

Paul's letter to Philemon...

- It's the shortest letter of Paul's that is in the NT.

Make some observations:

- What do you see in the letter?
- What's going on? What is the big picture?

Here's what's going on in this letter: Paul makes a request of Philemon for Onesimus.

- Yes—there's a lot more that could be said about this short epistle, but that's basically what the letter is.
- And all of the above leads to this question...

Why is this letter in the Bible?

Paul's letter to Philemon: why is it in the Bible?

- It doesn't reveal any new doctrine or truth.
- It doesn't fulfill or expand on any OT doctrine.
- It doesn't reveal any new truth about the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit, or the church.
- It doesn't have any ethical teaching in it.

Is the point of the letter to condemn slavery?

- No—it doesn't say that. In fact, Paul doesn't comment on the institution of slavery at all.

More than anything else, here, I believe, is what is in this letter: It shows the gospel in action. What do I mean by that?

Paul's letter to Philemon: the author

What does this short letter tell us about Paul?

It tells us two things about Paul –

- It tells us he is a prisoner—he mentions it five times in the letter (v. 1, 9, 10, 13, 23). We'll get into this more in a bit, but why do you think he mentions this so often in such a short letter? Why the emphasis on this?
- And it tells us that he is an old man (v. 9). So we know that this was written very late in his life, because he died as a martyr in Rome somewhere in the 64-67 AD timeframe after a second imprisonment (not recorded in Acts).

Paul's letter to Philemon: Why was Paul in prison?

Well, it's a long story...

- Paul was converted about AD 33-34 (Acts 9).
- He made his 1st missionary journey in 46-47, and his second in roughly 48-51.
- His third missionary journey took place in approx. 52-57, and may have lasted up to 5 years.
- He wintered over in Corinth in 57, where he wrote his epistle to the Romans.
- He travelled to Jerusalem sometime late in 57 (Acts 21:12-17), and after a short time there was arrested (Acts 21:27-36).

Paul's letter to Philemon: Why was Paul in prison?

- He was sent to the Roman governor, Felix, in Caesarea Maritima, where he was held in prison for two years (AD 57-59; Acts 24:27).
- At the end of that imprisonment Paul appealed to Caesar (Acts 25:10-12). As a Roman citizen he had the right of appeal for trial before the emperor.
- So after a 3-month stay on Malta after being shipwrecked (Acts 27:39-28:11), he finally arrived in Rome sometime in 60 (Acts 28:14).
- He was immediately placed under house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:16) for two years (28:30).

Paul's letter to Philemon: Why was Paul in prison?

Paul's two years under house arrest in Rome –

- He wrote his “prison epistles” – Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon.
- According to Luke, here's what Paul did for two years: “He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:30-31).
- Paul would not allow time to be wasted—he didn't have the freedom to move about as he pleased, but he was free to write, to think, and to preach.

Paul's letter to Philemon: Why was Paul in prison?

Paul's two years under house arrest in Rome –

- Paul's account of those years: "I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear." – Phil. 1:12-14
- And now he was an old man—here's what his 30 years of service for Christ held: 2 Cor. 6:3-10, 11:23-28; Acts 9:15-16, 20:22-23.

Paul's letter to Philemon: Who was Philemon?

Ok—question: What do we know about Philemon?

Answer: Not a great deal. Just this:

- He was likely wealthy—he had a house big enough for guests (v. 22) which was unusual, and large enough for some Christians to meet in (v. 2).
- He was a believer—the letter makes that clear.
- And it is probable that he was converted under Paul's preaching (v. 19).
- He was a slave owner (v. 15-16); more on this later.
- He probably lived in Colossae and likely heard the gospel during Paul's three year ministry in Ephesus—approx. 100 miles from Colossae.

Paul's letter to Philemon: Who was Onesimus?

There's one more major figure in this story—all of the “action” revolves around him: Onesimus. What do we know about him?

- He was a slave, owned by Philemon (v. 15-16).
- He ran away from Philemon for reasons that aren't mentioned in the letter (though it is possible he may have stolen some money as he left, v. 18-19).
- He was converted after meeting with Paul in Rome (v. 10).
- And along with Tychicus he delivered the letters to Ephesus, Colossae, and Philemon.

