

The New European Bible Commentary: Philemon

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:1 *Paul, a prisoner of Christ*- Paul clearly resented his imprisonment, but he sees his captors as representing Christ; just as he asks slaves to consider their masters as Christ and live 'as unto Him' through secular experience. And Paul was no hypocrite; he saw his imprisonment as being served as unto Christ.

And Timothy our brother- So Timothy was with Paul in Rome, possibly in prison with him. At the end of 2 Timothy, Paul begs Timothy to come to him, apparently before he dies. It could be argued that Paul was in fact released; for perhaps Timothy came to him, and now he writes to Philemon as if he expects to shortly be released and would come and visit him and settle any financial loss incurred by Onesimus (:19,22). Yet Paul does write in 2 Tim. 4 as if is at the end of his life, and the situation in prison has radically changed from the period at the end of Acts when he lived in his own rented accommodation within the prison. So perhaps during that period, Timothy came to him; and then on the second imprisonment, he asked for Timothy to come again to Rome and be with him. Seeing Paul had left Timothy with the difficult charge of running the rather wild church at Ephesus, this is itself a picture of how Paul took much encouragement from Timothy, a brother far weaker than himself. And this sets us an important principle.

To Philemon our beloved and fellow-worker - Paul shows an increasing fondness for the *syn* prefix in his letters, if we arrange them chronologically. He came to perceive, in his spiritual maturity, the need for our brethren, even if we disagree with them and have to rebuke their weaknesses.

:2 *And to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow-soldier, and to the church in your house*- Why mention these two? Probably Apphia was Philemon's wife and Archippus his son. Or maybe they were elders in the house church which Philemon ran. "Fellow soldier" might reflect how Paul, writing surrounded by soldiers guarding him, considered *himself* to be the soldier of Jesus.

:3 *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*- This was no mere formal greeting. Onesimus had run away from Philemon for a reason; and Onesimus feared that Philemon would show him no grace on his return. These greetings and conclusions of Paul in his letters were a real prayerful wish for grace and peace to be theirs. He wanted Philemon to know God's grace, and to have the peace which came from it. Fretting about the evil of his runaway slave and the financial loss caused (:18,19) was not the way of peace.

:4 *I thank my God always, making mention of you always in my prayers*- This is clearly alluding to the Is. 62:6,7 passage, about always making mention of Jerusalem in prayer. But for Paul, the true city of God was now the scattered group of Christian believers around the Roman empire of the first century. Jewish minds would've picked up Paul's purposeful allusion to the 'always' prayers for Jerusalem; and would've marvelled that he saw the great holy city as now the bunch of guys whom he'd baptized around the place, and that instead of a city, it was those very real men and women who filled his thoughts, prayers and yearnings.

Paul saw himself indeed as the watchman upon Zion's walls- but watching over the people of God, not a physical city.

:5 Hearing of the love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints- Because Philemon believes the Lord Jesus, he must believe what His brethren say. And so it is with us. In some parts of our community there is constant doubt of our brethren and suspicions as to their motives and words; and yet this, as with *all* attitudes we adopt to our brethren, is the mind we are showing toward the Lord Jesus Himself. See on Jn. 8:42. Paul would have heard about all this faith and love towards all believers from Onesimus. But Onesimus feared that in his case, Philemon would not show him much love. And presumably there was a reason why Onesimus ran away from Philemon- probably connected with abuse of him. This is a lovely picture, of a man recognizing that another brother who treats him badly does in fact have many good points, and treats others differently to how the brother treats him. And Paul thanked God for the good points in Philemon, even though he considered him deficient in grace (see on :3). Dealing with believers who lack grace is a real challenge; and Paul's positive approach to Philemon, thanking God for his good points, is a great example to us.

