

# COMMENTARY ON PHILEMON

Lee Gatiss, Bradley G. Green, and Timothy George, eds., *1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon: New Testament*, vol. XII, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2019).

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## 1-7 INTRODUCTION TO PHILEMON AND PAUL'S GREETING

*Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,  
To Philemon our beloved fellow worker <sup>2</sup>and Apphia our  
sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your  
house:  
3Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord  
Jesus Christ.*

*4I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers,  
5because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have  
toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, <sup>6</sup>and I pray that the  
sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowl-  
edge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.<sup>a</sup> <sup>7</sup>For  
I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my  
brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed  
through you.*

**OVERVIEW:** In Paul's shortest letter, to Philemon, who was the owner of Onesimus, a runaway slave who had become a Christian, our commentators find much of value for their audiences. While modern exegetes reflect more readily on the institution of slavery, this was not a pressing issue in the sixteenth century. Instead, Paul's concern for a slave, a person of little significance in worldly terms, is emphasized, and this posture of mercy and love is given general application as a model and expectation for all Christians. The interpreters recognize Paul's address to Philemon as a fellow Christian, leading him to omit the references to his authority that commonly appear at the beginning of his

<sup>a</sup>Or *for Christ's service*

letters. Paul's praise for Philemon's virtues is echoed by many of our commentators, although Luther provides a more critical reading, seeing Paul's kind words as preparation for his following request.

### ***Introductory Comments***

**A GODLY EXAMPLE OF CHRISTIAN LOVE.** WILLIAM TYNDALE: In this epistle St. Paul shows a godly example of Christian love. Herein we see how Paul takes poor Onesimus to him and makes intercession for him to his master and helps him with all that he may, and behaves as though he himself were the said Onesimus. Yet he does not do this with power and authority, as he well might have: but he puts off all authority and whatsoever he might by right do, so that Philemon might do likewise toward Onesimus, and with great meekness and wisdom he teaches Philemon to see his duty in Christ Jesus. **THE PROLOGUE TO THE EPISTLE OF ST. PAUL UNTO PHILEMON.**<sup>1</sup>

**THE LOFTINESS OF THE MIND OF PAUL IN A SHORT LETTER.** JOHN CALVIN: The singular loftiness of the mind of Paul, though it may be seen to greater advantage in his other writings that treat of weightier matters, is also attested by this epistle, in which, while he handles a subject otherwise low and mean, he rises to God with his wonted elevation. Sending back a runaway slave and thief, he asks pardon for him. But in pleading this cause, he speaks about Christian forbearance with such ability that he appears to speak about the interests of the whole church rather than the private affairs of a single individual. In behalf of a man of the low-

<sup>1</sup> *Tyndale's New Testament*, 323\*.

est condition, he demeans himself so modestly and humbly that nowhere else is the meekness of his temper painted in a more lively manner. [COMMENTARY ON PHILEMON](#).<sup>2</sup>

**PHILEMON IN THE CANON FOR THE GOOD OF THE CHURCH.**

DAVID DICKSON: Philemon, one of the Colossian pastors, had a servant called Onesimus, who being guilty of theft came to Rome, and by the special providence of God, upon his hearing of Paul (who preached the gospel at Rome in bonds), he is converted to the faith. This Onesimus the apostle sends back to his master Philemon, and earnestly with many arguments pleads his pardon, that he might be received into favor; and because the [Holy Ghost](#), in the business of Onesimus, would set forth an instance both of his divine love and of our duty toward penitent sinners, though of the meanest rank among human beings; therefore for the universal and perpetual edification of the church, God would admit this among other canonical epistles. [THE EPISTLE OF PAUL TO PHILEMON](#).<sup>3</sup>

**GOD'S CARE FOR THE CHURCH.** VIKTORIN STRIGEL: All households ought to be domestic churches. And then under the care of God the universal church is dispersed over all the earth; thus there is no doubt that individual churches are divinely protected and preserved, just as were the families of Joseph, Mary, Zechariah, Anna, and Simeon, a flock having roamed bitterly to Judea, of which the mark was wantonness. [ON THE LETTER TO PHILEMON](#).<sup>4</sup>

**A PRIVATE AND DOMESTIC LETTER.** [MARTIN LUTHER](#): Paul

<sup>2</sup>[CTS 43:347–48\\*](#) ([CO 52:441](#)).

<sup>3</sup> Dickson, *Exposition*, 183.

