

Redeemed, Reconciled, Restored

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Preacher: Terry McCutcheon

- [0 : 00] Well, now we come to our Bible reading. So let's turn to the letter of Paul to Philemon. If you have one of our big hardback Bibles, you'll find that on page 1000.
- Philemon. Our preacher this morning is Terry McCutcheon, and this will be his text for us. So page 1000, the letter of Paul to his old friend and Christian brother Philemon.
- Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy, our brother, to Philemon, our beloved fellow worker, and Athia, our sister, and Archippus, our fellow soldier, and the church in your house.
- Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints.
- And I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.
- [1 : 28] Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you. I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus, I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.
- Formerly, he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me. I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. 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.
- But I prefer to do nothing without your consent, in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion, but of your own free will. For this, perhaps, is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, as a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.
- So, 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.
- I, Paul, write this with my own hand. I will repay it, to say nothing of your owing me, even your own self. Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord.
- [2 : 58] Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers, I will be graciously given to you.
- Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you. And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.
- The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. This is the word of the Lord, and may his blessing be added to it.
- I invite you to take your Bibles, and to turn with me again to the Apostle Paul's letter to Philemon, which you will find in page 1000 of the Pew Bible.

And as you turn that up, a word of prayer. Make the book live to us, O Lord. Show us yourself within thy word. Show us ourselves, and show us our Savior.

[4 : 08] And make the book live to us, for Jesus' sake. Amen. I recently had the privilege of hearing the story of a Glasgow man, who would I suspect maybe be in his late 60s, or maybe touching 70.

But anyway, this man told me the story of his life. How from the age of 15, he was involved in stealing, thieving, breaking into shops. And he also got himself involved in the whole gang culture back in the 1960s in Glasgow, which brought a lot of violence and heavy drinking into his life.

And so with a lifestyle like this, it will not surprise you to hear that very soon, being arrested by the police became a regular occurrence in this man's life. And subsequently, periods of time spent in prison.

Well, during one period in prison, he decided he didn't like that prison very much. And in his own words, I decided to leave early. In other words, he decided to escape.

And escape he did. But he was soon caught. And he was placed in a maximum security wing of another prison. His break for freedom had failed. And only sought to bring further incarceration into his life.

[5 : 27] And there in the maximum security wing of a prison, even his prison liberties were less than they had been previously. But during this time, he remembered conversations that he'd had with Christians, who had told him the gospel of all that Christ had done for sinners.

And so with the time he had in his hands, which was a lot, he began to think about God, the Lord Jesus Christ, the things of faith and forgiveness. One week after being released from prison, he declared himself a Christian.

And he went round all his old haunts in Glasgow, and all his old pals, and he told them all, I'm new a Christian. I'm a new creation in Christ. And I'm no longer going to live as I had done previously.

I'm done with the stealing. I'm done with the violence. And I'm done with the drinking. And friends, that is what he said about doing. And for the past 45 years or so, this man has continued to grow and mature as a Christian.

Isn't he a lovely Christian man? Doing much here in this land for the sake of the gospel. And also for over two decades, giving sacrificially of his time, talents and money to the work of a charity that he set up in a developing country to give training, education, dignity and hope to men and women and boys and girls, while at the same time, advancing the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[6 : 53] It's a wonderful story. A wonderful story of a young man whose life was going nowhere fast. A life that was useless. But now because of the grace of God poured out in his life, a life that was and is useful.

Now friends, I share this story as a helpful way into this morning's sermon. As we come to the book of Philemon this morning, we find the same grace of God transforming a man called Anisimus.

One who was useless, but now who has been made or has become useful. Verse 11. Paul writing to Philemon in regards to Anisimus. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.

Or as the NIV puts it, he has now become useful, both to you and to me. He was useless, but now he has become useful.

Well, we'll come to this man Onesimus and how it was that this transformation was brought about in his life. But firstly, let's give some background for the context of this letter. It is a letter, the shortest of all the Apostle Paul's letters, which is a companion to the letter to the Colossians.

[8 : 06] It seems that Philemon was a member of the church at Colossae, or one of the churches there in that area of the Lycus Valley. And if any of you buy commentaries, you'll find that most commentaries have these two books together, Colossians and Philemon.

We can see from verse 1 that it is addressed, it is written to Philemon. So it is a personal letter, a personal letter written by the Apostle Paul to Philemon.

And it's about a personal matter, this personal matter of Onesimus, verse 10. I appeal to you on behalf of my child, Onesimus.

So it was a personal letter about a personal matter. And although it was a letter of this kind, it was still to be, verse 2, I suppose, heard by the church that met in Philemon's house.

Philemon is a Christian man, verse 1, to Philemon, our beloved brother. In fact, Philemon became a Christian under Paul's ministry, verse 19, to say nothing of your owing me, even your own self.

