

## THE EPISTLE TO PHILEMON.

### I.

“ Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved and fellow-worker, and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow-soldier, and to the Church in thy house : Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”—PHILEM, i. 1-3 (Rev. Ver.).

THIS Epistle stands alone among Paul's letters in being addressed to a private Christian, and in being entirely occupied with a small though very singular private matter ; its aim being merely to bespeak a kindly welcome for a runaway slave who was invited to perform the unheard of act of voluntarily returning to servitude. If the New Testament were simply a book of doctrinal teaching, this Epistle would certainly be out of place in it ; and if the great purpose of Revelation were to supply material for creeds, it would be hard to see what value could be attached to a simple, short letter from which no contribution to theological doctrine or ecclesiastical order can be extracted. But if we do not turn to it for discoveries of truth, we can find in it very beautiful illustrations of Christianity in action. It shows us the operation of the new forces which Christ has lodged in humanity—and that on two planes of action. It exhibits a perfect model of Christian friendship, refined and ennobled by a half-conscious reflection of the love which has called us no longer slaves but friends, and surrounded by delicate courtesies and quick consideration which divines with subtlest instinct what it will be sweetest to the friend to hear, while it never approaches by a hairbreadth to flattery, nor forgets to counsel high duties. But still more important is the light which the letter casts on the relation of Christianity to slavery, which may be taken as a specimen of its relation to social and political evils generally, and yields fruitful results for the guidance of all who would deal with such.

It may be observed, too, that most of the considerations which Paul urges on Philemon as reasons for his kindly reception of Onesimus do not even need the alteration of a word, but simply a change in their application, to become worthy statements of the highest Christian truths. As Luther puts it, "We are all God's Onesimuses"; and the welcome which Paul seeks to secure for the returning fugitive, as well as the motives to which he appeals in order to secure it, do shadow forth in no uncertain outline our welcome from God, and the treasures of His heart towards us, because they are at bottom the same. The Epistle, then, is valuable, as showing in a concrete instance how the Christian life, in its attitude to others, and especially to those who have injured us, is all modelled upon God's forgiving love to us. Our Lord's parable of the forgiven servant who took his brother by the throat finds here a commentary, and the apostle's own precept, "Be imitators of God, and walk in love," a practical exemplification.

Nor is the light which the letter throws on the character of the Apostle to be regarded as unimportant. The warmth, the delicacy, and what, if it were not so spontaneous, we might call tact, the graceful ingenuity with which he pleads for the fugitive, the perfect courtesy of every word, the gleam of playfulness—all fused together and harmonized to one end, and that in so brief a compass and with such unstudied ease and complete self-oblivion, make this epistle a pure gem. Without thought of effect, and with complete unconsciousness, this man beats all the famous letter-writers on their own ground. That must have been a great intellect, and closely conversant with the Fountain of all light and beauty, which could shape the profound and far-reaching teachings of the Epistle to the Colossians, and pass from them to the graceful simplicity and sweet kindness of this exquisite letter; as if Michael Angelo had gone straight from smiting his magnificent

Moses from the marble mass to incise some delicate and tiny figure of Love or Friendship on a gem.

The structure of the letter is of the utmost simplicity. It is not so much a structure as a flow. There is the usual superscription and salutation, followed, according to Paul's custom, by the expression of his thankful recognition of the love and faith of Philemon and his prayer for the perfecting of these. Then he goes straight to the business in hand, and with incomparable persuasiveness pleads for a welcome to Onesimus, bringing all possible reasons to converge on that one request, with an ingenious eloquence born of earnestness. Having poured out his heart in this plea, he adds no more but affectionate greetings from his companions and himself.

In the present paper we shall confine our attention to the superscription and opening salutation.