<sup>4</sup> Strigel, *Omnes Libros Novi Testamenti*, 594\* (pdf 772).

cannot refrain from inculcating the general doctrine concerning Christ even here in treating a private matter. “In the faith.” This is how he urges and insists in order to preserve this doctrine in the church. He reconciles a slave to his master in such a way that it seems that he will not accomplish anything. But you will see the outstanding doctrines, which Cicero did not see. We will set these forth diligently in order to see that one can say nothing so ordinary that Christ is not present. [LECTURES ON PHILEMON](#).<sup>5</sup>

### 1–3 *Greetings*

**TIMOTHY A COWORKER IN THE GOSPEL.** DAVID DICKSON: Philemon had no doubt of Paul’s apostleship. Therefore the apostle makes no mention of it, but of this bond which he accounted honorable for the gospel of Christ, he adjoins his brother Timothy to himself, as a partner in his request. First, he calls Philemon “Beloved,” then his “fellow laborer,” that is, in the preaching of the gospel, that he might make way for the reconciling of Philemon’s mind. **THE EPISTLE OF PAUL TO PHILEMON.**<sup>6</sup>

**TEACHERS ARE SOLDIERS IN AN ACUTE SENSE.** JOHN CALVIN: Although the condition of a soldier belongs to all Christians universally, yet because teachers may be regarded as standard-bearers in the warfare, they ought to be ready more than all others to fight, and Satan usually gives them greater annoyance. It is also possible, that Archippus attended and shared in some contests that Paul maintained; and, indeed, this is the very word that Paul makes use of

<sup>5</sup> [LW 29:93](#); citing [Titus 3:15](#).

<sup>6</sup> Dickson, *Exposition*, 183\*.

whenever he mentions persecutions. [COMMENTARY ON PHILEMON](#).<sup>7</sup>

**PHILEMON ADVOCATES FOR ONESIMUS.** CARDINAL CAJETAN: Being about to ask for a kindness for Onesimus, he begins with a remembrance, indeed, with a recognition of the services of Philemon himself toward the faithfulness of Christ. And therefore he mentions that he gives thanks to God, and prays for Philemon. [ON THE LETTER OF PAUL TO PHILEMON](#).<sup>8</sup>

#### **4–7 Philemon’s Love and Faith**

**PAUL’S FOUR ARGUMENTS IN THE OPENING OF THE LETTER.** DAVID DICKSON: [First argument:] He gives thanks for the gifts of the Holy Spirit bestowed on Philemon, and also praises for the increase of his gifts.... [Second argument:] Particularly from the commendation of his faith in Christ, and his love flowing therefrom toward all people, especially toward the saints, which two comprehend the whole perfection of a Christian person, and this is the matter of his thanksgiving for Philemon. [Third argument:] By way of prayer, that his faith might show its efficacy in good fruits, that to the honor of Christ, the sincere grace of Christ abiding in him and his wife might be known to all, and this is the matter of his prayer for Philemon. [Fourth argument:] From the rejoicing that he had in that Philemon was so helpful to the necessity of the saints, that they all acknowledged to be refreshed by him. [THE EPISTLE OF PAUL TO PHILEMON](#).<sup>9</sup>

**ALWAYS GIVING THANKS TO GOD.** [JOHN CALVIN](#): The arrange-

<sup>7</sup> [CTS 43:348–49 \(CO 52:442\)](#).

<sup>8</sup> Cajetan, *In Omnes*, 326 (pdf 333).

<sup>9</sup> Dickson, *Exposition*, 183.

ment of the passage is somewhat confused; but there is no obscurity in the meaning, except that it is doubtful whether the adverb “always” is connected with the first clause, “I give thanks always to my God,” or with the second clause, “making mention of you always in my prayers.” The meaning may be brought out in this manner, that whenever the apostle offered prayer for Philemon, he interwove thanksgiving with it; that is, because Philemon’s piety afforded ground of rejoicing, for we often pray for those in whom nothing is to be found but what gives occasion for grief and tears. Yet the second mode of pointing is generally preferred, that Paul “gives thanks for Philemon, and always makes mention of him in his prayers.” Let my readers be at full liberty to judge for themselves; but, for my own part, I think that the former meaning is more appropriate. [COMMENTARY ON PHILEMON](#).<sup>10</sup>

**WE SHOULD BE THANKFUL WHEN WE HEAR THE WORD TRULY PREACHED.** [MARTIN LUTHER](#): “Because I hear [of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus Christ and all the saints].” This is Paul’s general method of arranging his epistles, to begin with thanksgiving. But he adapts this rule to his purpose here, since he wants to motivate Philemon to a good work. Look at the individual words. “I thank my [God] always.” You know that these things are taught by the felling that comes from the Holy Spirit himself. For Paul had suffered from false prophets and had heard that many were forsaking the faith and were stirring up heresies and sects, just as is happening to us. It is a rare thing to hear a preacher who is constant in the Word. But if we hear one, this is a cause for prayer and thanksgiving. The

<sup>10</sup> [CTS 43:349–50 \(CO 52:442\)](#).

