

*THE EPISTLE TO PHILEMON.*

II.

“I thank my God always, making mention of thee in my prayers, hearing of thy love, and of the faith which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all the saints; that the fellowship of thy faith may become effectual, in the knowledge of every good thing which is in you, unto Christ. For I had much joy and comfort in thy love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through thee, brother.”—PHILEM. 4-7 (Rev. Ver.).

PAUL'S was one of those regal natures to which things are possible that other men dare not do. No suspicion of weakness attaches to him when he pours out his heart in love, nor any of insincerity when he speaks of his continual prayers for his friends, or when he runs over in praise of his converts. Few men have been able to talk so much of their love without betraying its shallowness and self-consciousness, or of their prayers without exciting a doubt of their manly sincerity. But the Apostle could venture to do these things without being thought either feeble or false, and could unveil his deepest affections and his most secret devotions without provoking either a smile or a shrug.

He has the habit of beginning all his letters with thankful commendations and assurances of a place in his prayers. The exceptions are 2 Corinthians, where he writes under strong and painful emotion, and Galatians, where a vehement accusation of fickleness takes the place of the usual greeting. But these exceptions make the habit more conspicuous. But though this is a habit, it is not a form, but is the perfectly simple and natural expression of the moment's feelings. He begins his letters so, not in order to please and to say smooth things, but because he feels lovingly, and his heart fills with a pure joy which speaks most fitly in prayer. To recognise good is the way to make good better. Teachers must love if their teaching is to help. The best way to secure the doing of any signal act of Christian generosity, such as Paul wished of Phile-

mon is to show absolute confidence that it will be done, because it is in accordance with what we know of the doer's character. "It's a shame to tell Arnold a lie: he always trusts us," the Rugby boys used to say. Nothing could so powerfully have swayed Philemon to grant Paul's request, as Paul's graceful mention of his beneficence, which mention is yet by no means conscious diplomacy, but simple instinct.

The words of this section are simple enough, but their order is not altogether clear. They are a good example of the hurry and rush of the Apostle's style, arising from his impetuosity of nature. His thoughts and feelings come knocking at "the door of his lips" in a crowd, and do not always make their way out in logical order. For instance, he begins here with thankfulness, and that suggests the mention of his prayers, *v.* 4. Then he gives the occasion of his thankfulness in *v.* 5, "Hearing of thy love and of the faith which thou hast," etc. He next tells Philemon the subject matter of his prayers in *v.* 6, "That the fellowship of thy faith may become effectual," etc. These two verses thus correspond to the two clauses of *v.* 4, and finally in *v.* 7 he harks back once more to his reasons for thankfulness in Philemon's love and faith, adding, in a very lovely and pathetic way, that the good deeds done in far off Colossæ had wafted a refreshing air to the Roman prison house, and, little as the doer knew it, had been a joy and comfort to the solitary prisoner there.

I. We have then here the character of Philemon, which made Paul glad and thankful. The order of the language is noteworthy. Love is put before faith. The significance of this sequence comes out by contrast with similar expressions in Ephesians i. 15: "Your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints" (A.V.) and Colossians i. 4: "Your faith in Christ Jesus, and the love which ye have toward all the saints," where the same elements are

arranged in the more natural order, corresponding to their logical relation; *viz.* Faith first, and love as its consequence. The reason for the change here is probably that Onesimus and Epaphras, from whom Paul would be likely to hear of Philemon, would enlarge upon his practical benevolence, and would naturally say less about the root than about the sweet and visible fruit. The arrangement then is an echo of the talks which had gladdened the Apostle. Possibly, too, love is put first, because the object of the whole letter is to secure its exercise towards the fugitive slave; and seeing that the Apostle would listen with that purpose in view, each story which was told of Philemon's kindness to others made the deeper impression on Paul. The order here is the order of analysis, digging down from manifestation to cause: the order in the parallel passages quoted is the order of production, ascending from root to flower.

