

Missions & Reluctance

Heavenly Father, we want to thank You that You have been so gracious to us. There is not one of us who sought You with our whole hearts, or who deserved to be saved by You. Every one of us is a rebel, and every one of us has sinned in all sorts of ways, and Your Word teaches us that if we break Your law at one point, we are guilty of all of it. Father, we pray that You will forgive us, all of us, for the hardness of our hearts, because we acknowledge our hearts are hard to You, to one another as fellow believers, and to people around us in their unbelief and sin. Father, we pray that You will do Your work of grace in our hearts, to soften our hearts both toward You and toward the great love You have shown us through Your Son. And also, Father, soften our hearts to people around us. We pray that You will make us into people who are conformed to the image of Your Son. Enable us to be an example of that to others, and enable us to teach it to our children and model it to them. Father, we ask these things and we pray that You will be with us . In Jesus' name. Amen.

We have been discussing Acts, and we went through this first section on the day of Pentecost. We looked at the way the Gospel went out from Jerusalem and the apostles' reluctance. We looked at how persecution drove the Church to missions, though the apostles themselves did not go. We saw Philip ministering in Samaria, and then we looked at what it took to get Peter into the home of Cornelius. And we also looked just very briefly at some of the reluctance of the Church to go out throughout Church history. We looked at Jonah in the Old Testament. I mentioned briefly Ulfilas' mission to the Goths, the beginning of the church in Ethiopia, the apostle Thomas in India, Patrick in Ireland, the conversion of the Vikings, the Crusades, and the Reformers' failure to reach beyond Christendom. We spoke briefly about William Carey.

At the end of last session I used the example of slavery and the slave trade from Africa to the Americas. The church failed abysmally either to send missionaries to Africa, which is what it should have been doing, or, with the very few exceptions, to speak against slavery and the slave trade. What was new about the slave trade is not that human beings had not practiced slavery through much of their history. It is sad that they have and still do. It is one of the things Bill Devlin has recently been involved in. He has just been in Pakistan speaking to the government there on behalf of Christians who are, at this present time, enslaved by Muslims in Pakistan and have been for many, many generations. For the tiny minority of Christians in Pakistan there is slavery there right now. Of course during the time of war there were women enslaved to be used as prostitutes. I was listening to a program on NPR this morning and Dianne Ream was interviewing several lawyers who have been working in the international court of justice to bring people to trial for the appalling rape, abuse, and enslavement of women as prostitutes during the wars that have taken place in Yugoslavia over the last seven or eight years, and they have managed to convict people of that. There is lots of slavery in the Sudan right now—enslavement of Christians by Muslims.

So there has been lots of slavery through the history of the human race. What is different here, in terms of what I am referring to in the slavery to the Americas, is that up until about 1480, slavery was basically practiced by most people against most other people. If you looked at a group of slaves, for example, in 1450 in various parts of Europe, North Africa, or across the Middle East, you would have found slaves of every nation and race, basically, up until that point. The term slave itself comes from the word *Slav*, the Slavic peoples of Eastern Europe. That is where the term slave comes from. But up until about 1480, slavery was very widely practiced, and most slaves were prisoners of war, people captured in war who were then used as slaves. And of course, that was completely wrong. What is different from 1480 onward is that, beginning with Portugal, the Portuguese began to capture and buy Africans from,

first of all, the west coast of Africa. And they started transporting them across the Atlantic to the Caribbean, to South America, and eventually to North America as well. And beginning with the Portuguese and then the Spanish, French, Dutch, and British, that slave trade then just grew dramatically from that beginning and around 1480.

There is a very fine history of this, which just came out a few years ago. It is the definitive history by a Welshman named Thomas. It is the best history of the slave trade that has ever been written. That was the first instance, really, in the history of the enslavement of one race by another race for purely economic purposes. And that is really what happened from that point onward. Millions and millions of Africans were transported across the Atlantic to North, South, and Central America and the Caribbean over the next several hundred years. And what is appalling about that period of history is, as I say, really two things in terms of the Church's involvement and lack of response biblically to what was taking place. The first was the failure of churches in Europe and in the Americas to send missionaries to Africa, which is what they should have been doing in obedience to Jesus' command. And the second failure, of course, was the failure to speak against the slave trade and against slavery, with very few exceptions. And there are a few exceptions. The Quaker Church here in America, from very early on, was passionately involved in fighting against slavery. They did not fight, of course, because Quakers are pacifists, but they protested against slavery and against the slave trade.

