Jesus Pays the Debt of Repentant Sinners

Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? Romans 2:4, NKJV.

Among the disciples who ministered to Paul at Rome was Onesimus, a fugitive slave from the city of Colosse. He belonged to a Christian named Philemon, a member of the Colossian church. But he had robbed his master and fled to Rome.... In the kindness of his heart, the apostle sought to relieve the poverty and distress of the wretched fugitive, and then endeavored to shed the light of truth into his darkened mind. Onesimus listened attentively to the words of life which he had once despised, and was converted to the faith of Christ. He now confessed his sin against his master, and gratefully accepted the counsel of the apostle.

He had endeared himself to Paul by his piety, meekness, and sincerity, no less than by his tender care for the apostle's comfort and his zeal to promote the work of the gospel. Paul saw in him traits of character that would render him a useful helper in missionary labor, and he would gladly have kept him at Rome. But he would not do this without the full consent of Philemon.

He therefore decided that Onesimus should at once return to his master.... It was a severe test for this servant to thus deliver himself up to the master he had wronged; but he had been truly converted, and, painful as it was, he did not shrink from this duty. Paul made Onesimus the bearer of a letter to Philemon, in which he with great delicacy and kindness pleaded the cause of the repentant slave, and intimated his own wishes concerning him....

He requests Philemon to receive him as his own child. He says that it was his desire to retain Onesimus, that he might act the same part in ministering to him in his bonds as Philemon would have done. But he did not desire his services unless Philemon should voluntarily set him free; for it might be in the providence of God that Onesimus had left his master for a season in so improper a manner, that, being converted, he might on his return be forgiven and received with such affection that he would choose to dwell with him ever after, "not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved."...

How fitting an illustration of the love of Christ toward repenting sinners! As the servant who had defrauded his master had nothing with which to make restitution, so sinners who have robbed God of years of service have no means of canceling their debt; Jesus interposes between them and the
just wrath of God, and says, I will pay the debt. Let them be spared the punishment of their guilt. I will suffer in their stead.--Sketches from the Life of Paul, 284-287.