Another peculiarity in the arrangement of the words is that the objects of love and faith are named in the reverse order to that in which these graces are mentioned, "the Lord Jesus" being first, and "all the saints" last. Thus we have, as it were, "faith towards the Lord Jesus" imbedded in the centre of the verse, while "thy love . . . toward all the saints," which flows from it, wraps it round. The arrangement is like some forms of Hebrew poetical parallelism, in which the first and fourth members correspond, and the second and third, or like the pathetic measure of *In Memoriam*, and has the same sweet lingering cadence; while it also implies important truths as to the central place in regard to human virtues which knit hearts in soft bonds of love and help, of the faith which finds its sole object in Jesus Christ.

The source and foundation of goodness and nobility of character is faith in Jesus the Lord. That must be buried deep in the soul if tender love toward men is to flow from it. It is "the very pulse of the machine." All the pearls

of goodness are held in solution in faith. Or, to speak more accurately, faith in Christ gives possession of His life and Spirit, from which all good is unfolded; and it further sets in action strong motives by which to lead to every form of purity and beauty of soul; and, still further, it brings the heart into glad contact with a Divine love which forgives its Onesimuses, and so it cannot but touch the heart into some glad imitation of that love which is its own dearest treasure. So that, for all these and many more reasons, love to men is the truest visible expression, as it is the direct and necessary result, of faith in Christ. What is exhaled from the heart and drawn upwards by the fervours of Christ's self-sacrificing love is faith; when it falls on earth again, as a sweet rain of pity and tenderness, it is love.

Further, the true object of faith and one phase of its attitude towards that object are brought out in this central clause. We have the two names which express, the one the divinity, the other the humanity of Christ. So the proper object of faith is the whole Christ, in both His natures, the Divine-human Saviour. Christian faith sees the divinity in the humanity, and the humanity around the divinity. A faith which grasps only the manhood is maimed, and indeed has no right to the name. Humanity is not a fit object of trust. It may change; it has limits; it must die. "Cursed be the man that maketh flesh his arm," is as true about faith in a merely human Christ as about faith in any other man. There may be reverence, there may be in some sense love, obedience, imitation; but there should not be, and I see not how there can be, the absolute reliance, the utter dependence, the unconditional submission, which are of the very essence of faith, in the emotions which men cherish towards a human Christ. The Lord Jesus only can evoke these; on the other hand, the far off splendour and stupendous glory of the Divine

nature becomes the object of untrembling trust, and draws near enough to be known and loved, when we have it mellowed to our weak eyes by shining through the tempering medium of His humanity.

The preposition here used to define the relation of faith to its object is noteworthy. We find several different phases of that connexion expressed by different prepositions in the New Testament. Sometimes faith is spoken of as "in" Christ, sometimes as "unto Him" or "upon Him"; but here it is "toward" Him. The idea is that of aspiration and movement of yearning after an unattained good. And that is one part of the true office of faith. There is fruition and contact in it. We rest *in* Christ by faith. It incorporates us into His mystical body, and brings about a mutual indwelling. We lean *on* Christ by faith, and by it build the fabric of our loves, and repose the weight of our confidence upon Him, as on the sure foundation. We reach *unto* and, in deepest truth, pass *into* Christ by faith. But there is also in faith an element of aspiration, as of the soaring eagle to the sun, or the climbing tendrils to the summit of the supporting stem. In Christ there is always something beyond, which discloses itself the more clearly, the fuller is our present possession of Him. Faith builds upon and rests in the Christ possessed and experienced, and just therefore will it, if it be true, yearn towards the Christ unpossessed. A great reach of flashing glory beyond opens on us, as we round each new headland in that unending voyage. Our faith should and will be an ever-increasing fruition of Christ, accompanied with increasing perception of unreachd depths in Him, and increasing longing after enlarged possession of His infinite fulness.