In a very consistent way for a long period of time, the other church that was involved from its beginning was the Covenanters, a small group of Presbyterians of Scottish descent. From their beginnings in the United States they spoke passionately against slavery and the slave trade, and they refused to be involved in it in any kind of way at all. They disciplined church members who were involved in it. They would not welcome any other Presbyterians, or any other professed Christians who were involved, to the Lord's Table in their churches at any point, and that caused all sorts of criticism for them, of course. They were very involved in proclaiming the Gospel to black people around them, to Africans around them, and at some points they had to move whole churches to avoid the problems. Some of their churches were moved from the Carolinas to Illinois to avoid problems they got into because of their stand against slavery. And then they became extremely involved in the Underground Railroad. When the nation was founded as a nation, at the time of the Declaration of Independence, they refused to acknowledge the United States government as a legitimate government for two reasons. One was because they said it is not explicitly Christian. It simply acknowledges the God of nature; it is basically a deist document. That was their stand. And only in the 1970s did they finally acknowledge the legitimacy of the government. And also, they absolutely refused to acknowledge the rightness of the Declaration of Independence because of the attitude toward Africans, that they were treated as less than human, and they said this is not a document that a Christian can recognize as something to be obeyed.

Now, they have a wonderful history, though they were a very small church in terms of this. But sadly the overwhelming majority of our churches, and our church members of almost every denomination, failed to either speak or act in any way against slavery and the slave trade. It was not really until William Wilberforce, working in the British parliament in the early 1800s for this, and in fact giving his whole life to it, that there began to be a passionate outcry by Christians against slavery and the slave trade. And that in itself is a wonderful story to read.

Wilberforce was born in an English noble family and was converted as a young man, actually under the ministry of John Newton, who wrote the song "Amazing Grace." That is also a wonderful story. John Newton himself, of course, had been an officer on a slave ship for many years before his own spiritual awakening, and then he was called to ministry. Wilberforce was converted under his ministry and then as a young man devoted his life as a Christian to the abolition of, first, the slave trade, and then the

practice of slavery. When he began, of course, very few people paid any attention. He was a tiny minority, he and his group of friends in the British Parliament. He kept reintroducing bills for a period of 40 years and eventually was able to change the law. It is a wonderful example of a Christian realizing that if you are going to change anything, it takes a long time, and you have to keep trying. You do not just give up when you do not get anywhere.

This is one of the problems with democracy; it is why Plato called democracy the best form of bad government and the worst form of good government. What he meant by that was that it is the worst form of good government because it takes a very long time to change things, because you have got to change the way people think. You cannot just pass laws if people do not acknowledge them. You have to change the moral climate of a nation in a democracy to change laws; it is something Christians need to recognize at the present time with the battles in which we are all involved. Plato said it is the worst form of good government for that reason. It is the best form of bad government because it takes longer for things to get worse in a democracy for the same reason: because you have got to take the people with you.

Wilberforce recognized the necessity of not only working in parliament, but also working to change the way that people thought. He and his friends committed themselves to two things. One was unceasing attempts to change the law as a Christian obligation in obedience to the Word of God. Second, they had to commit themselves to reshaping the moral climate of the nation. And not only the British nation, but other nations as well, because they then became involved in seeking to abolish the slave trade and slavery not only for Britain, but for every other European nation involved in it: North America, the United States, and South American nations, too. They devoted themselves to changing the moral climate.

If you study the history of politics and government, you will discover that it is really the first popular movement, where Wilberforce and his friends devoted themselves to getting involved at the local level, sending teachers all over Britain to give lectures and have discussions in every village and city hall all over the nation to change the way people thought. And they gave those talks, of course, from a biblical perspective, attacking the institution of slavery and the slave trade as an abomination to God and a disobedience to His Word. And it began a popular movement. It was because the people, under their influence, started speaking out against slavery, writing to their politicians, and putting pressure on them, that eventually the British parliament finally passed the laws that Wilberforce kept introducing year after year, because there was such enormous pressure economically.

