

Philemon the Refresher

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Date: 19 July 2026

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[0:00] Before we continue, let's ask for the Lord's help again in prayer. Let's pray. Father, you promised that your word that goes out will not return to you empty, but will accomplish! what you desire and achieve the purpose for which you sent it. Gracious Father, again, it's on that promise that we now stand. Send forth your word and achieve your purposes, we ask.

And anything from me that is not accurate to it, would you in your mercy cause it to fall to the floor and die? In our Savior's precious name, amen.

I wonder if you've ever been in a room before that someone walks in and suddenly that atmosphere just changes. Now, you might not fully know the person that has just come in, one of the people you're with definitely does, and it's like time slows down as their eyes meet, and you can see there's a story behind that gaze. You're now in the room with the two broken halves of a previous bond that have been brought face to face, and you're sitting with the onlookers, waiting to see how this whole thing is going to pan out.

Now, I'm sure that scenario can trigger memories in many of our minds, but as we come to the little book of Philemon, a book that we will spend the next three Sunday evenings in, we are coming to a letter written into a scenario similar to the one just described.

In verse 1, we see it is written by the apostle Paul as he's in chains. He's been imprisoned for the gospel, and he writes this short letter with Timothy to the beloved friend and fellow worker Philemon. Philemon's the man that has been referred to throughout this letter, hence the title, and it's deeply personal.

[2:00] But keep reading, and in verse 2, we see it's not only addressed to him. Look down with me. And Aphaea, our sister, and Agrippus, our fellow soldier, and the church in your house.

I mean, here Paul is writing a deeply personal letter to his beloved friend and gospel partner, but at the same time, a profoundly public one. It seems a strange approach, doesn't it?

Private, yet public. Writing a letter directly to Philemon, but in such a way that he desires everyone else to be able to listen in.

I mean, what's that all about? Well, before we go forward, we're going to take a step back and view this letter in its big picture context, as it all starts to become clear.

You see, as Philemon and the church that met in his house opened their mailbox to receive this letter from Paul, the letter wasn't the only thing waiting for them.

[3:06] This letter was also sent back accompanied with a person. A person who was well known to the church and was especially well known to Philemon.

And that man was called Anesimus. Now, Anesimus was a disgraced bond servant of Philemon. And he had, for whatever reason, packed up and ditched Philemon and his household, and apparently on unfavorable terms.

It's hinted at later on in this letter that Anesimus might have even stolen from Philemon. And a slave with that type of behavior in Roman society was likely to be put to death.

Now, when we hear the word slave, we immediately start thinking about people being kidnapped or the American slave trade. But let me just make it clear from the beginning of our series in Philemon that this is not the type of slavery that's been referred to here.

Slavery in the ancient Roman Empire wasn't based on race and had more in common with modern-day employer and employee relationships than it did with the American slave trade. Paul, in his letters, speaks strongly against those who would kidnap others, so please don't start picturing Philemon as some villain because he owned Anesimus as his bond servant.

[4:26] He's not, and we'll see that fairly soon. But for now, it's more helpful to picture Philemon more like your boss at work. Because if you're a doctor, teacher, accountant, or any sort of

government employee, back then, you'd most likely be seen as the property of your employer.

That's how civilization was ordered, and Paul is simply just acknowledging and working within the social construct of his day. Now, with all that said, while Anesimus was away, he came across Paul, who was in prison, and amazingly became a Christian.

This disgraced bond servant, this disgraced bond servant who had packed up and ditched, was now a brother in Christ that Paul had welcomed into fellowship. You see, in our first reading, we read from the end of Paul's letter to Colossians and heard that Paul was now sending Anesimus back.

Sending a once disgraced bond servant back to his master, along with a letter that called for the reconciliation. So, just imagine with me, right?

We are no longer in Bon Accord. For the next three weeks, we are a Colossian house church.

We've moved to modern-day Turkey. You can see it as a three-week vacation.

[5:48] And here we are, as a church, who've gathered together in Philemon's home when all of a sudden, Anesimus, the once disgraced bond servant, walks through those back doors, walks in, clocks eyes with Philemon, and hands him this letter.