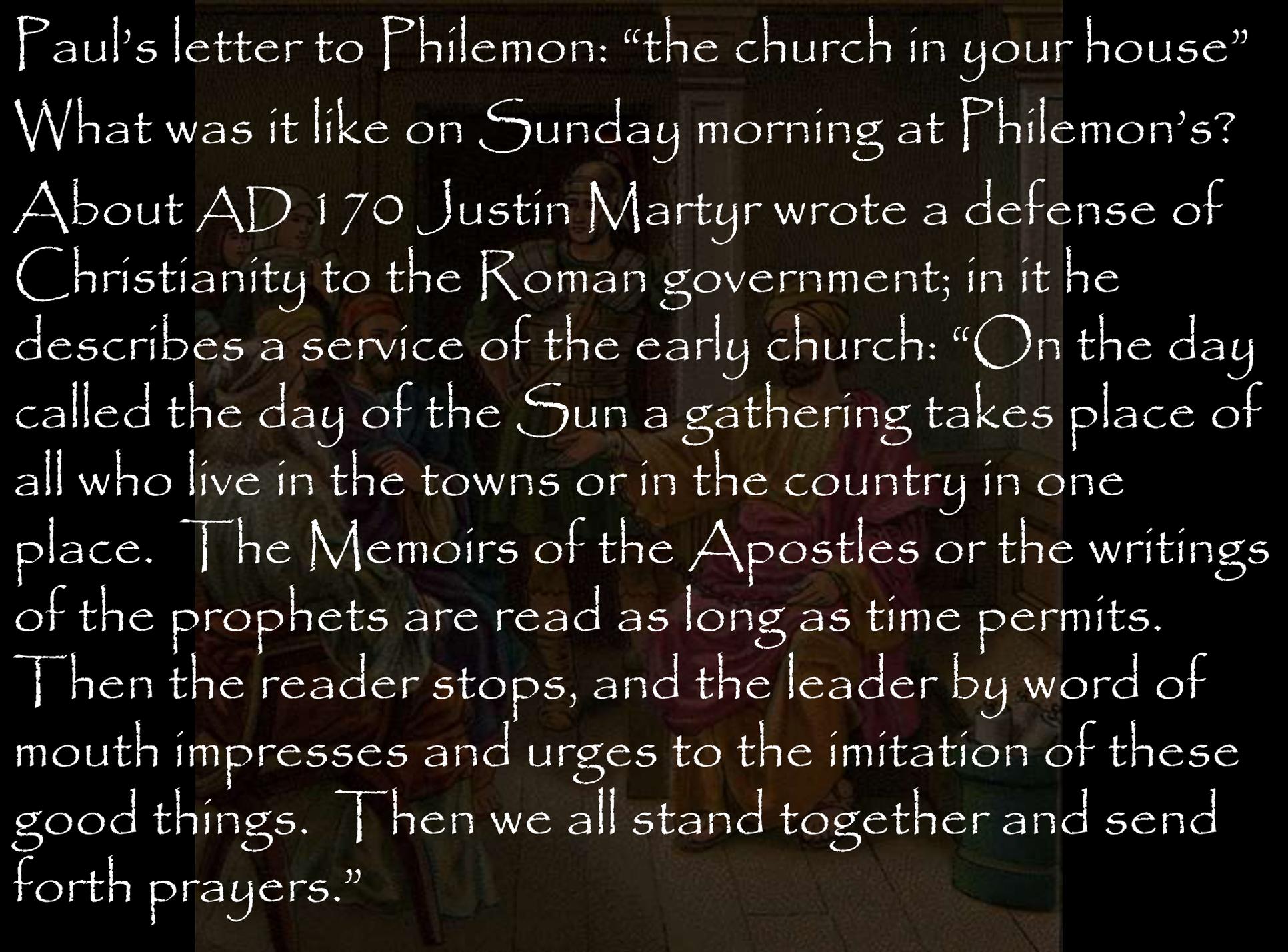
Something from another (extra-biblical) letter that may—or may not—be true...

Ignatius was born in 35 AD and died in 107, one of the most prominent and godly leaders of the very early church; he survived the apostle John by some 10 or 11 years. He served as the bishop, or overseer, of the church of Antioch. As he was being forcibly taken from Antioch to Rome, where he would be martyred, he was allowed to visit some friends along the way and managed to write several letters to the churches of Asia Minor which have survived. One of his letters was written to the church at Ephesus.

