

The Impact of Conversion

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[0 : 01] Well this morning we're looking at Paul's letter to Philemon, this very short letter, a very personal letter.

It's very different in the introduction to all of Paul's other letters because the introduction shows that it's a personal letter. He doesn't describe himself even as an apostle as he does in the other letters we have in the New Testament from the hand of Paul.

He simply says Paul, prisoner for Jesus Christ and Timothy our brother to Philemon, our beloved fellow worker. But although it's a personal letter it's not marked private and confidential because it's addressed also to Apphia, to Archippus and even to the church that's in Philemon's house.

And that shows us that in those days in the New Testament age that God's people met in the likes of houses belonging to Christians like Philemon.

They didn't have church buildings. They didn't have those sorts of meeting places that we're so used to. They simply went to each other's houses and gathered to worship God there.

[1 : 16] And that's why he's writing here not just to Philemon but also to the church that's in his house. And the letter really concerns the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus.

Although we'll see that the relation between Philemon and Paul is also a feature of the letter. The problem in the letter is Onesimus or certainly the way that he has acted.

Onesimus was a slave of Philemon. Philemon was obviously a wealthy man and would have slaves or servants in his household.

And this Onesimus seems to have stolen some money. I think that's why Paul is referring there near the end of the letter to if he owes you anything, charge that to my account.

I will repay it, which is a very magnanimous thing of himself to do. We'll pick that point up later. But it seems that he had stolen some money and then fled or just absconded.

[2 : 21] Whether he absconded for the reason that he had taken the money or just had decided to abscond and just take some money anyway, we can't say. But anyway, the situation is he had fled from his employer and taken some money, we understand.

But in the providence of God, he had come to meet with Paul. Where it is, where it happened, we don't know for sure. Perhaps it was actually in Rome. Paul was a prisoner in Rome at this time.

And it could very well be that Onesimus had made his way to Rome. He's certainly in Rome here because Paul is sending him back to Philemon.

But in any case, what had happened was this escaped slave who had made such a difficulty for his employer had been converted. Through the ministry of Paul, he had come to know Jesus.

He had come to know a change of life. He had come to be converted to Christ. And that's why Paul is now, in sending him back, he's commending him actually to his employer Philemon, not just as a slave, but even as a brother in Christ, as a fellow Christian.

[3 : 41] And what he's appealing for is that Philemon will receive him in that way. That he will receive him in a Christian manner and as a Christian himself, that is Philemon.

So the letter really, in a sense, is about how Philemon should receive Onesimus. The spirit in which he should receive him and all that's built around that.

In other words, it's really a letter about reconciliation. A reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus. And I want to look at it just in the way of two main headings.

And we're going to relate it to the matter of conversion. And first of all, how conversion produces Christian character. Conversion produces Christian character.

Now we all know what conversion is. That conversion is when God brings about a change in our life, where we're turned from what we are naturally, to be followers of Christ, to be Christians, to be saved, to be born again, where God brings that about.

[4 : 53] Where we are converted, turned around, our life is different to what it used to be. A whole lot of things come into that, of course. But what we're saying is conversion produces Christian character.

The kind of people that Christians should be, as that's described in the Bible, especially in the New Testament, you can trace it back to conversion as the root of it, as that from which that Christian character comes and is produced.

Secondly, that conversion positively affects relationships. You notice the word positively. I'm not just saying that conversion affects relationship.

We learn from Philemon, this letter to Philemon, is that conversion positively affects relationships. It brings a positive aspect to how you relate to other people.

And that will include such things as forgiveness and love and reconciliation and so on. So here's the first thing. Conversion produces Christian character.

[5 : 58] Now, there are three characters really in the letter, three main characters at least. There's Philemon, there's Onesimus, but there's also Paul himself. And something of their character comes across.

The character of each of them comes across really from the letter as you read through it. Look at Philemon, first of all. And you can see in verse 19, verse 19b, how Philemon himself also is a product of Paul's ministry.

Philemon himself was a convert through Paul's ministry. That's why Paul is saying to him there, he's not making a big point of it, but he says to say nothing of you're owing me your own self.

