

employed by them all in writing their Gospels? Surely, on the contrary, to be brought face to face with a document which existed before any of the Gospels is something of surpassing interest and importance. Every step which brings us closer to the central figure of Christianity is an immense gain. It cannot be ours to hear the living voice of Him who "spake as never man spake"; but, amid much that is perplexing and obscure, there is, if we will but see it with our eyes, much that—like the present passage—we may rightly and reasonably accept as presenting us with a record of the actual words of Christ, as they were accepted and recorded by His followers at a time when those followers were still taught by His own immediate disciples, and when therefore the accepted tradition may fairly be considered accurate and authentic.

THOMAS ETHELBERT PAGE.

THE EPISTLE TO PHILEMON.

V.

"For perhaps he was therefore parted from thee for a season, that thou shouldest have him for ever; no longer as a servant, but more than a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much rather to thee, both in the flesh and in the Lord. If then thou countest me a partner, receive him as myself. But if he hath wronged thee at all, or oweth thee aught, put that to mine account; I Paul write it with mine own hand, I will repay it: that I say not unto thee how that thou owest to me even thine own self besides."—PHILEM. 15-19 (Rev. Ver.).

THE first words of these verses are connected with the preceding by the "for" at the beginning; that is to say, the thought that possibly the Divine purpose in permitting the flight of Onesimus was his restoration, in eternal and holy relationship, to Philemon was Paul's reason for not carrying out his wish to keep Onesimus as his own attendant and helper. "I did not decide, though I very much

wished, to retain him without your consent, because it is possible that he was allowed to flee from you, though his flight was his own blameable act, in order that he might be given back to you, a richer possession, a brother instead of a slave."

I. There is here a Divine purpose discerned as shining through a questionable human act.

The first point to note is, with what charitable delicacy of feeling the Apostle uses a mild word to express the fugitive's flight. He will not employ the harsh naked word "ran away." It might irritate Philemon. Besides, Onesimus has repented of his faults, as is plain from the fact of his voluntary return, and therefore there is no need for dwelling on them. The harshest, sharpest words are best when callous consciences are to be made to wince; but words that are balm and healing are to be used when men are heartily ashamed of their sins. So the deed for which Philemon's forgiveness is asked is half veiled in the phrase "he was parted."

Not only so, but the word suggests that behind the slave's mutiny and flight there was another Will working, of which, in some sense, Onesimus was but the instrument. He "*was parted*"—not that he was not responsible for his flight, but that, through his act, which in the eyes of all concerned was wrong, Paul discerns as dimly visible a great Divine purpose.

But he puts that as only a possibility: "*Perhaps* he departed from thee."—He will not be too sure of what God means by such and such a thing, as some of us are wont to be, as if we had been sworn of God's privy council. "*Perhaps*" is one of the hardest words for minds of a certain class to say; but in regard to all such subjects, and to many more, it is the motto of the wise man, and the shibboleth which sifts out the patient, modest lovers of truth from rash theorists and precipitate dogmatisers. Impatience of un-

certainty is a moral fault which mars many an intellectual process ; and its evil effects are nowhere more visible than in the field of theology. A humble "perhaps" often grows into a "verily, verily,"—and a hasty, over-confident "verily, verily" often dwindles to a hesitating "perhaps." Let us not be in too great a hurry to make sure that we have the key of the cabinet where God keeps His purposes, but content ourselves with "perhaps" when we are interpreting the often questionable ways of His providences, each of which has many meanings and many ends.

But however modestly he may hesitate as to the application of the principle, Paul has no doubt as to the principle itself ; namely, that God, in the sweep of His wise providence, utilizes even men's evil, and works it in, to the accomplishment of great purposes far beyond their ken, as nature, in her patient chemistry, takes the rubbish and filth of the dunghill and turns them into beauty and food. Onesimus had no high motives in his flight ; he had run away under discreditable circumstances, and perhaps to escape deserved punishment. Laziness and theft had been the hopeful companions of his flight, which, so far as he was concerned, had been the outcome of low and probably criminal impulses ; and yet God had known how to use it so as to lead to his becoming a Christian. "With the wrath of man Thou girdest Thyself," twisting and bending it so as to be flexible in Thy hands, and "the remainder Thou dost restrain." How unlike were the seed and the fruit—the flight of a good-for-nothing thief and the return of a Christian brother ! He meant it not so ; but in running away from his master, he was going straight into the arms of his Saviour. How little Onesimus knew what was to be the end of that day's work, when he slunk out of Philemon's house with his stolen booty hid away in his bosom ! And how little any of us know where we are going, and what strange results may evolve themselves from our

actions! Blessed they who can rest in the confidence that, however modest we should be in our interpretation of the events of our own or of other men's lives, the infinitely complex web of circumstance is woven by a loving, wise Hand, and takes shape, with all its interlacing threads, according to a pattern in His hand, which will vindicate itself when it is finished!