:6 I pray that our fellowshiping of your faith may result in our coming to acknowledge every good thing which is in you in Christ- The crucial importance of personal, Christ-like example empowering our witness is brought out here in the AV: "The communication [sharing] of thy faith may become effectual [Gk. 'energized'] by the acknowledgment [i.e. recognition, by others] of every good thing which is in you in Christ". There's a lot compacted into these words, strung together as they are in a rather awkward sentence. Our sharing of the faith is energized, it takes on power and compulsion as a witness, when others can acknowledge that we are "in Christ" because they see His characteristics reflected in us. This is why effective witness can only be made by those "in Christ", those who show His personality written in theirs. This will 'energize' their sharing of the facts of the Gospel with others. As I have pointed out at such length in *The Power Of Basics*, each doctrine of the Gospel is designed to elicit practical changes in human life. Where those changes are apparent, the preaching of a doctrinal Gospel becomes empowered and energized. Proffering mere doctrinal propositions to this world and nothing else, will never be successful. It will lack power, energy and the compulsion required for conversion.

What was good in Philemon was counted to him because he was "in Christ". We must perceive that others too are counted as righteous because they are in Christ, and we will likewise seek to count them as having imputed righteousness even as we feel and know God has so counted us. For frankly, Philemon was lacking in grace, and the good things about him are being almost exaggerated- because he is being seen as "in Christ". The power to share our faith ["fellowshipping of your faith"] is rooted in realizing that we have been counted righteous through our being in Christ. As God reckons us righteous, so we must reckon each other (Rom. 3:28; 4:3,5,24 RV). This is an immense challenge, but it comes directly from the doctrine of imputed righteousness. Our being justified / counted righteous by God's grace is the very basis and essence of our salvation. And yet, as ever, we can't be passive to this wonder. We too are to seek to count others as righteous, seeing them for who they are as 'in Christ'. Every time we are sinned against, or perceive the weakness and spiritual incompleteness in our brother or sister who is in Christ... we have a wonderful opportunity to count them as righteous, in the same way as we are counted righteous through being in

Christ. The Hebrew word *tsadaq*, to count righteous, to justify, is used about our justification of others in Dan. 12:3- those who count many as righteous will shine as the stars for ever [AV "turn many to righteousness" rather misleadingly gives the idea of converting others by preaching, but that's not the idea of the Hebrew].

:7 Already I had much joy and comfort in your love- Paul gives an excellent pattern to us in how he dealt with Philemon, whom, it would appear, had not treated neither Paul nor Onesimus in a Christ-like way. Paul genuinely rejoices in the good deeds of Philemon in other contexts: "We have great joy... in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother". But he goes on to ask Philemon to do this to him: "Brother, let me have joy of you... refresh my heart" (Philemon 7,20). The two verses are clearly linked to each other- the words "joy", "brother", "refresh", "bowels" etc. recur. Paul appears to be saying: 'I fully recognize, brother, that you've done many good things, given other brethren joy, refreshed their hearts. But, you've not done that to your slave, brother Onesimus, neither to me. But I acknowledge the good, Christ-like things in you that I see, in other contexts (:6). But please, expand that love to include me; please, treat me in the same good way you've treated other brethren; treat me too as a brother in Christ'. Now this sets a wonderful example to us. To acknowledge some good things even in our bitterest enemy in the ecclesia. Because they are in Christ. To realize that how they are treating us is not actually how they treat all brethren. And to plead with them as does Paul, "for love's sake", to treat us in the graceful way they treat their other brethren.

Because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you- See on :20 *Refresh my heart.*

:8 Thus although I have all boldness in Christ to command you to do what is required- Because Philemon was "in Christ" he had to act as Christ; he actually *had to* receive his slave back as a brother and not punish him as many slave owners would. This was a command, an imperative arising from being "in Christ". Paul could be bold about this- without doubt, Philemon should accept Onesimus back. Paul likewise opens his heart to the Corinthians, when he asks them if they want him to come to them with a rod, or with the spirit of meekness (1 Cor. 4:21). Paul is remarkably open hearted in his letters. He shares openly his internal questioning- whether to take a tough line, or to beg and implore in gentleness. Both would have been legitimate. And the "rod" or 'I command you, Philemon' would have been the approach he as a former legalist would have been more comfortable with. But he had now learned of Christ... to be different, and to take the gentler and more sensitive path.

:9 Yet I prefer to appeal to you for love's sake- I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus- It could be argued that this is a human way of appeal, and Paul would have been better sticking to spiritual principle rather than emotional appeal. But he says that he does at times put things "in human terms" (Rom. 6:19; Gal. 3:15); he shows a remarkable humanity and sensitivity to the human situations of the folks and situations he addresses.

