

Sermon

Dan Neary

Love That Refreshes the Heart

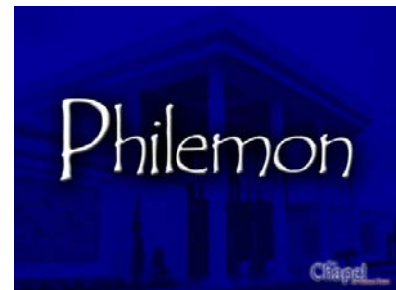
Today's sermon will *wrap up* our Fall series; we have spent October and November looking at the **thanksgiving passages** that are commonly found at the beginning of the New Testament books written by the Apostle Paul.



So, now, on this Sunday before we celebrate Thanksgiving, we look at this final thanksgiving passage found in the book of Philemon. Tucked in between Titus and Hebrews, the whole book only covers about ½ page in my Bible (only 25 verses, so let's touch them all).

Beyond the brevity of Philemon, there is much that sets the book apart.

- To a person, rather than a church
- Dealing with one situation, that, although complicated, isn't a theological problem
- Personal rather than authoritative



All we know about the man, Philemon, is in this book, and most of it can be found in the first two verses.

To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker—²also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home:¹

This is about all we know about Philemon.

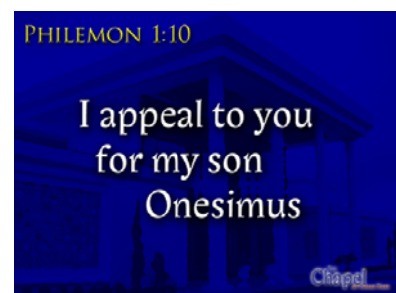
- Paul considered him a dear friend, and
- Fellow worker
- He was respected enough to lead the church in Colossae, and
- Wealthy enough to have a home suitable for hosting a church

We know something about Paul, now a little something about Philemon, and then there is a third person in this situation: Onesimus.

The key verse to the plot of the story told here in these 25 verses could be verse 10.

I appeal to you for my son Onesimus

Onesimus was a common slave name, meaning useful. Apparently Onesimus was Philemon's slave.



¹*The Holy Bible : Today's New International Version.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Phm 1-2.

Furthermore, it seems that Onesimus was a runaway slave, useless to Philemon, who somehow came in contact with Paul. In the context of that encounter, Onesimus came to faith. **Now what?** This was a fairly straightforward set of circumstances. Onesimus was a runaway slave that should be punished; the law allowed for Onesimus to be punished by death. But now Paul is saying that things are different.

¹²I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. ¹³I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. ¹⁵Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— ¹⁶no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

¹⁷So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me.²

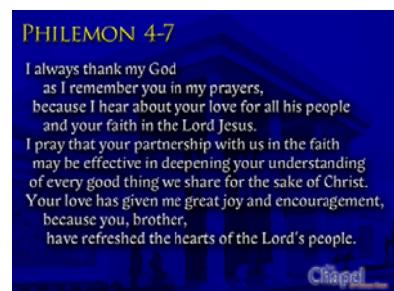
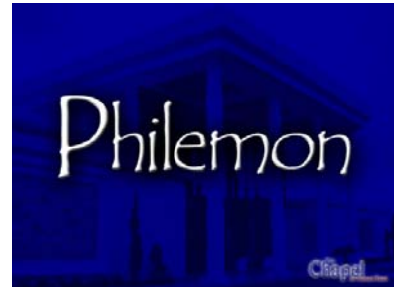
Things have clearly changed from Paul's perspective, but nothing has changed with respect to the law... and Paul expects that things haven't changed for Philemon. Paul could have taken matters in his own hands, simply keeping Onesimus out of Philemon's way, keeping him there with himself. But Paul, instead, took the better path, following the law of the land, and respecting Philemon's rights. He sent Onesimus back, with this letter, to work through this with Philemon.

That, *in a nut shell*, is the story of Philemon. We don't know, for sure, what happened after that. While we can reasonably expect that Paul was able to *work everything out* between Philemon and Onesimus... we can really only guess.

The purpose of Paul's letter to Philemon was to make a way for Onesimus. Paul appealed to Philemon based on the relationship Paul and Philemon shared, and Paul appealed to Philemon on the basis of the redemptive relationship that Philemon had with his savior, Jesus.

So with this task ahead, Paul offers this thanksgiving, the passage we have before us today.