The contrast is emphatic between the short absence and the eternity of the new relationship: "for a season"—literally an hour—and "for ever." There is but one point of view which gives importance to this material world, with all its fleeting joys and fallacious possessions. Life is not worth living, unless it be the vestibule to a life beyond. Why all its discipline, whether of sorrow or joy, unless there be another, ampler life, where we can use to nobler ends the powers acquired and greatedened by use here? What an inconsequent piece of work is man, if the few years of earth are his all! Surely, if nothing is to come of all this life here, men are made in vain, and had better not have been at all. Here is a narrow sound, with a mere ribbon of sea in it, shut in between grim, echoing rocks. How small and meaningless it looks as long as the fog lies on and hides the great ocean beyond! But when the mist lifts, and we see that the narrow strait leads out into a boundless sea that lies flashing in the sunshine to the horizon, then we find out the worth of that little dribble of water at our feet. It connects with the open sea, and that swathes the world. So is it with "the hour" of life; it opens out and debouches into the "for ever," and therefore it is great and solemn. This moment is one of the moments of that hour. We are the sport of our own generalizations, and ready to admit all these fine and solemn things about life, but we are less willing to apply them to the single moments as they fly. We should not rest content with recognising the general truth, but ever make conscious effort to feel that

this passing instant has something to do with our eternal character and with our eternal destiny.

That is an exquisitely beautiful and tender thought which the Apostle puts here, and one which is susceptible of many applications. The temporary loss may be eternal gain. The dropping away of the earthly form of a relationship may, in God's great mercy, be a step towards its renewal in higher fashion and for evermore. All our blessings need to be past before reflection can be brought to bear upon them, to make us conscious how blessed we were. The blossoms have to perish before the rich perfume, which can be kept in undiminished fragrance for years, can be distilled from them. When death takes away dear ones, we first learn that we were entertaining angels unawares; and as they float away from us into the light, they look back with faces already beginning to brighten into the likeness of Christ, and take leave of us with His valediction, "It is expedient for you that I go away." Memory teaches us the true character of life. We can best estimate the height of the mountain peaks when we have left them behind. The softening and hallowing influence of death reveals the nobleness and sweetness of those who are gone. Fair country never looks so fair as when it has a curving river for a foreground, and their lines look fairer than before, when seen across the Jordan of death.

To us who believe that life and love are not killed by death, the end of their earthly form is but the beginning of a higher heavenly. Love which is "in Christ" is eternal. Because Philemon and Onesimus were two Christians, therefore their relationship was eternal. Is it not yet more true, if that were possible, that the sweet bonds which unite Christian souls here on earth are in their essence indestructible, and are affected by death only as the body is? Sown in weakness, will they not be raised in power? Nothing of them shall die but the encompassing death.

Their mortal part shall put on immortality. As the farmer gathers the green flax with its blue bells blooming on it, and throws it into a tank to rot, in order to get the firm fibre which cannot rot, and spin it into a strong cable, so God does with our earthly loves. He causes all about them that is perishable to perish, that the central fibre, which is eternal, may stand clear and disengaged from all that was less Divine than itself. Wherefore mourning hearts may stay themselves on this assurance, that they will never lose the dear ones whom they have loved in Christ, and that death itself but changes the manner of the communion, and refines the tie. They were as for a moment dead, but they are alive again. To our bewildered sight they departed and were lost for a season, but they are found, and we can fold them in our heart of hearts for ever.

But there is also set forth here a change, not only in the duration but in the quality of the relation between the Christian master and his former slave, who continues a slave indeed, but is also a brother. "No longer as a servant, but more than a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much rather to thee, both in the flesh and in the Lord." It is clear from these words that Paul did not anticipate the manumission of Onesimus. What he asks is, that he should not be received *as* a slave. Evidently then he is to be still a slave in so far as the outward fact goes—but a new spirit is to be breathed into the relationship. "Specially to me"; he is more than a slave to me. I have not looked on him as such, but have taken him to my heart as a brother, as a son indeed, for he is especially dear to me as my convert. But however dear he is to me, he should be more so thee, to whom his relation is permanent, while to me it is temporary. And this brotherhood of the slave is to be felt and made visible "both in the flesh"—that is, in the earthly and personal relations of common life, "and in the Lord"—that is, in the

spiritual and religious relationships of worship and the Church.