During the eighteenth century Britain carried the greatest number of slaves across the Atlantic to the Americas and consequently made enormous amounts of money from it. It was one of the sources of Britain's prosperity at that time, as well as, of course, the source of prosperity of particularly the southern states in the United States that practiced slavery so widely. The prosperity of the South was built on the practice of slavery. If you do not have to pay people, you can make lots of money. Well, those economic pressures made it very difficult for Wilberforce and his friends, but they committed themselves as Christians to that, and it took 44 years of Wilberforce's life; he was almost dead himself. He was dying, in fact, by the time that first the slave trade, and then finally slavery itself, was completely abolished throughout Britain and all of its colonies. And then they also persuaded the British government to use its naval forces to prevent the carrying of slaves across the Atlantic to the Americas, and they gradually managed to bring other nations into that as well. But overall, the history is a tragic history of the Church, with these singular exceptions.

So we have all these examples of our reluctance to obey the commandment of God and go out to the world with the Gospel. My last example here is an example from Wycliffe Bible translators in New Guinea, which I saw in one of their videos about their work. And it was an extraordinarily moving example. It was a Wycliffe Bible translator who was in New Guinea, working in a community there with the people, translating the Bible into their language. That is what Wycliffe does; many graduates of this seminary work for them. Wycliffe Bible translators go into a situation and learn the language of the people who have no written language themselves. They then create a written language for them and translate the Bible into the language of the people, beginning with the New Testament and then the Old Testament. They get it printed and distributed, and then of course they teach the people to read so that they can have God's Word in their own language. Well, this woman was in New Guinea doing this task in an area of New Guinea in the remote jungle.

One day a deputation from another part of New Guinea came on several days' journey to her with a request. And they say, "The news has come to us that you are teaching these people a new message about God's work of deliverance on our behalf, and we are eager for you to come and proclaim this message to our people, too. In fact, we have already built a church for you," and they had. "So, can you come and tell us this message as well?" And she goes with this deputation of people. It is rather like the account in Acts 10, actually, of Cornelius sending a deputation to Peter and the story we were looking at last time. And she goes with these people, and she comes to their villages in this even more remote area of the forest, several days' journey away, and there indeed they built a church. They were ready to hear the Gospel, and they asked her to stay. And she said, "Well, I cannot, because I have to go back and complete the work where God has called me. But I will send to our headquarters and see if they can send you somebody." It is a wonderful example of, again, the Church's inadequate response to the needs of people to hear the Gospel. God is always one step ahead, to say the least. In fact, he is hundreds of steps ahead, not just one, but that is to put it very mildly.

Let me just finish that section with this question. Do we believe the words of Christ when He says in John 4 that the fields are white to harvest? And, at an even deeper level, do we believe that God is a God of compassion and mercy? Because that is really the issue. Remember in starting this section I said so often we speak as if we had more care for people than God does when we ask questions like, "What about those who have never heard the Gospel, is God fair, and why does God not do something about it?" Well, when we look at all these historical examples of the failure of the Church, we see that it is not God's problem, but it is our problem. Our problem really is our failure to come to terms with these words of Jonah. And of course this is Jonah's complaint, though I am not using these words as a complaint, but rather as an encouragement to us. I hope that these words are not a complaint for any of us today: "You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity." That is Jonah's complaint. That is why he is sick to death. And God's response to him is "Nineveh has more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" And of course that is the message of Scripture, that God is concerned about every city and every people on the face of this earth.

Now, we next want to talk about the missionary, God. And I want to go very quickly through this first part, as we have already really gone over this. The apostles seemed reluctant to leave Jerusalem to preach in Samaria, to preach to the Gentiles, and they certainly were reluctant. They did not leave Jerusalem despite the persecution. It was others who went. Peter had a hard time going to the house of an easy Gentile, never mind pagan ones. So the apostles and the Church were reluctant, but of course God was not. And as we saw, God has planned for our salvation. Before the foundation of the world, He prepared for the coming of His Son and then He sent His Son. And the question is about who will see that this work is applied to anyone. God, of course, is the one who does make sure that this work is

applied. Now, we looked already at the example of the Ethiopian eunuch. We saw, of course, that God is the one who brings about His salvation. He takes Philip there by extraordinary means to answer the Ethiopian eunuch's questions about who Isaiah is speaking about in Isaiah 53. If we were to reread the account of the conversion of Cornelius, his household, his friends, and his soldiers from Acts 10, if we look at it from the other side, what you see of course is a record of what God does to bring the message of the Gospel to the house of Cornelius. We were looking at it from the perspective of what it took to get Peter there in terms of Peter's reluctance. If we look at it the other way around, all those points that I made last session reveal to us how committed God was to get the Gospel to the house of Cornelius. It is a really wonderful story.