[9 : 11] So it seems that Philemon had been converted under Paul's ministry. Paul had never been to Colossae, or the churches in that area, and we can pick this up from Colossians chapter 2, verse 1.

And so it's probably most likely that Philemon became a Christian when Paul was preaching in Ephesus. In Acts chapter 19, verse 10, Luke writes that Paul preached at Ephesus for two years.

And during this time, all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. So perhaps Philemon was there in a business journey, and he heard the gospel, and he was converted.

But anyway, when he came home, he became a working partner in the gospel, using all his means for the gospel. The church met in his house, verse 2, as was common at the time.

The church met in houses, house churches. Apphia, verse 2, is Philemon's wife, and Archippus is most probably Philemon's son. So his whole family had been converted, and were now involved in the work of the Lord.

[10 : 16] And Philemon used his house, and his wealth, for the refreshment of the saints. Verse 7, Paul writes, Philemon is a Christian, converted under Paul's ministry, a wealthy man who uses his house for the church, and he uses his wealth also for the sake and the refreshment of God's people.

Well, that's Philemon. But what was the occasion? What was the reason for the apostle Paul writing? Well, it's this personal letter about this personal matter of Onesimus, verse 10. I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus.

Now, it seems that Onesimus was a slave, a slave belonging to the household of Philemon, verse 16, that you may have him back no longer as a slave.

The name Onesimus means useful or profitable, but his behavior betrayed his name. He didn't live up to his name. He may have been useful by name, but he was useless by nature.

He wasn't useful. He became worse than useless as he robbed Philemon, his master, and he bolted. Verse 18. Paul writes, If he has wronged you at all or owes you anything, charge that to my account.

[11 : 37] I will repay it. Verse 19. So most probably, Onesimus had stolen money from Philemon, and he'd made a break for freedom, and he'd fled. But Paul writes, There has been a transformation in Onesimus.

He was formerly useless to you, but now he has become useful. Well, how had this come about? Well, friends, Onesimus was on the run, and folks that are on the run tend to head for big cities in order that they can mingle in with the crowds so that their anonymity might be protected and they might remain free.

Someone on the run here in our land may head for London, but Onesimus' London was Rome. So somehow he found his way to Rome, and somehow he found his way to the Apostle Paul.

At the time, Paul was imprisoned in Rome. Now, how had that come about? Did Onesimus fall into crime in the big city and found himself in prison?

Or did he know Onesimus seek out Paul, having most probably heard the Apostle's name mentioned in Philemon's house church or in Philemon's prayers?

[12 : 47] Verse 22. However it came about, the most important thing is this, that it did come about. Now, friends, I just want us to stop for a second.

Isn't the providence of God amazing? Isn't the providence of God absolutely wonderful? Isn't it amazing how in his providence God will use all sorts of different circumstances, all different types of situations, good and bad, all different types of people, in order to accomplish his purposes in the life of the world and in someone's personal life?

I mean, just think for a minute. There's Onesimus. He'd been living in a Christian home. And living in a Christian home, as Paul describes Philemon's in verses 1 to 7, surely living in a home like that, he heard the gospel and he saw the gospel.

And who knows? Maybe he was running from the gospel. But whatever he was running from, he stole the money and he bolted. And he was on the run. But friends, while on the run, Onesimus found that he was being pursued.

He was being pursued. Not by the police. Not by bounty hunters or the missing persons bureau. No. Onesimus found himself being pursued by God.

[14 : 10] I wonder if I asked you to draw a picture or to imagine a situation of someone being pursued by God. I bet you this is not the picture you would come up with. But God was pursuing Onesimus.

And he pursued him all the way to Rome. And he sought him out and he found him when no one else could. God found him and brought him to save in faith, to salvation in Christ Jesus.

I wonder if you've ever been pursued by God. Maybe as you look back over your life, there are a set of circumstances there that you would never have volunteered for. But circumstances nonetheless that you can see that God was pursuing you through.

Maybe our Iranian brothers and sisters can see this through the hardships of maybe having to leave family, friends and home to come to this land. But as you look, you see the hand of God in it all pursuing you, seeking you and bringing you to Christ Jesus.

Maybe there's someone here this morning who finds themselves in that place right now being pursued by God. Well, if that's you, friend, learn from Onesimus. You can't run from God.

[15 : 25] That's what Jonah found out, wasn't it? That you can't run from God. And that's also what the psalmist writes in Psalm 139. Where shall I go from your spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me.

If I say, surely the darkness will cover me and the light about me by night, even the darkness is not dark to you. Night is as bright as the day, for darkness is light with you.

You see, friends, you can't run from God. God was pursuing Onesimus. It's absolutely amazing. And there is another great lesson we learn here. Nothing will stop the advance of the gospel.