As has been well said, "In the flesh, Philemon has the brother for his slave; in the Lord, Philemon has the slave for his brother." He is to treat him as his brother therefore both in the common relationships of every-day life and in the acts of religious worship.

That is a pregnant word. True, there is no gulf between Christian people now-a-days like that which in the old times parted owner and slave; but, as society becomes more and more differentiated, as the diversities of wealth become more extreme in our commercial communities, as education comes to make the educated man's whole way of looking at life differ more and more from that of the less cultured classes, the injunction implied in our text encounters enemies quite as formidable as slavery ever was. The highly educated man is apt to be very oblivious of the brotherhood of the ignorant Christian, and he, on his part, finds the recognition just as hard. The rich mill-owner has not much sympathy with the poor brother who works at his spinning jennies. It is often difficult for the Christian mistress to remember that her cook is her sister in Christ. There is quite as much sin against fraternity on the side of the poor Christians who are servants and illiterate, as on the side of the rich who are masters or cultured. But the principle that Christian brotherhood is to reach across the wall of class distinctions is as binding to-day as it was on these two good people, Philemon the master and Onesimus the slave.

That brotherhood is not to be confined to acts and times of Christian communion, but is to be shown and to shape conduct in common life. "Both in the flesh and in the Lord" may be put into plain English thus—a rich man and a poor one belong to the same Church; they unite in the same worship, they are "partakers of the

one bread," and therefore, Paul thinks, "are one bread." They go outside the church door. Do they ever dream of speaking to one another outside? "A brother beloved in the Lord,"—on Sundays, and during worship and in Church matters,—is often a stranger "in the flesh" on Mondays, in the street, and in common life. Some good people seem to keep their brotherly love in the same wardrobe with their Sunday clothes. Philemon was bid, and all are bid, to wear it all the week, at market as well as church.

II. In the next verse, the essential purpose for which the whole letter was written is put at last in an articulate request, based upon a very tender motive. "If then thou countest me as a partner, receive him as myself." Paul now at last completes the sentence which he began in *v.* 12, and from which he was hurried away by the other thoughts that came crowding in upon him. This plea for the kindly welcome to be accorded to Onesimus has been knocking at the door of his lips for utterance from the beginning of the letter; but only now, so near the end, after so much conciliation, he ventures to put it into plain words; and even now he does not dwell on it, but goes quickly on to another point. He puts his requests on a modest and yet a strong ground, appealing to Philemon's sense of comradeship—"if thou countest me a partner"—a comrade or a sharer in Christian blessings. He sinks all reference to apostolic authority, and only points to their common possession of faith, hope, and joy in Christ. "Receive him as myself." That request was sufficiently illustrated in the preceding paper, so that I need only refer to what was then said on this instance of interceding love identifying itself with its object, and on the enunciation in it of great Christian truth.

III. The course of thought next shows—Love taking the slave's debts on itself.

“If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee aught.” Paul makes an “if” of what he knew well enough to be the fact; for no doubt Onesimus had told him all his faults, and the whole context shows that there was no uncertainty in Paul’s mind, but that he puts it hypothetically for the same reason for which he chooses to say, “was parted,” instead of “ran away,” namely, to keep some thin veil over the crimes of a penitent, and not to rasp him with rough words. For the same reason he falls back upon the gentler expressions, “wronged” and “oweth,” instead of blurting out the ugly word “stolen.” And then, with a half-playful assumption of lawyer-like phraseology, he bids Philemon put that to his account. Here is my autograph—“I Paul write it with mine own hand”—I make this letter into a bond. Witness my hand; “I will repay it.” The formal tone of the promise, rendered more formal by the insertion of the name—and perhaps by that sentence only being in his own handwriting—seems to warrant the explanation that it is half playful; for he could never have supposed that Philemon would exact the fulfilment of the bond, and we have no reason to suppose that, if he had, Paul could really have paid the amount. But beneath the playfulness there lies the implied exhortation to forgive the money wrong as well as the others which Onesimus had done him.

