

Refreshing Christians

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[0 : 00] As I mentioned in the morning, we're going to take a wee break this evening from our study of the Ten Commandments. And, well, we'll return to that, God willing, if travel plans are confirmed, as I hope they will be, in three weeks, three Sundays from today.

What kind of Christian are you? What adjective could you place before the word Christian to describe yourself?

Now, perhaps many adjectives might be appropriate or accurate. Perhaps you're a bright Christian, a committed Christian.

Maybe you would describe yourself in other ways, as a nominal Christian, or perhaps a struggling Christian. And the list could go on. How would you describe yourself?

Maybe another question that I hadn't intended to pose, but could be posed, is how would others describe you? Well, there are no shortage of possibilities.

[1 : 14] What about a refreshing Christian? Are you a refreshing Christian? Refreshing is one of those feel-good words.

Certainly in my ears. The word refreshing has a very high feel-good factor. It conjures images of an ice-cold drink for a parched throat on a hot day.

Not a regular occurrence. In Aberdeen, it has to be said. But if you have powers of imagination, you can maybe just about get there. A refreshing drink. Maybe a soothing bath after a long and stressful day.

It's refreshing. Or maybe the word conjures up the picture of a time away with friends, away from the routine of work and responsibilities.

And you can get away with people who you are close to, you are friends with, and you can simply chill and hang out and enjoy friendship. And it's refreshing.

[2 : 21] You come back from that time refreshed. Well, whatever it means to be a refreshing Christian, and we're going to be thinking about this evening, I would certainly like to be one.

I would like to be a refreshing Christian. I hope you too would wish to be one. And I am sure that any church, any congregation, including our own here at Bon Accord, would be very well served by a good number of refreshing Christians in our fellowship.

Well, what does such a specimen look like? How can I be a refreshing Christian? This evening we want to meet one. I think that should help, to actually meet a refreshing Christian and see what he looks like, and as we examine, admire, consider what this refreshing Christian looked like, so we will know what it is we're dealing with, and what it is that we too can aspire to, if that's the way of describing it.

We've read Paul's letter to Philemon. And in it, it is said of Philemon the following. In verse 7, we read, Paul directs these words to Philemon, your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.

You have refreshed the hearts of the saints. Philemon, a refreshing Christian. So what do you need to be a refreshing Christian?

[4 : 13] Well, you've got to have faith, and you've got to have faith in the following ways or the following descriptions or characteristics of the faith that you've got to have if you are going to be a refreshing Christian.

And three things that I think we find here in the letter, and particularly just revolving around that verse that we've just read. You need a faith grounded in Jesus.

We'll see that in a moment. You need a faith demonstrated in love. And you need a faith shared with others. These three things certainly help to present to us or describe to us a refreshing Christian, a Christian with a faith with these characteristics.

Let's think of them each in turn. First of all, a faith grounded in Jesus. Notice what Paul says of Philemon, this man who refreshed the hearts of the saints.

What does he say concerning him? In verse 5, he says there, I always thank my God as I remember you, Philemon, in my prayers. Why?

[5 : 28] Because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus. I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints.

Philemon had a faith grounded in the Lord Jesus. Now, what does that mean? It's a very familiar phrase or term, faith in the Lord Jesus. But what does it mean?

The Greek word translated faith here in verse 5 is a word that certainly as it is used on this occasion, it can have one of two related meanings.

The two meanings are not mutually exclusive. They can go together. The first meaning of the word faith here is, as maybe we would immediately understand it, the idea of trust in Jesus.

When we read that, I hear of your faith in the Lord Jesus. I think the thought that would immediately come to mind is that Paul is speaking about the manner in which Philemon is trusting in Jesus as his Savior.

[6 : 35] He's trusting in Jesus as his Lord. He's become a Christian. He's realized that Jesus is the one he must have faith in, that he must trust in for his salvation.

And that certainly is true of Philemon. But the other idea or the other emphasis, if you wish, of this word can be of loyalty, of loyalty towards Jesus.

Or if you wish, faithfulness in the service of Jesus. And so when Paul speaks of Philemon's faith in the Lord Jesus, he's perhaps not thinking exclusively of the fact that Philemon is trusting in Jesus, which clearly he is, but of his faithfulness in the service of Jesus, his loyalty towards Jesus.

On this occasion, it would seem that both are intended. The reality that we have to deal with in considering this verse is that the New International Version, this Bible that we have as the church Bible, is less than helpful in the manner in which it translates what Paul actually says here.

And at face value, as we read it here before us, as I say, the immediate thought is that Paul would be referring to Philemon's trust in Jesus, and perhaps that alone.

[7 : 59] But if we listen, and I'm going to ask you to do that now, to a literal translation of the verse. If we listen carefully, I have the advantage that I have it written before me.