I mean, there's the apostle Paul in chains, in prison. I'm sure his enemies thought, yes, that's Paul in prison. Yes, that's him silenced.

[16 : 26] That's his ministry finished. But they couldn't shut the apostle Paul up. You see, friends, the man or the woman that has a mind to share the gospel will share the gospel anywhere.

They'll share it on the bus. They'll share it with their neighbors, with their family members, their friends, their colleagues. They'll share it with their hairdresser or their barber. They'll share it with the guy who serves coffee at Costa or the checkout operator at the supermarket where you do your weekly shop or on the city center streets like Alex Bedford.

Folks that have a mind and a heart to share the gospel will share it no matter where they are or no matter where they are put even in a Roman prison. So there in that Roman prison, a place where your freedom and liberty are taken from you, Paul shared the gospel with Onesimus and he had become a Christian and he now knew new freedom and liberty in Christ.

Everything was now changed for Onesimus. All the relationships in his life had now changed and I want to look at each one. Firstly, Onesimus got a new master.

He got a new master. Transformation had taken place in Onesimus' life. Spiritual transformation. That's why Paul was sending him back. Spiritual transformation had taken place.

[17 : 51] No longer was he useless but he was now useful. Onesimus probably dreamed of transformation. Maybe social or political or economic transformation.

Thinking that these things would have changed his situation or his circumstances. But God in a Roman prison had brought about transformation in his life that made every other change that he had hoped for pale into insignificance.

For none of these other circumstances or transformations could ever deal with the real root of his problem. His alienation from God. personal spiritual transformation had taken place in his life.

He was useless but now had become useful. That's what the gospel does, isn't it, friends? It transforms lives. The gospel transforms lives. If anyone is in Christ they are a new creation.

Onesimus needed this spiritual transformation, friends. But all of us here in this building today and all of those outside of it too need this transformation also.

[19 : 01] It was Martin Luther who said we are all of us God's onesimuses on the run from God. The gospel transforms.

It transforms the spiritual state of people making them new creations as they receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. They get a new master. That's what Paul writes in Colossians chapter 1 verse 13.

God has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved son in whom we now have redemption the forgiveness of sins. The gospel brings about spiritual transformation delivering us from the domain of darkness the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of Christ giving us a new king a new master.

The gospel restores our relationship to our maker our rightful ruler our rightful master. Again Colossians chapter 1 and 21 and you who were once alienated estranged and hostile in mind doing evil deeds Christ has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.

the heart of the gospel is all about spiritual transformation but sadly friends in many places in these days spiritual transformation is not top of the list in many so-called Christian churches in fact it's not even on the list so concerned with this world they have forgot about the world to come focusing all their attention and devoting themselves to political social and economic transformation for they believe that that is what the gospel is all about.

[20 : 51] I read earlier this year that the moderator of the Church of Scotland said that the greatest crisis in the history of man was global warming. The greatest crisis in the history of man was global warming.

Can you believe that? Global warming is the biggest threat in human history. that every man and woman's child greatest need is for the ice caps not to melt. It's not to have our sins forgiven and be spiritually transformed.

Can you believe that a so-called minister of the gospel could even say that? Well it shows doesn't it friends that he is the minister of the gospel that is not the Christian gospel and therefore not a gospel at all.

No friends any real genuine Christian ministry will have at its heart and primary focus spiritual transformation. Now that doesn't mean that we don't care about social and political and economic transformation.

Of course we do. We care for the social well-being of folks. Here at the Tron I run the road to recovery ministry for those that struggle with alcohol and drug addiction. Now our sincere desire is that our friends would get clean from substances.

[22 : 01] But more than that our desire is that spiritual transformation would take place in their lives and that they would be clean from sin. I would rather die drunk and know Jesus than die 50 or 60 years sober and know him.

Spiritual transformation is at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Spiritual transformation had taken place in Onesimus' life. He was formerly useless but now he had become useful.

He had a new master who had made him a new creation. Onesimus got a new master in God. But secondly he got a new spiritual father in the apostle Paul.

Look how Paul describes Onesimus in verse 10. I appeal to you for my child Onesimus whose father I became in my imprisonment. Paul often speaks about those who have come to faith under his ministry in this way.

Remember Timothy? The apostle Paul called him his son. Now I don't imagine that Paul had much time to spend with Onesimus but what is evident is that he had real fatherly care and tenderness towards him.

[23 : 11] Now the apostle Paul we assume and believe wasn't married so he had no physical children of his own but he was a spiritual father to many showing great care and great concern for their ongoing spiritual well-being.

