

"Charge That to My Account"

by H. A. Ironside

"If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself. If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account; I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it; albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides" (Philemon 17-19).

SOMEONE has said that this Epistle to Philemon is the finest specimen of early private Christian correspondence extant. We should expect this, since it was given by divine inspiration. And yet it all has to do with a thieving runaway slave named Onesimus, who was about to return to his former master.

The history behind the letter, which is deduced from a careful study of the Epistle itself, seems to be this: In the city of Colosse dwelt a wealthy Christian man by the name of Philemon, possibly the head of a large household, and like many in that day, he had a number of slaves or bondsmen. Christianity did not immediately overturn the evil custom of slavery, although eventually it was the means of practically driving it out of the whole civilized world. It began by regulating the relation of master and slave, thus bringing untold blessing to those in bondage.

This man Philemon evidently was converted through the ministry of the apostle Paul. Where they met, we are not told; certainly not in the city of Colosse, because in writing the letter to the Colossians, Paul makes it clear that he had never seen the faces of those who formed the Colossian church. You will recall that he labored at Ephesus for a long period. The fame of his preaching and teaching was spread abroad, and we read that "all...in Asia heard the word." Among those who thus heard the Gospel message may have been this man Philemon of Colosse, and so he was brought to know Christ.

Some years had gone by, and this slave, Onesimus, had run away. Evidently before going, he had robbed his master. With his ill-gotten gains he had fled to Rome. How he reached there we do not know, but I have no doubt that upon his arrival he had his fling, and enjoyed to the full that which had belonged to his master. He did not take God into account, but nevertheless God's eye was upon him when he left his home, and it followed him along the journey from Colosse to Rome. When he reached that great metropolis, he was evidently brought into

contact with the very man through whom his master, Philemon, had been converted. Possibly Onesimus was arrested because of some further rascality, and in that way came in contact with Paul in prison, or he may have visited him voluntarily. At any rate God, who knows just how to bring the needy sinner and the messenger of the Cross together, saw to it that Onesimus and Paul met face to face.

Sam Hadley Finds Jim

Some years ago there happened a wonderful illustration of this very thing: the divine ability to bring the needy sinner and the messenger of Christ together.

When Sam Hadley was in California, just shortly before he died, Dr. J. Wilbur Chapman, that princely man of God, arranged a midnight meeting, using the largest theatre in the city of Oakland, in order to get the message of Hadley before the very people who needed it most. On that night a great procession, maybe one thousand people, from all the different churches, led by the Salvation Army band, wended their way through the main streets of the city. Beginning at 10:30, they marched for one-half hour, and then came to the Metropolitan Theatre. In a moment or two it was packed from floor to gallery.

I happened to be sitting in the first balcony, looking right down upon the stage. I noticed that every seat on the stage was filled with Christian workers, but when Sam Hadley stepped forward to deliver the stirring message of the evening, his seat was left vacant. Just as he began to speak, I saw a man who had come in at the rear of the stage, slip around from behind the back curtain, and stand at one of the wings with his hand up to his ear, listening to the address. Evidently he did not hear very well. In a moment or two he moved to another wing, and then on to another one. Finally he came forward to one side of the front part of the stage and stood there listening, but still he could not hear very well. Upon noticing him, Dr. Chapman immediately got up, greeted the poor fellow, brought him to the front, and put him in the very chair which Sam Hadley had occupied. There he listened entranced to the story of Hadley's redemption.

When the speaker had finished, Dr. Chapman arose to close the meeting, and Hadley took Chapman's chair next to this man. Turning to the man he shook hands with him, and they chatted together. When Dr. Chapman was about ready to ask the people to rise and receive the benediction, Hadley suddenly sprang to his feet, and said, "Just a moment, my friends. Before we close, Dr. Chapman, may I say something? When I was on my way from New York to Oakland a

couple of weeks ago, I stopped at Detroit. I was traveling in a private car, put at my disposal by a generous Christian manufacturer. While my car was in the yards, I went downtown and addressed a group at a mission. As I finished, an old couple came up, and said, 'Mr. Hadley, won't you go home and take supper with us?'

"I replied, 'You must excuse me; I am not at all well, and it is a great strain for me to go out and visit between meetings. I had better go back to the car and rest.'

"They were so disappointed. The mother faltered. 'Oh, Mr. Hadley, we did want to see you so badly about something.'

"Very well, give me a few moments to lie down and I will go with you."

He then told how they sat together in the old-fashioned parlor, on the horse-hair furniture, and talked. They told him their story: "Mr. Hadley, you know we have a son, Jim. Our son was brought up to go to Sunday school and church, and oh, we had such hopes of him. But he had to work out rather early in life and he got into association with worldly men, and went down and down and down. By and by he came under the power of strong drink. We shall never forget the first time he came home drunk. Sometimes he would never get home at all until the early hours of the morning. Our hearts were breaking over him. One time he did not come all night, but early in the morning, after we had waited through a sleepless night for him, he came in hurriedly, with a pale face, and said, 'Folks, I cannot stay; I must get out. I did something when I was drunk last night, and if it is found out, it will go hard with me. I am not going to stay here and blot your name.' He kissed us both and left, and until recently we have never seen nor heard of him."