Why would he say such a thing to Philemon? Well, it's because Philemon, as Paul well knows, and as Philemon well knows, owes his conversion to Paul's ministry.

God converts. God, through the Holy Spirit, changes us. But through the ministry of the gospel, by whoever it is, people come to have their lives changed. And through Paul's ministry, Philemon became a Christian.

[7 : 02] And his character as a Christian is described in verses 4 to 7. Look what he says there about Philemon. This is really a bit of a masterpiece on Paul's part, the way that he has structured this letter.

It's a personal letter, though not entirely private, but it's still very well thought out. Paul didn't just start this letter and just, without thinking, just put point after point down for Philemon to consider. It's very carefully crafted. He first of all sets out certain facts. And then, from these facts, he comes to present things to Philemon's mind.

And then, thirdly, from that, he works towards Philemon's emotional life, towards his inner heart, as he calls it. And that's always a lesson for ourselves.

You don't begin with trying to move people emotionally. You begin with the facts. And then you move from the facts to the mind. And the mind, as it contemplates certain things, that are facts and undeniable facts, comes then to reach the emotions.

[8 : 10] And you become emotionally attached. And there's nothing wrong with that. We should be emotionally attached to Christ, and to the gospel, and to fellow believers, and to whoever, in terms of what we are as Christians.

Well, here it is, in verses 4 and 5, you can see how he's describing the facts here about Philemon. I thank my God always when I remember you, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have.

And he points out these two especially. Love and faith. And he says that love and faith is directed towards these two, firstly to Jesus and also to all the saints.

I mean, of course, that faith is particularly in Christ, or faith is toward Christ as the ground of his faith, as the one in whom he has come to trust.

But he also mentions this love that he has for all the saints. And that fits in with what Paul says elsewhere about what Christians should be like in their own character.

[9 : 17] They should be loving people. There should be people who love other saints, other people of God especially. And that's what he's saying about him here. Philemon's character, as it was produced by his conversion, or through his conversion, his character is one of love and of faith.

And not only that, but it has an impact. In his love and faith as it operates, you can see what he's saying, Philemon's life has had an impact on the wider Christian community.

Philemon's life has had an impact in the way that the saints in their hearts and their very inner being have been refreshed by him. This was a man who ministered love.

This was a man who showed love. This was a man who did things in love. This was a man who showed that he was a believer in the way in which he exercised love, in the way in which his character came to disseminate its qualities, if you like, to other Christians, and especially throughout the Christian community that he was part of in Colossae, because that's where Philemon was situated and where Onesimus had come from in Colossae.

This little letter sits along with the letter to the Colossaeans where Onesimus is again mentioned, along with Tychicus as the bearer of the letters, and probably this one was sent along with the letter to the Colossaeans that we have.

[10:57] That's the way that Philemon is mentioned. That's the kind of character he was. What a challenge that is to you and to me, not just, first of all, asking, am I a Christian?

Am I converted? Am I really like that? Is that what my life is about? And then, as a Christian, if I say that I'm a Christian, if I know that I'm a Christian, if my life has changed, am I committed today to love and to faith?

Am I committed to love all the saints? Am I committed to the kind of life that will have a positive impact on the lives of other people? And you see, that's also resulted, for Paul himself, in much joy and comfort from the love of Philemon, as he has seen the love of Philemon, not just in their personal relationship, Paul and Philemon together, but as he has seen Philemon's love and faith operating amongst his fellow Christians, as he's seen the benefits that others have gained from that, it's come to fill Paul himself personally with much love and much joy and comfort.

Now, there's a thing as well. What's your life about in relation to other people? There are some people that you meet and it seems that the rationale of their life is to cause misery, that that's what they're about, that they want to transmit misery and make other people feel bad and make other people miserable by their comments, by their insinuations, by their snide remarks, by the way that they turn their backs on them, by the way that they're constantly sniping, that sort of thing.

That's not what we're about, is it? That's not what a Christian character is about at least. Because Paul is saying here, from what I've seen of your life, my brother, I have come myself to derive much joy and comfort from your love.

[13:09] And for you and for me today, there's another challenge, there's another point that's put to us. Not only do we have to be Christians and seek that in being converted people, as Christians, we ourselves have a positive impact, as much as we can, on other people.