Just look how Paul writes about Onesimus verse 10 my child Onesimus verse 10 whose father I became verse 11 he is useful to both you and to me verse 12 I am sending him back to you sending my very heart sending you my heart the apostle Paul says I am sending part of myself when you see him you will see part of me isn't this such warm lovely caring fatherly language and friends if we are honest it is not the kind of first things that come to mind when we think about the apostle Paul when we think about the apostle Paul we often think about his great mind his great intellect his long suffering for the gospel the great courage that he showed how he was such a hard man and with traits like this we would picture the apostle Paul to be austere and distant and I suppose to borrow a description from Edward Lobb we would picture him to look like a man who had never had a jam roly-poly with custard in all of his life but this letter shows the real fatherly tenderness the real fatherly love and concern that Paul had for Onesimus so warm so loving verse 16 such a beloved brother especially to me but how much more to you or as the NIV puts it he is very dear to me but even dearer to you and Paul also shows his responsibility as Onesimus' father stepping in on behalf of his child look at verse 18 to 19 if he has wronged you at all or owes you anything charge that to my account

I Paul write this with my own hand I will repay it well those of you who are fathers especially those of you who are fathers to boys will know that sometimes sometimes you are liable for damage that your boy has caused maybe by kicking a football through a through a neighbor's window you have to pick up the tab you're responsible I suppose I've got all that to look forward to with my son James but as a father you pick up the tab and maybe you make your son pay off a little each week from his pocket money well maybe you don't do that but that's certainly what I'm going to do with James but Paul says I will repay it I will repay it if he has wronged you charge it to my account I will repay it gladly and I will be responsible for my child Onesimus it's a small wonder that Onesimus was transformed and rehabilitated encountering such Christ-like love as this

Onesimus got a new master in God he got a new spiritual father in Paul and thirdly he got a new brother in Philemon Onesimus was given a new spiritual brother in Philemon Paul's interpretation of Onesimus Bolton is very gracious and contains the idea that perhaps a higher hand was at work Paul could see the providential hand of God over all the circumstances of this whole episode verse 15 and 16 for this is perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while that you might have him back forever no longer as a slave but more than a slave as a beloved brother especially to me but how much more to you both in the flesh and in the Lord no longer as a slave but a dear brother the gospel of Jesus Christ is a great leveler for all men cutting through racial religious cultural social and economic backgrounds the gospel cuts the roots of slavery

Paul is saying to Philemon this man is now your brother and if that is the case then he can be your slave no longer he is your brother receive him as such receive him as you would receive me a runaway slave could have been killed for their betrayal though they were valuable to their masters so this normally wouldn't happen they would be flogged or punished in some way but Paul tells Philemon he is now your brother can you imagine the effect this had when folks seen what being a Christian looked like in action forgiving a thief a runaway and welcoming him back as a brother I'm sure it turned Philemon's world upside down that's what the gospel does isn't it it turns the world upside down and that friends is what exactly what the gospel needs to do in all of our lives to make us so distinctive so different from the world round about us

[28 : 29] I don't know about you but often I want to be part of the world I want to be seen as one of the boys I want to fit in but the world needs us to be distinctive and different the world needs to see the gospel work in us for the gospel is the world's only hope now friends I want slavery William Wilberforce helped bring about the abolition of the slave trade over 200 years ago but you know as well as I do that slavery is alive and well today now why should this be well friends that is so because of this the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart the heart of the human problem is not political or social or economic or anything else it's man's heart that is the problem man's heart needs spiritual regeneration spiritual transformation you see friends that's why Paul's gospel Paul's gospel was a spiritual force not a political force the gospel addresses not political problems but the spiritual problem of our hearts and when addressed that problem is dealt with at the root making new men and new relationships are formed you see friends the gospel doesn't deal with the weeds of the human problem by cutting their heads off any good gardener will tell you that that won't work the weeds will come back and they will grow back stronger instead the gospel deals with the weeds of the human problem by destroying them at the heart the gospel of Jesus

Christ makes new creatures of men and women and boys and girls bringing about spiritual transformation as we remember the great wars today friends the world will be full of wars and justice and slavery and a whole load of all manner of ills right up until we're taken home to heaven so it's no political transformation or social or any other power of change your sick world needs but the transforming power of the gospel well God pursued Onesimus a runaway and brought him to saving faith in Christ Jesus well friend what about you remember what Martin Luther said we are all of us God's Onesimus we are all on the run from God the same God who pursued Onesimus is pursuing some of you here this morning don't keep running friends because you can't run from God the same

God who met Onesimus can meet with you in this building here today and when he does the Lord Jesus Christ will take your sin and all your rebelling and he will say to God the Father charge that to my account if he has wronged you at all or owes you anything at all charge that to my account I will repay it I will repay it gladly not with gold or silver but with my very own precious blood and death that's such an irresistible offer don't you agree amen I will I I I I I

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