"Mr. Hadley, here is a letter that just came from a friend who lives in California, and he tells us, 'I am quite certain that I saw your son, Jim, in San Francisco. I was coming down on a street car, and saw him waiting for a car. I was carried by a block. I hurried back, but he had boarded another car and was gone. I know it was Jim.'

"He is still living, Mr. Hadley, and we are praying that God will save him yet. You are going to California to have meetings out there. Daily we will be kneeling here praying that God will send our boy, Jim, to hear you, and perhaps when he learns how God saved one poor drunkard, he will know there is hope also for him. Will you join us in daily prayer?"

"I said I would, and we prayed together. They made me promise that every day at a given hour, Detroit time, I would lift my heart to God in fellowship with them, knowing that they were kneeling in that room, praying God that He would reach Jim, and give me the opportunity of bringing him to Christ. That was two weeks ago. I have kept my promise every day. My friends, this is my first meeting in California, and here is Jim. Tonight he was drinking in a saloon on Broadway as the great procession passed. He heard the singing, followed us to the theatre, and said, 'I believe I will go in.' He hurried up here, but it was too late. Every place was filled, and the police officer said, 'We cannot allow another person to go inside.' Jim thought, 'This is just my luck. Even if I want to go and hear the gospel, I cannot. I will go back to the saloon.' He started back; then he returned determined to see if there was not some way to get in. He came in the back door, and finally sat in my own chair. Friends, Jim wants Christ, and I ask you all to pray for him."

There that night we saw that poor fellow drop on his knees, and confess his sin and guilt, and accept Christ as his Saviour. The last sight we had of Jim was when J. Wilbur Chapman and he were on their way to the Western Union Telegraph office to send the joyful message: "God heard your prayers. My soul is saved." Oh, what a God, lover of sinners that He is! How He delights to reach the lost and needy!

"He Delighteth in Mercy"

This same God was watching over Onesimus. He saw him when he stole that money, and as he fled from his master's house. He watched him on his way to Rome, and in due time brought him face to face with Paul. Through that same precious gospel that had been blest to the salvation of Philemon, Onesimus, the thieving runaway slave, was also saved, and another star was added to the Redeemer's crown.

Then I can imagine Onesimus coming to Paul, and saying, "Now, Paul, I want your advice. There is a matter which is troubling me. You know my master, Philemon. I must confess that I robbed him and ran away. I feel now that I must go back, and try to make things right."

One evidence that people are really born of God is their effort to make restitution for wrong done in the past. They want a good conscience both before God and man.

"Paul, ought I to go back in accordance with the Roman law? I have nothing to pay, and I don't know just what to do. I do not belong to

myself, and it is quite impossible to ever earn anything to make up for the loss. Will you advise me what to do?"

Paul might have said, "I know Philemon well. He has a tender, kind, loving heart and a forgiving spirit. I will write him a note and ask him to forgive you, and that will make everything all right."

But he did not do that. Why? I think that he wanted to give us a wonderful picture of the great gospel of vicarious substitution. One of the primary aspects of the work of the Cross is substitution. The Lord Jesus Christ Himself paid the debt that we owe to the infinite God, in order that when forgiveness came to us it would be on a perfectly righteous basis. Paul, who had himself been justified through the Cross, now says, "I will write a letter to Philemon, and undertake to become your surety. You go back to Philemon, and present my letter. You do not need to plead your own case; just give him my letter."

We see Onesimus with that message from Paul safely hidden in his wallet, hurrying back to Colosse. Imagine Philemon standing on the portico of his beautiful residence, looking down the road, and suddenly exclaiming, "Why, who is that? It certainly looks like that scoundrel, Onesimus! But surely he would not have the face to come back. Still, it looks very much like him. I will just watch and wait."

A little later, he says, "I declare, it is Onesimus! He seems to be coming to the house. I suppose he has had a hard time in the world. The stolen money is all gone, and now perhaps he is coming to beg for pardon."

As he comes up the pathway, Onesimus calls, "Master, Master!"

"Well, Onesimus, are you home again?"

"Yes, Master, read this, please."

No other word would Onesimus speak for himself; Paul's letter would explain all.

Philemon takes the letter, opens it, and begins to read: *Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ.*

"Why Onesimus, where did you meet Paul? Did you see him personally?"

"Yes, Master, in the prison in Rome; he led me to Christ."

Unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer.

"Little enough I have ever done, but that is just like Paul."

And to our beloved Apphia. (That was Mrs. Philemon.)

"Come here, Apphia. Here is a letter from Paul." When Mrs. Philemon sees Onesimus, she exclaims, "Are you back?"