Where the centre is such a faith, its circumference and outward expression will be a widely diffused love. That deep and most private emotion of the soul, which is the flight of the lonely spirit to the single Christ, as if these

two were alone in the world, does not bar a man off from his kind, but effloresces into the largest and most practical love. One point of the compass struck deeply and firmly into that centre of all things, the other can steadily sweep a wide circle. The widest is not here drawn, but a somewhat narrower, concentric one. The love is "toward all saints." Clearly their relation to Jesus Christ puts all Christians into relation with one another. That was an astounding thought in Philemon's days, when such high walls separated race from race, the slave from the free, woman from man; but the new faith leaped all barriers, and put a sense of brotherhood into every heart that learned God's fatherhood in Jesus. The nave of the wheel holds all the spokes in place. The sun makes the system called by its name a unity, though some planets be of giant bulk and swing through a mighty orbit, waited on by obedient satellites, and some be but specks and move through a narrow circle, and some have scarce been seen by human eye. All are one, though solemn abysses part them, and though no message has ever crossed the gulfs from one to another, because all revolve round one sun.

The recognition of the common relation which all who bear the same relation to Christ bear to one another has more formidable difficulties to encounter to-day than it had in these times when the Church had no stereotyped creeds and no stiffened organizations, and when to the flexibility of its youth was added the warmth of new conviction and the joy of a new field for expanding emotions of brotherly kindness. But nothing can absolve from the duty. Creeds separate, Christ unites. The road to "the reunion of Christendom" is through closer union to Jesus Christ. When that is secured, barriers which now keep brethren apart will be leaped, or pulled down, or got rid of somehow. It is of no use to say, "Go to, let us love one another." That will be unreal, mawkish, histrionic. "The faith

which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus" will be the productive cause, as it is the measure of "thy love toward all the saints."

But the love which is here commended is not a mere feeling, nor does it go off in gushes, however fervid, of eloquent emotion. Clearly Philemon was a benefactor of the brotherhood, and his love did not spend only the paper money of words and promises to pay, but the solid coin of kindly deeds. Practical charity is plainly included in that love of which it had cheered Paul in his imprisonment to hear. Its mention, then, is one step nearer to the object of the letter. Paul conducts his siege of Philemon's heart skilfully, and opens here a fresh parallel, and creeps a yard or two closer up. "Surely you are not going to shut out one of your own household from that wide-reaching kindness." So much is most delicately hinted, or rather, left to Philemon to infer, by this recognition of his brotherly love. A hint lies in it that there may be a danger of cherishing a cheap and easy charity that reverses the law of gravity, and *increases* as the square of the distance, having tenderness and smiles for people and Churches which are well out of our road, and frowns for some nearer home. "He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how shall he love" his brother "whom he hath not seen?"

II. In *v.* 6 we have the apostolic prayer for Philemon, grounded on the tidings of his love and faith. It is immediately connected with "the prayers" of *v.* 4 by the introductory "that," which is best understood as introducing the subject matter of the prayer. Whatever then may be the meaning of this supplication, it is a prayer for Philemon, and not for others. That remark disposes of the explanations which widen its scope, contrary, as it seems to me, to the natural understanding of the context.

"The fellowship of thy faith" is capable of more than one meaning. The signification of the principal word and

the relation expressed by the preposition may be variously determined. "Fellowship" is more than once used in the sense of sharing material wealth with Christ's poor, or more harshly and plainly, charitable contribution. So we find it in Romans xv. 26 and 2 Corinthians ix. 13. Adopting that meaning here, the preposition must express, as it often does, the origin of Philemon's kindly gifts, namely, his faith; and the whole phrase accords with the preceding verse in its view of the genesis of beneficence to the brethren as the result of faith in the Lord.

The Apostle prays that this faith-begotten practical liberality may become efficacious, or may acquire still more power; *i.e.* may increase in activity, and so may lead to "the knowledge of every good thing that is in us." The interpretation has found extensive support, which takes this as equivalent to a desire that Philemon's good deeds might lead others, whether enemies or friends, to recognise the beauties of sympathetic goodness in the true Christian character. Such an explanation hopelessly confuses the whole, and does violence to the plain requirements of the context, which limit the prayer to Philemon. It is *his* "knowledge" of which Paul is thinking. The same profound and pregnant word is used here which occurs so frequently in the other epistles of the captivity, and which always means that deep and vital knowledge which knows because it possesses. Usually its object is God as revealed in the great work and person of Christ. Here its object is the sum total of spiritual blessings, the whole fulness of the gifts given us by, and, at bottom, consisting of, that same Christ dwelling in the heart, who is revealer, because He is communicator, of God. The full, deep knowledge of this manifold and yet one good is no mere theoretical work of the understanding, but is that experience which is only possible to him who enjoys it.

