

Onesimus the Renewed

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Date: 26 July 2026

Preacher: Joe Tough

[0:00] Can people be changed? What do you think? Now, I'm not talking about changing superficially or mere surface level stuff.

! No, I'm talking about genuine transformation.! Someone becoming the complete opposite from what they used to be.! Can people be changed?

Now, I know most people in this room are polite Christians, and as polite Christians, we know the right answers, don't we? It's very quick to come to our minds and then pass on to our lips.

Can people be changed? Yes, of course. Mind to mouth, that's easy. But what about heart to eyes?

We can be very good at saying people can be changed, and believing that with our minds intellectually. But is it not true that inside the church, we can be very bad at seeing people that way?

[1:10] Our heads might nod yes, but deep down, our hearts, they often shake no. Our mouths profess one thing, and our eyes, well, they just see another.

I know I used to think that because I was quick to say yes to that question, and because I could openly tell others it was true, that I really believed it.

I thought my heart was fine when it came to not seeing people through the lens of who they used to be. But when a checkered past arrives on your doorstep, it's a whole other story, isn't it?

Suddenly, you're shown your head and heart aren't quite on the same page anymore. I mean, I can tell someone they've been changed, but do I really see them that way?

Why is it that, to my eyes, the shadow of the past always seems to blend in so subtly with the sunlight of today? Or how about when you're the one who's just been changed?

[2:15] And if you're honest, you're scared to tell others what you've been changed from. You've come to faith, people give thanks, but what if they knew all that's in my rear view?

They see that, and that's all they'll think when they see me. Whether the prodigal is on your doorstep, or you're the prodigal at the door, either way, what our hearts need convinced of is that people really can be changed through the gospel.

That's what we all need to be shown. That is the truth our hearts need to be convinced of so that our vision might be clear. So we can have a right view of ourselves, and we can have a right view of others.

And as we come again to the book of Philemon, and we pick up from where we left off last week, we are given a real-life picture of the transformation the gospel brings.

As Paul moves away from greeting and thanking his dear friend Philemon, and starts bringing an appeal for his dear child Onesimus.

[3:30] Just look down with me to verses 8 and 9. 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 prisoner also for Christ Jesus.

Here we have Paul begin to get to the heart of why he's written to Philemon in the first place. He wants to appeal to him, not command him.

You see that? Paul could easily use his special God-given authority as an apostle to simply command Philemon in the good he wants him to do. But he doesn't, does he?

For love's sake, he says, I prefer to appeal to you. I, Paul, an old man, and now prisoner. And here, the gray-haired apostle shows us what it's like to age like fine wine.

He's old, he's likely uncomfortable sitting in a prison cell, but when it comes to dealing with a tricky pastoral situation between two younger men in the church, his hands are gentle and generous.

[4:42] And as we just pause to notice Paul's pastoral approach here, let me just encourage those of you who are older in the faith or that hold positions of authority within the church to resist the desire to use your age or authority as an excuse to quickly boss others around you.

If Paul hesitated, how much more should we? Because it can be easy, can't it, to just become so focused on getting people to do the right thing and tick the right boxes. But what I think we see through Paul's aged pastoral wisdom is that he is after far more than just mere surface obedience. He wants to assure and persuade Philemon through his appeal. He wants to take the time to sit down and explain to him why it is the right thing for him to do. Paul could just point his aged finger and insist. But instead, he puts an arm around the young man's shoulders and has a conversation. It's a beautiful picture, isn't it? An aged arm around the shoulder and then Paul says these words, verse 10.

[5:58] I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. Paul has his arm around Philemon and starts off his appeal by telling Philemon that his disgraced bond servant, who packed up and ditched, amazingly, has become a Christian.

While Paul has been in prison, he somehow crossed paths with Onesimus and through Paul sharing the gospel with him, he came to faith. And that's why he calls himself Onesimus' father. So here we see the crux of the whole situation. Why Paul is even making an appeal in the first place. Onesimus has become a Christian through Paul's ministry in prison and now Paul is sending him back to Philemon.

Now, we could just go straight from here right over to next week's passage. Verse 17, where Paul makes his request for Philemon to receive Onesimus.

Philemon, I know Onesimus is in your debt and most likely caused you great offense, but he's a Christian now, so receive him. End of the letter. But you'll notice that it's just the start of Paul's appeal.

[7:20] And we've got six more verses before the call to receive him comes. Now, why? Well, because I believe Paul, the gray-haired apostle, is far more pastoral than that.

There is more he wants to show that is now true of Onesimus. He's not just a disgraced bond servant who has become a Christian. No, he's a totally new person.

A totally new person with a totally new identity. So, let's see that now with our first point of Onesimus, the renewed, is now a new person.

Look down with me to verse 11. Formerly, he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me. Now, it might sound like Paul is pretty harsh here.

Strong words, isn't it? But Paul is making a play on words. The name Onesimus means useful or beneficial. So, using the comparison of useless to useful, that's a pretty fitting way to go about it.