But that the aim of our life is to produce joy and comfort in other people. And not the opposite. There's enough in the world of misery, of pain, of regret, that Christians should avoid it and live differently.

And that's what Paul is saying about this man. His conversion has produced this Christian character that has this impact, that has such beauty to it, that has really had a positive effect amongst his fellow Christians.

The second character is Onesimus himself. And the key, in terms of his character, is actually what you find in verse 11. Formerly, he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.

And you can see the two words there, the opposites, useless and useful. Useless means more than just not having any use, which is what literally you would think about it.

[14:41] Useless actually carries in it the idea of being bad or having something bad about it, having something harmful about it. And that indeed is what Onesimus was.

He wasn't a nice man. He wasn't someone who helped his employer. He was somebody who caused him hassle and lots of anguish. and unnecessary pain.

He'd been harmful, bad, difficult. But then Paul is saying, now he's useful.

Now actually, I commend him to you as someone who can bring you real benefit. You see, the way things have changed, the man's conversion has changed his character. The man's conversion has actually changed him into a different person.

From being useless, from being unreliable, from being somebody that would be known as a harmful, not nice person. Here is now Paul saying, this man is now useful.

[15:47] Not just useful to you, Philemon, but useful to me. And in fact, Paul is saying that in one sense, he'd rather have kept him with himself. Paul wouldn't have kept him with himself if he'd just been the same as when he met him.

Paul wouldn't have kept him if he wasn't actually useful and very beneficial. In other words, what Paul is saying is, this man is actually now a very beneficial servant for the kingdom, for the work of Christ, for the church of Christ.

And I'm sending him back to you because that's what he's now like. That's what his character is now. His conversion has brought this about. That he's now no longer useless or harmful, but actually it's opposite.

And in fact, it's very interesting that although this was a very real person, this is not just a nice story, this was a historical event, Onesimus in Greek means useful.

His very name means useful and it wasn't a name that Paul coined. This was the name he'd always had. But you see, previously, he actually lived in a way that was opposite to what his name meant.

[17:03] He was carrying this name useful and yet he was actually useless. He was the opposite of useful. He wasn't a man who was beneficial. He was a man who was known as being not reliable and harmful.

But now the two things match up. His character and his name. That's what Jesus does. When we're given the name Christian, our character has to match that name.

And we've lost sense of the fact that a Christian in the wider sense is someone who has been baptized into the Christian church.

I know that we speak about being a Christian from being converted. That's what we're saying about this character of Onesimus. But what I'm saying is that our baptism actually itself signifies what a Christian life is about.

A life that's been cleansed from sin. A life that's committed to Christ. A life that's united to Jesus. A life that follows Him. And what we have to ensure in our lives is that we come to be converted so that our baptism and what it signifies matches up to our character.

[18:35] And if we're not converted that's not the case. If we're not actually useful then it's not the case. But the other point of course is that as Christians Onesimus ought to be our name also.

It should be written on the life of every one of us. Because whatever else a Christian is a Christian ought to be useful.

a Christian ought to be beneficial in their lives to other people and especially to the kingdom to the work of the gospel to the cause of Christ.

There's something wrong with a Christian who just hangs back and does not get involved in the work of the kingdom. There's something lacking and someone says I'm a Christian but really I don't think I should get.

I don't have the gifts to get involved like other people are involved so I'm quite happy just to sit back and really let others take the strain. That's not what the essence of being a Christian means because here's Onesimus who was useless but now is useful and that usefulness really has to be at the heart of what we're about as Christians.

[19:54] And one of the most rewarding things in life especially for us ministers or those who are in the leadership of congregations or the church is when people come to us and say look I'd like to help.

Could I do something and could I do this? Of course that should be our attitude. Instead of being those who wait to ask will you do this please?

It should be the other way about shouldn't it? If we are indeed Christians as we claim to be and I'm not saying you're not. I'm not saying anything about yourselves in this but just challenging myself and yourselves to what Paul is saying here about Onesimus.

We should be and must be useful for Christ for the kingdom. Thirdly there's Paul himself. Very briefly you can see how he introduces himself in the letter.

