

INTRODUCTION TO THE EPISTLE TO PHILEMON

by

H. Harvey
D.D.

Note: Author's introduction in his *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles, First and Second Timothy and Titus, and the Epistle to Philemon* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1890). The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.

The Genuineness

The private character and the brevity of this Epistle would naturally make it slow in coming to the notice of the churches. Yet there are indications in the Epistles of Ignatius that, even as early as the period of the Apostolical Fathers, it had become known among the Pauline Epistles. It is acknowledged as such in the Muratorian Canon, in the last half of the second century. Tertullian and Origen, near the beginning of the third century, and Eusebius and Jerome in the fourth, all either name it among the epistles of Paul or quote from it as such. Its genuineness seems to have been commonly admitted in antiquity; but in the fourth century some objected to giving it a place in the Canon because of its purely personal character, its brevity, and especially its lack of doctrinal significance--objections which Jerome, Chrysostom, and Theodore of Mopsuestia notice and refute.

The internal evidence is all in its favor. Throughout it breathes the spirit and bears the mark of Paul. The remarkable and evidently undesigned coincidences in it with the Epistle to the Colossians have been pointed out by Paley, and utterly exclude the supposition of forgery ("Horæ Paulinæ," Chapter XIV). German criticism has, however, assailed this as it has the other epistles of the first Roman imprisonment. Baur, with the Tübingen school in general, places it among the doubtful epistles. But the grounds on which they base this doubt of its Pauline authorship--such as the occurrence in it of some unusual words, etc.--if used in testing literature in general, would set aside as spurious a large number of the best authenticated works of our own and of former times. So clearly does the letter exhibit the personal characteristics of the apostle, and so marked are the minute and undesigned coincidences with Paul's acknowledged writings and with the facts of his life, that the internal evidence leaves absolutely no room for doubt on any grounds which either sound criticism or ordinary common sense would justify. It would be far more difficult to account for the manifest presence of Paul's heart and head and hand in a forged epistle than to account for a few new words which common sense at once explains as natural and necessary in an epistle dealing with a subject unusual in its character and scope.

The Person Addressed and the Occasion

Philemon was a resident at Colosse in Phrygia; for Onesimus, his slave, belonged there, and Archippus, who is here addressed with Philemon, is alluded to as a minister there (Ver. 2;

Col. 4:9,17). Whether he [Philemon] filled an office in the Colossian Church is uncertain, as Paul speaks of him only as a "fellow-worker," which need not imply official station; but he was distinguished for his high religious character and his generous hospitality to the saints. Probably he was a man of substance, as his house was one of the meeting places of the church in Colosse, a fact which suggests that it was spacious, such as only the wealthier classes occupied (2). His conversion doubtless occurred under the ministry of Paul, since the apostle, in making his appeal for the slave, says to Philemon, "Thou owest unto me even thine own self besides" (19). If, as is generally supposed, Paul had not as yet personally visited Colosse, it is a natural supposition that Philemon had come to Ephesus, the metropolis of Western Asia Minor, and had there been converted by the instrumentality of the apostle (Acts 19:10,26). The resulting friendship was warm and enduring, leading to constant mutual remembrance in prayer (4). In regard to the others to whom the Epistle is addressed, it is supposed that Apphia was the wife of Philemon and that Archippus, spoken of elsewhere as a minister, was his son; and the association of their names with his in addressing the household certainly renders the conjecture not improbable.

Onesimus, the immediate occasion of the Epistle, was a slave of Philemon. He had, apparently, in some way wronged his master and had fled to Rome where, in the slums of the thronged metropolis of the world, he doubtless hoped to elude pursuit. In some way now unknown he came in contact with the apostle, then a prisoner in Rome, and was converted (Acts 28:30,31). A warm mutual attachment resulted, and to the imprisoned apostle the fugitive slave became not only very dear but probably in many ways useful. Paul would gladly have retained him, but though he does not doubt that Philemon, if he knew the circumstances, would grant him the service of Onesimus, he is unwilling to presume on this favor by anticipating it. Probably, also, Onesimus himself, now fully conscious of his wrong, desired to return and make confession and reparation. But at that period such a course might involve serious hazard to the slave. Torture, or even death might be the result at the hands of a cruel and irritated master. In sending Onesimus, therefore, Paul not only commended him to the whole Colossian Church, as "the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you" (Col. 4:9), but also wrote to Philemon this marvelously forceful and touching appeal in behalf of the now penitent and returning servant.

The courtesy, delicacy, and tact of the Epistle have been admired in all ages, and render it in its pathos and beauty unapproached in epistolary literature. Among the numerous private epistles which have come down to us from antiquity, while there are many that exhibit great wealth of thought and polish of style with much of sparkling wit, all fall far below this in nobility and elevation of sentiment, and breadth and tenderness of sympathy for man as man. In that age of slavery (when more than half the Roman world were in bondage, bought and sold as chattels and without rights in law), the apostle, looking beyond artificial, earthly distinctions, sees all redeemed men, whatever their social position, as one in Christ Jesus, equal before God, bound each to the other in the bonds of sacred, eternal brotherhood. From this high standpoint, which was unknown to ancient heathenism but forms the distinctive social characteristic of Christianity, he pleads with the master for a once erring but now penitent offender belonging to the despised downtrodden class.

