

Philemon 1:11

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now
profitable to thee and to me:

Analysis

Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me—τόν ποτέ σοι ἀχρηστον (ton pote soi achrēston, the once to you useless) νυνὶ δὲ σοὶ καὶ ἐμοὶ εὔχρηστον (nyni de soi kai emoi euchrēston, but now to you and to me useful). Brilliant wordplay on Onesimus's name: Ὁνήσιμος (Onēsimos) derives from ὄνησις (onēsis, profit/benefit). ἀχρηστος (achrēstos, useless/unprofitable—runaway slave) versus εὔχρηστος (euchrēstos, useful/profitable—Christian brother).

Paul doesn't minimize Onesimus's wrong (running away, possibly stealing) but emphasizes gospel transformation. The once-useless slave becomes doubly useful: to Philemon as restored servant-brother, to Paul as ministry assistant (v. 13). Conversion doesn't erase past wrongs but creates new future. This verse anticipates v. 15-16: perhaps God orchestrated Onesimus's departure to effect his salvation and return as brother, not mere slave.

Historical Context

Slave names often reflected owners' aspirations—Onesimus ("Useful") ironically became useless by running away. But conversion fulfilled the name's promise truly. Paul's wordplay would delight ancient hearers: the etymology argument (name determines character) inverted by gospel (new nature supersedes old name). Colossians 4:9 calls Onesimus "faithful and beloved brother," confirming transformation.

Related Passages

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Study Questions

1. How has the gospel transformed you from spiritually useless (dead in sins) to useful for God's kingdom purposes?
2. Do you view converted people through their past failures or their redeemed present and future?
3. What "unprofitable" people or situations might God be transforming into "profitable" blessings if you'll receive them?

Interlinear Text

τόν	ποτέ	σοι	ἄχρηστον	νυνὶ	δέ	σοι	καὶ	ἐμοὶ
Which	in time past	to thee	unprofitable	now	but	to thee	and	to me
G3588	G4218	G4671	G890	G3570	G1161	G4671	G2532	G1698
<i>εὔχρηστον</i>								
profitable								
G2173								

Additional Cross-References

2 Timothy 4:11 (Parallel theme): Only Luke is with me. Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry.

Luke 15:32 (Parallel theme): It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.

1 Peter 2:10 (Parallel theme): Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy.

Romans 3:12 (Parallel theme): They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

Matthew 25:30 (Parallel theme): And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Luke 17:10 (Parallel theme): So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.

Luke 15:24 (Parallel theme): For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.

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