



## “Love’s Refreshing Grace”

Philemon 1:4-7

July 24, 2022

As we get into the Word of the Lord this morning, I want for you to picture with me a group of people sitting together in a hot, stuffy room. It’s a nasty, gnarly, humid day in the middle of a heat wave. Beads of sweat are dropping down foreheads. Perspiration is starting to soak and saturate articles of clothing. You can feel the weight of all the nasty heat in that room. But, behold, there is a window. Behold, further, somebody in that room stands up, walks to that window, unlatches it, and opens it up. Then through that opened window, miraculously, a big, full, extended breeze of cool air fills that room. Can you feel it?

There are a number of words that can be used to describe such a gust of wind. One of those words is most definitely the word refreshing. That gust of wind would be so refreshing for what release and comfort it would bring in the midst of what was previously oppressive.

This morning as we open up the Word of the Lord together, I want for each of us to know the refreshing effect that forgiveness and reconciliation has in the house of God, in the body of Christ, in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is just as David the king said of old in Psalm 133 and Verse 1:

**<sup>1</sup>Behold, how good and pleasing it is when brothers dwell in unity!**

By the work of the Spirit of the Living God through you, you can be an agent of such refreshing grace in the house of God, even here at Bethel Grace, as by the Spirit’s power, you pursue reconciliation with people that you might be at odds with, or as the Lord uses you, as a peacemaker in the lives of others.

The Spirit of God desires Bethel Grace to be a place of harmonious peace and refreshment for the saints, for the people that He has called and chosen and brought together here at Bethel Grace. He desires an atmosphere of peace here among us.

This morning we are going to be equipped and encouraged in that. I pray that inspires us as we look once again to a situation that was facing the First Century church of Colossae. There was a man there by the name of Philemon, and it is very clear that he had been a source of love and peace for the church in the past.

Now he faced a difficult situation in that a trusted household bond slave had evidently stolen from him a significant sum and took flight to Rome. As Paul sought to interact with that situation and bring those men together, we see in the return of the young man Onesimus not an occasion for retribution, but we see an opportunity for the man of God, Philemon, to show even more of the goodness and the grace of Christ to the glory of God and to the refreshing of the church that he was a part of.

Let's look at what is here for us and see how Paul opened up the extended appeal for love and mercy in that First Century congregation. We will see how Paul opened his letter and how his words speak into our lives as well, as we desire Bethel Grace to be a refreshing place for the church of God.

Our focus is going to be on Verses 4 through 7, but I am going to start reading in Verse 1, so we will read Verses 1 through 7:

**<sup>1</sup>Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved fellow worker <sup>2</sup>and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:  
<sup>3</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

**<sup>4</sup>I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, <sup>5</sup>because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, <sup>6</sup>and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. <sup>7</sup>For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.**

Amen, and may the Lord bless the reading and teaching of His Word.

As we see here, Philemon was known for the refreshing effect that he had on the church of God that he was a part of. We see this very clearly stated in Verse 7. That word *refresh* is used repeatedly in the letters of the Apostle Paul to speak of Christians who had given relief and encouragement to the people of God.

Philemon had been a gust of refreshment to the church in the days past. Now Paul was recognizing how God was preparing an opportunity for Philemon to do the same, and even more, in the situation at hand and in the moments that would be ahead of him in his church.

This morning as we give some attention to how God was positioning Philemon, I want for us to be thinking about life in our day and in our church and how the Lord might be positioning us, even through the trials that we are facing; even through the relational challenges that we are facing—to be filled with the Spirit of Jesus and to be Christ-like toward the people that we are engaged with in the church.

Are there any situations of complexity? Are there any situations of conflict? Are there any situations where there is any kind of prolonged anger or bitterness that has been taking root? The Lord is at work, even in opportunities like this to display Christlikeness. It is when we display Christlikeness in hard situations like this that we have opportunities to show the Spirit's work of making us mature in Jesus Christ.

What we see here in this text is that Philemon, he was in fact a man who is described as having, by God's grace, a level of maturity in the faith. That was very clearly Paul's impression of him as he described him here in this text. But then God was positioning Philemon so that he would grow even more mature in Jesus. That was what was going on here in Philemon's life.

