

# The Grace of Christ in Daily Life.

W W Fereday

(from the Bible Treasury Vol. N1, page 362.)

The brief Epistle to Philemon furnishes us with a lovely picture of the way in which the grace of Christ operates in the relationships and circumstances of every day life. The apostle pleads with his brother in the Lord for Onesimus, who, being the property of Philemon, had absconded (perhaps robbing him first), but who had been brought to Christ through contact with himself, while a prisoner in Rome. By Roman law the master had ample authority to punish him severely for such conduct. His behaviour, too, was aggravated by the fact that he served an excellent master, not a tyrannical man of the world. Paul pleads for him, that in Philemon's heart divine grace and love might triumph over any feelings of annoyance and anger.

Generally the inspired epistles of Paul are occupied with the great doctrines of Christianity. He was the privileged vessel for the unfolding of the wondrous counsels of God concerning Christ which had been kept secret since the world began. Now Christianity not only soars high but descends low, and occupies itself with all the practical details of daily life, that in these, as in all else, the grace of Christ may be expressed by those who believe. We are thus preserved through the operation of the Holy Ghost from being mere theorists.

Paul does not here introduce himself as an apostle, but as "a prisoner of Jesus Christ." Here we may observe the wisdom and delicacy of the Spirit of God. In addressing Timothy and Titus Paul was careful to bring forward his apostleship for obvious reasons. In those Epistles, we find inspired regulations for the internal order of the house of God, and for the walk which becomes the saints individually. Authority was as valuable there, as its omission is precious here. Paul would rest the matter of Onesimus entirely upon the ground of divine grace, which, he was assured, reigned in Philemon's heart. He was not alone in his appeal, but associated Timothy with himself to give it additional force.

Philemon was evidently a labourer among the saints. His measure we know not; Paul simply states the fact. His wife is addressed also — "our beloved Apphia," or perhaps "the sister Apphia." This was gracious and wise. Such a matter concerned the mistress as much as the master, and perhaps her feelings were stronger about it than those of her husband. Paul would have both act together in this, as heirs together of the grace of life. Archippus is included in the address also, a brother who ministered in connection with the assembly in Colosse (Col. 4: 17). Perhaps he could help in this circumstance. Gracious counsel from him might strengthen the godly sentiments in the hearts of this excellent couple. Then the assembly is named (for evidently some saints met in their house); for Paul would have all open their hearts and lovingly welcome, according to Christ, him who was being sent back. All knew of his wrong-doing, all should have fellowship in the work of God's grace.

It is much to be observed in this Epistle to Philemon, the uniting power of divine grace. Here we have brought together Paul the former Pharisee, Timothy the Jew of mixed parentage, Philemon, Archippus, etc., Gentiles and Onesimus the poor slave. All were bound up with Christ in the same bundle of life, all were equally members of His body by the Holy Ghost. Hence we find Paul calling Timothy "brother" (ver. 1), Philemon "brother" (ver. 7 etc.), Onesimus also (ver. 16), adding in the latter case "beloved." Precious bonds! who would or could have formed them but the Holy Spirit of God?

After his usual, greeting of grace and peace, the apostle's heart bursts forth in thanksgiving to God. He gratefully recognises all the good in his dear brother. He blesses God for his love and faith toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints. The bowels of the saints were refreshed by him. We may always observe this gracious way in the Epistles of Paul. In cases where there was much to blame, if anything of Christ was to be seen, he gladly owned it, and gave thanks; an important lesson for our souls to learn in the school of God in this day. There is so much to grieve the spirit, and to draw forth our remonstrances and rebukes that we are apt to overlook the measure of the Spirit's fruit that is really there. Philemon's love to *all* the saints was about to be severely tested. Onesimus was now a saint; would he love him? It is not easy to love those who have done us a positive injury, yet nothing less is according to Christ. This loving recognition of grace in Philemon is the basis of this Epistle. Paul proceeds on the ground of it, and appeals to his fellow-labourer's heart.

He looked for reciprocation. Having owned Christ in him, he expected Philemon to do the same towards himself and to recognise the claim grace had given him upon him. Read "in us" in verse 6, not "in you." The poor prisoner had great joy and consolation by reason of the love of this excellent Colossian.