[8:30] He was once indeed useless to Philemon. He had packed up and ditched on apparently unfavorable terms, but now he's indeed useful not only to Philemon, but also to Paul.

Paul gives him a glorying report in verses 13 to 14. Look down with me, he writes, 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 accord. If Paul could, he would gladly keep Onesimus with him.

Such is the encouragement and help he has been to the apostle in chains. Paul even calls him his own very heart, verse 12. That's how much love Paul has for this newly converted Christian.

Philemon, you might not have the fondest memories of this man, but let me assure you, he's totally different now. He's not what he once was. You see, here we are shown that Onesimus becoming a Christian didn't just give him a new label.

[9:47] No, it was far more profound than that. Conversion made him a brand new person. And since he was a new person, he had new desires which showed themselves in new actions.

If you've recently just come to faith in Jesus, let me encourage you that what is true of Onesimus is also true of you. Maybe you've come to faith quite recently and if you're honest, you've still got more questions than answers, but what you know for sure is that you have different desires now and you don't want to be seen as the person that you used to be.

That reputation that seems to haunt you, that lingers over you like a dark cloud made up of poor choices and poor mistakes. It's not who you are now and it's not how you're to see yourself.

So you can look at photos from the past and boldly and confidently say, I'm not that same guy. I'm not that same girl. She doesn't define me no more.

He isn't who I am. I've been changed. I really have been. And that reputation, well, it's lost its stick. I mean, imagine what it must have been like for Onesimus to hear this letter being read out in public. [11:15] Hearing the apostle Paul validate his conversion and validate the chain's heart and actions. What encouragement it must have been to be assured that he really was now a new man who was now living up to the name he had been given.

Paul no longer saw Onesimus as useless to Philemon. He didn't view him in light of his past but instead viewed him in light of his present.

And he's encouraging and giving reason for Philemon and the wider church that met in his house well, to do the same. Now, maybe you're here tonight and in one way or another you've got a prodigal at your door.

Maybe it's a child who's recently been converted but from a life no parent would have wanted. Maybe it's someone that deeply wronged you a long time ago maybe and now you hear they've just been saved.

Or maybe it's a partner a partner with a past and in your eyes the shadow of who they used to be just seems to merge with who they are now. Whatever your situation dear brother or sister it's not just that the past has been forgiven but that it's the person in the past has been made new.

[12:47] The prodigal at your door is no longer a prodigal. They're a new person now that have been totally transformed and renewed by God. The child that did those things they no longer exist.

The person that hurt you is not the same person that's now converted and the person your partner was is not the person your partner is now. You see Onesimus the useless died and now it's only Onesimus the useful that lives.

Paul is validating that. He's seen it first hand and he's inviting Philemon and the wider church family that met in his house to see Onesimus that way. To see the prodigal not through the lens of their past but to see the prodigal through the lens of their present.

Now before we move on to our second point let me just take this opportunity as an aside to encourage any of you that are either struggling with your own past or maybe the past of someone else to talk with someone.

Don't struggle on your own. Don't go in on yourself and feel like you can't possibly let others in. Because we often convince ourselves don't we?

[14:17] That we're the only black sheep in the herd. The only one that is struggling and the only one for who you're asking for help well that just is an option. Dear brother or sister you don't have to keep bottling it up.

You don't have to keep shoving it down with either distraction or denial because there is help here for you. This room is full of people that can testify to the change that has been brought about through simply letting others in.

And I'm one of them. I can't thank people like Joe and Ann enough for the help they've given me.

You see dealing with your own past or dealing with the past of someone else is a journey.

A journey you don't have to walk alone. We are all messy people but thankfully that's who the gospel and the church is for. so if you've got some mess you need help with there are fellow messy people here to help.

So we've seen conversion has transformed Onesimus into a completely new person but that's not all as now it's time to see that Onesimus the bond servant has been given a completely new identity.

[15:35] Let's pick up from verse 15. For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while that you might have him back forever no longer as a bond servant but more than a bond servant as a beloved brother especially to me but how much more to you both in the flesh and in the Lord.

Philemon you might have lost a useless bond servant but you're getting sent back a beloved brother. Now these words here are truly remarkable especially when you consider the context and day and age that they were written in.

A day when there was a very clear societal hierarchy and none quite as blatant as between a bond servant and their master. Bond servants were seen as being the property of their master so it was clear in the eyes of society and the culture that they didn't belong on the same level.

But here we see Paul taking Onesimus and Philemon and putting them on exactly the same level. They're brothers now all through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now since we're Scottish often the phrase brother is seen as that cringy American phrase that people just love to throw about. The type of thing that's only said between cringy Christians. But you see calling another Christian brother or sister has a far more profound and genuine meaning.

[17:08] Philemon and Onesimus are now a part of the same family as they now share the same heavenly father. They're equals, fellow heirs and fellow sons of the living God.

Now as a culture we love to rank people don't we? You add up the mixture of where you're from and what you do and you're given a certain status. The job you do, the money you make, the place you're from.

And this can sometimes bleed into the culture of the church can't it? As if there's different classes or standings of Christians. But you see what Onesimus and Philemon show us so beautifully is that beneath the cross of Christ there is only level ground.