:10 I appeal to you for my child Onesimus- The fact that the Lord intercedes for us means that we should be open to others interceding with *us* on behalf of another. Paul explains what I mean. In one of his countless allusions to the Gospels, he speaks of how he 'beseeches' or 'appeals' Philemon to be generous and gracious to his runaway slave Onesimus. Paul uses the word *parakleo*- well known for its repeated use in the Gospels to describe how the Lord Jesus is our *parakletos*, our comforter, interceder, beseecher of the Father for us. Surely he means us to get the connection. As the Lord Jesus beseeches / intercedes the Father for us, Philemon

included, so we, and Philemon, should be open to others beseeching *us*- and respond with a like grace and lavish response. And there's another allusion to the Gospels in the very next verse of the letter to Philemon.

Whose father I became in my imprisonment- Paul had presumably converted or baptized Onesimus in prison. And yet he uses the same language of 'my child' regarding Timothy, whom he did not baptize, but spiritually influenced to a formative extent. Perhaps Onesimus had been baptized and was a brother in Philemon's house church. But he had run away and ended up either in Rome, or in prison there. And Paul's outreach even in chains had reached this runaway slave, just as it reached the Praetorian guard (Phil. 1:13). Those who feel shut in and unable to do much preaching can take great encouragement from how Paul managed to witness.

:11- see on Col. 1:6.

He was once unprofitable to you- The unprofitable servant of Mt. 25:30 is all of us, the Lord taught. And so when Paul appeals to Philemon to be gracious to his unprofitable servant Onesimus (Philemon 11), he's alluding back to that parable. And making the point that Philemon is himself an unprofitable servant, graciously received by his Lord; and so he should be likewise gracious to *his* unprofitable servant.

But now is profitable to you and to me- By receiving Onesimus with grace, there would be "benefit" and "profit" for Philemon (Philemon 11,14 Gk.). Humanly speaking, there was only loss. For Onesimus had defrauded Philemon (Philemon 18 Gk.), and Paul was implying that Onesimus send him back to Rome to help him, with Philemon's 'agreement' [AV "mind"] (Philemon 13,14 GK.). Losing a slave was a material, financial loss. But by showing grace in this case, the material loss would become a spiritual profit for Philemon in the last day.

:12 *He is as my very heart-* Paul's spirit or heart was in Onesimus; they thought the same way. In this sense the spirit of Christ was in Noah and as it were preached to people in 1 Pet. 3:18, although Christ Himself was not there in Noah's time; the spirit of Christ was in the prophets although He didn't exist then (1 Pet. 1:11); Paul's spirit was present at the church gatherings in Corinth even though he was absent (1 Cor. 5:4). So in Onesimus, insofar as he had the spirit of Christ and Paul did too, Paul's spirit / mind / presence was standing before Philemon. This is "the unity of the Spirit".

And it is he whom I have sent back to you- That might seem obvious, but the idea is 'My very heart is in his very own person'.

:13 *I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel-* If Onesimus returned to Rome and served Paul there, he would be ministering to Paul as if Philemon was doing this- "on your behalf". So as Paul was represented by Onesimus (:12,17), so likewise Onesimus would represent Philemon. This is the John 17-style unity which there is in Christ. It would seem that if Onesimus could be so useful to Paul in Rome, he was not therefore in prison; therefore Paul's outreach from within prison had reached to a runaway slave outside prison. And of course Onesimus was free to travel back from Rome to Philemon. Maybe Paul's teaching about grace in the letter to the church at Rome had been heard by Onesimus, and so he had come to ask Paul about working it all out in practice.