God was giving him the opportunity to have even more Christ exuded through him. Philemon was already a man who had recognized his sin; his need for a Savior. He had already recognized the fact that Christ was nailed to the cross to atone for his sin. He was a man who understood the resurrection of Christ and new life in Him.

But here is what we praise God for: By His grace, not only are we as followers of Christ instantly justified in the sight of God by grace alone through faith and declared righteous but as those in Christ, He is also going to be at work in our lives to form and fashion us into the very image of Christ. It is when we become people of graciousness that maturity is being manifested and formed in our lives as we follow the Messiah.

What we see here is that Philmon was a friend of the Apostle Paul. These two men had some history together. We gain that impression just because of the personal nature of the language that is used throughout this letter. Paul was speaking to someone that he knew.

Philemon was a man who was maturing in the faith. We see this in how Paul described him early in the letter, "To Philemon, our beloved fellow worker." Whenever the term *fellow worker* is used in Paul's letters, it is used of someone that Paul had been in personal Gospel church building ministry with. This is the phrase that Paul used for men like Timothy, Titus and Epaphroditus. They were his fellow workers. And Philemon was among them, and they had a personal relationship.

Later in the letter in Verse 16, we see where Paul said, "You owe me your very self." He was reminding Philemon that, "God saved you, but I am the human vessel that God used to convey the Gospel to you." This most likely occurred in their time of ministry in Ephesus, which was close to Colossae. There was clearly a connection that they had. Philemon was saved. He heard the Gospel. He grew in the Gospel. He was ignited in the Lord.

It is also evident that Philemon's wife, Apphia, was saved. His son, Archippus, was saved. This family was lit up for the ministry. If you were going to be a church planter in the First Century city of Colossae, or even perhaps in the Twenty-first Century California, this family is the team that you would want to have as your core partners, because they knew and loved Jesus, knowing that Jesus first loved them.

They had such love and all the attentiveness and the compassion that comes with love. These were people that had means. They had some wealth and they used their wealth inviting the church to come and meet in their homes, because they did not have buildings like this back in that day.

So we have this team of people and praise God for the work that God had done in their lives, but now God was doing even more work of forming Christ first in Philemon, and then in his family, and then throughout the church in the attitude that they would have toward Onesimus, the runaway slave.

Let's understand that Philemon and his family, they were facing a serious conflict in the flight of their bondservant. He took off and it is evident that Onesimus stole from Philemon's family significantly, most likely to finance his trip to Rome and the next chapter of his new life. The flight itself was considered a crime in Roman society. It was compounded all the more by the fact that Onesimus used Philemon's wealth to pay for his escape.

Then Onesimus was either connected with some of Paul's coworkers on the street or maybe he pursued Paul himself. But by the grace of God, what we find is that he came to faith in Jesus Christ. He had become a new man in Jesus. As they were lifting up this situation before the Lord, they realized that this work of reconciliation needed to take place between Onesimus and Philemon and his family. So either by Paul's nudging or by the work of the Spirit within, Onesimus was going back and there would be a situation of tension that needed to be addressed.

Slavery was rampant in the Roman world of the First Century and of the early church. So there was a huge question of how it was going to go down when Philemon opened the door and there he saw that Onesimus had come back. By the way, they didn't have email then for Paul to send a heads-up, saying, "Philemon, you might want to prepare yourself because guess who's coming?"

So Onesimus showed up and the societal expectation was that Philemon would severely discipline Onesimus. With the tens of millions of slaves that were there in the Roman society, it was understood that they could not allow thoughts of an uprising to ferment within the hearts of the slaves. So the expectation was that masters would severely discipline runaway slaves. Philemon was facing that.

In addition to that, Philemon would have to deal with the fallen impulses lingering in his own heart. "You did me wrong, and now you are going to get what is coming to you!" This kind of attitude.

So Paul entered into a touchy situation in that First Century environment. He was walking into something that was complex. He was serving in this role as a mediator, as peacemaker. And he wrote this letter, this appeal, not based on his apostleship, but based on the love of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ that was invading Colossae. Paul appealed to Philemon on the basis of love to enter into a totally new relationship with the young man, Onesimus. He was writing this letter, seeking to be an agent of reconciliation.

