

Real Reconciliation

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[0 : 00] Let's pray together. Father, we do ask that as we gather in Christ's name, that your love will be found among us, and that we will strive to maintain the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace.

We ask as we gaze into your word, Lord, that you will speak to us and reveal more of your plans and your purposes for us. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Some weeks ago, we had the great privilege in Glasgow of welcoming the Zimbabwean preacher Stephen Lungu, who spoke one evening in the Free Church on St. Vincent Street.

And Stephen had a testimony which is quite remarkable. He came from a broken home. He dropped out of school. He was illiterate. And he got caught up in violent gangs, armed gangs in Zimbabwe.

He hated white people more than anything else. And he spent his days causing destruction and pain. And on one of these days, he was given a bomb and directed to go to the bank, to blow up the bank.

[1 : 14] And as he did, he and his gang, they passed this large marquee that had been set up. And they decided to take a look in and to see what was going on. And inside the marquee were several preachers preaching the gospel of grace.

And he and his friends went and sat down while they plotted their next move. But as they sat and as the preacher preached, he came under a profound conviction of sin and an awareness of the love of God for sinners.

And that day, he didn't bomb the marquee. In fact, he went on his way and something began to happen in his life. And very soon, he became a believer. And somebody taught him how to read. Very important, if you're a believer, that you learn how to read the Bible. And he began to read it. And it began to change him. And before long, he became an evangelist and a preacher of that same gospel of grace.

And now he spends his time traveling around Africa preaching and working in racial reconciliation. It is quite remarkable what God can do with a useless life to make someone useful.

[2 : 25] Well, the story of Stephen is one that could be repeated throughout church history. And it's an example of the kind of thing that happened to Onesimus the slave, who we meet in Philemon and also in Colossians.

Philemon lived in Colossae. And so we want to look at his story, his testimony today, and consider the grace of God in the life of Onesimus.

We'll do so under four headings. Firstly, the grace of God works in desperate situations. Secondly, that grace can transform damaged relationships. Thirdly, that the grace of God can make the useless useful in his service.

And fourthly, we'll see that the grace of God was exemplified in Paul's mediation between these two men. So Onesimus was a slave, we're told that in verse 16.

And in the Roman Empire, though, slavery wasn't what we had in the British Empire. It wasn't people being removed from their homes and put on boats and chains and being sailed across to the plantations.

[3 : 33] It was still wicked, but a slave would often live in a family house for many years. Perhaps they would marry, perhaps they would have children, perhaps they would be promoted to a position of responsibility.

But they were still items, objects, tools. They weren't considered real people. But Philemon is a slave, Onesimus, excuse me, is a slave.

But he is a slave in the house of Philemon. And in verse 1, we're introduced to this man who is a beloved fellow worker of the Apostle Paul.

He's a Christian. He's a partner in the Gospel. He's an active believer. And in verse 4 to 7, we discover that he is also a fruitful believer.

Paul rejoices because he hears of his love and the faith that he has towards the Lord Jesus Christ and all the saints. By this, Jesus said, shall all men know that you are my disciples, that you love one another.

[4 : 39] In verse 6, he prays that the sharing of his faith, that his partnership in the Gospel may become effective. And in verse 7, Paul speaks of the joy he receives because Philemon has refreshed the hearts of the saints, encouraging them, strengthening them, affirming them.

Sounds like a wonderful man to work for. And it's not uncommon, of course, when people work for a Christian that they come under their influence and in time they embrace the Gospel for themselves. When we were medical students, we received an invitation to go to Albania. Beautiful beaches in Albania. Some of the medical students there had booked a hotel and they said, we want you to come over and to teach medicine and teach the Bible for a week.

And we'll invite all of our friends who aren't Christians. We'll spend the week together and we'll share the Gospel with them. And we had a very interesting time doing medical training, seminars on the roof of this hotel overlooking the sea and so on.

But there was one chap there who was really, I think he was the nephew of the owner of the hotel. He was a little teenager but very muscular because he spent all his days carrying bottles of water and carrying cylinders of gas and so on around the hotel.

[5 : 59] And when he had time off, he would come and sit with us. And at the end of the week he came up to one of the leaders and he said, I've been listening to everything you've been saying and I want to become a Christian.

And we were very delighted and we put him in touch with a church in Albania and there was great rejoicing. Anisimus might have had that experience but he didn't.

And it seems that something happened in that household which caused the relationship between Anisimus and Philemon to break down. Anisimus became useless. Anisimus became useless. Anisimus became useless. Anisimus became useless. Anisimus. In verse 11 we're told that he became useless to his master.

In verse 16 we're told verse 18 excuse me if he has wronged you at all or owes you anything charge that to my account.

Something happened. The relationship broke down. Anisimus became useless. His work may have been poor. He may have been gossiping and slandering in front of his colleagues.