And for the next three weeks, we are going to be the church family that is watching this all take place. As we become something of the onlooking crowd that gets to see Paul pastor this whole messy, delicate, and difficult situation.

As he publicly, but tenderly, sits down with Anesimus on one side and Philemon on the other, and him in between. And you see, as we watch him use gospel threads to mend what's been broken, we are going to see that Paul isn't just interested in stitching things back together between a bond servant and their master.

No, he's seeking to thread a complete transformation. A complete transformation that only the gospel could produce. But you see, for now, our focus needs to turn from Philemon, the letter, to the rest of our opening verses, where we really get to see who this man Philemon is.

We know he's a beloved friend of Timothy and Paul, but why? What's he like, and what's his reputation? The man reading this private letter in front of a very public audience.

[7:31] And with that big picture in mind, please now look with me to Philemon and verse 4, as we begin to look at Philemon, the refresher. Verse 4. I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers.

Here we see that Philemon is a person that Paul is profoundly thankful for. Now, that might seem like an obvious observation, I mean, great. What's so special about that?

Let's just pause here for just a moment. Right at the start, as Paul sits down with Philemon to address this difficult situation, he begins by making sure Philemon knows just how thankful he is for him.

And the question is, isn't it? Well, then, why? What is it that Paul is so thankful for? I mean, imagine being someone that Paul would publicly say, I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers.

What great spiritual feat has Philemon done to make Paul think about him in such a way? I mean, how would you answer that? What is it you think you need to do or become in order to be someone that other Christians can look at and say, I thank God when I remember you?

[8:48] Maybe you think it's only for the people that seem to be able to do everything, you just can't. That's how often my brain works. Before we note that in our own individual answers, look with me as the sentence continues in verse 5.

Because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints. Now, admittedly, this is a difficult verse to translate, but not as difficult as verse 6 that we'll come to later on.

But in verse 5, Paul seems to say one of the things he's thankful for is Philemon's faith. But a faith that as well as being toward the Lord Jesus is also for all the saints. Now, what does that mean? Well, that's the big question that I don't know and commentators disagree on. But taking a step back from that, what we can see is that Paul is thankful for Philemon's faith in the Lord Jesus and Philemon's love for all the saints.

Faith in Jesus and love for other Christians. That's what Paul hears when he hears Philemon's name and that's what's causing him to give thanks to God.

[10:01] I wonder if that was what was top of your list. Because we can, can't we, think of these qualities as basic or even just mundane.

I mean, how would you react if another Christian came up to you and said, you know, I was praying for you last night and I just gave thanks to God for the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus. or I just gave thanks for the love that you have for other Christians.

Now, I'm sure we'd be delighted, but we'd not be in the back of our minds the thought of, that's nice, but a little bit generic, is it not? It's like when a mother gets a card from a kid in primary school. They've had to make one for Mother's Day and she opens it up and it says, love you, Mom. You make the best ham sandwiches. Ham sandwiches, eh? That's all you could think of when your teacher asked you what you loved about me.

But brothers and sisters, faith toward the Lord Jesus and love for other Christians are not the ham sandwiches of the Christian life. They are the crown jewels.

[11:10] Your faith in Jesus, no matter how weak or frail, shimmers like the finest of pearls. And your love for other Christians is like the most pleasant perfumes.

You might not feel like anything special. You might even have more questions than answers. Being aware of all the things you're getting more wrong than right. But if you're a believer here tonight and you have your faith in Jesus and you're loving other Christians around you, you're someone to give thanks for.

It's no small thing you are doing, so be greatly encouraged. Now, in verse 7, Philemon's love is unpacked for us in more detail.

Just look down with me to that verse. Philemon is a man that has faith toward the Lord Jesus and love for his fellow believers.

And you see, that love shows itself in refreshing their hearts. Now, I just love Paul's turn of phrase here. That's where the title for this message came from. Paul's saying, Philemon, you're a refresher.

[12:31] And you refresh me with joy and comfort as I hear you refreshing the hearts of others. See, the way my mind works, this makes me think of Philemon as some sort of water boy going around, handing out cups of water to fellow believers in the heat of the day, refreshing them and making them go, ah.