I. We may observe the Apostle's designation of himself, as marked by consummate and instinctive appreciation of the claims of friendship, and of his own position in this letter as a suppliant. He does not come to his friend clothed with apostolic authority. In his letters to the Churches he always puts that in the forefront, and when he expected to be met by opponents, as in Galatia, there is a certain ring of defiance in his claim to receive his commission through no human intervention, but straight from heaven. Sometimes, as in the Epistle to the Colossians, he unites another strangely contrasted title, and calls himself also "the slave" of Christ; the one name asserting authority, the other bowing in humility before his Owner and Master. But here he is writing as a friend to a friend, and his object is to win his friend to a piece of Christian conduct which may be somewhat against the grain. Apostolic authority will not go half so far as personal influence in this case. So he drops all reference to it, and, instead, lets Philemon hear the fetters jangling on his limbs—a more

powerful plea. "Paul, a prisoner." Surely that would go straight to Philemon's heart, and give all but irresistible force to the request which follows. Surely if he could do anything to show his love and gratify even momentarily his friend in his prison, he would not refuse it. If this designation had been calculated to produce effect, it would have lost all its grace; but no one with any ear for the accents of inartificial spontaneousness, can fail to hear them in the unconscious pathos of these opening words, which say the right thing, all unaware of how right it is.

There is great dignity also, as well as profound faith, in the next words, in which the Apostle calls himself a prisoner "of Christ Jesus." With what calm ignoring of all subordinate agencies he looks to the true author of his captivity! Neither Jewish hatred nor Roman policy had shut him up in Rome. Christ Himself had rivetted his manacles on his wrists, therefore he bore them as lightly and proudly as a bride might the bracelet that her husband had clasped on her arm. The expression reveals both the author and the reason for his imprisonment, and discloses the conviction which held him up in it. He thinks of his Lord as the Lord of providence, whose hand moves the pieces on the board—Pharisees, and Roman governors, and guards, and Cæsar; and he knows that he is an ambassador in bonds for no crime, but for the testimony of Jesus. We need only notice that his younger companion Timothy is associated with the Apostle in the superscription, but disappears at once. The reason for the introduction of his name may either have been the slight additional weight thereby given to the request of the letter, or more probably, the additional authority thereby given to the junior, who would, in all likelihood, have much of Paul's work devolved on him when Paul was gone.

The names of the receivers of the letter bring before us a picture seen, as by one glimmering light across the centuries,

of a Christian household in that Phrygian valley. The head of it, Philemon, appears to have been a native of, or at all events a resident in, Colossæ, for Onesimus, his slave, is spoken of in the epistle to the Church there as "one of you." He was a person of some standing and wealth, for he had a house large enough to admit of a "Church" assembling in it, and to accommodate the Apostle and his travelling companions if he should visit Colossæ. He had apparently the means for large pecuniary help to poor brethren, and willingness to use them, for we read of the refreshment which his kindly deeds had imparted. He had been one of Paul's converts, and owed his own self to him; so that he must have met the Apostle, who had probably not been in Colossæ, on some of his journeys, perhaps during his three years' residence in Ephesus. He was of mature years, if, as is probable, Archippus, who was old enough to have service to do in the Church (Col. iv. 17), was his son.

He is called "our fellow-labourer." The designation may imply some actual co-operation at a former time. But more probably, the phrase, like the similar one in the next verse, "our fellow-soldier," is but Paul's gracefully affectionate way of lifting these good people's humbler work out of its narrowness, by associating it with his own. They in their little sphere, and he in his wider, were workers at the same task. All who toil for furtherance of Christ's kingdom, however widely they may be parted by time or distance, are fellow-workers. Division of labour does not impair unity of service. The field is wide, and the months between seed time and harvest are long; but all the husbandmen have been engaged in the same great work, and though they have toiled alone shall "rejoice together." The first man who dug a shovelful of earth for the foundations of Cologne Cathedral, and he who fixed the last stone on the topmost spire a thousand years after, are fellow-workers.