You have to rely on just listening to me read it. But if you listen carefully, you will notice that it introduces another way of understanding what Paul is saying.

In verse 4, I'll begin reading from verse 4, and I'll read verse 4 as we have it before us, and then I'll simply run into what would be a literal translation of what Paul says.

I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and the faith which you have towards the Lord Jesus and toward or for all the saints.

It's really quite different. What the NIV has done, I think taking liberties, has been to understand Paul as saying two things, that Philemon has faith in Christ Jesus and love towards the saints.

[9 : 03] But actually what is said is that he has faith towards Jesus and the saints and love towards Jesus and the saints. Now that would suggest that Paul is using the word faith here more in the sense of faithfulness or loyalty.

You see, Philemon doesn't have faith in the saints. He is faithful towards the saints. He is loyal in his service of the saints, but he's not trusting in the saints.

Certainly not in the manner that this word would suggest. So, this faith grounded in Jesus that is a feature of a refreshing Christian is certainly one that involves trusting in Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

But perhaps particularly the emphasis here is on faithfulness in his service, of loyalty to him. So, it's not simply that we say, well, yes, I'm a Christian, I'm trusting in Jesus, but that in the lives that we live, we demonstrate loyalty to him.

And indeed, here Paul speaks of loyalty and faithfulness to the saints and in the service of the saints. In any case, these two aspects of faith are both foundational for a refreshing Christian.

[10 : 37] Faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior and loyalty to him or faithfulness in his service. And so, before we move on, I ask myself the question and I pose you the question, is that true of you?

Do you trust in Jesus? You can't be a refreshing Christian if you aren't first a Christian. That is the fundamental first step. Perhaps there is somebody here this evening who as yet has not put their trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior.

And I would urge you, I would commend you to do so. Recognize your own condition, your own need as a sinner. And recognize in Jesus the one who God has provided to forgive your sin. The one who God has provided as your Savior if you would but put your trust in him. That you, with Philemon, would enjoy, would experience faith in the Lord Jesus.

But I ask those who by God's grace are Christians and who are trusting in Jesus, are you faithful in the service of Jesus?

[11 : 52] Is your discipleship a loyal discipleship? Are you loyal to him? Do you lift up his banner before all? Or do you hide him away?

Are you ashamed of him in certain circles or in certain circumstances? Or are you loyal and faithful to him? A refreshing Christian is one who, like Philemon, has a faith grounded in Jesus.

Trusting in Jesus and loyal to Jesus. But also, before moving on, this faith of Philemon, this faith that is a feature of the refreshing Christian, is not only genuine faith, clearly it is genuine faith, but I think we can also say that it is a growing faith, or certainly a persevering faith.

And I say that for the following reason. Paul here, when he commends the faith of Philemon, notice on what basis he does so. In verse 5 he says, or his gratitude is based on what we read there in verse 5, because I hear about your faith.

Now it's interesting that Paul should base his commendation, or his words of gratitude, on what he has heard about Philemon. And I say that's curious because Paul knew Philemon personally.

[13 : 13] He knew Philemon very well. He describes him as his dear friend. He had spent much time with Philemon. He didn't need to say that I've heard about your faith. He had witnessed it.

He had experienced it face to face. So why does he say, because I hear about your faith, or because I have heard about your faith? Well, it seems to me the reason he would say that is because Paul has left Philemon.

He's no longer with him. He's now in jail, far away. Time has elapsed. And in that time that has elapsed, he has had the opportunity to hear that Philemon is continuing, is persevering in his faith. So he grounds his words not simply in what he remembers of Philemon from time back, but he grounds what he says on what he has heard in the present, if you wish.

Those who have come and who have said, remember Philemon. Well, he continues in the faith. He perseveres in the faith. He's growing in his faith. So this faith of Philemon, this faith grounded in Jesus, this faith that is a feature of the refreshing Christian, not only about his trusting in Jesus as Savior, not only his loyalty in the service of Jesus, but of course this is related to the aspect of loyalty.

[14 : 37] It is a persevering and growing faith. And Paul notes that and rejoices in that and is grateful to God for that. So again, the question comes to us, is our faith, is your faith a growing faith?

It may well be, and I'm sure it is, a genuine faith. But is it a growing faith? Is it a vibrant, persevering faith? Such a faith is the stuff of refreshing Christians.

So that's the first thing we wanted to notice, that the faith of Philemon, the faith of this refreshing Christian, is a faith grounded in Jesus, but it's also a faith demonstrated in love.

That same verse that we've been considering, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. Genuine faith finds expression in love.

And Paul gives thanks for Philemon's faith, but also for his love. And again, if we go back to the point that I was highlighting concerning perhaps a more helpful way of translating just literally what Paul says, that also aids us at this point, as we consider Philemon's faith demonstrated in love.