Something from another letter that may—or may not—be true...

William Barclay writes this: “In the first chapter of that letter, he has much to say about their wonderful bishop. And what is the bishop’s name? It is Onesimus; and Ignatius makes exactly the same pun as Paul made—he is Onesimus by name and Onesimus by nature, the profitable one to Christ. It may well be that Onesimus, the runaway slave, had become with the passing years none other than Onesimus, the great bishop of Ephesus.”

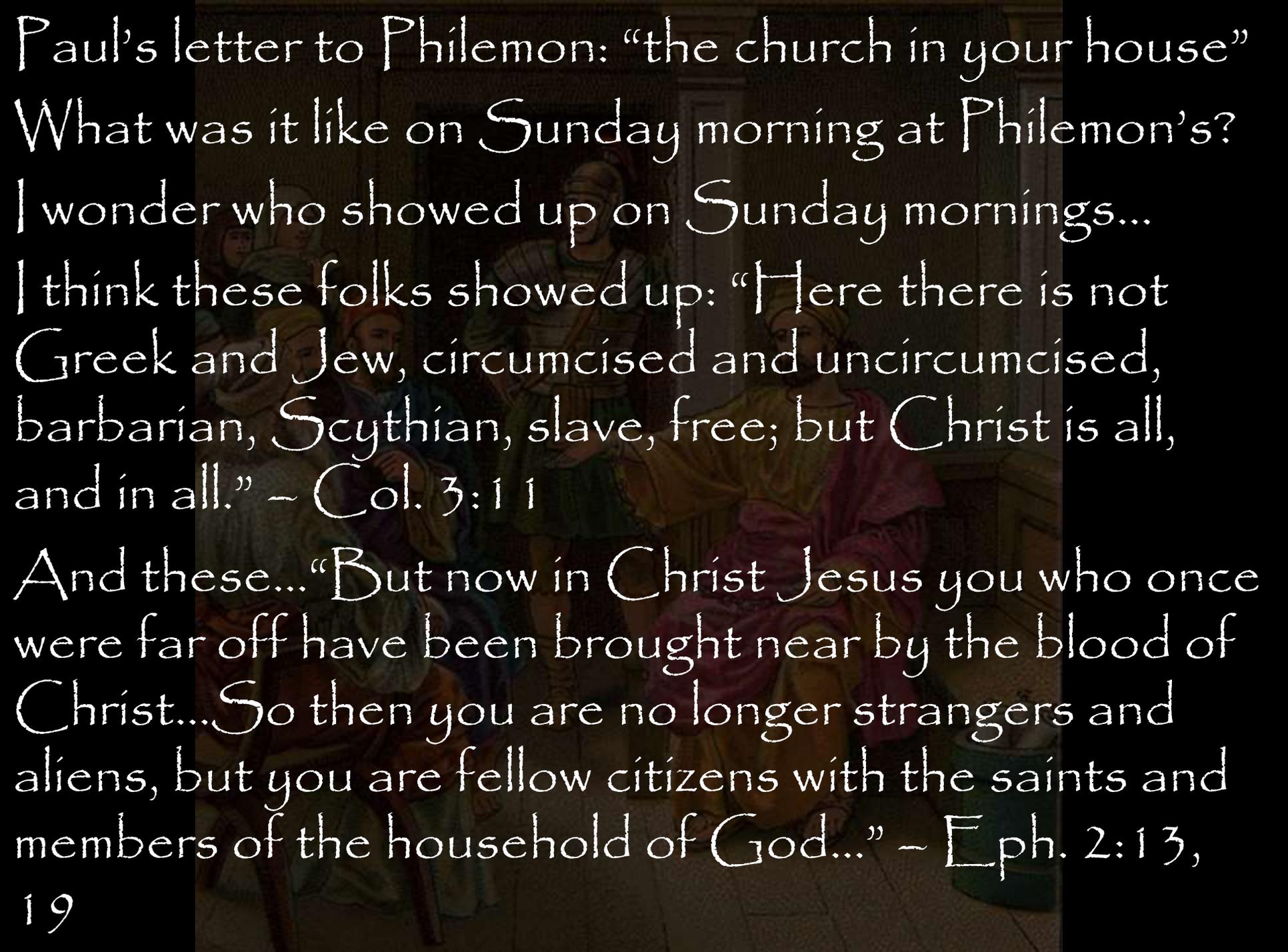
I want that to be true. I don’t know if it is or not, but I want it to be true.