Having cleared the way, having struck chords to which he was sure Philemon's heart would respond, the apostle proceeds to plead the cause of the erring one. He would not use authority. "Though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient, yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee."

He would not stand on the position the Lord had given him in the assembly, intending this to act on Philemon, in order that he might not stand on his position toward the one who served him. Suppose he had sent back Onesimus with an apostolic mandate. Doubtless it would have been obeyed, and the runaway pardoned and reinstated. But would this have satisfied his heart? Where then the precious display of the grace of Christ which rises above all, even the deepest evil, and not only forgives but welcomes the transgressor to its bosom for ever? Nothing less than this would meet the desire of that heart which longed above all to see Christ displayed in all His members below. He would not command, but besought; he names his authority, only to set it aside in such a case as this.

He presents several considerations, including two personal ones of a very touching character: 1. he was "Paul the aged;" 2. "and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ."\*

\*It is very blessed to notice the way in which the apostle looked beyond men to Christ. He was His prisoner. He did not chafe under the tyranny and unrighteousness of the Roman authorities, but looked at the Lord. It was His will for him, and that was enough. Christ was his gaoler, as it were. He who sent His angel and released Peter could have done the same for Paul had it suited Him. The heart never finds rest when looking at second causes.

Who could resist this? Who could refuse one who had grown "old" in the Lord's service, one who had patiently and earnestly served Him, in the face of all opposition and every conceivable form of suffering? "Now also a prisoner!" Surely a gracious heart would grant such an one the concession prayed for in this epistle Philemon, we may be assured, was not the man to set at nought such an appeal.

He then presents two other considerations.

1. Onesimus was his own child in the faith, his own bowels. This was equally true of Titus, etc; but of Onesimus it could be added, "whom I have begotten in my bonds." In time past he was unprofitable to Philemon, but now profitable to him and to Paul in every way. The apostle desired

greatly to retain him, that on his master's part he might minister to him in the bonds of the gospel; but he would not ignore Philemon's rights. Let none suppose that this affords any sanction to slavery. It does not touch the question. The Spirit does not, in this Epistle, pronounce at all as to the right or wrong of the matter. The day has not come to set the world right. When glory bursts and the Lord Jesus reigns, God's order will be carried out through the universe; but until that day, these things are left where they are, divine instruction being given to the saints in view of them. Paul would have Onesimus received in a manner worthy of God, not now as a mere slave, but as a brother in the Lord, one who was calculated to be a help to Philemon now, in contrast with his behaviour in the past, and who had shown, it would appear, an aptitude in the Lord's service as well. Being Paul's child through grace, he must be received as himself; and if he owed his master ought, Paul would repay. Mighty fruit of divine grace and love! Where had Paul learnt this, if not from Him Who in deepest grace undertook His people's cause, and paid their mighty dues? "I will repay" was His language, as it were, as He went to the cross for us. The cold selfish heart of man can never produce such sentiments: these are plants of heavenly growth.

2. Next he reminds his brother that he owed all to himself; "thou owest unto me even thine own self besides." Here we reach, as it were, the top of the scale. Philemon was himself a monument of saving grace. Paul had brought Christ to him. Having freely received, he must now freely give. Having been forgiven ten thousands talents, he must now willingly blot out the hundred pence. The exhortations in Titus 3 proceed on similar ground. We are to be gentle and meek, and are to act in the spirit of grace towards men, because we ourselves were once foolish living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another; but are now recipients of the kindness and love of our Saviour God.

Paul desired that he would give him joy, that he would refresh his bowels in the Lord (ver. 20). If it so refreshed His servant to gaze upon this display of divine grace, how much more the Lord! He loves to see Himself reproduced practically in His own that are in the world. Paul now leaves the matter, having confidence in his beloved brother that he would do even more than he had said. He looked for the superabundance of divine grace. He counted upon him that thus it would be.

May the Spirit of God write these things in our hearts! This is Christianity indeed. It is a mighty power, forming the heart and permeating all our circumstances, lifting us entirely above every human consideration, and giving us practically days of heaven upon the earth. W. W. F.