I wonder if any of you have ever attempted to write such a letter. I wonder if any of you have ever had the occasion to be a mediator between this person whom you love, and that person whom you love. And it's a sticky situation and there is some resentment and fear that is there, and you are the one who is going to be used of the Lord to help these people come to an understanding. Writing a letter like that is not easy. You need to choose your words carefully. So, we see the tact and diplomacy that Paul used all throughout this letter.

This morning as we look at the opening paragraph after the greeting, we get to see how Paul started, what Paul began with. What we see here in this wonderful paragraph of Scripture is that the Apostle Paul began this work of mediation with prayer. He saturated this portion with prayer.

Paul had been praying and he continued to pray. He knew that that situation needed to be a work of the Spirit of God, who was there at the dawn of creation producing the created realm. The Spirit of God who does the work of new creation, Paul knew that same Spirit needed to be touching that situation.

So Paul told Philemon that he was praying. First he talked about how thankful he was for the man that Philemon had been up that point. So Paul gave thanks for him. We are going to receive some encouragement that we might be those who refresh as we see how Paul gave thanks for him.

Then moving forward, Paul talked about his petition; how he was praying for him in the situation that was unfolding in Philemon's life. As see with this petition, we will see how we can further grow in Christlikeness in the relational complexities that would drain the energy out of us without the Spirit of God doing these wonderful works through us. So we are going to see the petitions that Paul made.

All of this is so that the church might be refreshed. Did you notice back in the beginning that this letter is addressed not just tot Philemon and Apphia and Archippus, but to the whole church in their house? We might ask why Paul addressed the whole church here. Philemon might have argued that it was a personal affair and Paul should have just addressed him.

But Paul would say, "No, to the whole church, because the whole church was going to have to know how they were to think of Onesimus too, and the way that Philemon was going to respond to him with love." This was what that whole church was going to be called to do as well—that church where there was no slave or free but Christ is all and Christ is in all. So this was for the refreshment of the whole church. And may the Spirit of Jesus speak into the life of this church, empowering grace within us as well as we think about what is written here.

To bring refreshing unity to the church, first we will see a prayer of thanksgiving, then a prayer of petition. First, we see:

### **1. A prayer of thanksgiving for love (1:4-5, 7)**

A prayer of thanksgiving for the love that had been manifested in this man's life already. Let's see how Paul laid this out in Verses 4, 5, and 7. Paul said to Philemon:

**<sup>4</sup>I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, <sup>5</sup>because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints**

**<sup>7</sup>For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.**

In this prayer of Paul on behalf of Philemon, we see that it is bookended by love. I hear of and I am continuing to hear of your love and your faith toward Jesus.

Understand kind of the chiasmic structure of Verse 5, where the two things at the end relate to each other and the two things in the middle related to each other. The faith was in and toward Christ . The love was toward the people of Christ.

We see that this prayer is bookended by expressions of Philemon's love. Christ has loved Philemon and not only has Philemon responded by the Spirit with love for Christ, but love for the people that belong to Christ.

Philemon has come to a personal knowledge of the Messiah who was slain for his sin and who rose again, and he had love for the church that belonged to the Messiah as well. There is love for both. All of this affection was filling this man.

In the language of the Reformers back at the tail-end of the Medieval times, they would have maybe seen this as an expression that characterized the essence of saving faith where it says that *we are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is not alone*. We are saved by faith alone. We can't perform works to balance out the good deeds and the bad deeds in the sight of God. We are saved by grace through faith in Christ who atoned for our sin at the cross.

We are saved by the work of Christ and the work of Christ alone, but the faith that saves is not alone. Not only are we justified by faith, but we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is the deposit that is placed within us, and the Holy Spirit is going to start working love within the hearts of the people that He saves.

It is up to us to say, "Lord, Spirit, my flesh still resists the work that You are doing in me. Please by Your power, let me yield to the work of love that You are doing. Help me love like Christ loves. Help me to love Your church." This man Philemon, he loved the people of God. He cared for them. He refreshed them.

There is a book on my shelf. I haven't read it in a long time. The title of that book is "They Like Jesus But Not the Church." The point of the book is that the church, it better just shape up and get its act together, because the unsaved world looks at all the hypocrisy of the church and they say, "Jesus is good. We are cool with Jesus, but we don't like the people of Jesus."

