

# Philemon 1

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Date: 16 August 2015

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[ 0 : 00 ]     The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. Especially that last phrase.

That can be translated and often is translated in a related but slightly different way, he refreshes my soul. God is the one who brings us refreshment, refreshment to our soul, to our very inner being.

How does he do that? How does God refresh us? Well, that is a big question and God does so in different ways. But one of the ways in which God refreshes his people is through others, through refreshing Christians who God places in our path and we are refreshed by them. What about you? Are you a refreshing Christian? Is that an adjective that you would think qualifies for yourself? We're probably reluctant to apply adjectives to ourselves, but sometimes we need to pose the question and try to honestly answer the question. Am I, are you, are we refreshing Christians? The very word refreshing has a feel-good factor about it. We all enjoy being refreshed. It conjures up images, maybe of an ice-cold drink on a hot day. It's maybe an image that's difficult to conjure up given the summer we've had, but with a bit of imagination I'm sure you can do that.

An ice-cold drink when you're parched and thirsty. It's refreshing. Or maybe after a long day at work and it's been difficult and stressful and you can pour a bath and just have a refreshing and soothing soak in a bath. It's refreshing. Or maybe it's a word that conjures up for you the enjoyment and the refreshment that you can experience in the company of good friends. When maybe you don't have the normal responsibilities of a day and you can simply spend time with friends and loved ones. Maybe the holidays have provided for some of you that opportunity. I hope they have, where you've been able to maybe just get away and just have a time with those you love that has been refreshing.

Of course, holidays aren't always refreshing. Maybe some of you have experienced holidays that are far from refreshing, but I trust that for you this summer has provided refreshing holidays. Well, however we understand the word or whatever images it conjures for us, I hope that it would be our desire that we would be refreshing Christians. I'm sure that any congregation, and we think especially of our own, would be very well served by any number of refreshing believers in our fellowship. Well, what does that look like?

[ 3 : 47 ]     What does a refreshing Christian look like, and how can I be one? Well, what we're going to do this morning is we're going to meet one, and as we meet one who is so described, we hope to learn from this believer who is described for us as one who refreshed others. And we're going to meet this Christian in the New Testament in the book of Philemon. The book of Philemon, it's right at the end of the New Testament, just before Hebrews. It's just one chapter, so it can be tricky to find, but if you just head towards the end of the New Testament, and if you're in Hebrews, you've passed it, and just head back a few pages. It's on, in this Bible, it's on page 1,200. This is a short letter that Paul wrote to the man whose name is given for the letter to

Philemon. There was a particular purpose in Paul writing. It concerned a slave, Onesimus, who had been part of Philemon's household, who it seems had escaped, and in circumstances wonderfully ordered by God, had come to faith through Paul, and Paul now was sending him back. And he was encouraging, he was urging Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother, and to receive him with love and care, and very particularly as a brother, no longer a slave, but a brother in Christ. That's what the letter is about. But our particular concern is how Philemon is described in this letter in one particular way. So let's read from verse 1 through to verse 7.

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy, our brother, to Philemon, our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia, our sister, to Archippus, our fellow soldier, and to the church that meets in your home.

Grace to you and peace from God, our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. 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. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints. Notice that especially how Paul commends Philemon for this very particular reason, you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.

What do you need to be a refreshing Christian? Well, you need to have faith. What is very clear is that the secret, if we want to use that word, are the grounds upon which Philemon can be described in the way that he is as a brother who had refreshed the hearts of the saints, is grounded in his faith. And three particular aspects of Philemon's faith that I want to notice and identify and comment on this morning. First of all, it was a faith grounded in Jesus, in the person of Jesus. But then secondly, Philemon's faith is a faith that was demonstrated in love, in loving action towards others. And then thirdly, it's related but somewhat distinct. His faith is a faith that he was to share with others, that he was sharing with others, and that he is urged to continue sharing with others. So, these three aspects that describe, in some measure, this man, this man commended by Paul as one who refreshed the hearts of the saints. First of all, then, a faith grounded in Jesus. We read that in verses 4 and 5, I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints.

