



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

How the Gospel Changes Lives: Paul

TIM PAULEY

PHILEMON ; 1 TIMOTHY 1:12-17

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Tim Pauley / PO Box 58403, Charleston, WV 25358 / 304.767.8430 / tim.pauley@capitolcom.org

A lot of what takes place in the West Virginia capitol during the regular session is done so that it might change people's lives. Education reform is pursued so that more children will stay in school and receive a better education so that it might change their lives. Legislators and elected officials pursue economic reforms to provide more and better jobs which would certainly make a difference in people's lives. Leaders are considering the issue of overcrowded jails and seeking answers to what might change people's lives so that they do not go to or return to prison. It is certainly important for leaders involved in state government to seek answers to problems such as these. But the letter of Philemon points us to the real answer – it is the gospel that changes lives!

One of the big messages we want to study in Paul's little letter to Philemon is how the gospel changes lives. We see this demonstrated in each of the three characters involved in the story: Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon. Onesimus, Philemon's slave stole from his master and ran away to Rome. There he meets Paul, the imprisoned preacher who shares the gospel with him and leads him to faith in Christ. As Onesimus grows in his faith, it becomes clear that he must return and make things right with Philemon. Paul sends Onesimus back, along with this letter encouraging Philemon to forgive Onesimus and accept him as a brother. One thing we see is that the gospel changed all three of these men. First we will look at Paul and see how the gospel made such a big difference in his life.

Paul is a prisoner in Rome. He has spent many years traveling throughout that part of the world, preaching the gospel and starting churches. He desires to journey even further to spread the good news, but he now finds himself chained to an imperial guard awaiting trial before the emperor. Though he is a prisoner, it is a "house arrest" in which he has the freedom to minister to guests as they might come and go to his quarters. His situation is described at the end of the Book of Acts:

And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of

God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered. Acts 28:30-31

This is quite likely how Onesimus met Paul. Whether he had heard of Paul while serving Philemon or ran into Paul by "chance", Onesimus was able to meet Paul and hear the gospel message. Paul begins Philemon with a greeting which is unique to this letter: "**Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus...**" In verse 9 he describes himself as "**Paul the aged, and now a prisoner of Christ Jesus**". He depicts himself and his colleague Epaphras as "**fellow prisoners**" in Christ Jesus. Though a prisoner of Rome, he considered himself a prisoner of Christ. He understood he was detained as part of God's plan and for His purposes.

How did Paul come to be a prisoner in Rome? In the Bible his story begins as Saul, a persecutor of Christians, arresting them, throwing them in prison, and participating in their executions. Now he is in prison for following Christ and preaching the gospel. In a short time he will face execution. Let us quickly look back and see how the gospel made such a difference in Paul's life.

PAUL THE PERSECUTOR

In Acts 7 Stephen becomes the first martyr for the Christian faith. As the people were stoning Stephen, they laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul, and he was in hearty agreement with putting Stephen to death (Acts 8:1). This began a great persecution against the followers of Christ, and Saul "began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison" (Acts 8:3). Saul, "breathing threats and murder" against the believers, was on his way to Damascus to arrest more believers and bring them back to Jerusalem. On his way, Jesus appeared to him and confronted him in a flash of light. Paul was physically blinded by the light, but his eyes were opened to understand who Christ was. We read in Acts 9 how this experience changed Saul's life so that he went from being Saul, the persecutor to Paul, the preacher.¹

BIBLE STUDIES

LOBBYIST / STAFF STUDY: **TUESDAYS, 12:00 NOON**, TREASURER'S CONFERENCE ROOM (EB 54)

LEGISLATOR / ELECTED OFFICIAL STUDIES: **THURSDAYS 8:00 A.M. & NOON** TREASURER'S CONFERENCE ROOM (EB 54)

West Virginia

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PAUL THE PREACHER

The change in Paul's life was dramatic and immediate. You can read in the chapters following Acts 9 how Paul went from being a young believer to a leader in the church. He traveled all over that part of the world preaching the gospel in the face of great persecution. He started up churches which would continue the ministry of proclaiming the gospel and teaching believers after he had moved on to the next city. Paul did not start the church in Colossae (where Philemon was from). He did start the church in Ephesus (Acts 19) where Philemon likely heard the gospel. How did the gospel make such a change in his life? In Paul's first letter to Timothy we have perhaps the clearest summary of his salvation experience and how dramatically it changed his life:

¹²I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, ¹³even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; ¹⁴and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. ¹⁶Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life. ¹⁷Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. 1 Timothy 1:12-17

Paul described himself as a blasphemer, persecutor, and violent aggressor. He saw himself as the foremost of sinners. He was amazed that God showed him mercy by sending Jesus into the world to save sinners like him.

He was certainly a great sinner because of his persecution and abuse of Christians. But he was also the foremost of sinners because of his great pride and self-righteousness. In Philippians 3 Paul listed all of the positions and accomplishments he owned by right of birth or gained through his own efforts (Phil 3:4-6). He admits at one time he considered all those things to be of great gain to himself. But

once he understood the gospel he came to consider all those things as loss, "rubbish", when compared to the righteousness that can only be found through faith in Christ. (Philippians 3:8-9)

Paul was amazed that God not only saved him, but also put him into service preaching the gospel. Paul never got over this truth of what God had done for him. He shared his testimony of this change at every opportunity. He repeated his testimony in Acts 9, 22, and 26. He spoke of the testimony of God's grace in his life throughout his letters.

Paul's salvation experience as a young man was many years in the past. He now describes himself as "Paul the aged" (Philemon 9). Yet the fact that God showed him mercy still overwhelmed his heart as we see him give thanks and break out in a great expression of praise.

PAUL THE PRISONER

And now we see Paul the prisoner. Detained from the work he loved, he is still faithful in preaching and teaching the gospel. In so doing, he comes across this young slave, Onesimus. He shares the good news that no matter what he might have done, God in His mercy had sent Christ Jesus into the world to save sinners. Onesimus could find forgiveness of his sin through faith in what Christ had done. The message that changed Paul's life would change Onesimus' life as well.

CONCLUSION

- **WHILE WE MIGHT NOT BE BLASPHEMERS AND PERSECUTORS LIKE PAUL, EACH OF US HAVE SINNED AGAINST GOD AND NEED FORGIVENESS PROVIDED ONLY THROUGH WHAT CHRIST HAS DONE FOR US. HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED THE CHANGED LIFE THAT IS AVAILABLE THROUGH THE GOSPEL?**
- **AS A FOLLOWER OF CHRIST, IN THE MIDST OF THE BUSYNESS AND CHALLENGE OF LIFE IN THE CAPITOL, ARE YOU REJOICING, THANKING, AND PRAISING GOD FOR THE MERCY HE HAS SHOWN YOU IN SENDING CHRIST TO SAVE YOU?**

¹ Some put great significance in the change of Saul's name. Saul was his Hebrew name, Paul, his Roman name. He seems to have chosen to go by his Roman name after His salvation.