You kind of get the point because we want more of the love to be evident in us, but that wasn't happening with this man Philemon—I like Jesus, but I don't like the church. In fact, Philemon might say, "Actually, that is true. I don't like the church. I love the church! I love these people."

Philemon had love for the actual church. The actual people. The kind of people who are flawed and growing. Stumbling around and learning about Jesus. Being tempted. Sometimes stumbling. Perhaps daily stumbling in temptation. Yet being carried in the work of sanctification by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Philemon loved this whole work in progress that is the church of God. The actual people in all of their struggles and all of their difficulties and in the victories that were being achieved in their lives by grace. This man, by the work of Christ in him, he was seeing the people of God through the eyes of the Messiah. It was the work of grace that was taking place in him.

The real church. People longing for growth and holiness, yet still struggling with various kinds of sin. People stumbling in darkness even as they are learning to walk in the Light. These kinds of people.

There is another book by a man named Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “Life Together.” My favorite portion of that book is when he was speaking of all of the disciples in the church, with a special focus on the pastor where Bonhoeffer said, “Love your actual church. Jesus is going to help you love your church. Not your wish dream version, this idealized, mountaintop, version of the church. And yes, we do long for growth and want more and more of Christ, not the wish dream version of the church, but the actual struggling people in your church. Love your church!”

There was Philemon knowing the people of the church. Loving them. I would submit to you that the reason why this man had such a refreshing effect is that the people knew that when Philemon was interacting with them, he would be able to recognize and celebrate the victories and the conquests of the Messiah in their lives.

But when they shared with him how they were struggling in ongoing sin, he was not going to recoil in frustration, but rather take them into his embrace all the more, because it is grace that refreshes hearts.

As we think about this text, the Bible gives us yet another opportunity for us in the church to pray that the experience of the church would be the refreshing reality indicated by the name of our church—Bethel Grace, the house of God’s grace. God’s mercy upon sinners as we know the sweetness of His forgiveness by the shed blood of His Son and as we know that He is with us and that He remains steadfast with us, helping us on that winding road of sanctification as we are approaching the culmination of His Kingdom.

So there was this prayer of thanksgiving for love as Paul thought about Philemon. In so many ways Philemon demonstrated maturity in Christ, but moving forward we see how Paul moved from thanksgiving to petition in this text. Paul went from thanking God for the work of grace that had already been at work in Philemon, asking in this situation for more of Christ to be revealed through Philemon’s life.

Once again, to bring refreshing unity to the church, we see:

## 2. A prayer of petition for growth (1:6)

We see this in Verse 6:

**<sup>6</sup>and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.**

Some knowledge of Christ had been revealed in Philemon's life already. But now Paul's prayer was for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us, the people of God, through Philemon's interaction with that situation. This is a prayer for growth that more of the goodness, more and more of the goodness in us by the grace of Christ, would be revealed.

**<sup>6</sup>and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.**

The question becomes: What is every good thing in us? A better way to frame that question might be: Who is every good thing in us? Who is the source of good in us? Jesus! Isn't this what was totally emphasized in the book of Colossians? Colossians 2:9

**<sup>9</sup>For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells in bodily form.**

And you, people of God, you have been given fullness in Christ. Christ is in you. He is the hope of glory. Christ is the treasure trove of all of the wisdom and knowledge of God. Christ is the treasure and in us, that treasure has been placed by the indwelling of the Messiah.

And Paul was praying that more of this goodness would be revealed. This is a prayer for Philemon's growth in the Lord. So how would this occur in Philemon's interaction with Onesimus, the runaway who had stolen from him and had come back? How was this goodness to be manifested in the life of Philemon?

This goodness would be manifested when Philemon died to Philemon. When the old man was crucified and put to death, and Christ in him rose up and lived through him. And Philemon, then filled with Jesus, would treat Onesimus like Jesus treated him.

So in the same way that Jesus had forgiven this man his sins, so Philemon was to forgive whatever perceived offense had taken place. Philemon was to forgive. He was to release. Christ had robed Onesimus in the garments of His righteousness, so Philemon was to then look upon him as a man dignified in the righteousness of Jesus.