:14 *But I preferred to do nothing without your consent, so that your goodness-* Gk. 'your profit'. See on :12 *But now is profitable*. The picture we get of Philemon is that he was an active and good brother in many ways. He had an ecclesia that met in his house, probably, by implication, comprised of his own family / "house" whom he had converted. The "beloved Aphia" refers to a female [*agapete*]- probably his wife. He was well known for a truly generous spirit to the brethren, and for a deep faith (:5-7). And yet he his whole standing with the Lord, Paul implies, was going to be revealed, and stood now under question, over the issue of his attitude to his runaway slave who had now accepted Christ. If he wouldn't accept him, then all this good upright living was in vain. Paul was giving him a test. He could've just kept Onesimus with him in Rome. But he sent him all the way back home to Philemon, to get his 'agreement' (Philemon 14, AV "mind") that Philemon accepts Onesimus as a brother, and sends him back to Rome to serve Paul. He could've "retained" Onesimus; but instead, he seeks a "benefit" [spiritually] for Philemon by bringing the issue to a pointed head (:13,14). And so it can be with us, that providence brings one specific case or person into our lives to test whether or not we have really accepted grace in the very core of our hearts. And on this, all else ultimately depends. And these things 'God works oftentimes with man'. We find ourselves living out the situations of both Onesimus and Philemon. The crucial challenge of grace comes to us time and again in ecclesial life, and we too present it to others. Upon our response to it, our salvation-by-grace depends.

Might not be by compulsion but of your own free will- Paul thought of ways to make Philemon bear spiritual fruit; so he leaves the choice over to his free will. Likewise he says that he had asked for and taken support from the believers in Philippi "Not because I desire a gift, but I desire fruit that may abound to your account" (Phil. 4:17). We likewise should sensitively consider our brethren and try to set up situations whereby they will produce spiritual fruit which will be credited to them. This is the way of spiritual maturity. We must not just do what *we* wish in the Lord's service, but think of what others need to do, for their own fruitfulness. For we seek the Lord's glory and for Him to be pleased by them as well as by ourselves. Too often we can embark on a project for the Lord because it is what *we* want to do. But the bigger picture of the Lord's glorification must be ever in view.

:15 *For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever-* The "forever" sounds like a reference to the life eternal together in the Kingdom. The whole situation, of Onesimus apparently committing fraud, running away, probably from abuse by Philemon; his meeting with Paul in Rome and conversion, or at least, deeper conversion; Paul's desire to send him back to Philemon... all this was so that they might live eternally together forever. *Aionos*, "forever", is usually used of the life eternal and not for the remainder of this life. Perhaps Philemon's eternity depended upon his forgiveness of and reconciliation with Onesimus. Paul speaks of how Philemon would "receive" Onesimus "for ever"- and yet he is implying Onesimus should be sent back to minister to him in Rome. Surely what Paul has in mind is that if someone is truly our brother, then we will eternally "receive" them as such in the Kingdom ages- and therefore we ought to be doing that right now. The baptism of Onesimus was a hard call for Philemon. He had to believe that that difficult man who had defrauded him was now his brother, even though he hadn't baptized him. Many an ecclesial upset has been caused by this kind of thing.

:16 *No longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother-* This is just the term Paul has used about both Philemon and Archippa, presumably his wife. Paul's patient love for Philemon was to be reflected in Philemon's love for Onesimus.

Especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord- "In the flesh" perhaps refers to how after reconciliation, the parties are closer to each other than before.

:17 So if you consider me your partner- Paul asks Philemon to prepare a room in his home because he was planning on visiting after his release from prison (:22). Paul is really saying that Philemon is to accept Onesimus as much as he would accept him; and if he didn't, then he was effectively separating himself from partnership with Paul.

Take him into your home- 'Receive him'. The point is made twice (Philemon 12,17). Paul had written to the Romans years before that they should receive one another, as God for Christ's sake has received us (Rom. 15:7 s.w.). It seems that the case of Onesimus gave Paul an opportunity to practically exemplify what he had meant- now that he was in Rome. Time and again, the theory of the Romans letter has to be lived out by Paul once in Rome himself. Paul says that if Philemon received Onesimus, then he received Paul. Paul was one with his new brother Onesimus (:12).