Paul's letter to Philemon: "the church in your house"

What was it like on Sunday morning at Philemon's?

About AD 170 Justin Martyr wrote a defense of Christianity to the Roman government; in it he describes a service of the early church: "On the day called the day of the Sun a gathering takes place of all who live in the towns or in the country in one place. The Memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. Then the reader stops, and the leader by word of mouth impresses and urges to the imitation of these good things. Then we all stand together and send forth prayers."



Paul's letter to Philemon: "the church in your house"
What was it like on Sunday morning at Philemon's?
I wonder who showed up on Sunday mornings...
I think these folks showed up: "Here there is not
Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised,
barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all,
and in all." - Col. 3:11

And these... "But now in Christ Jesus you who once
were far off have been brought near by the blood of
Christ... So then you are no longer strangers and
aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and
members of the household of God..." - Eph. 2:13,

Paul's letter to Philemon: a brief outline

- Paul's introduction to his letter to Philemon, v. 1-3
- Paul's thanksgiving and prayer for Philemon, v. 4-7
- Paul's appeal to Philemon, v. 8-16
- Paul's confidence in the obedience of Philemon, v. 17-22
- Paul's final greetings and prayer for Philemon, v. 23-25

How would you title the book?

- No longer a slave, but a beloved brother
- From bondservant to brother
- Bondservant to brother: Transformed by Christ

Paul's letter to Philemon: a brief outline

If you were to choose a key verse for the book, what would it be? Which verse seems to you to best capture the message of this letter?

Here's what I chose: "So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me." – v. 17

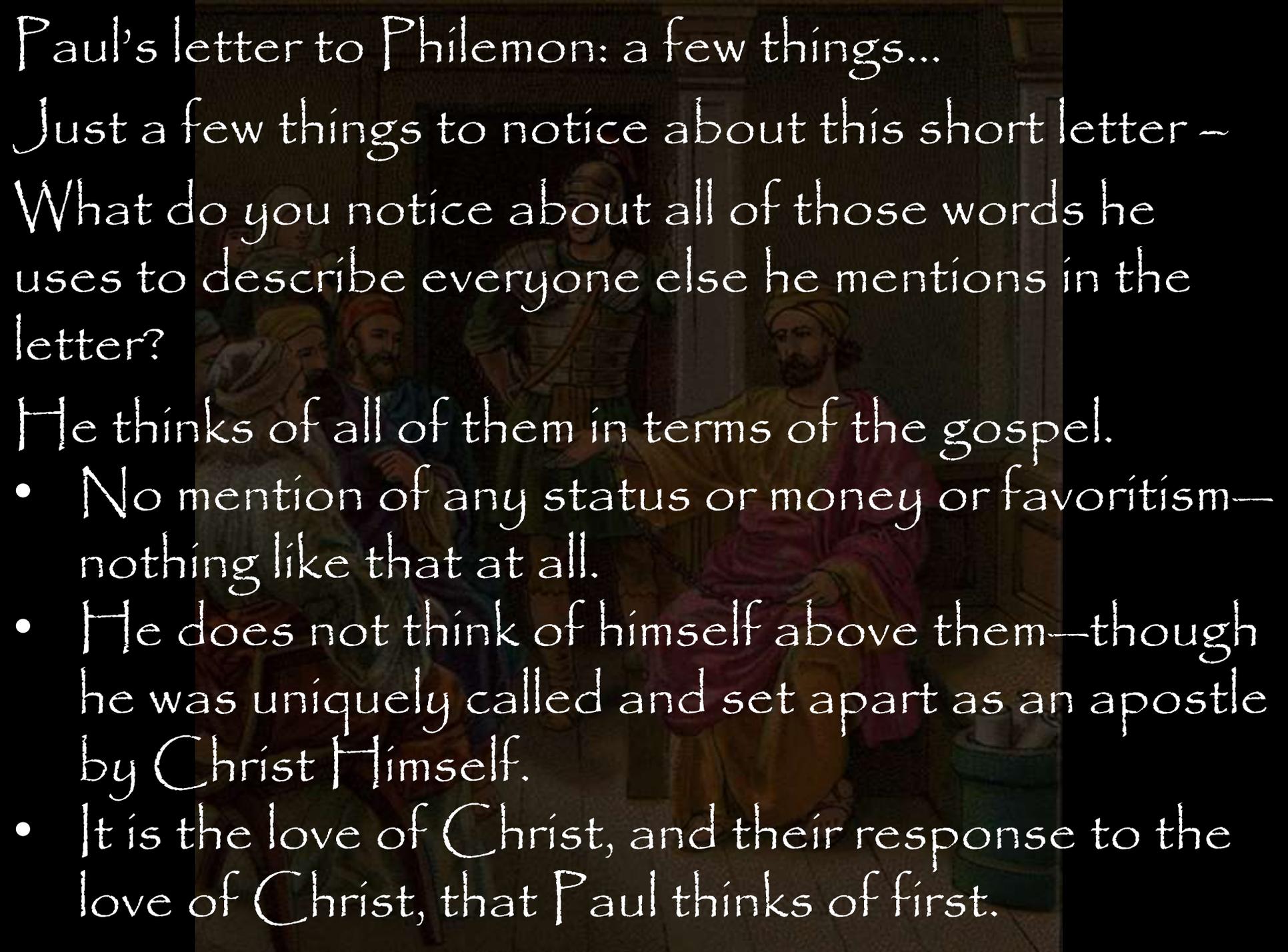
- No barriers.
- No divisions.
- No factions.
- No making the slaves sit in the back so the beautiful people can sit in the prominent seats.
- No superior and inferior in the church—like Galatians 3:28.

