

# God's Message to Us in Philemon

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## **Introduction**

Today as we continue to make our way through all sixty-six books of the Bible, we come to the little book of Philemon.

- It is the smallest of Paul's epistles, and it is often overlooked.
- I would guess that there are many here today who have never heard a sermon on this book before.
- One of the things I especially like about this series is that when I finish (Lord willing), I will be able to say that I have preached from every book in the Bible and all of you will have heard a sermon on every book in the Bible.

This particular book is a personal letter, written to an individual named Philemon.

- Philemon was a wealthy man who lived at Colossae.
  - It is generally believed that Paul sent this letter to Philemon at the same time he sent his letter to the Colossians—
    - in AD 60 when he was in prison at Rome for the first time.
  - It is also believed that “the beloved Apphia” (mentioned in verse 2) is probably Philemon's wife, and that “Archippus, our fellow soldier” is probably his son.
    - The letter is also said to be to the church that met in Philemon's house.

But enough of those details.

- My main concern in this sermon series is to consider how each book in the Bible applies to us today.
- The Bible is a unique book in that all of it is God's word to His church in all ages subsequent to the time it was written.
  - All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, for conviction, for correction, and for training in righteousness.

## **I. The first part of Philemon shows us how splendid heart-refreshers are.**

A. Paul describes Philemon as one who refreshes the hearts of the saints in verses 4-7.

1. In verse 7, he says, **“For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.”**
  - The idea is that Philemon is one of those people who encourages you on the inside... the word *heart* here refers to your innards—the place where you feel it when you are in turmoil...
    - You know how we can get all unsettled and agitated—
      - because we have lost our focus,
      - because we have forgotten that we are here for God—
        - that He loves us—and is committed to blessing to us...
        - that He is in control—so that He is able to bless us and so that nothing can stop Him from blessing us...
        - and perhaps we have forgotten that everything is for Him so that instead of facing hardships for His glory, we are crushed by them.

2. Paul expresses how glad it makes him to see Philemon refreshing hearts...
  - You see how in verse 7 he declares that he and Timothy **have great joy and consolation in Philemon's love** that has brought refreshment to the saints.
    - It is such a helpful thing for the people of God—
      - They were rejuvenated in their Christian walk through their interaction with Philemon—so that they are ready to go forward with joy and zeal in their service to Christ.
      - How good it is to have people like that in the church!
3. Give thanks to God for people like this, and pray for them.
  - You see in verse 4 and 5 how Paul says, **“I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints...”**
    - I wonder, how often do you actually thank God for the gifts and graces that are found in other Christians?
    - I think we find it easier to overlook such things and zero in on their faults or on how they irritate us.
      - Sometimes we envy those who prove to be a blessing to others, and instead of giving thanks for them and praying that they would bless more and more people, we grumble about them.
    - If you loved other believers the way Paul did, you would rejoice and give thanks whenever another believer helps them.
      - And you should seek to be a heart-refresher yourself!

B. But how do you refresh the hearts of the saints?

1. It is good to know how Philemon did it because this is something we should all want to do as God enables.
  - And not only that, but we also need to understand how God uses others to refresh our rejuvenate our own hearts.
  - In our day, we often suppose that all we (and others) need is a good boost of self-esteem—a stroke to our ego.
    - That is how the world goes about encouraging people.
      - And of course it is good to express our appreciation for others and to encourage them that God is using them when we see that...
        - That is actually what Paul is doing here to Philemon.
- But there is something we need much more than that if true spiritual refreshment is to be the result.
2. The refreshment of heart that Philemon was helping people obtain came from the sharing of his faith with them.
  - You can see this in verse 6: **that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.**
    - The majority of manuscripts do not say *every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus*, but *every good thing which is in us in Christ Jesus*.
      - *every good thing that is in us* as Christians...