As you would [receive] me- Paul parallels loving the Lord Jesus with loving "all saints" (Philemon 5). To receive Onesimus was to receive Paul (Philemon 12); and "if thou count me therefore a partner [Gk. *Koinonos*- 'one in fellowship'], receive him as myself" (Philemon 17 AV). Paul's mind or spirit was in Onesimus (:12). Paul is saying that if we receive any brother, then, we receive him. He clearly has in mind the Lord's teaching, that if we receive Him, then we are to receive His brethren. So if we receive any brother, we not only receive the Lord Jesus, but we receive all other brethren in Christ; for each brother represents the entire body of Christ. This shows the utter fallacy of division within the one body. It is an utter nonsense to accept one brother, but not the other brethren, e.g., of his ecclesia. According to the logic of Philemon 17, if we don't accept a true brother, then we are not treating our other brethren as being in fellowship. For Paul says that if Philemon considered *him* to be in fellowship, then Philemon ought to accept Onesimus. Likewise, he reasons that he saw in Onesimus the face of Philemon; for Onesimus ministered unto Paul "in thy [Philemon's] stead" (Philemon 13). The implications of this are far reaching. For by refusing fellowship with our brethren, we are effectively declaring ourselves outside of the body of Christ. And hence Paul's sober warnings in 1 Cor. 11, to discern / recognize the Lord's body; for if we refuse to break bread with our brethren, then, he says, we are eating and drinking damnation to ourselves, because we refuse to accept our part in the Lord's body.

:18 But if he has wronged you at all or owes you something- Philemon clearly thought that Onesimus had wronged him or stolen something from him. Or since he had bought Onesimus, he maybe meanly considered that all the time Onesimus was away in Rome, he was losing money because he had to take on another slave to replace him.

Put that on my bill- Literally, 'on me'. Again Paul is directly identifying himself with Onesimus. Attitudes to a brother in Christ are effectively our attitudes to others in Christ. This is why there can be no respect of persons at all in Christ.

:19 I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay any debt- Paul was writing from his hired house within the Roman prison, in the period at the end of Acts 28. He seems to have access to money. But by 2 Tim. 4 he is in prison [again] and can't afford even a cloak, and needs writing equipment. He knew how to abound and be abased when it came to money and wealth.

Even though you owe me your own self- Continuing the theme of 'profit', Paul says that Onesimus 'owed' him his very self because Paul had converted him; therefore any material debt that Onesimus 'owed' Philemon should be forgiven with pleasure (Philemon 18,19). The unpayable debt that we have should lead us to be forgiving of whatever others owe us. Note in passing how Philemon 'owed' his very [eternal] life to Paul. This is the power and responsibility of witnessing to others. The saviour is the Lord, and yet the preacher manifests that salvation to others to such an extent that effectively we owe our salvation additionally to the person who converted us. See on :22. Philemon owed his salvation to Paul's preaching, and was therefore eternally obligated to him. We too can be a tree of life to those with whom we live; we can win their souls for the Kingdom (Prov. 11:30). The Thessalonians would be accepted in the final glory of judgment day simply "because our testimony among you was believed" (2 Thess. 1:10). Eve, taken out of the wounded side of the first man, was a type of the ecclesia; and her name means 'source of life', in anticipation of how the church would bring life to the world.

The idea of two men in debt, one [Onesimus] more than the other [Philemon] recalls the Lord's parable of Mt. 18 about two men like this; and also to another parable of two indebted men who were both frankly forgiven, and the one forgiven most loved his master the most (Lk. 7:42,43). There are several allusions to the parables in the letter to Philemon. The man with the bigger debt was being unreasonable to the other servant who was indeed in his debt, but not so seriously as he was. The debt of Philemon was partly to Paul for saving him, but it could be argued that Onesimus had a similar debt. The rest of his huge accrual of debt was therefore from something else which Onesimus had not done. So it would seem that Philemon, pastor of his own house church, renowned for good deeds... had some pretty dark secrets, and perhaps it was the practice of them which had led Onesimus to steal money for a journey and then run away from him. The "frank forgiveness" of the Lord to the bigger debtor is picked up in :22 *I shall be restored to you.*

:20 *Yes, brother, let me profit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ-* Paul recognized that Philemon "refreshed the hearts of the saints", and he rejoiced that this was the case. Yet there was one saint whose bowels Philemon had not yet refreshed- and that was Paul himself. For Paul uses this very phrase in asking Philemon to rejoice *his* bowels by receiving Onesimus (:7,20). Here we see grace to the extreme. Paul could rejoice that a brother was genuinely loving and encouraging to other brethren, even though that brother had not been so to him personally. It's so easy in personal disputes to write a brother off as totally no good because he was unkind or inappropriate or downright wrong in his treatment of us personally; we so easily forget that in many *other* walks of his life, he is a wonderful servant of the Lord. Yet Paul modelled the very grace which he asked Philemon to show to Onesimus.