[ 8 : 10 ] Paul gives thanks to God on account of Philemon's faith in the Lord Jesus. Now, what does that mean? It's certainly an expression that we're very familiar with, but let's just think a little bit about what it means, especially as Paul uses it here, Philemon's faith in the Lord Jesus. The word that Paul uses, translated faith, as used on this occasion, kind of one of two related meanings. They're not mutually exclusive, but they are distinct. It can mean what we might initially imagine that it means, and that is trust in Jesus, your faith in Jesus. You trust in Jesus as your Savior. That certainly was true of Philemon, and I have no doubt that Paul thanked God for that truth. But a related meaning of the word that Paul uses here carries the idea of loyalty towards Jesus. So, you see how these things go together, and yet they are distinct. There's faith in Jesus, trusting in Jesus, but also a loyalty towards Jesus. And the cause of the gospel of which Philemon was beneficiary and a part. Trust in and loyalty towards. I think it's reasonable to imagine that Paul has both things in mind as he thanks God for

Philemon's faith. The translation that we have here in our version, in the New International Version, is maybe not as helpful as it might be in getting across what Paul is saying. As we read it in our Bibles, the focus seems to be very much on the idea of trusting in Jesus. And yet, if I just provide you with, I don't know if we could call it a literal translation, but a somewhat more literal translation to what Paul says, we can maybe capture a little bit better what Paul has in mind. And I'm speaking about verse 5 particularly. So, listen to this slightly different way of the words of Paul being translated. Because I hear of your love and the faith which you have towards the Lord Jesus and toward all of the saints. Now, the curious thing here is that Paul is indicating something that at first sight may seem a little intriguing. That the faith that he's speaking of and the love that he's speaking of is directed to Jesus. That makes sense. But also that it's directed in some way to the saints, to the other believers. Now, obviously, Philemon did not trust in the other believers in the sense that he trusts in Jesus. But it would have been true that he had a loyalty towards them in the same way that this word that this word can indicate, not only a trust in, but a loyalty towards.

So, Paul is saying that Philemon trusts in Jesus, he's loyal to Jesus, he loves Jesus, but that also, and as an expression really of his faith in Jesus, he loves the saints, and he's loyal to the saints. His faith, his love is directed in these two directions, if you wish.

Certainly, both meanings of the word that Paul uses are foundational for a refreshing Christian.

Faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior and loyalty to him or faithfulness in his service. And let's just pause there for a moment and allow me to ask you the question, is that true of you? Do you trust in Jesus?

[ 12 : 06 ] Do you trust in Jesus as your Savior? Have you come to recognize, as we were thinking about, as we were speaking to the children a few moments ago, that you are in need of a Savior, that we're all sinners, that we can't deal with our sin by ourselves, that we need a Savior, that God has provided a Savior.

He has provided his own Son as our only and sufficient Savior, and that we must put our trust in him. And as we do so enjoy forgiveness of sins and be welcomed into his family. Philemon trusted in Jesus as his Savior.

Is that true of you? But Philemon also was faithful to Jesus in service, having been blessed, having been forgiven, having been so richly loved. So he responds in faithful service for his Master. And this faith is not only a genuine, but it's growing or persevering faith. Notice how Paul introduces what he has to say about Philemon when he says, because I hear about your faith, there at the beginning of verse 5. I hear about your faith. Now, Paul knew Philemon personally, and so he had plenty knowledge about Philemon without having to receive reports from others.

He could draw on his store of knowledge about the man from his previous acquaintance with him. But in addition to that, he hears reports of Philemon, he hears reports of Philemon, of his faith and of his love in Jesus and towards the saints.

And what that demonstrates is that the faith of Philemon is a growing and maturing and persevering faith. Paul is no longer present to urge him and encourage him and disciple him, but Philemon continues to grow and to serve others and particularly the saints. His is a growing, maturing, persevering, vibrant faith. What about you? What about me? What about us? We may be able, and I trust with great gratitude and humility, we may be able to testify, well, yes, I do trust in Jesus.

[ 14 : 30 ] And it's wonderful to be able to testify that that is so. But is your faith a growing, vibrant, persevering faith? Such a faith is the characteristic of refreshing Christians. I think if we're honest, we have to acknowledge that it's so easy sometimes to get into a rut, to maybe become stagnant in our Christian lives. We don't abandon the faith. We continue to believe. We continue to involve ourselves and participate in one way or another. But it's just all become a bit routine, just a bit flat. And that's a danger that we have to be conscious of and be honest in acknowledging if it is indeed where we are. And if that's the case, how difficult to be refreshing towards others, to be of rich and deep blessing to others if our faith is stagnant and isn't vibrant as it ought to be? Well, the faith of

Philemon, the faith of this refreshing Christian, was a faith grounded in Jesus. But then a second characteristic is that it was a faith demonstrated in love. Genuine faith finds expression in love.

And Paul gives thanks for Philemon's faith and his love. As we noticed a moment ago about what he says there in verse 5, this faith and this love towards Jesus, but also towards the saints.

You might say that his love for Jesus is made evident in his love for those who, like him, were trusting in Jesus, his brothers and sisters, those described as the saints. And this love of Philemon for the saints has both breadth and depth. Let me just suggest why we can speak of it in those terms. It has been characterized both by breadth and depth. Well, why do we say that this love for the saints has breadth? Well, just in the language that Paul uses, he speaks of their love for, or his love, Philemon's love for all the saints, for all of them. We know what the saints are like. We are one of them.