So Paul and Philemon, though their tasks were widely different in kind, in range, and in importance, and were carried on apart and independent of each other, were fellow-workers. The one lived a Christian life and helped some humble saints in an insignificant, remote corner; the other flamed through the whole then civilized western world, and sheds light to-day: but the obscure, twinkling taper and the blazing torch were kindled at the same source, shone with the same light, and were parts of one great whole. Our narrowness is rebutted, our despondency cheered, our vulgar tendency to think little of modest, obscure service rendered by commonplace people, and to exaggerate the worth of the more conspicuous, corrected by such a thought. However small may be our capacity or sphere, and however solitary we may feel, we may summon up before the eyes of our faith a mighty multitude of apostles, martyrs, toilers in every land and age as *our*—even *our*—work-fellows. The field stretches far beyond our vision, and many are toiling in it for Him whose work never comes near ours. There are differences of service, but the same Lord, and all who have the same master are companions in labour. Therefore Paul, the greatest of the servants of Christ, reaches down his hand to the obscure Philemon, and says, "He works the work of the Lord, as I also do."

In the house at Colossæ there was a Christian wife by the side of a Christian husband; at least, the mention of Apphia here in so prominent a position is most naturally accounted for by supposing her the wife of Philemon. Her friendly reception of the runaway would be quite as important as his, and it is therefore most natural that the letter bespeaking it should be addressed to both. The probable reading "our sister" (R.V.), instead of "our beloved" (A.V.), gives the distinct assurance that she too was a Christian, and like-minded with her husband.

The prominent mention of this Phrygian matron is an

illustration of the way in which Christianity, without meddling with social usages, introduced a new tone of feeling about the position of woman, which gradually changed the face of the world, is still working, and has still revolutions to effect. The degraded classes of the Greek world were slaves and women. This epistle touches both, and shows us Christianity in the very act of elevating both. The same process substantially strikes the fetters from the slave and sets the wife by the side of the husband, "yoked in all exercise of noble end," namely, the proclamation of Christ as the Saviour of all mankind, and of all human creatures as equally capable of receiving an equal salvation. That annihilates all distinctions. The old world was parted by deep gulfs. There were three of especial depth and width, across which it was hard for sympathy to fly. These were the distinctions of race, sex, and condition. But the good news that Christ has died for all men, and will live in all men, has thrown a bridge across, or rather has filled them up; so the Apostle bursts into his triumphant proclamation, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."

A third name is united with those of husband and wife, that of Archippus. The close relation in which the names stand, and the purely domestic character of the letter, make it probable that he was a son of the wedded pair. At all events, he was in some way part of their household, possibly some kind of teacher and guide. We meet his name also in the Epistle to the Colossians, and from the nature of the reference to him there draw the inference that he filled some "ministry" in the Church of Laodicea. The nearness of the two cities made it quite possible that he should live in Philemon's house in Colossæ and yet go over to Laodicea for his work.

The Apostle calls him "his fellow-soldier," a phrase

which is best explained in the same fashion as is the previous "fellow-worker," namely, that by it Paul graciously associates Archippus with himself, different as their tasks were. The variation of soldier for worker probably is due to the fact of Archippus being the bishop of the Laodicean Church. In any case, it is very beautiful that the grizzled veteran officer should thus, as it were, clasp the hand of this young recruit, and call him his comrade. How it would go to the heart of Archippus !

A somewhat stern message is sent to Archippus in the Colossian letter. Why did not Paul send it quietly in this, instead of letting a whole Church know of it? It seems at first sight as if he had chosen the harshest way; but perhaps further consideration may suggest that the reason was an instinctive unwillingness to introduce a jarring note into the joyous friendship and confidence which sounds through this epistle, nor would he bring public matters into this private letter. The warning would come with more effect from the Church, and this cordial message of goodwill and confidence would prepare Archippus to receive the other, as rain showers make the ground soft for the good seed. The private affection would mitigate the public exhortation, with whatever rebuke may have been in it.