That brings us to another example, which is the conversion of Saul. The conversion of Saul, of course, is a turning point in the history of missions. The account of the conversion of Saul is perhaps the most dramatic story of anyone's salvation that we read in the New Testament. And the reason it is so dramatic is that Saul is, according to his own testimony, a person who lived at the very heart of Judaism. If you read Paul's description of himself in Philippians 3:4-6, he writes this way about himself: "I was a Hebrew of the Hebrews. In regard to the law I was a Pharisee, and a Pharisee of the strictest sect." That is also how he describes himself in Acts 23:6, saying that "I lived according to the strictest sect of our religion." He was a Pharisee of the strictest persuasion. As for zeal he says, "I persecuted the Church. As for legalistic righteousness, I was faultless. I was passionately committed to obeying every letter of the law of God, and not just God's written laws, but all those laws that Judaism had over the centuries added to the law of God." As we read the book of Acts we see that Saul is present at the stoning to death of Stephen. If you read at the beginning of Acts 8 and the end of Acts 7, it says Saul is there where Stephen is stoned to death. And right after that, Saul then takes the lead in bringing about a terrible persecution of the Church in Jerusalem. And he is not content to destroy the Church only there, so he simply gets letters from the chief priests, and he goes to other cities as well to drag men and women who are Christians off to prison.

As we think about the conversion of Saul and how it came about, we might ask the question of whether the Christians were praying for his conversion. Of course we do not know the answer to that question, but if we look at the way Christians are today, how often do we pray for those who persecute the Church? When I tell you a story, for example, about Christians being enslaved for generations in Pakistan, is your response to pray for them? I am sure it is, and to feel sympathy for them. Or do you also respond and pray for those who are enslaving and persecuting them? It is hard to do. When you think of the Christians enslaved and murdered every day in the Sudan, you pray for them. Do you also pray for their persecutors that they might be converted? You think of Christians being persecuted in China today, and that of course is still happening. What makes the news all the time is the persecution of Falun Gong, because that is the one that is most right out in the open, but Christians are still having a hard time in China today, too. Do you pray not only for the Christians but also for their persecutors? We looked at the example of Jane Fonda, though she was not exactly a persecutor of Christianity. It is very difficult to do. So it is very unlikely that the Christians prayed much for Saul. Maybe one or two of them did, and we will find out one day. We know that Stephen did; that is the wonderful thing. He actually prayed for the people who were killing him, saying, "Lord, forgive them." His prayer is the same as Jesus' prayer on the cross for the people who were crucifying Him. See, that is what we are actually called to do. It is very difficult. It goes so much against the grain, because we like to hate people who hate us. It is very challenging to hear Jesus' word to love your enemies and to bless those who persecute you, and perhaps there were a few other Christians along with Stephen who were blessing, literally, the persecutor, Saul, and the others who were stoning him to death.

So were there prayers for his conversion? Perhaps there were a few, but probably not a lot. I imagine the response of most of the Christians was just to be terrified of Saul. And yet, you know, Saul becomes the apostle to the Gentiles. But if we read about the conversion of Saul, it is such a wonderful story, because it reminds us never to give up on praying for people. You may see somebody who you think is the most hardened enemy of the Gospel and who is most hateful to the Church, and you may draw the conclusion that it is pointless to pray for them. We very easily, and rather lightly, quote passages like, “We are not going to cast our pearls before swine,” and draw the conclusion that somebody is a swine and that he is not going to respond. What is the point of persevering with this person who is so unpleasant, so uninterested, and so hateful? Well, Saul stands as a wonderful reminder. God does not just write people off. He is prepared to reach people who are His enemies and the enemies of His Church and draw them to Himself. And of course, that is what He does with Saul.