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very nature of the gospel or the Spirit produces this in us. So we are trained by hearing evil everywhere to give thanks when we hear something good. [LECTURES ON PHILEMON](#).<sup>11</sup>

**FAITH AND LOVE ARE THE HIGHEST VIRTUES. JOHANNES BRENZ:** This is the praise from which Paul seeks the benevolence of Philemon in order to prepare the way for pleading with him on behalf of his runaway slave. For Paul commends Philemon's faith and love, saying, "I give thanks to my God when I hear about your faith, which you have from the Lord Jesus, and for your love which you have for all the saints." However, Paul cannot commend Philemon for greater and more excellent virtues. Neither could Philemon at any time do anything better, useful, or more greatly necessary than to believe or love. Some are wont to be commended for prudence, others for power, some for physical beauty, and others for good fortune. Heroes are commended for conspicuous deeds in war. Those who are commended for miracles which are produced. Others have a prophetic spirit for which they are commended. These, having such great praise and fame in the presence of people, have their own certain use in the church, but they are not those by which one stands in blessedness. Faith in Christ alone and love for neighbor are necessary for salvation. Whoever has these virtues can have all. Whoever lacks these virtues has none even though that person can have all other things. For first faith in Christ is the organ with which Christ is received and placed. Moreover, where Christ is, there is all righteousness, holiness, and salvation. For to whom Christ is given, how can it be that all good things do not come with it? Wherefore it is through faith that we are regarded as right-

<sup>11</sup> [LW 29:95–96](#).

eous before God and preserved. Furthermore it is by love for our neighbor that we serve our neighbor and conserve human society. It is therefore through love that we are regarded righteous before humanity. EXPLICATION ON PHILEMON.<sup>12</sup>

EFFECTIVE EVANGELISM. JOHN CALVIN: “That the communication of your faith may be effectual.” This clause is somewhat obscure; but I shall endeavor to elucidate it in such a manner that my readers may somewhat understand Paul’s meaning. First, it ought to be known that the apostle is not continuing to give the praise of Philemon, but that, on the contrary, he expresses those blessings for which he prays to God. These words are connected with what he had formerly said, that he “makes mention of him in his prayers.” What blessing then did he ask for Philemon? That his faith, exercising itself by good works, might be proved to be true, and not unprofitable. He calls it “the communication of faith” because it does not remain inactive and concealed within, but is manifested to men by actual effects. Although faith has a hidden residence in the heart, yet it communicates itself to people by good works. It is, therefore, as if he had said, “That your faith, by communicating itself, may demonstrate its efficacy in every good thing.” COMMENTARY ON PHILEMON.<sup>13</sup>

PAUL’S HEART IS FILLED, THUS HE SPEAKS ABOUT CHRIST. MARTIN LUTHER: Yesterday we dealt with the topic that Paul is fond of setting forth everywhere, so that he is not able to keep silence about it even in an epistle written about private

<sup>12</sup> Brenz, *Explicatio epistolarum*, 220.

<sup>13</sup> CTS 43:350–51 (CO 52:443).

matters. “Out of the abundance of the heart [the mouth speaks].” His heart is filled, and therefore he always speaks and writes about Christ. We do not find such things in the theologians after the apostles; nor do we find them among the other apostles. Our concern and entire light ought to be concentrated on this, that this knowledge may become firm. For this we need the Holy Spirit, to know what has been given to us, namely, salvation, righteousness, redemption from every evil, life eternal, a status as a brother of Christ, as a fellow heir of Christ, an heir of God. These things are expressed in short words; therefore the Holy Spirit is needed to make the knowledge grow. He always instructs about faith and redemption. LECTURES ON PHILEMON.<sup>14</sup>

**PRAYER FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH. MATTHIAS FLACIUS:** Following this latter point: For this is the reason why he later prays so much for members: that his faith should be built up by the sharing of good works, so that he may bring other brothers and sisters to himself, and share his fruit. He also adds the final reason as to why he seeks it, to which he says that he makes known the gifts and operations of Jesus for his glory. Observe that the good works of the godly glorify Christ, and are to be brought about through him also as though he were the fountain of all good things, who is the source of life, or the head, sprinkling all his own branches and members everywhere as depicted by the Holy Spirit in Scripture. GLOSS ON PHILEMON.<sup>15</sup>

**PHILEMON PROVIDED RELIEF FOR THE GODLY. JOHN CALVIN:**

<sup>14</sup> LW 29:97–98; citing Mt 12:34; Rom 8:17.