We all stand as equals in God's eyes. No matter our past and no matter our standing in society. So if you're a Christian here today and you feel like you're an economy class Christian like you're sitting back in Rose Ed while those who haven't done what you've done or those who aren't from where you're from are sitting up there in the front seats with a higher place in God's eyes remember this. there's only level ground beneath the cross of Christ. We're family beloved brothers and sisters no matter where the wider culture might place us and no matter the previous lives we might have lived.

[18:46] So please resist the temptation of keeping certain Christians at arm's length Christians that aren't like you or maybe have a past that you don't for we all have a seat at our father's table.

Now Paul in verse 15 suggests to Philemon that perhaps this is a reason why he was parted from Onesimus in the first place so that he could be returned to him not only as a bondservant but now as a beloved brother.

It's an interesting way he puts isn't it? For this is perhaps why he was parted from you. Perhaps perhaps Philemon. You see Paul seems to be hinting at reading this whole situation through the lens of God's sovereignty and providence.

You see on one level Onesimus was just a non-Christian rebel. He decided to pack up and ditch for whatever reason and on seemingly unfavorable terms and likely would have brought great offense and cost to Philemon personally.

He'd made mistakes. He'd taken wrong turns, hurt himself and other people. But yet even though all that was true and even though that was all choices he'd made, there was still a sovereign God over all of it.

[20:17] As one writer so helpfully puts it, despite whatever warped motives lay behind Onesimus' actions, even as someone not yet a Christian, God had a higher purpose for good that he was working out.

You see here we are shown again that God really does bring beauty out of pain. This whole little letter is proof of that. He takes what man meant for evil and orchestrates it all into his great plan for good.

Now often God's sovereignty can leave us with many questions, can't it? But what a comfort and assurance to know that however messy or complicated your past might be, what you once meant for evil, God is orchestrating into his great plan for good.

It was true for Onesimus and it's true for you too. He knows what he's doing. You were never a surprise to him.

Your behavior even before you became a Christian never took him off guard. Because sometimes we can think that God looks at us scratching his head like a bewildered parent wondering where it all went wrong.

[21:36] I never thought you'd go and do that. I mean what am I meant to do with you now? But you see he's more like a master potter. That takes every individual lump of clay that he's let sit for its own specific length of time and takes it in his hands with all its known imperfections and uniqueness and shape and crafts it into something truly bespoke.

You see Philemon has been invited to view Onesimus through the eyes of faith. trusting that God was working a greater purpose in mind through Onesimus' checkered past.

Even though he'd been likely wronged, even though he'd likely bared the cost for Onesimus' non-Christian antics, Philemon was to lift his head to the perhaps that changed it all.

Perhaps, Philemon, perhaps God was orchestrating beauty through the pain that was inflicted on you. Perhaps what once cost you has now brought you great gain of a beloved brother in Christ.

Perhaps this is why he was parted from you in the first place, so that unbeknown to you, 2,000 years later we'd be reading all about it in Bonacore, having it show us that God really can and does orchestrate good from what we meant for evil.

[23:15] Now, before we close, let me just encourage any of you here today that have not yet placed your faith in Jesus. Let Onesimus' life be an encouragement to you.

It's the type of renewal the gospel brings. For our great, merciful God really does love to take those with the most unlikely pasts and the most unlikely present situations and transform them into beloved children of God.

All your past failings, all your present rebellions can be wiped clean through the precious blood of Christ. They really can be, and you really can be changed through him.

You can be transformed into a new person with a totally new identity. I mean, his grace tracked down a useless bond servant called Onesimus in some random prison, and his providence brought him in contact with Paul, who simply preached the gospel.

people. You see, our God is a God of the individuals, who leaves the 99 and tracks down that one lost sheep.

[24:41] So please, please, I beg you, whoever you are, don't go away from here thinking, there's no way God would want me, and there's no way he could change me, and there's no way that he could deal with all my past mess.

Don't believe those lies. Instead, repent and believe. Cry out to him for mercy, and that's exactly what you'll receive.

And if you do that, then welcome to the family of fellow sinners who've been changed by God, and who've had their checkered pasts, totally wiped clean.

With that, let's pray now in closing. Let's pray. Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for the renewal that your gospel brings.

Lord, you know all our hearts, you know all our present situations as we come away from healing your word, so we just lift them all up before you. Father, do what only you can.

[26:04] Bring conviction and bring lasting healing, we pray. Father, for those of us who are struggling to see people in light of the renewal that you have brought in their lives, would you please help us clear our vision and free our hearts?

God, I see you as new people, as new, forgiven, cleansed, children of the King, and no longer through the lens of who we used to be.

That person isn't us anymore. So please, would your grace remove any lingering shadows? us. For any here tonight that have not yet been renewed through the gospel, Father, would tonight be the night that you track them down and draw them to yourself?

And as we come to sing our last item of praise, would you take the words we're about to sing and minister them to our hearts and minds, so that you might be glorified and that we might be refreshed.

Again, in Jesus' precious name, Amen.