A greeting is sent, too, to "the Church in thy house." As in the case of the similar community in the house of Nymphas (Col. iv. 15), we cannot decide whether by this expression is meant simply a Christian family, or some little company of believers who were wont to meet beneath Philemon's roof for Christian converse and worship. The latter seems the more probable supposition. It is natural that they should be addressed; for Onesimus, if received by Philemon, would naturally become a member of the group, and their good-will was important to be secured.

So we have here shown to us, by one stray beam of twinkling light, for a moment, a very sweet picture of the



domestic life of that Christian household in their remote valley. It shines still to us across the centuries which have swallowed up so much that seemed more permanent, and silenced so much that made far more noise in its day. The picture may well set us asking ourselves the question whether we, with all our boasted advancement, have been able to realize the true ideal of Christian family life as these three did. The husband and wife dwelling as heirs together of the grace of life, their child beside them, sharing their faith and service, their household ordered in the ways of the Lord, their friends Christ's friends, and their social joys hallowed and serene—what nobler form of family life can be conceived than that? What a rebuke and a satire on many a so-called Christian household!

II. We may deal briefly with the apostolic salutation. "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." The two main points to be observed in these words are the comprehensiveness of the Apostle's loving wish, and the source to which he looks for its fulfilment. It is perhaps accidental that we have here the union of the Greek and of the Eastern forms of salutation. Just as the regal title of the King, whose Throne was the Cross, was written in the languages of culture, of law, and of religion, as an unconscious prophecy of His universal reign; so, with like unintentional felicity, we have blended here the ideals of good which the East and the West have framed for those to whom they wish good, in token that Christ is able to slake all the thirsts of the soul, and that whatsoever things any races of men have dreamed as the chiefest blessing, these are all to be reached through Him and Him only.

But the deeper lesson here is to be found by observing that "grace" refers to the action of the Divine heart, and "peace" to the result thereof in man's experience. "Grace" is free, undeserved, unmotivated, self-springing love.

It is love which stoops, which forgives, which communicates. Hence it comes to mean, not only the deep fountain in the Divine nature, and that property in His love by which, like some strong spring, it leaps up and gushes forth by an inward impulse, in neglect of all motives drawn from the loveliness of its objects, such as determine our poor human loves, but also the results of that bestowing love in men's characters, or, as we say, the "graces" of the Christian soul. They are "grace," not only because in the æsthetic sense of the word they are beautiful, but because, in the theological meaning of it, they are the products of the giving love and power of God. "Whatsoever things are lovely and of good report," all nobilities, tendernesses, exquisite beauties, and steadfast strengths of mind and heart, of will and disposition—all are the gifts of God's undeserved and open-handed love.

The fruit of such grace received is peace. In other places the Apostle twice gives a fuller form of this salutation, inserting "mercy" between the two here named; as also does St. John in his second epistle. That fuller form gives us the source in the Divine heart, the manifestation of grace in the Divine act, and the outcome in human experience; or as we may say, carrying on the metaphor, the broad, calm lake which the grace, flowing to us in the stream of mercy, makes, when it opens out in our hearts. Here, however, we have but the ultimate source, and the effect in us.

That old Eastern salutation "peace" recalls a state of society, when every stranger might be a foe; but it touches a chord which vibrates in all hearts. We have little fear of war, but we are all weighed upon with sore unrest, and repose sometimes seems to us the one thing needful. All the discords of our nature and circumstances can be harmonized by that grace which is ready to flow into our hearts. Peace with God, with ourselves, with our fellows,

repose in the midst of change, calm in conflict, may be ours. All these various applications of the one idea should be included in our interpretation, for they are all included in fact in the peace which God's grace brings where it lights. The first and deepest need of the soul is conscious amity and harmony with God, and nothing but the consciousness of His love as forgiving and healing brings that. We are torn asunder by conflicting passions, and our hearts are the battleground for conscience and inclination, sin and goodness, hopes and fears, and a hundred other contending emotions. Nothing but a heavenly power can make the lion within lie down with the lamb. Our natures are "like the troubled sea, which cannot rest," whose churning waters cast up the foul things that lie in their slimy beds; but where God's grace comes, a great calm hushes the tempests, "and birds of peace sit brooding on the charmed wave."