- In other words, if we are to be truly refreshed, we need to see all the good that we have from Christ as His people.
  - A heart-refresher is one whose life is full of Christ and His Spirit and whose life overflows with Him—
    - Like Jesus describes in John 7:37-39: **On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. <sup>38</sup> He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” <sup>39</sup> But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.**
- The thing that gets us down the most as Christians is when we lose sight of the riches of Christ that we have from our heavenly Father.
  - We start to think it is all about us and we despair.
  - We see the evil of the world and we lose hope.
  - We stop living in the power of His grace, stop rejoicing in belonging to Him and living as His children.
  - Those who are full of Christ and His Spirit are able to refresh us with the living water of His Spirit...
- Just think of all that we do have in Christ.
  - We have full forgiveness of sin—think of it—a completely new record.
  - We are accepted in the beloved—the righteousness of Christ is ours.
  - We have the Holy Spirit at work in us to transform us, to make us more and more like Christ.
  - We have all things directed to bring about good in us—growth in holiness.
  - We have the promise and hope of eternal life in our Father’s house along with the promise of perfection in glory.
  - We have the hope of the complete overthrow of Satan and all who oppose God.
  - Above all, we have the promise of knowing God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit; of seeing His glory, His love, His beauty, His holiness, His majesty; the communion with the three persons.
  - We have the privilege of serving Him now, or growing in the wisdom and knowledge of Him, of serving each other and of suffering for Him, of leading others to Him.
- When you are full of Him, you are able to refresh others in Him.
  - The Holy Spirit is in you a river of refreshment to the saints, flowing out as living water from your inmost being!

TRANS> As Paul moves on in this little epistle, we are shown a second great truth. We are shown how the gospel changes us.

## **II. See here how the gospel transforms us into those who pour out our lives for God, and so for each other.**

A. It changes us from worthless servants to useful brothers.

1. Paul describes how the gospel has turned Philemon’s slave, Onesimus, around.

- a. Before we go forward, I need to say something about slavery.
- For a multitude of reasons, not the least of which includes the abuses we are so familiar with in the slavery of Africans...
    - we have a tendency to suppose that slavery is itself the evil...
    - in the same way that some people see the family or marriage as evil because of abuses in these.
      - Such persons set themselves up as judges over the Bible and reject it as God's word because it does not prohibit slavery.
  - Recently when we studied First Timothy, I explained to you that indeed, the Bible does not forbid slavery.
    - It regulates it, just as it regulates marriage and parenting and government, but it does not does not forbid one person owning another.
    - Man-stealing, where you capture people, is a capital offence according to the Bible,
      - but it was perfectly acceptable for a person to sell or give themselves and their children to a master who would take care of them and it was permissible when persons made war with you to take them as slaves if you were able to conquer them.
      - Also, those who stole as well as those who could not pay their bills could be put to forced labour to pay their debts.
  - We need to understand that slavery in the ancient world could be very desirable and even noble.
    - Some slaves were highly educated and counted it an honour to be the servant of a wealthy master.
      - For example, a rich man might have a physician, an accountant, a chef, and a manager, who were thrilled to be his slaves.
      - It meant that they and their families would be well taken care of for the rest of their lives and have the privilege of being part of an honourable family.
    - The same could be said of a simple labourer...
      - Rather than looking for work each day and having to deal with seasons of unemployment, it was far better to be provided with housing and healthcare in the house of a wealthy landowner.
  - Of course there were terrible abuses—just as there are in factories, marriages, families, and government agencies...
    - Just as there are parents that abuse their children and husbands that abuse their wives, so there were masters that abused their servants...
      - Sin is always a huge problem in every relationship...
    - And it also worked the other way—just as there are children that abuse their parents, so there were servants that abused their masters—
      - they might slander them, they might reveal their secrets, they might steal from them, they might refuse to do their work, they might be full of complaining, they might be disrespectful, they might stir up a rebellion—any number of things.

- b. Paul makes it clear that in the case of Onesimus, it was not Philemon the master, but Onesimus the slave who had been in the wrong.
- 1) If Philemon had been an abusive master, Paul would have been the first to rebuke him.
    - But there is no rebuke of him at all here.
  - 2) Instead, Paul refers to much wrong that Onesimus has done:
    - a) First, we see this in the way that Paul speaks of Onesimus as having been unprofitable to Philemon in the past... he speaks of him that way in v. 11.
    - b) Second, in verse 12, he says that he is sending this runaway back to Philemon; albeit urging Philemon to receive him graciously.
    - c) Third, it would seem that Onesimus was guilty of robbing Philemon when he ran away—because in verses 17-19, Paul vows that he himself will make up for any outstanding debts that Onesimus has...
      - Here is a beautiful example of what Christ did in paying the debt of our sin:
        - He says (verse 17-19): **“If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me. 18 But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. 19 I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay—not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides.”**
        - Christ actually took our sin and debt for rebelling against God upon Himself so that his reception by the Father was tied with our reception—so that if the Father had rejected us, He would also be rejecting Christ.
- So Onesimus was the one who had been in the wrong...
- c. But now Onesimus has been completely transformed by the gospel!
- 1) In verse 10, Paul refers to him as **“my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains.”**
    - In other words, somehow, Paul, far away from Colossae, shut up in the Roman prison, had met up with Onesimus and led him to Christ.
    - That is what Paul means when he says that he had begotten him.
      - Onesimus had been born from above of the Holy Spirit through Paul’s ministry to him.
      - He who had been dead in sin was now made alive in Christ.
        - By the Spirit through the word preached, he had seen that he was a sinner who needed forgiveness through Christ crucified, and who needed life from the dead,
          - and he had believed the gospel and had become a new creation in Christ.
  - 2) Paul describes him as being completely changed.
    - In verse 11, he makes a play on his name, Onesimus, which means “profitable” or “useful.”
    - He refers to him as the one **“who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.”**