[7 : 05] Or perhaps it was simply the fact that he'd run away abandoning the household and seeking liberty in the Roman Empire. Whatever happened he'd fallen out and got out of the household.

But the grace of God works in very difficult situations. And the Roman Empire of course was not a pretty place to be. It was full of idolatry and paganism and immorality.

And I'm sure they were worried in the household of what might happen to this little slave. But by God's grace and in God's providence in the midst of the entire Roman Empire he somehow found a prison and in that prison was the Apostle Paul.

And Paul shared within the Gospel as he had shared it with his master sometime before. On this Anisimus on the run from a broken relationship. Aware of his own wrongdoing and his own wickedness.

heard from Paul the Gospel. The Gospel which he spoke of and wrote of to the Colossian believers about Christ in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through whom God was reconciling the world to himself by making peace through his blood on the cross.

[8 : 28] He learned that there was a God in heaven who looked on people alienated and hostile in mind doing evil deeds and who longed to reconcile them to himself in order to present them holy and blameless and above reproach.

And Anisimus heard this and he believed it and he became a Christian. Great rejoicing in the prison that day. The grace of God works in very desperate circumstances.

Now I find this such a tremendous encouragement because in this church as we encounter people in the city and in the building evangelism team we often meet people with circumstances that just

seem so complicated.

Sometimes quite frankly we're just there at loss at what to do. Sometimes all we can do is pray and pray that somehow God's grace will be effective in these very hard very difficult very dark circumstances.

And Anisimus' life and Stephen Lungu's life is a lesson that God has the power to do something about it. But it's very encouraging as well when we lose touch with people.

[9 : 45] The very nature of the kind of international student ministry is that people don't stay here for very long. Most people I think we meet perhaps once or twice.

At the very best we get someone for three years if they're doing a PhD. It's not a very long time to get to know someone to teach the scripture to share our faith with them. And we can often think when somebody leaves oh there they go before they've had a chance to do Christianity Explored or come to the Bible study or whatever it is.

And yet God's grace is not limited is it by geography. And Anisimus lived in that Christian household for who knows how many years but he never professed. But then he went out all alone into the Roman Empire and it was then God met him.

What are the chances? What are the chances of Stephen Lungu walking past the tent that day?

What are the chances as we think back to our own testimonies and the people God brought across our paths in various times and circumstances?

His grace works in very difficult situations. I was encouraged a few years ago when there was one chap who I did meet twice I think and we got on very well and he said I'd be quite interested to read the Bible with you and I was rubbing my hands thinking wonderful what an opportunity and then he contacted me and said I'm moving to London and I thought that was the end of it.

[11 : 14] And then a few months later I get an email and he said to me do you know I'm in London I've not been to church for a very long time. In fact the only time I've been to church in the UK was the Tron.

But he said but I found a church in London and this was the first I attended since I arrived in the UK and I'm aware that God's love is very powerful. And I thought to myself that's an interesting thing to write in an email.

So I wrote back to him and asked just exactly what had happened. And then he told me that he'd had some difficulties at work, some difficulties in communication. But he closed that email by saying as long as I am under our Lord Jesus refuge I am not afraid to face the day.

And I thought how wonderful. I met him twice we barely got into a Bible study. And the Lord took him to London and it was there that he was converted and saved. Sometimes the prodigal has to go into a far country to come to his senses.

And Anisimus had to be taken out of that household for God to meet him. The Lord's ways are mysterious. But on this occasion he chose to work in a most unlikely way.

[12 : 32] So be encouraged friends as you share the gospel even if you just see someone once. The gospel has great power and the Lord has wonderful grace. And it's a grace that transforms damaged relationships.

some weeks ago a few of us were in Belfast and we were shown some of the sites. We saw where the Titanic was built. We saw the lovely town square and we saw some things which are called peace walls.

It's an ironic title. But these are great big concrete walls. Some of them many kilometres long, many metres high, which are built quite literally to divide communities. you have a Catholic group on one side, a Protestant group on the other, and the best way of keeping them apart is to build a very large concrete wall and call it a peace wall.

And many people in the UK think that's what religion does. That's what the gospel is all about. It's about dividing people, separating people. And yet Paul says in this letter and in Colossians that the gospel does the very opposite.

It reconciles people. From different backgrounds, through their faith in Christ. From verses 8 to 16, he is appealing to Philemon.

[13 : 52] And the language doesn't read like any letter I've ever read from a human resources department. Verse 9, for love's sake, I appeal to you. Verse 10, I appeal to you for my child.

Verse 12, I'm sending him back to you, sending my very heart. verse 16, he is no longer a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother.

You see, Paul is using the language not of the law of the time, but he's using the language of love. And the reason being, of course, Onesimus had become a believer.