[16 : 00] I remind you what the literal translation of verse 5 would be. I give thanks to God, because I hear of your love and the faith which you have towards the Lord Jesus and towards, or for, all the saints.

Just as the loyalty of Philemon was towards Jesus and the saints, so the love of Philemon is directed to Jesus, but is directed also to the saints, to all the saints.

Of course, his love for Jesus is evident. It finds expression in the love for those who, like him, are trusting in Jesus, the saints, the disciples, the Christians.

And as we think and as we focus in on this aspect of his love, yes, directed to Jesus, but if we focus on his love for the saints, his love for all the saints as it is described for us, we can say this about it, that it has two elements.

It has both breadth and it has depth. This love of Philemon, this faith that he has demonstrated in love, two aspects, breadth and depth.

[17 : 14] In what sense breadth? Well, in the sense that Paul speaks of Philemon's love for all the saints, for all the saints, the difficult ones, the awkward ones, the new ones, the poor ones, the demanding ones, the ones that maybe Philemon disagreed with on matters of maybe even doctrine or worship or other matters.

Not everybody thought the same way. But Philemon's love did not discriminate on the basis of these differences. His love, says Paul, was for all the saints, all without exception. And that's the way it is with refreshing Christians. Refreshing Christians aren't Christians who will pick and choose who among the saints they will honor with their love and with their affection. No, here Philemon, a refreshing Christian whose conduct, whose life refreshed the hearts of the saints, is described by Paul as one who enjoys a love that is for all the saints. There is then, as I say, a breadth to his love. And again, without laboring the point, I simply would leave that question for us.

[18 : 33] How broad is our love? How broad is your love? But as well as breadth, there is depth, or if you wish, quality, to the love of Philemon for all the saints.

And as we think of the depth of his love or the quality of his love, it's here that I want to develop a little the language of refreshment. We began by speaking about it.

Indeed, all we're saying revolves around this picture of a refreshing Christian. But what actually is being described? Certainly, this refreshing the hearts of the saints is a description of the manner in which Philemon loves the saints.

But what is it that is actually going on? What does Philemon actually do that the saints are refreshed in the manner described?

Well, we don't know for sure because Paul doesn't go into details about what Philemon actually was doing that had this as its result, that the hearts of the saints were refreshed.

[19 : 40] But even though we don't have it explicitly mentioned for us, I think we can reasonably suggest two aspects of this refreshing that is spoken of here in verse 7.

The first thing, I am sure, is that it involved Philemon's practical love for the believers, for the saints, for the Christians. Everything suggests that the home of Philemon was a warm, open Christian home.

We notice there in verse 2 how the church met in his home. The home of Philemon was open that the believers might gather there to break bread, to worship God, to have fellowship one with another.

That's the kind of home it was. He was a generous Christian. He was a hospitable Christian. He didn't guard his private space and say, well, up until here and no further.

No, his was an open home where with touching Christian liberality, he would generously provide for the needs of the saints, of all the saints, and in the measure that he was able.

[20 : 51] It would seem, we don't know, but it seems reasonable to presume that he was comfortably off. He would seemingly have had quite a large home in order to accommodate this gathering of Christians.

He was a man who had, as the letter goes on to make clear, that isn't our concern this evening, but he had slaves or servants that attended to his needs.

And so this wealth that he enjoyed was placed at the service of the saints. He was generous to those in need.

There was a meal for the hungry, a word of encouragement for the downcast, a listening ear to the confused, an open home full of love. And in this manner, he refreshed the saints.

He refreshed the hearts of the saints. To visit the home of Philemon was to leave unburdened and refreshed. I think we've all experienced in our own Christian lives what that's like, that when by God's grace, he's placed us in a situation where we discover a home, a Christian home, where we can go and we are refreshed.

[22 : 08] We are able to go and unburden ourselves and we leave different, refreshed by the love of those who are there. Well, that was true of Philemon.

In this way, I am sure, Paul speaks of him refreshing the hearts of the saints. His practical love. But I think there's another element that lies behind this language of Philemon as one who refreshed the hearts of the saints, of Philemon as a refreshing Christian.

And it is this, and it's clearly connected with what has just been said, but there is an added element. What I would describe as his Christ-like behavior. And I say that on the basis of the manner in which Paul uses this same phrase again in verse 20.

In verse 20, when he's broaching the subject of Onesimus, who will be the runaway slave who is being returned to Philemon. And as he broaches that subject and as he exhorts and encourages Philemon to receive Onesimus, as we are very sure he did, notice what he says there in verse 20. I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord. And then he says, refresh my heart in Christ. Exactly the same language that we have there in verse 7.

[23 : 30] But here Paul is speaking of his own heart. And he's saying to Philemon, you refresh the hearts of others. Well, now refresh my heart. And how would he do that? Well, he would do that not by showing practical love to Paul, not by offering hospitality to Paul or catering to Paul's physical needs, though he would do that on another occasion, or certainly that was Paul's hope.