:21 *I write to you having confidence in your obedience-* Paul believed his prayers would be answered and wrote, felt and acted accordingly. He goes straight on to ask for a room to be prepared for him on his release from prison (:22), so confident was he that the prayers for his release would be answered.

Knowing you will do what I ask- Gk. 'more than I ask'. In the same way as God had done for us exceeding abundantly *above* all we could ask or think (Eph. 3:20), so Philemon was to do *more* [s.w.] than the grace that Paul was suggesting (Philemon 21, 16 s.w.). It's not just a case of forgiving each other because we were forgiven; it's a question of lavishing the grace

upon each other which the Lord has upon us. And notice the context of all this. Paul says that as Philemon's elder, he could just "enjoin" him to do that which was required of those in Christ. But he prefers not to work through a command from an elder, demanding obedience. Instead, he appeals to Philemon's own experience of personal grace, and sees in *that* an imperative, a command to be 'obeyed' (Philemon 8,21). God's generosity to us in answering us "above all we ask of think" should be reflected in our doing things for others over and above what they have requested.

:22 See on Acts 20:25 *I know*.

But meanwhile also prepare for me a lodging- This sounds as if Paul was hoping to come to Philemon along with Onesimus- hence the word "Also", with the emphasis on "for me" [also]. This plan highlighted Paul's argument- that if Philemon would fellowship Onesimus, then he was fellowshiping Paul. And if he wanted to only fellowship Paul and not Onesimus, then this was effectively not fellowshiping Paul.

For I hope that through your prayers- On :19 *Even though* we saw that a third party can be responsible for the fortunes of another brother. Here too, Paul trusted that through the prayers of Philemon he would be released; and he was so confident in the answer to that prayer that he asked him even to prepare a room for him ahead of time!

I shall be restored to you- Or AV "given unto you". This rather awkward phrase is another allusion to the parable of the two debtors. It is translated "forgiven" in Lk. 7:42,43. Perhaps Paul's point is that he too is a big sinner, and through their prayers he would be released from the debts arising. He doesn't want Philemon to feel that Paul is as it were getting at him unkindly by suggesting he is like the bigger debtor; he is now saying that he himself is also in debt to the Lord and even more so.

:23 *Epaphras, my fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you-* Paul has twice referred to himself as a prisoner in Christ. He is practicing what he has preached elsewhere- that e.g. slaves should consider their service to their masters as done unto Christ. He saw himself not as a prisoner of Caesar but of Christ. This is likely the same as the Epaphroditus of Phil. 2:25; 4:18. It could be argued that Paul may be using "prisoner in Christ" in a spiritual sense (Rom. 16:7; 2 Cor. 10:5), which would not require Epaphras to actually be in prison with him. Rather, his sense of being a prisoner of Christ in a spiritual sense was so great that he felt one with Paul who was literally in prison, and Paul is noting that.

:24 *As do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow-workers-* From within prison, Paul had been able to 'convert' Onesimus and also some in the Praetorian guard. But this would have required the assistance of others, and it seems Paul had a faithful group of helpers who came to live in Rome and assist him in his witness. He calls them here his co-workers. He in prison, apparently stranded, was still able to "work". We wonder what role the church at Rome played in all this; for none of them stood with him at his final trial (2 Tim. 4:16). Paul had been so eager to get to Rome to witness, and had written to the church there ahead of his coming there; and it seems when he got there, they didn't really support him much.

:25 *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit-* See on :3. Philemon needed to have the grace of Jesus in his spirit / mind in order to make the right decisions about Onesimus, and Paul wishes this for him. The *charis* or gift of our Lord Jesus is *His* spirit or mind / disposition. And Paul wished that the Lord's Spirit would be with and in the spirit of

Philemon; for this is the essence of Christianity, that Christ should dwell in our hearts / minds.