<sup>15</sup> Flacius, *Glossa Compendaria*, 1099.

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“For your love.” It is plain enough what he means: that he has great joy and consolation, because Philemon administered relief to the necessities of the godly. This was singular love, to feel so much joy on account of the benefit received by others. Besides, the apostle does not only speak of his personal joy, but says that many rejoiced on account of the kindness and benevolence with which Philemon had aided religious people. [COMMENTARY ON PHILEMON](#).<sup>16</sup>

**THE REFRESHING VIRTUES OF PHILEMON.** JOHANNES PISCATOR: An appropriate introduction to the benevolence to be acquired and to be maintained. For he testifies concerning Philemon’s own benevolent works, and he praises his virtues. And he gives testimony to certain testimony by speaking of his deeds, which he might do for the sake of Philemon. Truly that he might do good things for with God for him, and he implores the same for himself, and continually. He expounds that matter of good deeds in verse [5](#) and thus also the works and strengths of Philemon he praises. For example, his faith in Christ, and his charity on account of the saints, truly the destitute and afflicted Christians. He expounds the matter of prayer in verse [6](#). For example, the faith of Philemon and the love through the sharing of duties, and so that his kindness might increase and be made known to all. In verse [7](#), he praises the charity and kindness of Philemon which has been demonstrated. [COMMENTARY ON PHILEMON](#).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> CTS 43:351–52 (CO 52:443–44).

<sup>17</sup> Piscator, *Commentarii in Omnes Libros Novi Testamenti*, 672.

## 8–25 PAUL'S PLEA ON BEHALF OF ONESIMUS

<sup>8</sup>Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, <sup>9</sup>yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—<sup>10</sup>I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, <sup>a</sup>whose father I became in my imprisonment. <sup>11</sup>(Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) <sup>12</sup>I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. <sup>13</sup>I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, <sup>14</sup>but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. <sup>15</sup>For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, <sup>16</sup>no longer as a bondservant<sup>b</sup> but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

<sup>17</sup>So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. <sup>18</sup>If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. <sup>19</sup>I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. <sup>20</sup>Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

<sup>21</sup>Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. <sup>22</sup>At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I

<sup>a</sup>Onesimus means useful (see verse 11) or beneficial (see verse 20)

<sup>b</sup> For the contextual rendering of the Greek word *doulos*, see Preface; twice in this verse

*will be graciously given to you.*

*<sup>23</sup>Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, <sup>24</sup>and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.*

*<sup>25</sup>The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.*

**OVERVIEW:** Paul's plea to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus makes up the heart of this brief epistle, and as the apostle lays out his reasoning, our commentators find much to discuss. Luther continues in his belief that Paul is flattering Philemon with the hope of ensuring a positive outcome, while others find Paul's appeals to be more genuine, based on his identification with Onesimus, the latter's newfound faith, and Paul's trust in Philemon to act mercifully as a fellow believer. Paul's personal assurances and the obligation he holds Philemon under as a Christian also draw significant comment, and they are generally seen by our interpreters as an opportunity to recognize the significance of fellowship and the importance of acting in consonance with our professed beliefs.

### **8–12 Paul's Appeal Based on Love**

**PAUL COMPARED TO THE POPE. MARTIN LUTHER:** I do not want this to be a matter of obligation, but of entreaty. But I have also experienced how laws usually take away desires. A man is more easily drawn than pushed, and compulsion brings with it a rebellious will. A Christian, however, does not act that way. Nevertheless, Paul flatters him in such a sweet manner that even in addressing a Christian he avoids a domineering tone. To be sure, there is not this danger among Christians, for the matter proceeds in love and there

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is pure love in you, not compulsion. Therefore it is my wish that you do this out of love, not out of compulsion.... When did the pope and the other officials act this way, when do they humble themselves this way, as Paul becomes a young man with the young, an equal with equals? [LECTURES ON PHILEMON](#).<sup>1</sup>

**THE RIGHT OF APOSTLESHIP.** DAVID DICKSON: [First argument:] By the right of an apostle I can command that which is thy duty. Therefore Onesimus is to be received into favor, when I shall have showed you your duty in this matter.