One can imagine her mingled disgust and indignation as she sees him standing there. But Philemon says: "Yes, my dear, not a word. Here is a letter for us to read—a letter from Paul."

Running on down the letter he comes to this: *Yet for love's sake, I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ. I beseech thee for my son Onesimus.*

"Think of that! He must have been putting it over on Paul in some way or another."

Whom I have begotten in my bonds. "I wonder if he told him anything about the money he stole from us. I suppose he has been playing the religious game with Paul."

Which in time past was to thee unprofitable.

"I should say he was."

But now profitable to thee and to me.

"I am not so sure of that."

Whom I have sent again.

"Paul must have thought a lot of him. If he didn't serve him any better than he did me, he would not get much out of him." He goes on reading through the letter.

"Well, well, that rascally, thieving liar! Maybe Paul believes that he is saved, but I will never believe it unless I find out that he owned up to the wrong he did me."

What is this? *If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on my account, I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.*

Oh, I think in a moment Philemon was conquered. "Why," he says, "it is all out then. He has confessed his sin. He has acknowledged his thieving, owned his guilt, and, just think, Paul, that dear servant of

God, suffering in prison for Christ's sake, says: *Put that on my account. I will settle everything for him.* Paul becomes his surety." It was just as though Paul should write today: "Charge that to my account!"

A Gospel Picture

Is not this a picture of the gospel? A picture of what the Saviour has done for every repentant soul? I think I see Him as he brings the needy, penitent sinner into the presence of God, and says, "My Father, he has wronged Thee, he owes Thee much, but all has been charged to My account. Let him go free." How could the Father turn aside the prayer of His Son after that death of shame and sorrow on Calvary's cross, when He took our blame upon Himself and suffered in our stead?

But now observe it is not only that Paul offered to become Onesimus' surety, it was not merely that he offered to settle everything for Onesimus in regard to the past, but he provided for his future too. He says to Philemon: *If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.*

Is not that another aspect of our salvation? We are "accepted in the beloved." The blessed Saviour brings the redeemed one into the presence of the Father, and says, "My Father, if thou countest Me the partner of Thy throne, receive him as Myself." Paul says, *Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?* He is to take the place, not of a bondsman, but of an honored member of the family and a brother in Christ. Think of it—once a poor, thieving, runaway slave, and now a recognized servant of Christ, made welcome for Paul's sake. Thus our Father saves the lawless, guilty sinner, and makes him welcome for Jesus' sake, treating him as He treats His own beloved Son.

"Jesus paid it all,
All to Him I owe;
Sin had left a crimson stain:
He washed it white as snow."

And now every redeemed one is "in Christ before God—yea, made the righteousness of God in him," Oh, wondrous love! Justice is satisfied. What a picture we have here then of substitution and acceptance. The apostle Paul epitomized it all for us: "Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification" (Romans 4:25).

We are accepted in the Beloved. The Lord Jesus became our Surety, settled for all our past, and has provided for all our future. In the book of Proverbs (11:15), there is a very striking statement, "He that is surety for a stranger shall smart for it; and he that hateth suretiship is sure." These words were written centuries before the Cross, to warn men of what is still a very common ground for failure and ruin in business life. To go surety for a stranger is a very dangerous thing, as thousands have learned to their sorrow. It is poor policy to take such a risk unless you are prepared to lose.

But there was One who knew to the full what all the consequences of His act would be, and yet, in grace, deigned to become "Surety for a stranger." Meditate upon these wonderful words: "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). He was the stranger's Surety.

A surety is one who stands good for another. Many a man will do this for a friend, long known and trusted, but no wise man will so act for a stranger, unless he is prepared to lose. But it was when we were strangers and foreigners and enemies, and alienated in our minds by wicked works, that Jesus in grace became our Surety. "Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God."

All we owed was exacted from Him when He suffered upon the tree for sins, not His own. He could then say, "I restored that which I took not away" (Psalm 69:4). Bishop Lowth's beautiful rendering of Isaiah 53:7 reads: "It was exacted and He became answerable." This is the very essence of the Gospel message. He died in my place, He paid my debt.

How fully He proved the truth of the words quoted from Proverbs, when He suffered on that cross of shame! How He had to "smart for it" when God's awful judgment against sin fell upon Him. But He wavered not! In love to God and to the strangers whose Surety He had become, "He endured the cross, despising the shame."

His sorrows are now forever past. He has paid the debt, met every claim in perfect righteousness. The believing sinner is cleared of every charge, and God is fully glorified.

"He bore on the tree
The sentence for me,
And now both the Surety

And sinner are free."

None other could have met the claims of God's holiness against the sinner and have come out triumphant at last. He alone could atone for sin. Because He has settled every claim, God has raised Him from the dead, and seated Him at His own right hand in highest glory.

Have you trusted "the stranger's Surety"? If not, turn to Him now while grace is free.

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