Paul a prisoner for Jesus Christ. Now Paul's character comes through in that very reference. What does he think about his situation? He's a prisoner.

[21:05] He's a prisoner in Rome. He's a prisoner under the regime of the Romans. He's a prisoner under their authority. But as far as Paul is concerned he's a prisoner for Jesus Christ.

And in the epistle to the Philippians chapter 1 and verses 12 to 14 he tells I'm going to leave and I'm going to read it because time's passing. Read that for yourselves later.

Match it up with what he's saying here about himself to Philemon. Paul a prisoner for Jesus Christ. For Paul everything's about Christ.

Whether he's a prisoner or whether he's free. It's all about Jesus. It's all about serving Jesus. Even as a prisoner he says in Philippians he's been set there for the promotion of Christ and of his gospel.

And he's seeing people even in Caesar's household in Rome being converted. and what he's really saying is I'm actually glad I'm here because I'm seeing through it that God has put me here for the gospel's sake.

[22 : 12] Now then I have to apply to myself and you have to apply to you. How does my conversion show itself when things are not going my way?

That's really one of the proofs isn't it? if I say that yes I'm a Christian I'm saying I've been converted I'm saying I'm a new person in Christ how does that show itself when things don't go my way? When things aren't as I expected? When things are different to what I would have chosen for myself? That's when conversion should show itself as it does in Paul by saying well I wouldn't have chosen it this way but I'm here for Christ and I'm here to reveal him and to speak about him and to honor him and to be his disciple that's the Christian character Paul is showing and that should be in my life and yours too so conversion produces Christian character in Philemon Onesimus and Paul conversion secondly positively affects relationships you see in Paul and Philemon first of all verses 1 and 2 how their relationship is mentioned there and in verses 8 and 9 Paul is saying I am bold enough although I'm bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required that's to say how to receive

Onesimus back I'm bold enough he says in Christ because Paul is an apostle after all and an apostle has a special authority to tell people like Philemon what they should be doing I would he said I could use that authority yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you what a wonderful relationship that is Paul is saying I have the authority as an apostle that could command you or instruct you to do certain things to do this especially but I'd rather not use that I'd rather the way of love I'd rather appeal to you as a Christian in your love to do this and that really fits with God's method of doing things too doesn't it how do we come to be converted are we forced into it is it against our will of course it isn't nobody is persuaded to embrace

Christ to give their lives to Christ forcibly nobody is forced into it nobody is constrained by any arguments against their will to come to embrace Christ God persuades you lovingly God persuades you with your will to embrace him in love and in love for him as he has loved you the father's love in sending the son the son's love in giving or lay down his life for us in other words there's such a thing of course as the law of God and there's such a thing as the gospel the law of God says this is my command to you this is what you must do or this is what you must not do but you are not actually converted simply through the law saying this is the command now don't please don't think that [25 : 43] I'm saying the law doesn't matter or that the law is now no longer relevant in thinking about what it means to be a Christian or to come to be a Christian the law says this is what you should do and it shows you that in not doing it you're sinning and in sinning that you're guilty before God and that you deserve the penalty of God over this law being broken by you which is death and how is that answered it's answered in the gospel the gospel that provides Jesus Christ for us as the one who kept the law and who actually came to give himself in his death to be what the law demanded for its breaking of it by us Jesus took that penalty and when you come to embrace him when in being converted you come to have Christ now in your life well he's answered the law for you and the demands of the law are met through him so it's not being forced into being a

Christian or being converted it's being persuaded persuaded through the gospel through the love of God and the love of Christ that this is indeed so relevant and so necessary for us to receive what God is offering us there's a story of two Christian men who were disputing as to the relationship between God's law and the gospel and they were disputing about which one should have prominence and one was saying well you have to give it to the law the law is the thing that drives us that tells us what sin is that gives us to see what we're doing wrong so you have to really give the first place to the law the other Pharaoh says it's not the law the law is necessary but first place goes to the gospel so they decided the best thing to do would when they went out to the moor to take home the sheep the one who was advocating that the gospel should have prominence said well the next time we go out to take home your sheep you take your rod and I'll take a sheaf of corn and we'll see who's most successful in bringing home the sheep you count the number that you can drive home with your rod and I'll count the number that will follow me with the sheaf and we'll see who's got the most and of course you know the answer is the sheep are far more likely almost