[Second argument:] Though I could command you I this matter, I would rather out of love to you lay aside commands and humbly request you. Therefore you ought to grant what I request touching Onesimus. [Third argument:] Though I ought to do that for Paul, now aged, and in bonds for Christ, which is acceptable to him, seeing he humbly requests of you that which is honest and may easily be done. Therefore you ought to grant what I require concerning Onesimus.

[Fourth argument:] My request is for Onesimus your servant, whom, while I lay in bonds, I have set at liberty from the bonds of Satan, by the gospel, to the faith of Christ, and whom I esteem no less than my own son. Therefore receive him.

[Fifth argument:] Although formerly before his conversation, Onesimus was unprofitable to you, hereafter he will prove a faithful and diligent servant in performing the duties of his condition.

[Sixth argument:] You shall refresh my heart if you courteously receive Onesimus, but if you do otherwise, you are

<sup>1</sup>[LW 29:99](#).

discourteous toward me. THE FIRST EPISTLE OF PAUL TO THE THESSALONIANS.<sup>2</sup>

ONESEMUS LIVES UP TO HIS NAME. THE ENGLISH ANNOTATIONS: He evidently alludes to the name *honēsimus*, Onesimus, which in the Greek means “profitable.” While he was a servant before and an unbeliever, he was contrary to his name; utterly unprofitable. But now, upon his conversion, he will make good and prove himself truly Onesimus, that is, profitable to you and to me. ANNOTATIONS ON PHILEMON 1:11.<sup>3</sup>

#### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE BEGOTTEN BY ANOTHER PERSON?

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 the soul of a 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,” on that account he who administers the doctrine holds the place of a parent. Moreover, because the Word of God preached by human beings 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 person 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 humankind, but only show what God does by means of human beings. When he

<sup>2</sup> Dickson, *Exposition*, 183–84.

<sup>3</sup> Downname, ed., *Annotations*, 3M1r\*.

says that he had “begotten him in his bonds,” this circumstance adds weight to the commendation. [COMMENTARY ON PHILEMON](#).<sup>4</sup>

**TO RECEIVE ONESIMUS IS TO RECEIVE PAUL'S VERY HEART.** [JOHN CALVIN](#): “Receive him, that is, my heart.” Nothing could have been more powerful for assuaging the wrath of Philemon; for if he had refused to forgive his slave, he would thus have used cruelty against “the heart” of Paul. This is remarkable kindness displayed by Paul, that he did not hesitate to receive, as it were into his heart, a contemptible slave, and thief, and runaway, so as to defend him from the indignation of his master. And, indeed, if the conversion of a person to God were estimated by us, at its proper value, we too would embrace in the same manner those who should give evidence that they had truly and sincerely repented. [COMMENTARY ON PHILEMON](#).<sup>5</sup>

**THE POINT OF THE EPISTLE.** [MARTIN LUTHER](#): “I am sending him back.” This is the [point] of the epistle. He is doing this to reconcile the slave to his master. He says, “I am simply sending him back. I do not ask that you grant him his freedom, but that he might return to the original servitude, so that he might serve you twice as well as he did before.” You see that slavery is not being abrogated here. [LECTURES ON PHILEMON](#).<sup>6</sup>

### **13–16 Now, a Beloved Brother**

**PAUL COMMENDS ONESIMUS.** DAVID DICKSON: [Argument

<sup>4</sup> CTS 43:353–54\* (CO 52:445); citing [Rom 10:17](#).

<sup>5</sup> CTS 43:354 (CO 52:445).

<sup>6</sup> LW 29:101.

seven:] I have so great an opinion of Onesimus's faithfulness in his service that I should commit myself and affairs to his fidelity, and should make use of him, had I not rather obtain that courtesy upon your offer, than extort it upon any necessity.... [Argument eight:] You yourself, Philemon, are bound to minister to me in my bonds, in no way to refuse your servant again at my request, for your own proper benefit....

[Argument nine:] By the providence of God, Onesimus's running away for a time will turn to your advantage, by his constant abiding with you for the future.