The meaning of the whole prayer, then, put into feebler



and more modern dress is simply that Philemon's liberality and Christian love may grow more and more, and may help him to a fuller appropriation and experience of the large treasures "which are in us," though in germ and potentiality only, until brought into consciousness by our own Christian growth. The various reading "in us," or "in you" only widens the circle of possessors of these gifts to the whole Church, or narrows it to the believers of Colossæ.

There still remain for consideration the last words of the clause, "unto Christ." They must be referred back to the main subject of the sentence, "may become effectual." They seem to express the condition on which Christian "fellowship," like all Christian acts, can be quickened with energy, and tend to spiritual progress; namely, that it shall be done as to the Lord. There is perhaps in this appended clause a kind of lingering echo of our Lord's own words, in which He accepts as done unto Him the kindly deeds done to the least of His brethren.

So then this great prayer brings out very strongly the goal to which the highest perfection of Christian character has still to aspire. Philemon was no weakling or laggard in the Christian conflict and race. His attainments sent a thrill of thankfulness through the Apostle's spirit. But there remained "very much land to be possessed"; and precisely because he had climbed so far, does his friend pray that he may mount still higher, where the sweep of view is wider, and the air clearer still. It is an endless task to bring into conscious possession and exercise all the fulness with which Christ endows His feeblest servant. Not till all that God can give, or rather has given, has been incorporated in the nature and wrought out in the life, is the term reached. This is the true sublime of the Christian life, that it begins with the reception of a strictly infinite gift, and demands immortality as the field in order to unfold its worth. Continual progress in all that ennobles the nature,

satisfies the heart, and floods the mind with light is the destiny of the Christian soul, and of it alone. Therefore unwearied effort, buoyancy, and hope which no dark memories can dash nor any fears darken should mark their temper, to whom the future offers an absolutely endless and limitless increase in the possession of the infinite God.

There is also brought out in this prayer the value of Christian beneficence as a means of spiritual growth. Philemon's "communication of faith" will help him to the knowledge of the fulness of Christ. The reaction of conduct on character and growth in godliness is a familiar idea with Paul, especially in the prison epistles. Thus we read in his prayer for the Colossians, "fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God." The faithful carrying out in life of what we already know is not the least important condition of increasing knowledge. If a man does not live up to his religion, his religion shrinks to the level of his life. Unoccupied territory lapses. We hold our spiritual gifts on the term of using them. The practice of convictions deepens convictions; not that the exercise of Christian graces will make theologians, but it will put in larger possession of the knowledge which is life.

While this general principle is abundantly enforced in Scripture and confirmed by experience, the specific form of it here is that the right administration of wealth is a direct means of increasing a Christian's possession of the large store treasured in Christ. Every loving thought towards the sorrowful and the needy, every touch of sympathy yielded to, and every kindly, Christlike deed flowing from these, thins away some film of the barriers between the believing soul and a full possession of God, makes it more capable of beholding Him and of rising to communion with Him. The possibilities of wealth lie, not only in the direction of earthly advantages, but in the fact that men may so use it as to secure their being "received into ever-

lasting habitations." Modern evangelical teachers have been afraid to say what Paul ventured to say on this matter, for fear of obscuring the truth which Paul gave his life to preach. Surely they need not be more jealous for the doctrine of "justification by faith" than he was; and if he had no scruples in telling rich men to "lay up in store for themselves a good foundation for the time to come," by being "ready to communicate," they may safely follow. There is probably no more powerful cause of the comparative feebleness of average English Christianity than the selfish use of money, and no surer means of securing a great increase in the depth and richness of the individual Christian life than the fuller application of Christian principle, that is, of the law of sacrifice, to the administration of property.