Paul's letter to Philemon: a few things...

Just a few things to notice about this short letter,
some observations ~

Notice the words Paul attaches to his every mention
of someone else in this letter:

- Timothy *our brother*
- Philemon *our beloved fellow worker*
- Apphia *our sister*
- Archippus *our fellow soldier*
- Onesimus the *beloved brother*
- Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, *my fellow workers.*



Paul's letter to Philemon: a few things...

Just a few things to notice about this short letter ~

What do you notice about all of those words he uses to describe everyone else he mentions in the letter?

He thinks of all of them in terms of the gospel.

- No mention of any status or money or favoritism—nothing like that at all.
- He does not think of himself above them—though he was uniquely called and set apart as an apostle by Christ Himself.
- It is the love of Christ, and their response to the love of Christ, that Paul thinks of first.

Paul's letter to Philemon: a few things...

Just a few things to notice about this short letter ~

Take a look down in v. 17-22. All of the imperatives (the "do this") words are in these verses. There are four of them: "receive...charge...Refresh...prepare..."

Of those four imperatives, which one seems to you to be the primary, or most significant?

My choice: "...receive him as you would receive me."

- The other three imperatives hinge on this one.
- This is the one that would cost Philemon the most; this would be difficult for him—it would require a new way of thinking, a renewing of his mind.

Paul's letter to Philemon: a few things...