There are difficult saints. There are awkward saints. There are new saints. There are poor saints. There are demanding saints. There are ones that, no doubt, Philemon disagreed with. There are ones who are maybe very distant, and we could go on. But Philemon's love, it would seem, was without exception. His love was for all the saints. And that's the way it is with refreshing Christians. And again, there we would do well to pause for a moment and examine ourselves. How broad is our love? Are we very selective in those saints that we love and demonstrate our love to in practical loving action? Maybe you can think of one saint that you find very difficult to love and be challenged by Philemon. I wonder, and I'm just wondering, I don't know, but I wonder if Paul, as he writes to Philemon and commends him for his love for all the saints, has in mind, or has as the background to what he's saying, which no doubt he understood to be true, the fact that the letter itself has as its primary function to encourage Philemon to receive Onesimus, the slave who had let him down, it would seem had stolen from him and had fled from the household. And now Onesimus has been sent back as a believer. And Paul, maybe you might say subtly or wisely says, now remember Philemon, I know you as one who has love for all the saints. Well, Onesimus is soon to turn out. Don't exclude him from the all that I know to be a feature of your love. It was broad, there was a breadth to his love. But not only breadth, there was also a depth or a quality to his love. And here I simply want to consider and develop the language of refreshment that we have in verse 7. You, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints. And this speaks of the practical outworking of Philemon's love having this effect on others. Others were refreshed. What did this refreshing involve? How did it impact those so refreshed? Well, we're not told in detail what it involved, but I think we can reasonably suggest two aspects of this refreshing. No doubt this is speaking of his practical love as a believer. It's clear from this letter that Philemon was a man of some means and his home was at the disposal of the Christian community. And he was a man marked by generosity to those in need. And so, no doubt, many had passed through his home. Paul, in fact, at the end of the letter speaks of Philemon preparing a guest room for him. It's clear that that room was there. And it's clear, I'm sure, that it was not only Paul who'd make a time an open home full of love, and in this manner he refreshed the saints. To visit the home of Philemon was to leave unburdened and refreshed. It was an oasis of love and refreshment for the saints.

[ 20 : 58 ] And what a powerful thing that is in the cause of the gospel, a home that is a place of refreshment, not only for those who live there, certainly it ought to be for those who live there, but for those who are brought into that home to be served and to be loved and to be refreshed. May that be true of our homes, that they would be those places of refreshment, as it seems very clear was true of Philemon and his home, his practical love. But also, and this is very much related, how this practical love was a reflection of a behavior on the part of Philemon that was Christ-like.

Our God is a refreshing God. We began by making reference to Psalm 23, the Lord as being the one who refreshes our soul. Our Savior is a refreshing Savior, and we are to be like Him. We are to reflect this very beautiful characteristic of our God and Savior. And certainly it would seem that this is true of Philemon, and it is what Paul expected of Philemon. It's interesting that Paul, on another occasion in this short letter, makes use of this language of refreshment, and it's for himself. And he anticipates being refreshed by the conduct of Philemon. Notice that at the end of the letter, in verse 20, we read, I do wish, brother, that I may know some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

Confident of your obedience, I write to you. Now, what is it that Paul is anticipating? What is it that will refresh Paul's heart? Well, it's clear that what Paul has in mind is that he will be refreshed.

He will be encouraged when he hears of Philemon receiving Onesimus with love and receiving him as a brother. It hasn't happened yet, but Paul expects it to happen. He says, no, I know you, Philemon. I'm confident of your obedience. I'm confident that you will behave in a Christ-like manner towards Onesimus. Christ received you. You receive Onesimus. Christ forgave you. You forgive Onesimus. Christ welcomed you and embraced you. Well, you are to welcome and embrace Onesimus. And Paul says, I'm confident that you will. And when you do, and I hear it confirmed that you have so done, my heart will be refreshed. Here, Paul is refreshed by the obedience and the Christ-like behavior of

Onesimus. And that is how we, too, can refresh the saints, by our obedience and our Christ-like behavior. What can we say of the impact of this refreshing? Well, we've touched on it somewhat.

[ 24 : 15 ] But what does the phrase that Paul uses indicate or suggest? You, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints. It's interesting, the word that Paul chooses to use here when he speaks of Philemon having refreshed the hearts of the saints. The word that he uses is not the ordinary or the usual word that would be used for the word heart, but rather it's the word that in the older versions would be translated bowels. Now, for obvious reasons, modern versions feel that that's not the most suitable or appropriate word. But the idea of that word, the word that Paul uses, is that it's pointing to the innermost being of a person, that which is at the heart of who we are. And what Paul is saying is that Philemon had refreshed the believers in that deep way, not simply a superficial encouragement, but a refreshment that reached to the very soul. It's the language of Psalm 23 that speaks of God's refreshment. He refreshes my soul. Well, Philemon was one who was used by God to refresh the souls, the hearts, the inner being of the saints. The saints were deeply moved, deeply encouraged, strangely warmed in their soul by the love that they received in practical ways from Philemon.