But his refreshing of Paul's heart would be achieved by his Christ-like behavior in connection with Onesimus.

And in his receiving graciously and lovingly Onesimus, that would refresh Paul's heart. When he hears, when subsequently, when Onesimus would arrive and he would be received by Philemon and Paul would receive the report, Onesimus was received graciously and generously by Philemon, at that point, Paul's heart would be refreshed.

Why? Because of the manner in which Philemon had behaved. Because of Philemon's Christian character in receiving Onesimus, as Paul encourages him to do.

So, in these ways, Onesimus, rather, sorry, Philemon, refreshed the hearts of the saints. His practical love, his Christian character, exemplary, commendable, attractive to those who lived around him.

[25 : 06] What about the impact of this refreshing? There's a reference to that in verse 7. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.

Now, it's important to note here that the word Paul uses that is translated heart there in verse 7 and also in verse 21 is not the Greek word *cardia* that we can recognize and its connections to heart, cardiac arrest, and cardiologists.

The most common word that would be used for heart in the New Testament. Here, Paul uses another word that literally isn't heart. The idea is of the internal organs or in the older versions it would have been translated the bowels.

Not a very happy translation today. But the idea is of the very heart of somebody, the very soul of somebody, way down deep inside of somebody.

And Paul says of Philemon that this refreshing reached to the very core of the being of the Christians who were so blessed to be refreshed by him.

[26 : 19] The saints are not only helped by Philemon, they're not only encouraged by Philemon, they are deeply moved and strangely warmed in their soul. I don't know, some of you, you have to be more or less my age, so this excludes a great number of you this evening.

But some of you may remember the Heineken advert going back at least 20 years. Heineken, the beer that reaches the parts that other beers cannot reach. Forgive the rather flippant illustration. Well, we can say of Philemon that his love reached the parts that other loves did not reach. It refreshed the heart of the saints.

Aspects of a refreshing Christian. The final thing, and more briefly, not only a faith grounded in Jesus, not only a faith demonstrated in love, but a faith shared with others.

Then in verse 6, I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith. We've spoken very highly of Philemon. But is Philemon the finished article? No, he's not.

[27 : 27] He still has much to learn. And Paul here exhorts him to share his faith. What does this mean? Well, it doesn't mean in the first instance what it might appear to mean.

It doesn't mean in the first instance that Paul is exhorting Philemon to witness, in the language we would probably use, to verbally share the gospel message with others.

Good though that was, and no doubt something that Philemon did and ought to have done. But rather the idea here is of Philemon living the faith. The actual word translated there, sharing, is the Greek word *koinonia*, which means, or is often translated, fellowship.

Really what Paul is saying to Philemon is, he's encouraging him to continue to do what he is already doing in loyal service to the saints and no doubt to others also. And what will be the result of this koinonia? What will be the result of this sharing? Well, you might expect Paul to say something along the lines of, so that the saints might be blessed or that others might be drawn to the faith.

[28 : 32] But rather, Paul says something else. I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.

It's a rather surprising outcome that Paul identifies to Philemon sharing his faith. But it's a very crucial point that Paul is making. Paul, almost in the passing, is answering a big question that should concern us all.

He's answering the question, how can I grow as a Christian? How can I deepen my understanding of the faith? How can I know Christ better? And what is the answer that Paul gives here, as I say, almost in the passing?

He says it doesn't involve reading great tomes of theology, good though that is. It doesn't involve some mystical high that will take us to another level of understanding of the deep things of God. No, he says, we will grow in our understanding of Christ in our day-to-day service for Christ, a service that involves serving others.

[29 : 38] This merits being developed more, but we're not going to do so. Serving Christians are growing Christians. In here, you can grow in knowledge, but out there in the service of God, you will grow in understanding of every good thing you have in Christ, of His love for you, of His grace for every trial, of His patience and His willingness to forgive, His wisdom granted in every situation as you serve Him, as you share your faith, as you serve the saints.

So, let's examine ourselves and see in what measure we are sharing our faith, and as we do, in service to God and to His people and to those who God places in our way, that we would experience what Paul assures Philemon's he will experience, which is that he would grow to a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.

What kind of Christian are you? Are you a refreshing Christian? Is your faith grounded in Jesus? Is your faith demonstrated in love, both broad and deep?

Will you share your faith in your day-to-day living, in service to the saints, but in service also to all who are placed in your path or indeed beyond your path?

If you can answer in the affirmative to these questions, then you are a refreshing Christian. And as a refreshing Christian, you will also know the thrill and the blessing of coming to that full understanding of every good thing that you have in Christ.

[31 : 29] God grant that that would indeed be our experience. Let us pray. Thank you.