[Tenth argument:] Onesimus will not return to you a servant only, but also a faithful brother in Christ, and therefore to be loved of you, as well according to the flesh, because your household servant, as in the Lord, because a Christian. For seeing I love him, though I make no use of him, how much more ought he to be loved by you, who are to receive the benefit of his fidelity. THE EPISTLE OF PAUL TO PHILEMON.<sup>7</sup>

**THE DEFENSE OF THE GOSPEL BELONGS TO ALL. JOHN CALVIN:**  
“That he might minister to me instead of you in the bonds of the gospel.” He now mentions other circumstances: First, Onesimus will supply the place of his master, by performing this service; second, Paul himself, through modesty, was unwilling to deprive Philemon of his right; and third, Philemon will receive more applause if, after having had his slave restored to him, he shall willingly and generously send him back. From this last consideration we infer that we ought to aid the martyrs of Christ by every kind office in our power, while they are laboring for the testimony of the

<sup>7</sup> Dickson, *Exposition*, 184.

gospel; for if exile, imprisonment, stripes, blows, and violent seizing of our property are believed by us to belong to the gospel, as Paul here calls them, whoever refuses to share and partake of them separates himself even from Christ. Undoubtedly the defense of the gospel belongs alike to all. Accordingly, he who endures persecution for the sake of the gospel ought not to be regarded as a private individual, but as one who publicly represents the whole church. Hence it follows that all believers ought to be united in taking care of it, so that they may not, as is frequently done, leave the gospel to be defended by one person. [COMMENTARY ON PHILEMON](#).<sup>8</sup>

**A MINISTRY IN THE BONDS OF THE GOSPEL.** [MARTIN LUTHER](#): In addition “[in order that he might serve me on your behalf] during my imprisonment of the gospel.” Such fine words! Is the gospel imprisoned? As though Christ and the gospel were imprisoned for my own sake; for it will redound to the glory of the gospel, for this expansion and dissemination. These are pure Hebraisms. Rejoice when Christ binds or has commanded to be bound. I am referring to imprisonment “for” or to the praise of the gospel. I need a ministry in the bonds of the gospel, through which you have been saved; therefore those bonds are precious in the sight of the Lord. I have a twofold obligation, you see. So do you, who are likewise in a most precious ministry, namely, in the cause of the gospel. Christ would have been satisfied with this. Therefore you should be also. Nevertheless I yield to you. [LECTURES ON PHILEMON](#).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> [CTS 43:354–55 \(CO 52:445–46\)](#).

<sup>9</sup> [LW 29:101.](#)

**FREE WILL OF THE HUMAN BEING.** BALTHASAR HUBMAIER: “I wanted to keep Onesimus with me so that he might serve me in your place in the bonds of the gospel. However, without your will I did not want to do anything so that your goodness might be forced but voluntary.” Whoever wants should look at Jerome concerning these words, though in themselves they testify more than clearly about the free will of the human being. FREEDOM OF THE WILL.<sup>10</sup>

**THINGS DONE THROUGH MALICE HAVE BEEN TURNED TO A DIFFERENT PURPOSE.** JOHN CALVIN: “For perhaps he was separated.” If we are angry on account of offenses committed by human beings, our minds ought to be soothed, when we perceive that those things which were done through malice have been turned to a different end by the purpose of God. A joyful result may be regarded as a remedy for evils, which is held out to us by the hand of God for blotting out offenses. Thus Joseph—when he takes into consideration that the wonderful providence of God brought it about that though he was sold as a slave, yet he was elevated to that high rank, from which he could provide food for his brethren and his father—forgets the treachery and cruelty of his brothers, and says that he was sent before on their account.

Paul therefore reminds Philemon that he ought not to be so greatly offended at the flight of his slave, for it was the cause of a benefit not to be regretted. So long as Onesimus was at heart a runaway, Philemon, though he had him in his house, did not actually enjoy him as his property; for he was wicked and unfaithful, and could not be of real advantage. He says, therefore, that he was a wanderer for a little time,

<sup>10</sup> CRR 5:463.

that by changing his place he might be converted and become a new man. And he prudently softens everything by calling the flight a departure, and adding that it was only “for a time.” **COMMENTARY ON PHILEMON.**<sup>11</sup>

**ELECT OFTEN BROUGHT TO FAITH VIA CIRCUITOUS ROUTES.**

JOHN CALVIN: “Especially to me.” Lest the heart of Onesimus, wounded by the offense that was still fresh, should be reluctant to admit the brotherly appellation, Paul claims Onesimus first of all as his own “brother.” Hence he infers that Philemon is much more closely related to him, because both of them had the same relationship in the Lord according to the Spirit, but, according to the flesh, Onesimus is a member of his family. Here we behold the uncommon modesty of Paul, who bestows on a worthless slave the title of a brother, and even calls him a dearly beloved brother to himself. And indeed, it would be excessive pride if we should be ashamed of acknowledging as our brother those whom God accounts to be his sons.