Let me just notice one final aspect of this faith that belongs to a refreshing Christian, and that is that it is a faith shared with others. Then verse 6, Paul continues, 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. Is Philemon the finished article? He's clearly commended by Paul, deeply loved by Paul, much that is good in Philemon. But he, like all of us, still had much to learn and to do. And Paul here exhorts him to share his faith. Now, what does that mean when Paul says here, I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith? On this occasion, what Paul has in mind is not in the first instance what we would maybe speak of or describe as witnessing or verbally sharing the gospel message with others. Now, that is important. That is one aspect of sharing our faith. It's not excluded.

But what Paul principally has in mind here is the idea of living the faith. The word that Paul uses that's translated sharing is the word *koinonia*, or sometimes translated fellowship. And really what Paul is saying is, I want you to continue doing what you have been doing, sharing your life, sharing your home, living the faith with others and in the service of others. Now, no doubt that would involve and would include sharing the good news, the content of the gospel with those who didn't know it. But it's broader than that. It is about living the faith, living the Christian life in community and in the service of others. And Paul exhorts Philemon that he would be active in so doing. He already is, but that he would continue to so share his faith with others. What will be the result of this sharing? Well, you might have expected Paul to say something along the lines of, well, be active in sharing your faith so that you might be blessed. No doubt that would have been one of the results. But rather, Paul identifies a different result of Philemon sharing. I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith so that, this is the outcome that Paul envisages of Philemon living the faith, sharing his faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. Now, that is a remarkable outcome that Paul anticipates. Indeed, for us as we read it, in a sense it can only be aspirational, that you may be able to do that. But we have a full understanding of every good thing that you have in Christ.

Where are we on this? Surely all of us are those who have a limited understanding of some of the good things we have in Christ. Is that not really where we all are? And yet here Paul projects towards this wonderful outcome that Philemon would have a full understanding of every good thing that he enjoys in Christ.

It's almost inconceivable that we would reach that point in this life. And yet this is what Paul is projecting towards. This is what he wishes for Philemon. But the interesting thing is, how will he achieve that? Or at least how will he move towards that full understanding of every good thing? Is it about reading tomes of theology? Well, no doubt that's part of it and is useful. Is it about some mystical experience that will elevate us from one plane of Christian experience to another? Is that what will achieve this full understanding of every good thing that we have in Christ? No, these are not the things that Paul identifies. Rather, we will grow in our understanding of Christ in our day-to-day service for Christ, a service that involves serving others. Serving Christians are growing Christians. As we gather around God's Word at a service like this morning, we can grow in knowledge. I trust that we do grow in knowledge. But that growth in knowledge must be accompanied by that growth in understanding of every good thing we have in Christ as we serve Him out there, as we leave this place and seek to continue our worship of God in the service of Him. It is out there in our service of Christ that we grow in our understanding, that we move towards a full understanding of every good thing we have in

[ 31 : 12 ] Christ, His love for you. In those difficult circumstances as you seek to love those who can be very difficult to love, His grace for every trial, His patience with you, His willingness to forgive you, His wisdom granted to you in every situation. These are the things you discover, not really listening to a sermon, but as you serve God in the world where God has placed you and in the circumstances where God has placed you. A faith shared with others. Well, let's draw things to a close. What kind of Christian Christian? Are you? Are you a refreshing Christian? Is your faith grounded in Jesus? Is your faith demonstrated in love, love that is broad and love that is deep? Will you share your faith in your day-to-day living in service to the saints and all those who are placed in your path? And as you do, do so with the excited expectation that as you do, you will move towards this full understanding of every good thing that you have in Christ. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your Word.

We thank you for Jesus. We thank you for the way in which you have enabled us to put our trust in Him. And we pray that that faith that we have in your Son would be one that is evident and finds expression in our love towards others, in our service for you, where you have placed us. We thank you for this great prospect that is laid before us of enjoying a full understanding of every good thing that we enjoy in Christ. We pray that it would be for us a great desire to ever approach that reality and that we would understand that as Paul makes clear, that will be our experience in the measure that we are refreshing Christians, in the measure that we are Christians who live our lives in the service of others to encourage and to build up and to serve and to be there for others. We pray for our homes, the homes that we form part of and our family circumstances may be very different and that will impinge on the measure in which we can be like Philemon. And yet we pray that whatever our own particular circumstances are, the composition of the homes that we belong to, we pray that they would be places of refreshment for ourselves and others. And all of these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.