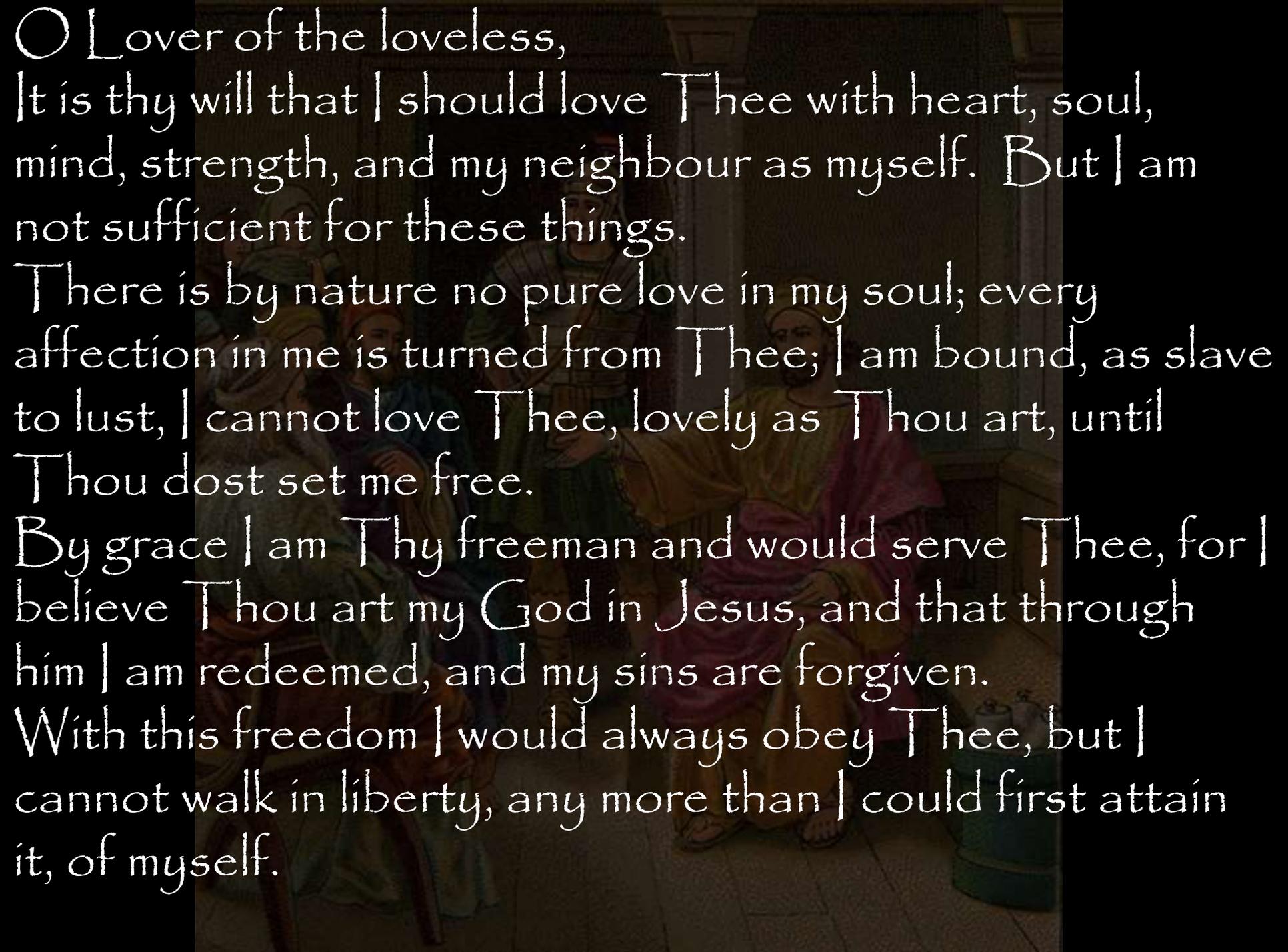
Just a few things to notice about this short letter ~

Paul commends Philemon for his clear love of the saints and his concern for their encouragement: "the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you." ~ v. 7

But Paul sees the need in his own heart for refreshing ~ "Refresh my heart in Christ." ~ v. 20

What was it that would refresh Paul's heart?

- "...receive him as you would receive me." ~ v. 17
- "Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say." ~ v. 21
- And what a delight it would have been to the heart of Onesimus to be received as Paul.