We are compassed about by foes with whom we have to wage undying warfare, and by hostile circumstances and difficult tasks which need continual conflict; but a man with God's grace in his heart may have the rest of submission, the repose of trust, the tranquillity of him who "has ceased from his own works": and so, while the daily struggle goes on and the battle rages round, there may be quiet, deep and sacred, in his heart.

The life of nature, which is a selfish life, flings us into unfriendly rivalries with others, and sets us battling for our own hands, and it is hard to pass out of ourselves sufficiently to live peaceably with all men. But the grace of God in our hearts drives out self, and changes the man who truly has it into its own likeness. He who knows that he owes everything to a Divine love which stooped to his lowliness, and pardoned his sins, and enriched him with all which he has that is worthy and noble, cannot but move among men, doing with them, in his poor fashion, what God has done with him.

Thus in all the manifold forms in which restless hearts need peace, the grace of God brings it to them. The great river of mercy which has its source deep in the heart of God, and in His free, undeserved love, pours into poor, unquiet spirits, and there spreads itself into a placid lake, on whose still surface all heaven is mirrored.

The elliptical form of this salutation leaves it doubtful whether we are to see in it a prayer or a prophecy, a wish or an assurance. According to the probable reading of the parallel greeting in the Second Epistle of John, the latter would be the construction ; but probably it is best to combine both ideas, and to see here, as Bengel does in the passage referred to in John's epistle, "votum cum affirmatione"—a desire which is so certain of its own fulfilment, that it is a prophecy, just because it is a prayer.

The ground of the certainty lies in the source from which the grace and peace come. They flow "from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." The placing of both names under the government of one preposition implies the mysterious unity of the Father with the Son ; while conversely St. John, in the parallel passage just mentioned, by employing two prepositions, brings out the distinction between the Father, who is the fountal source, and the Son, who is the flowing stream. But both forms of the expression demand for their honest explanation the recognition of the divinity of Jesus Christ. How dare a man, who thought of Him as other than Divine, put His name thus by the side of God's, as associated with the Father in the bestowal of grace? Surely such words, spoken without any thought of a doctrine of the Trinity, and which are the spontaneous utterance of Christian devotion, are demonstration, not to be gainsaid, that to Paul, at all events, Jesus Christ was, in the fullest sense, Divine, and that Paul held, as the very foundation of all his hope of receiving the love of God and any of its gifts

of forgiveness or hallowing, the truth which John was honoured to crystallize into the deep and radiant words, "We beheld His glory, as the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth; and of His fulness have all we received, and grace for grace." The double source is one source, for in the Son is the whole fulness of the Godhead; and the grace of God, bringing with it the peace of God, is poured into that spirit which bows humbly before Jesus Christ, and trusts Him when He says, with love in His eyes and comfort in His tones, "My grace is sufficient for thee"; "My peace give I unto you."

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DR. SANDAY ON THE ORIGIN OF THE  
CHRISTIAN MINISTRY.

THE admirably clear and sufficiently complete summary of the main theories in regard to the origin of the Christian ministry presently under discussion, given by Dr. Sanday in his opening paper, marks distinctly enough the lines along which investigation must proceed. The controversial productions of earlier years, though necessarily ranking still in any account of the historical development of the several theories referred to, have been so kept in view and used by Lightfoot, Hatch, and Harnack, the problems that demand examination and settlement, though not by any means solved, have yet been so clearly stated, that in a discussion of the opinions of those three investigators, all that is valuable in previous researches may be easily preserved and utilized. During the twenty years that have passed since the first publication of Lightfoot's *Commentary on Philippians*, with its detached note on the synonymes bishop and presbyter, and its appended "Dis-