inevitably they're going to follow the man with the sheaf rather than be driven by the man with the rod and so it is with human beings too the love of Christ persuades us the love of God draws us us the love of God brings us into life where the law shows us our sin the gospel draws us to God's provision against it in Christ so you notice also in the relationship of Paul and Philemon I'm really going over this quickly Paul mentions here the word heart three times verses 7 and 12 and 20 he says in sending back Onesimus 2 I'm sending you my very heart three times he's using this word now it's not the usual word for heart in the New Testament this is a word which actually brings in your very innermost feelings feelings has to do with your emotional life but it's your very innermost feelings your deepest feelings or your deepest longings and what Paul is saying to that is that the gospel really gets to the very deepest part of your life and being converted and having a relationship with other Christians should actually reach the innermost part of your being in other words being a Christian is not about superficiality it's not just about things on the surface it's not just about a little ripple here and there of love of affection of forgiveness whatever it's deep it's as deep as the deepest part of your soul and that's what conversion does it positively affects your relationships so that you feel the movements of love deep within your being it gets right into the roots of your soul and of course then you've got secondly the Philemon Onesimus relationship because Paul as we said is sending him back to Philemon so the letter as we said is about reconciliation and of course that's a test for both of them for both Onesimus and Philemon a test for Onesimus will he go back to his former employer will the fact that he's now a Christian mean that he'll go back and say he's sorry for what he's done and ask forgiveness will Philemon be prepared to receive him back will he be prepared to reestablish him in his household will he be prepared to receive him back as a brother in Christ as well as a former employee or slave and in all of that reconciliation there's going to be a need of forgiveness a need of asking for it by Onesimus a need of giving it on the part of Philemon and I think that's why Paul in verse 16 is saying to receive him back no longer as a slave it doesn't necessarily mean Paul was advocating that he be no longer a slave in Philemon's household but what he's saying is that he's not simply receiving him back as a slave but much more than a slave as a beloved brother not just as a brother but as a beloved brother a brother on whom you lavish love and in fact in verse 17 there you find Paul saying that receive him back as you would receive me in other words Paul is saying when Onesimus stands at your door and you go out and you open the door and see him there receive him as if that were me in other words don't just receive him back reluctantly don't receive him back grudgingly don't receive him back holding something against him welcome him that's what he's saying that's what reconciliation is about if you and [32 : 58] I have people we need to be reconciled to reconciliation is not something that is momentary it's not something that's just again superficial it's not something that's short of a real welcome in being reunited and reestablished in love that's what he's saying receive him as you would receive me and that's what reconciliation is about when God receives us in his embrace of reconciliation we are welcomed we're not received reluctantly we're welcomed wholeheartedly by the Lord into his fellowship and that corresponds to how we should treat one another now I haven't dealt with the last point which is that it shows the power of the gospel to restore social order philemon philemon's household had been disrupted by this man onesimus but you see the gospel and the power of the gospel in the conversion of onesimus has brought back harmony and reestablished order in the household of philemon and you can put that out into its wider context of the world which we live today you know people tell you religion is the problem what they basically mean by that is

Christianity is the problem although of course militant Islam is also brought into it understandably well if you mean by religion a slavish attachment to a creed even to Christianity then get rid of it it is a problem if you mean by religion the lifestyle that follows Christ lovingly and peacefully that is a very different thing religion is a problem if there is just religion and nothing else but conversion is not conversion brings the answer to the problem the problems within ourselves within every human heart and the only way that it can be solved is by conversion by coming to know Christ by coming to love him and to love his ways let's pray Lord we thank you for the way in which your word so clearly shows to us that way of love we pray that from this portion of your word today our own hearts truly will be affected so as to love one another earnestly and fervently but also to extend our love to your people and to others in the world even to those who are at enmity with you and with your people and we pray that we may be

different to so much of what we see in the world grant Lord that our differentness may itself have an impact positively for your glory hear us we pray for Jesus sake Amen Amen