And we're told in the gospel of John that all who believe in the name of Christ are given the right to become children of God. Philemon was a believer.

He too had become a child of God at some time in the past. And as a consequence, these two men were now brothers in Christ. That must have been massively counter-cultural.

[15:01] you see, they were at completely opposite ends of the social spectrum. Philemon was an owner of a household. He was a respected man, probably a wealthy man.

Onesimus was one of his slaves. And now they were brothers. And it must have caused a lot of stir when he went home to see him embracing him as a brother. What must the neighbors in Colossae have thought?

What are they doing? Calling each other brother. He hasn't even beaten him for running away.

What a witness to the community to see the reconciling power of the gospel.

But the gospel does reconcile people, doesn't it? It reconciles people from every walk of life. The old, the young, the rich, the poor, those from different warring nations, those from different nationalities, different backgrounds, united in Christ.

Paul, writing to the Colossians, said, there is neither slave nor free, but Christ is in all and is all.

Well, it's a wonderful thing, that Christian unity, and it costs a great deal to purchase it, and therefore it is so important that we work hard to maintain it.

[16:20] Writing to the believers in Colossae, Paul exhorted them. He told them to put on love, to bear with one another, to forgive one another, and to put on love, to bind everything together in perfect harmony, Colossians 3, verse 14.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body, and be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. God, as I look out from this pulpit, it is quite a thing I see, people from so many different backgrounds, united not by some common interest like lawn tennis or flying kites, but united in love, love for the Lord Jesus Christ and love for one another.

A massively powerful witness in Philemon's day, and a massively powerful witness in the centre of Glasgow in our day. The grace of God transforms damaged relationships.

These two men were now brothers. And thirdly, the grace of God makes useless things useful.

Kieran has a friend who is a baker, and he bakes, I'm not quite sure what you'd call them, sort of specialty breads in London.

[17:52] And when he was setting up his bakery, he decided he needed a really big oven. And rather than buy one, he decided he would make one. But the conditions were that it would be made of things which were free, or recycled, or scrap.

So he and I think his sister literally gathered together all the bits they needed, perhaps out of skips, perhaps from donations. And they put it together and made this lovely oven that makes lovely bread.

they took things which were utterly useless on this scrap heap, and they made something which is useful and productive and had a purpose.

Verse 11, Formerly Onesimus was useless to you, but now indeed he is useful to you and to me.

Onesimus was a slave, but he wasn't a very good slave because he left the house.

It's very hard to serve in a household if you aren't in the household. He abandoned his post, he ran away. And yet when he got converted, he immediately began to serve the apostle Paul.

[19:06] Verse 13, I would have been glad to keep him with me in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment from the gospel. You see, he went back to doing what he knew.

He went back to serving Paul. And Roman prisons were tough places. You didn't get three meals a day. You had to find your own clothing. You needed people to be looking out for you. And so Onesimus began to look out for Paul.

And he was a very good servant. As we read the letter, it almost seems like Paul is saying, send him back. Once you've been reconciled, send him back to me. He's so effective. He'd learned what Paul meant in Colossians when he told slaves to obey in everything their earthly masters, to work heartily as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord he would receive his

inheritance.

He was given a new beginning and he became very effective in his role, caring for prisoners. Interestingly, at the end of the first century, there was a man called Ignatius who was on his way from Syria to Rome to be martyred.

And as he went, he wrote letters to various churches. And the letter to the church in Ephesus, it was addressed to a man called Onesimus. We don't know if it's the same man.

[20 : 34] Certainly Colossae and Ephesus were nearby. I, and some see in the letter a hint that it's the same person and perhaps answers the question why this little letter came to be included in the New Testament canon.

But it's a fascinating thought, isn't it? Ignatius writes to this Onesimus, I have received your whole multitude in the name of God through Onesimus, a man of inexpressible love, or unspeakably beloved.

Who is your bishop whom I pray by Jesus Christ you love, and that you would all seek to be like him? Blessed be God who is granted unto you, who are yourselves so excellent, to obtain such an excellent bishop.

It's intriguing, isn't it? If it is the same man, a runaway slave, nowhere to live, no possessions, nothing to offer anyone, who by God's grace becomes the most excellent servant of his people, famed for his love, and held up in his example of a Christian life.

Well, Onesimus learned that God's grace makes the useless useful. In fact, Paul learned that himself, didn't he? Paul, formerly a blasphemer.

[21 : 59] What does God do? He gives them a gospel to preach to the nations. Formerly a violent man, a persecutor, tearing apart the church of Christ, and God gives him the authority to build it up and to strengthen it.

So we mustn't write people off. We mustn't write ourselves off. Sometimes we can feel pretty helpless. Sometimes we can think, what can the Lord ever do with me?