⁴I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers,³



²*The Holy Bible : Today's New International Version.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Phm 12-18.

³*The Holy Bible : Today's New International Version.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Phm 4.

Is there a higher compliment or more meaningful expression of affection? **Paul talked to God about Philemon.**

Aren't you glad that people are praying for you? I know that many of you pray for me, and I am so very grateful. I too am praying for you. This is a church in which we habitually pray for one another. We pray because we love one another, and we know that it makes a difference.

Paul talked to God about Philemon, and based on our experience with this sort of praying... we can expect that **God talked to Paul** about Philemon. When we pray for one another, really pray, we can expect to be led by the Holy Spirit in that prayer. We can anticipate that God will not only lead us in how we can pray effectively for one another, we can also expect that God will lead us in how we should act on behalf of one another, or toward one another.

I'm not all that proud of what I'm going to say... but I will admit to you that I **occasionally resist praying** for some people. I put it off because I've been at this for a while now and know that when I pray for certain people, especially those who are presenting some sort of challenge, God generally chooses to change things by **changing me.**

There is little doubt in my mind that Paul prayed about the task laid before us in this little book of Philemon. Could it have been that Paul's first inclination in this matter was to simply rest in his authority to **tell** Philemon what to do? Knowing that Paul was the Apostle here, with legitimate authority over the church that met in Philemon's home, he could have simply laid down an edict. It is reasonable to assume that Philemon came to faith, finding Jesus as his savior, directly because of Paul. There was certainly a basis for Paul to *call in* a small favor.

But if Paul took this matter to prayer, it could have been that God changed Paul's mind, and hear, and intentions. We can expect that Paul was approaching all of this with the mind of God as a result of Paul's prayer for his friend Philemon.

because I hear about your love for all his people and your faith in the Lord Jesus.⁴

Just as Paul loved his friend Philemon, Philemon was famous for his love of God's people. Philemon was *spreading the wealth* (the right way). Sharing his riches in service to God's people, at least by hosting the church... but more importantly sharing the wealth of his faith in Jesus. Philemon was a truly generous man, motivated by his faith in Christ.

I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ.⁵

⁴*The Holy Bible : Today's New International Version.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Phm 5.

Verse 6 is interesting, and apparently a bit difficult to translate, since there seem to be some many different translations.

The TNIV puts it this way:

I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ.

From my study it appears that they did a good job with this in the TNIV... but I doubt that is perfect either. The lesson that did come from my bit of study is this: faith, understanding, action, and fellowship all work together for our perfection in Christ. Hearts, heads, hands and community all play a part.

We understand that a significant part of the work of this life, after we come to faith, is wrapped up in one of our churchy-theological words: *sanctification*. You've heard me say it before, God loves us the way we are, but he loves us too much to leave us this way. We worship God by living up to what He has done for us. This perfecting process is sanctification. We could think of this work of sanctification along several paths:

- faith (devotion, spiritual disciplines)
- action (good works, social justice, evangelism)
- understanding (study, academics)
- fellowship (discipleship, hospitality)

Typically, we're stronger in some areas than others. Sometimes we have seasons of life that focus on one area. But I think we can agree that we are best served when we see all of this active in our work of sanctification. I think, no matter how you translate this difficult passage, that verse 6 has all of these present.

⁷Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.⁶

Philemon's love refreshed Paul, and the hearts (core, innermost being) of Lord's people. The word that Paul used for "refresh" is the word used in Matthew 11:28, some of the very best words of Jesus, saying:

²⁸"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."⁷

⁵*The Holy Bible : Today's New International Version*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Phm 6.

⁶*The Holy Bible : Today's New International Version*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Phm 7.

⁷*The Holy Bible : Today's New International Version*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 11:28-30.

Come unto Jesus, and He will give you rest... or in the way the word is used Philemon, Jesus will **refresh** you.

Paul was thankful for Philemon because Philemon had clearly picked up the Lord's work, **refreshing people**. Out of God's great love for us, He refreshes us... and Philemon had clearly chosen to be God's agent of refreshment.

Thank God for the *Philemons* who live their lives to refresh others. Thank God for Philemon's example.

Let's endeavor to apply this to our lives and circumstances and ask ourselves **so what?** With this being our last sermon in this thanksgiving series, and this being the Sunday before our Thanksgiving celebrations, we can draw our attention to our own **thanksgivings**.