We had a wonderful example like this in our church where I was a pastor in England. We had a man come to church one day with his wife and children, and he was in a wheelchair. He had fragile bone disease, and that is a very appalling disease where your bones just break very, very easily, and eventually he died of pneumonia, which is a really shocking way to die. And that is how people with that disease usually die, because every time he coughed he would break another rib, and then they do not mend. So it is excruciatingly painful. But he came to our church and started coming every week. And another friend in our church, one of the deacons in our congregation, is also a man who is in a wheelchair. He is paralyzed from his neck down. When Philip saw this man Peter coming to our church, he said, “That is amazing. That really teaches me a lesson. I knew him 13 years ago, and I thought he was the most cynical person I had ever met in my life. And I decided it was not worth even praying for him, because clearly he was a person who was totally beyond God’s reach. He was so filled with bitterness over his fragile bone disease and so filled with cynicism about life, the possibility of God’s existence, or God being good in everything else. I thought I should not even pray for this man.” And he came to our church and became converted with his family; it was just wonderful. But it really taught Philip a lesson, and all of us a lesson, not to write people off and not to say, “Well here is a person who is completely beyond reach,” because God delights to do what is impossible for us. Actually saving anybody is impossible for us. Remember how Jesus says this to the rich young ruler when he goes away sorrowful. The apostles’ response is to wonder how people can be saved, if this guy goes away like this. And Jesus’ response is, well, with men this is impossible, but with God it is possible. He can save the wealthy, and He can save the cynical, the bitter, and the hard-hearted. And He can save persecutors of His Church, as He does with Saul.

As we read the account of Saul’s conversion, we cannot imagine a more dramatic conversion. Here is Saul, on his way to Damascus with letters from the High Priest, planning to put more Christians in prison. He is breathing out murderous threats—that is the language that the book of Acts uses—against the believers. And while he is on the journey, he is literally arrested, stopped in his tracks, by this shining light from heaven, brighter than the sun, and a voice speaking to him. And of course it is the voice of Christ. “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” And he replies, “Who are you, Lord?” And He says, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.” And Saul comes to faith. It is just a wonderful story of God’s work in saving people. If you doubt that God is the one who saves people, read the story of Saul’s conversion again. It is such a marvelous account of what God does.

Another point that is interesting about this is that as you read this story, even in the account of Saul’s conversion, there is an indication that God has already been at work in Saul’s heart before that day when Jesus confronts him on the Damascus road. Now why do I say that? One of the things that Paul tells us that Jesus said to him was “It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” That is recorded in Acts 26:14, where Paul himself tells about his conversion in one of his trials. He talks about his conversion, and he

adds these words to the words that we read in Acts 9 in the first account of his conversion, because Acts 9 is not complete. So, later on Paul gives us some more details: “Why are you kicking against the goads?” The point is that God is already at work in Saul’s heart before Christ meets him on the Damascus road. Already there are goads pricking at his mind and heart. The text does not tell us precisely, but the point is that the Spirit of God is already at work drawing Saul to Christ before he meets the Lord face to face. Now, we do not know what those goads were. There are several possibilities. It might have been the quality of life, courage, and even the love for Saul in the faces of some of the people he dragged off to prison. Were they the goads that God was using? Maybe it was the words of Stephen as he was dying, and Saul heard those: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” Was it his own excellent knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures, the Messianic prophecies, and what he had heard about Jesus, so that he was beginning to wonder whether he should be quite so confident in his assumption that Christianity is a heresy? We do not know, of course, and again, being of a curious mind, I would love to ask him one day. What were the goads that Jesus referred to? What was He doing in Saul’s mind and heart as He worked to draw him to Himself?

As we think about the conversion of Saul, it is something enormously important in the life of the history of the Church and in the history of missions in particular. It is to the church at Antioch that Saul goes not too long after his conversion. The church at Antioch, you remember, was the one where they first started reaching out to pagan Gentiles, and we read that account at the end of Acts 11. They are the first people, these Christians from North Africa and Cyprus, who start reaching out to the pagan Gentiles, and large numbers of them are converted in Antioch and Syria. And then Barnabas goes and fetches Saul, and Saul comes to work at the church in Antioch to preach, teach, and do the work of evangelism there. And then from that church, as they fast and pray, the Holy Spirit sends Barnabas and Saul out on their first missionary journey, and they start going right across the Roman Empire. And we see missions, as we understand them, really beginning to take place in a planned way by God’s people for the first time.