Certainly, as I look back to my first days as a Christian, I think, how could the Lord ever do anything with me? And by God's grace, he is able to do things with each of us.

To him be the glory. Finally, the grace of God is exemplified in Paul's mediation. Revelation, verse 17 to 19.

Paul impresses upon Philemon his request. If you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all or owes you anything, charge that to my account.

[23 : 12] I, Paul, write this with my own hand. I will repay it to say nothing of your owing me your own self. At university, a friend of mine stole a spoon one day from a very posh dinner he was invited to.

And at these dinners, they brought out little antique silver spoons. And he quite liked the look of it, and he thought it would be a nice trophy, so he popped it in his pocket and he took it home. And he went off for a year to another country, and he got converted in this faraway land.

And he came back and he found this spoon, and he thought, this isn't right. I'm a Christian, and I've got this rather fine spoon that I've stolen from the university.

And so he phoned up the college chaplain, and he said, I'd like to come and see you. He explained what had happened. The chaplain said, that's quite all right, I'll deal with this. Took the spoon, handed it back, and defended the chap in front of the authorities.

My friend needed a mediator to help him in that situation. Onesimus needed a mediator to help him with his master.

[24 : 27] Mediators were common in the ancient world, and they're still very common in many cultures today, especially in the Middle East. And so Paul speaks on behalf of Onesimus.

And it's very interesting his tactic. Effectively, he says, I want to take his place. Verse 17, if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.

Paul and Philemon got unwell, and he's saying, well, I want you to extend the friendship and the welcome you would give to me to Onesimus. And likewise, verse 18, if he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.

All the wrong he's done, says Paul, put it on me. Make me pay for it. He says, I will become your debtor.

But he says in verse 19, well, I, Paul, write this with my own hand. I will repay it to say nothing of your owing me your own self. So Paul says to Philemon, of course, Onesimus is in your debt for the wrong he's done.

[25 : 39] But let's not forget verse 19, and you can almost see him writing this with a smile. You're in my debt, because I came and I preached the gospel to you and your household. So we have a story of two debtors.

Jesus told a story once of two debtors. One of them who was forgiven a great debt, and he immediately went out and refused to forgive anyone else their debt.

There's maybe a hint of that here, isn't there? Paul saying, perhaps with a wry grin and a wink, you're in my debt, and Onesimus is in your debt.

Might you be willing to cancel his, as I've never claimed mine from you? Well, we don't know for sure.

But one thing is clear. As Paul mediates for Onesimus, we see in his actions an example of the grace of Christ. Paul says, treat him as you would treat me, and treat me as you would treat him.

[26 : 43] I will take his place. I will bear the guilt. I will pay his bill. I will suffer the shame for the wrong he has done. And you are to welcome him back as a brother. A small picture of a far greater reconciliation by a far greater mediator.

One who for our sake God made to be sin, the one who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

charge that to my account. Our sin and our shame and our guilt and our wrongdoing put on Christ. That we might enjoy a welcome into the household of God, clothed in his righteousness alone, cleansed, purified, justified.

And that says Paul in the letter to the Colossians is the key to Christian forgiveness, to reconciliation, to understand that we, like Philemon, are debtors, debtors to grace.

And that when people wrong us or sin against us or speak against us, that the wrong they have done is nothing compared to the wrong we've done to the almighty God.

[28 : 08] Bironi says in Colossians 3, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other as the Lord has forgiven you.

We must never forget the debt we owe to God and how in his grace he has cancelled that debt.

Therefore, when others wrong us or sin against us, we must extend that same mercy as Paul looks to Philemon to gladly extend that mercy to Onesimus.

Well, we're not told they end, but we know it's a happy ending. He's confident of his obedience and Paul looks forward, verse 22, to going and visiting them and sharing in that household, perhaps worshipping with these two men side by side in the church which meets in his house.

The grace of God can work in very difficult situations. It can transform the most damaged relationships, turning enemies into brothers. others. It can make the useless useful in the service of God, fruitful in their lives and it's modelled by Paul's mediation where the innocent party takes on the guilt of the guilty one in order that they might be welcomed home.

So we thank God for his grace and we thank God for these mighty themes contained in such a little letter. Let's pray together. Father, we do thank you for your great love that in love you sought out Onesimus, you called him to yourself, you reconciled him to his household and you made him, Lord, very effective and useful in your service.

[30 : 20] We thank you for that grace that it is still as effective today the gospel still has the same power and we pray that as we go out this week to face a dark world in which there are a great many broken relationships and people on the scrap heap.

We ask, Lord, that we will see your grace working in mighty power that we will be given soft hearts to love and forgive one another and to continue to hold out that gospel of grace united in love around the truth of your Son.

So we thank you for him and for this time together in his name. Amen.