What is it that we're celebrating after all?

It turns out that there are several different cases made regarding the **first Thanksgiving**. Some say Plymouth Colony, others Massachusetts Bay Colony. There are many historians that are certain that the first thanksgiving on North American soil was actually in Florida, and there are even some who make the case that the first Thanksgiving was in Texas (have you ever met someone from Texas? They think they discovered everything.)

There isn't much reason to argue about the specifics of the first thanksgiving; basically what we have here is a **harvest festival**. There are harvest festivals, of course, throughout all of recorded human history.

Traditionally, most people hold to the **Plymouth Colony** as the holding the first Thanksgiving. There a small band of pilgrims landed on the shores near where Cape Cod meets with the bulk of Massachusetts. Weary from their death-defying travels, they endured more hardship upon their arrival to the New World. With insufficient survival skills, they would have perished if not for Squanto and his fellow natives teaching the Pilgrims how to hunt, fish, and farm. The Pilgrims owed their lives to Squanto and the corn he taught them to grow.



So, after the harvest, and in the face of a grueling winter, the Pilgrims set aside a day to give thanks... to celebrate the harvest and give thanks to their creator.

There's a lesson right there, isn't there? What are we facing in the months ahead?

In 2008, here in Bothell, I don't suppose anyone is concerned that they may not **make it** through the winter. We are not facing starvation or hypothermia like the Pilgrims. In their case, the previous winter killed some, and could have wiped them all out. We do not face the same kind of peril. But in the face of their peril, knowing full well that it would be hard, and maybe even deadly, they paused to give thanks.

Are we facing uncertainty? Trouble? Hardship? Maybe.

Do we know what lies ahead for our jobs, families, economy, and nation? We don't. We may be more anxious about the winter ahead than ever before.

Today, and in the celebrations ahead, with all that may lie ahead, let's be sure to pause and give thanks.

What were they really giving thanks for there at Plymouth? Even though it was a harvest festival like so many others that have occurred throughout human history, was it merely the food? Were they merely thankful for the stuff, the provision, the corn and fish?

I think they were most thankful for the people. They were grateful for the kindness and expertise of Squanto and his fellow natives. And, furthermore, they were thankful for one another, knowing that their very survival depended on their ability to function together as a community.

This is a lesson from this Philemon passage... actually it is a lesson from the whole series.

In every case, the point of Paul's thanksgiving is not stuff... not food or shelter, not safety or provision... but people.



The images of thanksgiving often go along with the themes of a **harvest festival**. Most of you know me pretty well... you know that I enjoy the *harvest festival* part of Thanksgiving. Just look at me; I really like food.

It is good, and right, that we express our thanks for God's provision in the forms of food, clothing, shelter, and all our material goods. We should certainly be sure, at



Thanksgiving, to thank God for his provision and blessing.

But today, and throughout this season of Thanksgiving, let's be sure to thank God for his best gifts to us... which always come in the form of the people he brings into our lives.

And more than that be specific.

This Book of Philemon may be most unique, and this specific thanksgiving passage may be most distinct, because it shows Paul thanking God for this **one, specific** friend: Philemon.

I'm not just thankful for **all** of you; I am thankful for **each** of you. I am specifically thankful to God for your friendship, your example, your encouragement, and your partnership in this ministry.

My encouragement to you this Thanksgiving is to be especially thankful for people. Go ahead and make a list in the coming days. List the people in your life, family, friends, and coworkers and thank God for them and how they enrich your life.

Thank God especially for those who introduced you to Jesus, and encourage you along the way in your faith.

And more than thanking God, thank them. Call them, send them a note, extend a hand and thank people. And in so doing, continually thank God for His blessing through people.

And let's take it just one step farther. Let's **be** those kinds of people who **draw out** thanks. I'm not saying that we should **seek** to be thanked... but be those kinds of friends whom we would be thankful for. As we are refreshed by people, we need to be those who are refreshing others with our friendship. Pouring the water of our friendship, that springs from our faith, even on the hard, dry ground of some of the toughest cases in our lives.



If there are those that are so hard, so difficult and calloused, that you can't even imagine how you might bring any refreshing, start by praying. Just as we suspect Paul prayed for Philemon and the difficult matter at hand, we too should pray for the people in our lives... and we shouldn't be surprised when the change that God brings to the situation is a change in us.