- This man has been changed so drastically that Paul even wants him for the ministry—and Paul was pretty strict about those he allowed to serve in the ministry!
  - In vv. 12-13, he says: **“I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, <sup>13</sup> whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel.”**
  - So this man has been transformed from a worthless runaway slave to one is fit to serve with Paul in the ministry!
    - What a transformation!
- That is what the gospel does in the lives of those it reaches.
- 2. It takes worthless human beings and it makes them fruitful.
  - a. I know it seems harsh to call people worthless, but it is true of all who are without Christ.
    - Of course there are many kind people in the world who do not know Christ—people who are very helpful to others.
      - But the reality is, without Christ, all our best works are but filthy rags.
  - b. You see, we were made for God.
    - We are His creatures and everything we do is meant to be for Him.
    - Because we have rejected Him as our God, it makes even our good deeds are an abomination in His sight until we have been restored to Him...
      - Not to mention the fact that we do many things that are not kind or good, even to each other—the gossip and the greed, the harsh words, the neglect of others, the immorality, the lies...
    - We are like a barren wilderness that cannot bear good fruit—not until Christ has saved us.
      - No one can expect to go to heaven to live in God’s presence but those who have been redeemed, and received life and forgiveness through Him.
  - c. But what a change there is when we are begotten again!
    - Now we are they who bring forth fruit for eternal life.
      - We are not yet perfect, but we are alive and we are reconciled to God so that we can serve Him acceptably.
      - He is at work in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure.
    - We who were once useless are now Onesimus, all because of Christ.
      - Now, like Onesimus, we are ready to pour out our lives in service to God and others.

TRANS> In this little letter, Paul not only shows us how the gospel transformed Onesimus into a fruitful servant,

B. He also shows that he expects Philemon to exhibit the sacrificial service of a true believer who has likewise been transformed.

1. He expects much of Philemon.
  - a. In particular, that he will freely forgive this runaway servant, who, according to the law of the land, deserved to die...
    - and that he will release him to serve in the ministry with Paul.

- To forgive a runaway slave who had stolen your property would have been unheard of in that day!
  - We do not know how Onesimus had become a slave, but he may well have received a sum of money; nor do we know what he might have taken from Philemon...
    - but under Roman law, Onesimus was worthy of death.
- So you see that Paul is expecting Philemon to do something that only a person who knew that *he* had been forgiven would be able to do.
  - That is what makes Christians able to forgive those who wrong them.
  - We know that we have actually sinned against God—and that *whatever* wrong anyone might have done to us cannot compare with our sin against God.
- b. Paul says that as an apostle, he might command Philemon to do what is fitting, but that instead of commanding him, he is sending Onesimus back so that Philemon can do it voluntarily.
  - It would be one thing to forgive this servant that has come to Christ,
    - and an even greater thing to release him for ministry.
    - As an apostle, Paul had the authority to require this of a believer—but he wants to leave it up to Philemon to do what he will... that Philemon might have the joy of doing this for the Lord.
  - In verse 14-16, Paul says: **“But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary. <sup>15</sup> For perhaps he departed for a while for this *purpose*, that you might receive him forever, <sup>16</sup> no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.”**
    - Philemon can donate his slave to the ministry.
      - Hearing that his servant has been saved and is needed by the apostle for service opens the way for him to share in the work of the gospel through his servant.
      - Instead of putting Onesimus in charge of his flocks or his accounts or whatever Onesimus had done before,
        - Philemon can send him to labour for Christ and His church.
        - What an opportunity he has to testify of his love for Christ before a watching world.
    - I am not sure, but it is probable that when Paul expresses his confidence in verse 21 that Philemon will do even more than he has said,
      - he is thinking that Philemon will not only forgive Onesimus and release him to serve in the ministry,
        - but that he will continue to provide for him as a servant in his own household.
- Such willing sacrifices are what is expected of us as believers.
- 2. And so as Paul appeals to Philemon, so now I appeal to you—offer such sacrifices to the Lord as are fitting for those who have been redeemed by Him.