The Epistle of Pliny the Younger, written to a friend near the close of the first century in

behalf of an offending freedman, is one of the noblest utterances of heathen literature, and has often been compared with this. But beautiful as it is, and in the original faultless in style, the whole conception of the illustrious heathen is far inferior to that of the apostle. The following is a translation:

"Caius Pliny to Sabinianus, health: Thy freedman, with whom thou saidst thou wast incensed, came to me, and falling at my feet, as if at thine, clung to them. He wept much, much he entreated, and much was the force of his silence. In short, he fully satisfied me of his penitence. Truly I believe him to be reformed, because he is sensible of his wrong. Thou art angry, I know; and thou art angry justly, this also I know; but clemency has then the highest praise, when there is the greatest cause for anger. Thou hast loved the man; and I hope, thou wilt love him. Meanwhile it is sufficient that thou suffer thyself to be entreated. It will be right for thee to be angry with him again, if he shall deserve it, because having once yielded to entreaty, thine anger will be the more just.

"Forgive something in view of his youth. Forgive on account of his tears. Forgive for the sake of thy own kindness. Do not torture him, lest thou torture also thyself; for thou wilt be in torture, when thou, who art so gentle, shalt be angry. I fear lest, if to his prayers I should unite my own, I should seem not to ask, but to compel. Yet I will unite them, and the more fully and abundantly in that I have very sharply and severely reprov'd him, strictly threatening that I will never hereafter intercede for him. This I said to him, because it was necessary to alarm him; but I do not say the same to thee. For perchance I shall intercede again, and shall again obtain; only that my request be such as it befits me to ask and thee to grant. Farewell."

Slavery in the Apostolic Age

At this period more than half the population of the Roman Empire were slaves. Servile insurrections of great magnitude had occurred, which threatened to upheave and destroy the foundations of society and government. The Romans lived in constant fear of these outbreaks, and the most stringent and cruel laws chained down this vast body of bondmen. The slave had no rights in law. Absolutely under the master's control, he could be tortured, maimed, crucified, or thrown to the wild beasts at his cruel caprice. The servile population formed an ever restless, seething, muttering volcano beneath the fabric of society, which might burst forth with terrible devastation at any moment. Roman law decreed that if a master had been slain by a slave, the whole body of slaves in his household should be put to death. Only three years before Paul wrote this letter, a citizen having been thus assassinated, four hundred slaves composing his household--men, women and children--though well known to be innocent of the crime, were relentlessly led to death. Such terrible examples were thought necessary to repress this servile element, and protect the masters.

What was the attitude of the gospel toward this gigantic evil? Plainly, it did not proclaim a crusade against slavery as a civil institution. This would only have been, in these circumstances, to excite these oppressed masses to bloody and anarchical revolution. Nothing is more evident than the presence of slaves in Christian families in the apostolic age, and the requirement of Scripture enjoining obedience to the master. Christianity did

not strike at once and directly at the civil relation. But it lifted both master and slave into a new relation to Christ, making them equal before God, equal in the church, and equal as citizens and heirs of the heavenly kingdom; and this great fact, as its significance came to be felt, changed the actual relation of master and slave even where the formal, outward civil relation remained. Hence Philemon is not commanded to manumit Onesimus, but to receive him, no longer merely "as a servant, but above a servant a brother beloved." It is easy to see that as the gospel interpenetrated the social life and created a Christian civilization, this change in the moral and spiritual relation of the parties would lead to a change in the civil relation; and master and slave, from the first unknown in the Church, would also cease to be known in the State.

The chief significance of this Epistle for all the ages is, that *in Christ Jesus there is neither bond nor free*; that Christianity means the moral and spiritual equality of all men before God and his church; and that consequently, as it enters and purifies and uplifts the race, there must come through this Christian civilization, as the ultimate result, the equality of all men before the civil law. The Epistle thus touches the profoundest social questions of all ages and all lands.

The Time and Place of Writing

The Epistle was written during the apostle's first imprisonment at Rome, A.D. 60-63; and, as he expresses an expectation of speedy liberation, its date may probably be placed near the close of this period, A.D. 62 or 63. Tychicus, when departing for Asia bearing the Epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians, was accompanied by Onesimus; and the apostle sends this letter to insure the repentant fugitive a kind reception and full pardon. The Epistle is, therefore, to be studied in connection with the group of epistles belonging to the first Roman imprisonment.

Literature of the Epistle

The helps on this brief Epistle are very abundant and full; only the more recent and important will be here named. Among the best expositions are Wiesinger's, in Olshausen's "Commentaries;" Meyer's, in his "New Testament Commentary," and Van Oosterzee's in Lange's "Commentary"; all of which are now by translation accessible to the English reader. Van Oosterzee's, in Lange, is edited by the late Dr. Hackett, who has made additions of great value. Among modern English commentators may be specially named Alford, Ellicott, and Lightfoot. The last named, in his "Commentary on Colossians and Philemon," has added much to the literature of the subject, and produced a work very rich in learning and exegetical value. Farrar's "Life and Work of St. Paul" should also be mentioned, it being quite full and valuable in its notice and analysis of this Epistle.

[Return to Introductions to the Epistles of Paul](#)