him who lives ever in the shelter of the peace and love of the will of God. In this Epaphras also shared (Col. 4:12, 13).

Do not fail to give some time to the study of Paul's companions here mentioned, Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke. What is mentioned of each in the New Testament is instructive in every sense. They all commenced well, but they did not all end their course in the same way. The first was Paul's fellow-prisoner, the others his fellow-labourers, and of these latter the first two were Jews, the other two Gentiles.

Maclaren summarises the teaching in this Letter thus: In it 'the central springs of Christian service are touched, and the motives used to sway Philemon are the echo of the motives which Christ uses to sway men' in this day.

THE WISDOM LITERATURE OF THE BIBLE

By F. F. BRUCE, M.A.

The Book of Job

Of the various Wisdom books of the Old Testament the book of Job, by general consent, is outstanding both for literary beauty, for penetration of thought, and still more for the intenseness with which one of the fundamental problems of life is wrestled with. It is easy to answer the question 'Why do men suffer?' by saying that they suffer because they sin—easy, so long as the thinker holds himself aloof from the real facts of human experience and is content to view the whole subject in abstraction. One of the most influential theologians of our generation has contrasted what he calls the 'balcony' view of life—which looks down upon the crowded street from a comfortable detachment and philosophizes about all that appears to be taking place down there—with the view