Now, what does it practically mean for Philemon to have refreshed fellow believers? How did he do it? Well, we aren't told. He likely was the one who showed hospitality having the church meet in his home.

But whatever he did, it refreshed the hearts of those around him. And brothers and sisters, I'm sure we can all think of other believers that have refreshed us in so many different ways in our journey home to glory.

People that have just come alongside us at different seasons of life, that have refreshed us either through sharing with us God's word or through practical acts of service. They've sat and listened and offered biblical counsel.

They've opened their homes, carried our burdens, or even just babysat the kids when we needed a night alone. There are lots of ways you can give a glass of water.

[13:47] And brothers and sisters, seeking to refresh one another's hearts as we press on in the race we are to run is something that should be praised. Maybe you've been a Christian for many years, and to you, your life looks very unimpressive.

Just the same, ordinary faithfulness year after year. And it feels like all you've been doing is handing out cups of water to people who've been and went. Dear brother or sister, take great encouragement.

Refreshing other believers is no waste of time or resource. It's a great service for the king, no menial task, and it's a type of life that's to be aspired for.

Or maybe you're not a Christian here this evening, and you're yet to put your trust in Jesus because you think trusting him and living a life that bears fruit and loving his people is just such a waste of time.

Maybe you saw your parents do it. You saw your friends, and you decided that would never be you. I know that's how I used to think. So I hope this challenges your false point of view.

[15:05] Trusting in Jesus and that bearing fruit in ordinary faithfulness, handing out cups of refreshment to other believers, truly is something to be praised and truly is the life to give thanks

for.

But as we think of giving thanks, remember with me who Paul thanked back in verse 4.

He thanked God, didn't he? Now again, that might sound obvious. But what would you think if, let's say for example, Ben came up to me after the service and handed me a freshly baked lasagna? That would be nice. And instead of turning around to him to say thanks, I turned around to Sarah and thanked her for the food instead. Now what would that tell you? It would tell you that I know the person who was really behind the gift.

It may have been Ben who gave it to me, but I know who was really the mastermind behind the whole thing. And so it is here. Paul gives thanks to God for Philemon's love and faith as he hears of him refreshing the lives of others because Paul knows the true source of every good thing.

[16:20] Any good he sees in Philemon was first given to him by God and any encouragement that he received through Philemon finds its ultimate source in him. Now, am I implying that we should never directly thank someone for the encouragement that they are to us?

No, not at all. If anything, we should be doing more of that. But as we do, let's not forget the true source of every good thing. Because when we do, we can fall into the danger of idolizing people like Philemon.

And this is something I know in and of myself I'm very prone to do. There's two common ways you see that cashing out. The first is that when we see godly characteristics in other believers, we instantly want to stop at them, don't we?

We want to put them on some sort of pedestal and idolize people like Philemon as if they're the ultimate source. And when we do that, we don't rejoice in the good of others or give thanks for it. Well, we might publicly, but not deep down. Instead, we are secretly envious or even discouraged as we internally try comparing ourselves. ourselves. But when we recognize any good in us or any good in others comes from God, it frees us from being crippled and it frees us from being bitter.

[17:46] But secondly, another danger is that when we receive refreshment or encouragement from others, we can be tempted to disconnect that encouragement from God himself.

I mean, just think with me to Paul sitting in prison. He's sitting there enduring a season he likely never would have chosen. And when we're in seasons or situations of life like that, if you're anything like me, when my faith is feeling shaky or I'm going through something challenging and another believer comes along and refreshes my heart, whether by a timely conversation or a helpful book or even podcast, I can so quickly view it as if it's something God had nothing to do with. Just a timely chance or benefit of my current situation. It shows itself in thoughts like, I'm so thankful you were there for me because God doesn't seem to be lately.

Or I don't know where I'd be without X, Y, or Z because God doesn't seem to be answering my prayers. Brothers and sisters, let's see what Paul saw as he sat in prison being encouraged by news of his fellow worker.

every good and perfect gift really does come from above, coming down from your heavenly Father who knows what you need like he knows every hair on your head.