The verb used here for *put to the account of* is, according to the commentators, a very rare word; and perhaps the singular phrase may be chosen to let another great Christian truth shine through. Was Paul’s love the only one that we know of which took the slave’s debts on itself? Did anybody else ever say, “Put that on mine account”? We have been taught to ask for the forgiveness of our sins as “debts,” and we have been taught that there is One on whom God has made to meet the iniquities of us all. Christ takes on Himself all Paul’s debt, all Philemon’s, all

ours. He has paid the ransom for all, and He so identifies Himself with men that He takes all their sins upon Him, and so identifies men with Himself that they are "received as Himself." It is His great example that Paul is trying to copy here. Forgiven all that great debt, he dare not rise from his knees to take his brother by the throat, but goes forth to show to his fellow the mercy he has found, and to model his life after the pattern of that miracle of love in which is his trust. It is Christ's own voice which echoes in "put that on mine account."

IV. Finally, these verses pass to a gentle reminder of a greater debt: "That I say not unto thee how that thou owest to me even thine own self besides."

As his child in the Gospel, Philemon owed to Paul much more than the trifle of money of which Onesimus had robbed him; namely, his spiritual life, which he had received through the Apostle's ministry. But he will not insist on that. True love never presses its claims, nor recounts its services. Claims which need to be urged are not worth urging. A true, generous heart will never say, "You ought to do so much for me, because I have done so much for you." To come down to that low level of chaffering and barter is a dreadful descent from the heights where the love which delights in giving should ever dwell.

Does not Christ speak to us in the same language? We owe ourselves to Him, as Lazarus did, for He raises us from the death of sin to a share in His own new, undying life. As a sick man owes his life to the doctor who has cured him, as a drowning man owes his to his rescuer, who dragged him from the water and breathed into his lungs till they began to work of themselves, as a child owes its life to its parent, so we owe ourselves to Christ. But He does not insist upon the debt; He gently reminds us of it, as making His commandment sweeter and easier to obey. Every heart that is really touched with gratitude will feel,

that the less the giver insists upon his gifts, the more do they impel to affectionate service. To be perpetually reminded of them weakens their force as motives to obedience, for it then appears as if they had not been gifts of love at all, but bribes given by self-interest; and the frequent reference to them sounds like complaint. But Christ does not insist on His claims, and therefore the remembrance of them ought to underlie all our lives and to lead to constant glad devotion.

One more thought may be drawn from the words. The great debt which can never be discharged does not prevent the debtor from receiving reward for the obedience of love. "I will repay it," even though thou owest me thyself. Christ has bought us for His servants by giving Himself and ourselves to us. No work, no devotion, no love can ever repay our debt to Him. From His love alone comes the desire to serve Him; from His grace comes the power. The best works are stained and incomplete, and could only be acceptable to a love that was glad to welcome even unworthy offerings, and to forgive their imperfections. Nevertheless He treats them as worthy of reward, and crowns His own grace in men with an exuberance of recompense far beyond their deserts. He will suffer no man to work for Him for nothing; but to each He gives even here "great reward *in* keeping His commandments," and hereafter "an exceeding great reward," of which the inward joys and outward blessings that now flow from obedience are but the earnest. His merciful allowance of imperfections treats even our poor deeds as rewardable; and though eternal life must ever be the *gift* of God, and no claim of merit can be sustained before His judgment seat, yet the measure of that life which is possessed here or hereafter is accurately proportioned to and is, in a very real sense, the consequence of obedience and service. "If any man's work abide, he shall receive a reward," and

Christ's own tender voice speaks the promise, "I will repay, albeit I say not unto thee how thou owest to Me even thine own self besides."

Men do not really possess themselves unless they yield themselves to Jesus Christ. He that loveth his life shall lose it, and he that loseth himself, in glad surrender of himself to his Saviour; he and only he is truly lord and owner of his own soul. And to such an one shall be given rewards beyond hope and beyond measure—and, as the crown of all, the blessed possession of Christ, and in it the full, true, eternal possession of himself, glorified and changed into the image of the Lord who loved him and gave Himself for him.

ALEXANDER MACLAREN.

ASKING IN CHRIST'S NAME.

It is sometimes instructive to make an effort of the imagination, and ask how certain words, so familiar to us that we pass them lightly by, must, in their novel grandeur, strike upon unaccustomed ears. Let us suppose the case of a heathen who has learned the story of Jesus and become a convert. He has been taught that the universal Father listens, considerately and lovingly, to the prayers of His weakest child, so that if any trustful supplication remains ungranted, it must have been asked amiss. And now the Gospel of St. John is put into his hands, and there he finds a new promise, and words unheard before, "*Whatsoever* ye shall ask in My name, that will I do"; "If ye shall ask *anything* in My name, I will do it."

Would our convert be content, or ought he to be content, to regard these words as a mere repetition of previous