“How much more to you.” By these words he does not mean that Philemon is higher in rank according to the Spirit; but the meaning is, “Seeing that he is especially a brother to me, he must be much more so to you; for there is a twofold relationship between you.”

We must hold it to be an undoubted truth that Paul does not rashly or lightly (as many people do) answer for a man of whom he knows little, or extol his faith before he has ascertained it by strong proofs, and therefore in the person of Onesimus there is exhibited a memorable example of repentance. We know how wicked the dispositions of slaves were, so that scarcely one in a hundred ever came to be of

<sup>11</sup> CTS 43:356 (CO 52:446); citing Gen 45:5.

Lee Gatiss, Bradley G. Green, and Timothy George, eds., *1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon: New Testament*, vol. XII, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2019).

real use. As to Onesimus, we may conjecture from his flight that he had been hardened in depravity by long habit and practice. It is therefore uncommon and wonderful virtue to lay aside the vices by which his nature was polluted, so that the apostle can truly declare that he has now become another man.

From the same source proceeds a profitable doctrine, that the elect of God are sometimes brought to salvation by a method that could not have been believed, contrary to general expectation, by circuitous windings, and even by labyrinths. Onesimus lived in a religious and holy family, and being banished from it by his own evil actions, he deliberately, as it were, withdraws far from God and from eternal life. Yet God, by hidden providence, wonderfully directs his pernicious flight, so that he meets with Paul. [COMMENTARY ON PHILEMON<sup>12</sup>](#)

### **17–22 Paul as a Partner in the Gospel**

**PAUL APPEALS TO PHILEMON.** DAVID DICKSON: [Twelfth argument:] By way of an answer to an objection, the damage that you have sustained by his theft, whereby Onesimus has become a debtor, I Paul am ready to answer. In testimony of which, I will that you set to my account what Onesimus might have cost you; to that end, keep this epistle written with my own hand as an obligation. Therefore he is to be received again.

[Thirteenth argument:] You owe yourself to me, because converted by my ministry, and are bound to lay out yourself, and all you have, in my service, much more to receive a

<sup>12</sup> CTS 43:357–58 (CO 52:446–47).

fugitive servant upon such equal terms. THE EPISTLE OF PAUL TO PHILEMON.<sup>13</sup>

PHILEMON ASKED TO NOT REQUIRE ANYTHING FROM ONESIMUS. JOHN CALVIN: There remains one question. How does Paul—who, if he had not been aided by the churches, did not have the means of living sparingly and frugally—promise to pay money? Amid such poverty and want this does certainly appear to be a ridiculous promise; but it is easy to see that, by this form of expression, Paul beseeches Philemon not to ask anything back from his slave. Though he does not speak ironically, yet, by an indirect figure, he requests him to blot out and cancel this account. The meaning, therefore, is—“I wish that you should not contend with your slave, unless you choose to have me for your debtor in his stead.” For he immediately adds that Philemon is altogether his own; and he who claims the whole man as his property need not be uneasy about paying money. COMMENTARY ON PHILEMON.<sup>14</sup>

PHILEMON OWES PAUL HIS VERY LIFE. MARTIN LUTHER: What an exaggeration! This is how intensely Christian hearts feel. This is to be a special memorandum, and I want to put my seal upon it, so that you may have a testimony. Because we want to proceed in a completely legal manner, you ought to give me a free Onesimus to pay your debt. Nevertheless, you owe me your own self. If you demand your rights, I will do the same. You do not owe me your house, but yourself. My brother, let me enjoy you. Augustine says that a creature is not meant to be enjoyed but to be used.<sup>†</sup> This is the

<sup>13</sup> Dickson, *Exposition*, 184\*.

<sup>14</sup> CTS 43:358–59\* (CO 52:446–47).

supreme argument. I want to find my consolation in you, that is, in you as a Christian, not in you as Philemon. [LECTURES ON PHILEMON](#).<sup>15</sup>

**PAUL EXPECTS THE FRUIT OF PHILEMON'S FAITH.** DAVID DICKSON: I shall receive fruit of your faith in the Lord if you grant this to me: you shall refresh his heart and mine for Christ's sake. Therefore Onesimus ought to be received into favor. [THE EPISTLE OF PAUL TO PHILEMON](#).<sup>16</sup>

**THE QUESTION OF CIVIL GOVERNMENT AND PAUL'S PERSUASION.** [JOHN CALVIN](#): "Refresh my heart in the Lord." He again repeats the same form of expressions that he had previously employed. Hence we infer that the faith of the gospel does not overturn civil government, or set aside the power and authority that masters have over slaves. For Philemon was not a man of the ordinary rank, but a fellow laborer of Paul in cultivating Christ's vineyard; and yet that power over a slave which was permitted by the law is not taken away, but he is only commanded to receive him kindly by granting [forgiveness](#), and is even humbly besought by Paul to restore him to his former condition.