[19:11] Don't, like me, let yourself be robbed of the assurance and comfort that comes from receiving every good thing, every timely refreshment, every treasured relationship as if it comes from the hand of God himself.

because seeing sources of refreshment like that will stop the water from being stale and instead make it go down that much more cool and that much more sweet.

Now, you probably noticed that we've missed a verse, right? Seemed to have just brushed past verse 6. But I can assure you that we haven't, even though it's the most challenging verse out of the whole book to try and understand.

But you see, in verse 6, Paul is laying out his big prayer for Philemon. Verses 4, 5, and 7 show us why Paul is so thankful for him and we've seen it's because he's a refresher, a man of faith and love.

And seeing that first is what makes this prayer so interesting. Look down, verse 6, Now, that sounds like a very Christian thing to say, doesn't it?

[20:28] The type of statement we'd happily not along to. But when we slow down and try and get a grasp of what's been said, it gets a lot more difficult. But what I'm confident can be said about this statement is that Paul prays that Philemon's faith would become more effective, which appears to be a subtle pointer to his request later on in the letter to receive Onesimus.

So, here is a man that Paul is thankful to God for as he refreshes his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ and yet Paul still prays that his faith might become more and more effective.

There is still more for Philemon to do, store more ways that he is to grow. Paul wants Philemon the refresher, well, to keep on refreshing.

He wants his faith to become more and more effective for who will end the verse 6 for Christ.

Philemon hasn't arrived yet. There is still more growth and still more good to be done for Christ.

And Paul is going to suggest a very specific good later on in the letter. And we'll explore more as the weeks go on. So, we can see from this that no matter what stage we might be in, there's always more ways that we can grow.

[21:50] More goods to be done. More glasses of water to be given. So, if you're a believer here tonight and you have your faith in Jesus which has worked itself out into love for other Christians, be encouraged to keep going.

Keep seeking to grow and doing good for Christ. Don't think that because you've already had so many years of faithful service that now it's time to give up or start packing it in.

Because, I hope, I hope we've all now seen from Philemon's example that having faith in Christ and loving our brothers and sisters in the church by bringing them refreshment, it's a glorious way to live.

a glorious way that many of you here amongst us are living. Now, often you can feel more like a pack mule that just keeps getting loaded up with more and more string.

I mean, how many faithful saints serving churches feeling like that? Like the only time someone speaks to them is when another thing is needing to get done or another rota is needing to be filled.

But, for all of you here that for years have been faithfully loving other Christians around you, serving Christ in many unseen ways, thank you.

[23:09] You're someone to thank God for if you really are. So please, keep going. And may your faith become more and more effective as you seek to continue refreshing those around you.

Because, it's all for Christ. And he's keeping record of every small glass that's ever been given in his name. So, as you look to round this all off, to summarize it all in one sentence, Philemon, I thank God you're a refresher.

And my prayer is that you'll keep on refreshing. With that in mind, let's close now in prayer. Let's pray.

Amen. Dear Heavenly Father, thank you that you're the source of every good thing and that you use fellow believers to refresh our hearts on our way home to glory.

Lord, we ask that you would give us all a renewed desire to keep our trust in Christ and to keep loving your people. Would you keep seeking to bring refreshment to those around us and enable us to hold that way of life in high esteem?

[24:29] May we not think of it as ordinary, but instead would we see it as glorious? And we confess that any good in us comes from you and any good in others is your doing.

So please, help us to remember that as we look at ourselves and as we look at each other. And Father, we give you thanks for those in our lives that refresh our hearts.

You know them, each one. Thank you for giving them to us and we ask that you would keep them faithful. Keep them going, going strong in the Lord and seeking to do more and more good for Christ.

Lord, we thank especially of our brothers and sisters from the States. Thank you for the encouragement they have been to us and may you bless them as they have richly blessed us. But

Lord, as we now turn to sing your praises once again, renew our hearts and minds to the words we're about to sing.

Remind us again of the servant king we follow. In Jesus' precious name. Amen. Amen. Amen.