You might ask a question about the institution of slavery in the Old Testament. I want to make several comments about it. I do not have time to give a full lecture on it, but I will make several comments. First, there are all sorts of laws within Israel that ameliorate the condition of the slaves and also require their liberation. Slaves are to be treated with justice and fairness. In the life of Israel as a nation, they are not property like animals, for example, in the way that modern slavery was practiced in Europe and the Americas. There were laws, as I said, that required their liberation. In the fiftieth year, in the year of Jubilee, slaves were to be released. Liberty was to be proclaimed throughout the land. So, enslavement was not a permanent institution. I think that is the first thing I would say. The second is that there are all sorts of laws in the Old Testament that are allowed because of the hardness of the hearts of the people of Israel. So we ought not to read all Old Testament law as if it were perfect. This is true with regard to marriage and easy divorce, where Jesus uses those words explicitly. He said that these easy divorces were allowed because of the hardness of your hearts, but that is not God’s original intention and not God’s perfect law for you, for the human race, or for His people, and He quotes Genesis. So there are laws about marriage and divorce, and the treatment of women, that are clearly rescinded by Christ very explicitly. And we can say the same as we also think about marriage, with the practice of polygamy, which is clearly not in agreement with God’s law, but is endured by Him in the Old Testament. And there are many other examples like this. You can think of the way Abraham treats his wife, Sarah, which is clearly not in obedience to the commandments of God, and many, many other examples.

In terms of enslavement, you can think of Joseph’s brothers selling him into slavery. And you have many things that take place, both that were recorded as historical events and also laws within the Law of Moses, that are clearly not God’s perfect purpose for His people, but that are endured by God because of the hardness of the hearts of His people. So that is a second thing, I think, that needs to be said about it.

The third thing you should notice is that it is never based on race as such. Slavery in Israel is practiced as it is in the nations around Israel, primarily in the context of people who are taken captive in war. And as I said, this is how most slavery has been practiced throughout history. They are forbidden to kidnap people and to enslave them. So there are all sorts of laws against the enslavement of people. The times you see it practiced are with prisoners of war, and that happens to Israelis. They are taken as prisoners of war by, let us say, the Syrians. We are going to look later at Nahum's conversion. He is converted primarily through the witness of an Israeli slave girl in his home. So slavery is practiced in that context, but the enslavement of other people by kidnapping them is forbidden by the Word of God.

When you come to the New Testament, it is made quite clear that to enslave people is a sin absolutely forbidden by God. To kidnap people and to sell them into slavery is sin in the New Testament. It is spoken of explicitly as a practice that is outside the kingdom of God, Paul says, just like murdering of mothers and fathers, and all kinds of other sins. He includes enslaving people in that list that the Church needed to pay attention to. Now clearly in the New Testament, there are many people who are slaves who become Christians in the early Church. We have lots of examples of this as you read the New Testament letters. And that does not imply an approval of the practice. Slavery is very widely practiced in the Roman Empire. There were enormous numbers of slaves, millions of them in the Roman Empire. And consequently, wherever the Gospel was preached within the Gentile world in particular, there were vast numbers of slaves, and so in many of the New Testament letters you find Paul writing to slaves and their masters. What is interesting to us about that is first that it does not imply any approval of the practice. In fact what you see Paul doing is challenging Christians who are masters to treat their slaves justly and fairly, which is a huge thing. In other words, slaves are not property. These are fellow human beings who are to be treated as people who bear the image of God, and what Paul says to the slave owners is this: "You need to remember you have your own Master in heaven. You are going to give an account to him one day."