- a. Give sacrificially of your substance, as an expression of gratitude for how Christ became poor that you might be rich.
  - Give to help your brothers in sisters in their need.
  - Give to support the work of the gospel.
  - It would be a tremendous thing if we could call another minister to help us here and in planting the church in Truro.
    - Two ministers could do the work of three men.
  - What a grand thing it is to see the example of Paul here in our text, willing to pay for any damages that Onesimus has incurred.
- b. Give sacrificially of your time.
  - Do not indulge in selfish pursuits—look for ways to serve the Lord.
    - Take the time to invite people to your home to encourage them.
    - Go out for coffee with a brother or sister in need.
    - Reach out to those who do not know Christ around you.
  - Give up your time to help a busy mother or to care for an elderly neighbour.
- c. Give up your own life sacrificially, no longer demanding your own rights,
  - no longer feeling that you have to set everyone around you straight whenever they have wronged you...
  - Yes, you can and should help those who need to be confronted and challenged,
    - but I am talking about desisting from making demands of your spouse—focusing on what you want from him or her instead of on what you can give.
    - or correcting your siblings when they come short instead of seeking to encourage them and help them when they are burdened.
    - And instead of complaining at work about all that is unfair, looking for ways you can be a better servant...
      - Not that you allow your employer to take you away from your family or from church, but that you seek to be faithful before God in all your service.
- d. Give up your pride and your reputation for Christ as a sacrifice...
  - Instead of hiding your faith as one who is embarrassed and ashamed, let others know of your love for Christ, in a humble and gracious way.
    - They may think less of you, but let that be so... it is for Christ who became sin for you and bore your shame that you do it.
  - And be honest with others about your own sin.
    - Not that you air all your dirty laundry before others,
      - but when it is appropriate and helpful, don't be afraid to tell others of your struggles and sins—of how you must look to Christ—of how he had forgiven you.
    - We need to have more fellowship of the kind where we speak about our struggles and pray for one another...
      - where we testify of how God has forgiven us.



### III. So in conclusion, let us do as Paul does in this letter to Philemon and encourage each other in our service to Christ.

#### A. Consider what the apostle does in this letter...

1. He began by speaking of how Philemon is a heart-refresher to those around him.
  - As one who is filled with Christ, Philemon is like a fountain of living water, bringing refreshment to those who love the Lord.
2. And then Paul encourages Philemon to give up his rights concerning Onesimus, who had wronged him.
  - Onesimus has come to the Lord and is needed in the ministry.
  - So now Philemon has the opportunity to give him to do the work of the Lord, perhaps even as his own servant who he supports as part of his household.
3. In doing so, Paul tells Philemon the heart-refresher that he has the opportunity to refresh Paul's heart.
  - He uses the same words in verse 20 that he used in verse 7 when he says: **“Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.”**
    - What a powerful appeal!
    - Philemon has the power to be a heart-refresher to the apostle and to many others—including Onesimus and all who see his example.

#### B. My brothers and sisters, you have the power to refresh the hearts of God's people, too.

1. In your pride, you can grieve their hearts and discourage them from Christ.
  - You can grieve the elders of the church.
  - But by God's grace, you can give of yourself sacrificially, doing what is expected of any believer and going beyond even that.
2. Yes indeed, the way you grow into such service is simply by giving of yourself in love whenever you have an opportunity until it becomes a way of life for you.
  - Sacrifices are always costly—that is what makes them so valuable. That is what enables you to show your love for Christ.
3. Ultimately, the power to give up yourself comes from the Lord.
  - Paul seems to be thinking of this even in his closing benediction in which he says (v. 25), **“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.”**
    - Do you notice what is different about that benediction?
      - that he adds the words “with your spirit.”
    - He knows that for Philemon to forgive Onesimus and to give him up to the ministry, he will need grace in his spirit.
      - Let us pray that we who know Christ will have grace in our spirits that we might refresh the hearts of others by pouring out our lives for Christ and for them.