When Paul pleads so humbly in behalf of another, we are reminded how far distant they are from true repentance who obstinately excuse their vices, or who without shame and without tokens of humility acknowledge indeed that they have sinned, but in such a manner as if they had never sinned. When Onesimus saw so distinguished an apostle of Christ plead so eagerly in his behalf, he, must undoubtedly

<sup>15</sup> Augustine, *Teaching Christianity* 1.22–23.

<sup>16</sup> [LW 29:104](#).

<sup>16</sup> Dickson, *Exposition*, 184\*.

have been much more humbled, that he might bend the heart of his master to be merciful to him. To the same purpose is the excuse he offers for writing so boldly, because he knew that Philemon would do more than he had been requested. [COMMENTARY ON PHILEMON](#).<sup>17</sup>

**ALL CHRISTIANS NEED THE PRAYERS OF OTHERS.** [MARTIN LUTHER](#): Here again you see that although Paul is a saint and a “chosen instrument,” nevertheless he everywhere requests prayers and support for himself and asks that others stand by him in battle. Thus every one of us needs the prayer of others even more, we who are conscious of being in the same Christ, but are far inferior to him. “Not only am I sending Onesimus, but you will have me as well.” [LECTURES ON PHILEMON](#).<sup>18</sup>

### **23–25 Final Greetings**

**DEMAS FORSAKES PAUL.** [JOHN CALVIN](#): This [i.e., Demas] is the same person who afterward forsook him, as he complains in the second epistle to Timothy. And if one of Paul’s assistants, having become weary and discouraged, was afterward drawn aside by the vanity of the world, let no one reckon too confidently on the zeal of a single year; but considering how large a portion of the journey still remains to be accomplished, let him pray to God for steadfastness.

[COMMENTARY ON PHILEMON](#).<sup>19</sup>

**PAUL’S COWORKERS SAFEGUARD THE GOSPEL AND CARE FOR THE CHURCHES.** [MARTIN LUTHER](#): Epaphras is the one who

<sup>17</sup> CTS 43:359–60 (CO 52:448).

<sup>18</sup> LW 19:104–5; citing [Acts 9:15](#).

<sup>19</sup> CTS 43:360–61 (CO 52:450); citing [2 Tim 4:10](#).

has established and given birth to the Colossians.... He was certainly a pious person and one who receives great praise from Paul. Mark, whom he once wanted to take along as a companion on his journey. Demas is still a man of sincere faith because he mentions Luke after him. This must have been shortly before [the apostasy of Demas], because Paul is already in prison. He was a great man, since he is mentioned before Luke, who is a great man in preaching, expounding, and writing the Gospel. As long as the Roman Empire stood, there was completely free passage throughout the world. Therefore he had many such with him, to see to it that nothing evil [befell the gospel]. They were his messengers and visitors. Timothy, Titus, Crescens, and Luke had to run in order to resist the false prophets and to see Philemon and Archippus. Thus we have a private epistle from which much should be learned about how the brethren are to be commended, that is, that an example might be provided to the church how we ought to take care of those who fall and restore those who err, for the kingdom of Christ is a kingdom of mercy and grace, while the kingdom of Satan is a kingdom of murder, error, darkness, and lies. LECTURE ON PHILEMON 23–25.<sup>20</sup>

**PERSEVERING GRACE GIVEN BY GOD.** HEINRICH BULLINGER: Rightly Jerome believed therefore that the apostle mentioned hospitality since he expected that what he had asked might soon take place. But in fact he needed faithfully to trust in his prayers, which certainly in the presence of the Lord were efficacious. Elsewhere mention was made of those of which here he remembered—of these illustrious men. Demas had not yet defected [from the faith]. The Lord

<sup>20</sup> LW 29:105\* (WA 25:78); citing Col 1:7; 4:12; 4:10; 2 Tim 4:10.

Lee Gatiss, Bradley G. Green, and Timothy George, eds., 1-2 *Thessalonians*, 1-2 *Timothy, Titus, Philemon: New Testament*, vol. XII, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2019).

granted to all faithful men a strong spirit, and thus therefore revived, they might persevere in gospel profession all the way to the end. Amen. COMMENTARY ON PHILEMON.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Bullinger, *Ad Philemenon*, 236.