And in the most explicit example we have, you find Paul's letter to Philemon, which is a letter to a slave owner about his slave Onesimus. And that is a very interesting example, because in that particular account, Onesimus has run away from Philemon. And just as in any other culture, when people run away they try to hide themselves by going to some major city, and Onesimus ends up in the city of Rome. That is a long way to come from Turkey, from the city of Colossi, that area of Asia Minor in the heart of Turkey to the east of Ephesus. And he runs to the city of Rome where there were enormous numbers of runaway slaves and many others. Onesimus goes there, and while he is there somehow, by the providence of God, he is brought into the hearing of the Gospel proclaimed by Paul. Paul is under house arrest in Rome, waiting for his trial before Caesar, and he spends two or three years in that context. And Onesimus is converted. Then Paul sends Onesimus back as a converted, new Christian. He sends him back to Philemon with a letter. And of course, he is also carrying the letter to the Colossian church, the letter to the Ephesian churches, and probably the letter to the Philippian church also. And we must assume that he did indeed return with these letters, which is why we have them, that they actually reached their destination, and that he did not burn them or disappear with them along the way. So he returned. But as you read the letter to the Philemon, you see Paul's challenge to Philemon, because what he says is this: You are to receive Onesimus back, no longer as a slave, but as a brother in Christ. In fact he goes further, and he says you are to receive this man back, your runaway slave, as if he were me. You are to treat him as if he were the apostle Paul coming to stay in your home. In other words, treat him as an honored guest. That is how Paul challenges Philemon, and again we must assume that is what happened. It would be rather unlikely to have these letters still if Philemon's response had been to burn them as soon as they came and to immediately re-enslave Onesimus. So what you see in the practice of the early Church is that basically, in the context of the Christian home, slavery became completely changed into household servants instead. That was the result of Paul's challenges. It completely changed

the institution. Now as Christianity began to have more impact, and as it grew within the Roman Empire, it eventually led to the abolition of these practices, certainly within the context of the Church and eventually more widely.

What I want to spend a little time on before we start looking in great detail at the way Paul communicated the Gospel, which is going to be the heart of our course here, is the infinite variety of means that God uses to save people. Because our overall theme here in this section is that God is the great missionary. Remember, I have already said to you that one of the things you need to do, when God gives you the privilege of leading somebody to faith in Christ, is to ask them their history. What has God been doing in this person's life that he or she has come to faith?

If we look at the example of Timothy, his story is a very different one, of course, from the conversion of Saul. Now, we are told by the apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 1:2 that Timothy was Paul's true son in the faith. That is the expression Paul uses: "My true son in the faith." This expression, and others like it, when they are used by Paul and the other apostles, appear to indicate that the person who is "my son" or "my child in the faith" was converted primarily through the ministry of the one writing or speaking. If you look at 3 John 4, you will see another example of this, where the apostle John talks to someone there about his child in the faith, someone who was converted primarily through his ministry. So, we must assume from Paul using this expression that Timothy came to faith under the preaching and ministry of the apostle Paul. And we must assume, I think, as we read the account in Acts, that it was while Paul was preaching on his first missionary journey through the cities of Asia Minor. That is southern Turkey today. Timothy lived in the pagan city of Lystra. If you read Acts 16:1, that is where we are told about Timothy, who at this point is already a convert. This is when Paul comes back through these cities and Timothy's faith is well spoken of by the other members of the church, and so Paul calls Timothy to come along with him and learn to be a missionary. Paul took Timothy with him because he was well spoken of, and Paul had him circumcised.

Now, what is fascinating about the city of Lystra, where Timothy lived, is that we read about Paul's time there in Acts 14:19-20. In Acts 14, we read about what happened to Paul there. This is after his and Barnabas' encounter with the people wanting to worship them as if they were gods, and we will talk more about this story later. Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes in verse 12, and then they want to offer sacrifices to them. The chief priest of the temple of Zeus wants to do this, and then they manage to stop them. Verse 18 says that they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them, and then some "Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe." What is fascinating is that in this account of the time of Paul and Barnabas in Lystra, it does not tell us anything about anybody being converted. But in fact, a church was started there, and Timothy is one of the early members of this church. So when Paul comes back there, this church is in existence.

I am going to stop at this point, and I will pick this story up at the beginning of our next session. Now, let me give you one more challenge here. We are going to look at Nahum and the Syrian, the widow of Zarephath, and then I am going to tell you a little bit about my own conversion. Then we are going to talk about why the early Church had such a hard time reaching out to people around them, and why Peter, for example, had such a hard time going to the home of Cornelius. So I would like you to think about that question. Why did Peter and the others have such a hard time reaching out to the Gentiles?