Christ had given Onesimus an honored place in an eternal kingdom that will never fade away and so Philemon was to look upon Onesimus as a joint heir, a brother in the Kingdom. The relationship between those men was going to be utterly transformed for here in the Kingdom of Jesus, there is no Jew nor Greek. There is neither circumcised nor uncircumcised. There is neither slave nor free. There is a racial paradigm shift that took place. It is an awesome thing to explore and it is an awesome thing to look at.



We see here that this would take place through the sharing of faith:

**<sup>6</sup>and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.**

We see that *sharing of our faith* and we tend to think of that in terms of evangelism. You share your faith with somebody when you share the message of salvation. You share your testimony about how God has saved you.

I would say amen to that. That is an aspect of sharing your faith. But what Paul had in view here is much more comprehensive and it has to do with body life among the people who have been born again. That is the context that we are dealing with in this phrase.

The word *sharing* is a familiar Greek term for many of us who have been paying attention here at Bethel Grace, for it is the word *koinonia*. It is a fellowship term. It is the language that pertains to sharing in common.

For Philemon, this sharing of his faith with Onesimus would be found in his full embrace of a new regard for Onesimus. When Philemon received Onesimus, not as a slave but so much more than a slave, but as a brother—not as a thief, but as one fully forgiven and embraced—then he would be putting on display the goodness of Christ, because that is how Christ regarded Onesimus.

It is a complete transformation and furthermore, Philemon would be a pioneer for the early Christians in terms of how relationships between “owners and slaves” would be totally transformed by intimate fellowship between equals in the sight of Jesus Christ. These issues are laid out before us in the book of Philemon and we get to explore the details of this as we continue the next couple of weeks seeing just what Paul envisioned between these men. This is how God was positioning Philemon.

The question now is: How is the Lord positioning us? Knowing that the Lord designs trials, knowing that He is sovereign, where is there tension? Where is there friction? Where is an opportunity for grace in your life to love others with the love that Christ has loved you with?

Even as we read in the sister epistle that came with the book of Philemon, in Ephesians Chapter 4 and Verse 32 to Chapter 5 and Verse 2:

**<sup>32</sup>Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.**

**<sup>1</sup>Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. <sup>2</sup>And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.**

How many of you are still noticing the background that is up here? Kingdom, right? Kingdom Chronicles. The theme of this week's VBS is that of spiritual warfare. Spiritual warfare has to do with the invisible but very real battle we face against demonic foes and how Christ gives us secure fortifications against them.

In the book of Colossians, we were talking about how false teaching was one of Satan's chief tactic from the beginning, and it still is to this day. But another of Satan's devices is ongoing, smoldering bitterness and conflict and strife. He appeals to something that lingers in our flesh. He wants us to hold on to situations until the person who has sinned against us provides the perfect atonement and penance for what they have done.

Yes, there has to be the acknowledgment of sin for reconciliation. We have to confess sins to one another. That is absolutely the case, but within the hearts of the Spirit-filled Christian, there is going to be the desire to forgive, to release, to let go because, by the Spirit, we have lingered by the cross and we have perceived how we have been released; how our debt has been forgiven. Then we become forgiving people.

Unforgiveness locks people in the past, keeping the pain alive. Unforgiveness produces bitterness, which is not just a sin but an infection. Unforgiveness hinders the growth of godliness and God's work in us, because God has committed Himself to ongoing relational forgiveness between believers and Himself.

Unforgiveness is something serious. Forgiveness, however, sets people free. Forgiveness, however, brings refreshment where there was bitterness. Forgiveness aligns us with the heart of God, who has first forgiven us.

So we must recognize that the relationships within the people of God, each one has a target because Satan wants to wreak havoc. So with this, we come to the foot of the cross, saying, "Lord, I still have such a propensity in me to hold on. Father, I need for You to resolve that. I need for You to set it free. I need for You to make me new."

How can we have Christlike forgiveness with its refreshing winds of grace flowing through us? Brothers and sisters, we see where it started with Paul's address to Philemon and it will start in the same place for us. It starts with prayer.

It starts with us seeking God to move through us and to breath grace in us and through us that is going to bring healing to our relationships, and that is going to bring refreshment to the church of Jesus Christ. This is what Paul and God is calling us to do. We see an example of this in what Philemon was facing.

May the Lord give us eyes to see the thigs that we are experiencing in our lives. May the Lord be at work to make us agents of the forgiveness that we have received from Him.

Will you join me in a word of prayer?