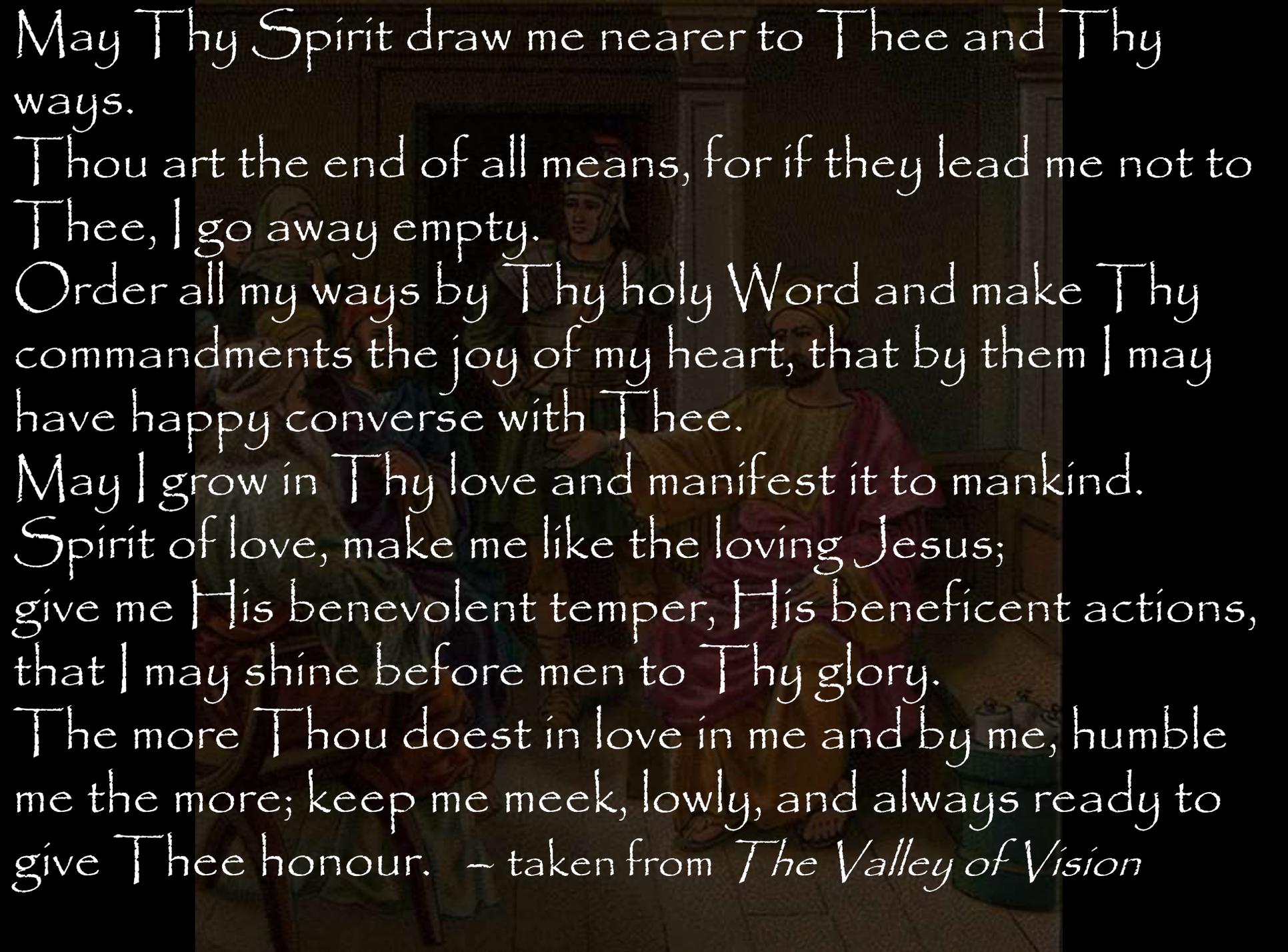


O Lover of the loveless,
It is thy will that I should love Thee with heart, soul,
mind, strength, and my neighbour as myself. But I am
not sufficient for these things.

There is by nature no pure love in my soul; every
affection in me is turned from Thee; I am bound, as slave
to lust, I cannot love Thee, lovely as Thou art, until
Thou dost set me free.

By grace I am Thy freeman and would serve Thee, for I
believe Thou art my God in Jesus, and that through
him I am redeemed, and my sins are forgiven.

With this freedom I would always obey Thee, but I
cannot walk in liberty, any more than I could first attain
it, of myself.



May Thy Spirit draw me nearer to Thee and Thy ways.

Thou art the end of all means, for if they lead me not to Thee, I go away empty.

Order all my ways by Thy holy Word and make Thy commandments the joy of my heart, that by them I may have happy converse with Thee.

May I grow in Thy love and manifest it to mankind.

Spirit of love, make me like the loving Jesus; give me His benevolent temper, His beneficent actions, that I may shine before men to Thy glory.

The more Thou doest in love in me and by me, humble me the more; keep me meek, lowly, and always ready to give Thee honour. ~ taken from *The Valley of Vision*