The final clause of the verse seems to state the condition on which Philemon's good deeds will avail for his own growth in grace, and implies that in him that condition is fulfilled. If a man does deeds of kindness and help to one of these little ones, as "unto Christ," then his beneficence will come back in spiritual blessing on his own head. If they are the result of simple natural compassion, beautiful as it is, they will reinforce *it*, but have no tendency to strengthen that from which they do *not* flow. If they are tainted by any self-regard, then they are not charitable deeds at all. What is done for Christ will bring to the doer more of Christ as its consequence and reward. All life, with all its varied forms of endurance and service, comes under this same law, and tends to make more assured and more blessed and more profound the knowledge and grasp of the fulness of Christ, in the measure in which it is directed to Him, and done or suffered for His sake.

III. The present section closes with a very sweet and pathetic representation of the Apostle's joy in the character of his friend.

The "for" of *v.* 7 connects not with the words of petition immediately before, but with "I thank my God" (*v.* 4), and gives a graceful turn—graceful only because so unforced and true—to the sentence. "My thanks are due to you for your kindness to others, for, though you did not think of it, you have done me as much good as you did them." The "love" which gives Paul such "great joy and consolation" is not love directed to himself, but to others; and the reason why it gladdened the Apostle was because it had "refreshed the hearts" of sorrowful and needy saints in Colossæ. This tender expression of affectionate joy in Philemon's good deeds is made wonderfully emotional by that emphatic "brother" which ends the verse, and by its unusual position in the sentence assumes the character of a sudden, irrepressible shoot of love from Paul's heart towards Philemon, like the quick impulse with which a mother will catch up her child, and cover it with caresses. Paul was never ashamed of showing his tenderness, and it never repels us.

These final words suggest the unexpected good which good deeds may do. No man can ever tell how far the blessing of his small acts of kindness, or other pieces of Christian conduct, may travel. They may benefit one in material fashion, but the fragrance may reach far beyond. Philemon little dreamed that his small charity to some suffering brother in Colossæ would find its way across the sea, and bring a waft of coolness and refreshing into the hot prison house. Neither Paul nor Philemon dreamed that, made immortal by the word of the former, the same transient act would find its way across the centuries, and would "smell sweet and blossom in the dust" to-day. Men know not who are their audiences, or who may be spectators of their works; for they are all bound so mystically and closely together, that none can tell how far the vibrations which he sets in motion will thrill. This is true

about all deeds, good and bad, and invests them all with solemn importance. The arrow shot travels beyond the archer's eye, and may wound where he knows not. The only thing certain about the deed once done is, that its irrevocable consequences will reach much farther than the doer thought of, and that no limits can be set to the subtle influence which, for blessing or harm, it exerts.

Since the diameter of the circle which our acts may fill is unknown and unknowable, the doer who stands at the centre is all the more solemnly bound to make sure of what he can make sure of, the quality of the influence sent forth ; and since his deed may blight or bless so widely, to clarify his motives and guard his doings, that they may bring only good wherever they light.

May we not venture to see shining through the Apostle's words the Master's face? "Even as Christ did for us with God the Father," says Luther, "thus also doth St. Paul for Onesimus with Philemon"; and that thought may permissibly be applied to many parts of this letter, to which it gives much beauty. It may not be all fanciful to say that, as Paul's heart was gladdened when he heard of the good deeds done in far off Colossæ by a man who "owed to him his own self," so we may believe that Christ is glad and has "great joy in our love" to His servants and in our kindness, when He beholds the poor work done by the humblest for His sake. He sees and rejoices, and approves when there are none but Himself to know or praise ; and at last many who did lowly service to His friends will be surprised to hear from His lips the acknowledgment that it was Himself whom they had visited and succoured, and that they had been ministering to the Master's joy when they had only known themselves to be succouring His servants' need.

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