

Born the King

Part Five

Philemon 4 - 7

1. _____ in the Lord Jesus

2. _____ for all the _____

3. _____ in _____ your _____

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Philemon 4-7

How many of you travelled over Christmas? Did anyone have to fly? If you flew for the holidays, or even recently, did you notice how long you had to wait for your baggage? Did it seem like a long time?

In a New York Times article, journalist Alex Stone tells the story of how executives at a Houston airport faced and then solved a huge number of passenger complaints about long waits at the baggage claim. So first they decided to hire more baggage handlers, which reduced wait times to eight minutes – much better than the industry average. But people still complained. This made no sense to the executives until they discovered that, on the average, passengers took just one minute to walk to baggage claim, resulting in a hurry-up-and-wait situation. The walk time was not a problem; the remaining seven empty minutes of staring at the baggage carousel was. So, in a flash of brilliance, the executives moved the arrival gates farther away from the baggage claim area. Passengers now had to walk much farther, but their bags were often waiting for them when they arrived. Problem solved. The complaints dropped.

For the same article Stone interviewed MIT operations researcher Richard Larson, the world's leading expert on waiting in lines to discover the psychology behind our waiting. What happened at the Houston airport makes for a perfect illustration. According to Larson, the length of our wait is not as important as *what we're doing* while we wait. Larson says, "Often the psychology of queuing is more important than the statistics of the wait itself." Essentially, we tolerate "occupied time" (for example, walking to baggage claim) far better than "unoccupied time" (such as standing at the baggage carousel). Give us something to do while we wait, and the wait becomes endurable.¹

I want to talk to us about waiting. Advent is about remembering that the world was waiting for Jesus to arrive for his first Advent, but it is also about acknowledging that as Christians we continue to wait for Christ's second Advent – for his return. The Bible talks a lot about waiting, but it's an *active* waiting.

We've been in a series for this Advent season called, Born the King, and we've seen that Jesus was born to be our King. But how do we live while we wait for his return? How do we make sure that Jesus is King in the in-between times? That's what I'd like for us to talk about today. This is the Sunday between holidays – between Christmas and New Year's, and admittedly it's not usually very well attended. Usually people are on vacation or they are travelling, or just enjoying some down time and want to stay home. But you are here

¹ Rick Lawrence, *Skin in the Game* (Kregel Publishers, 2015), pages 105-107

today! Thank you for being here on the Sunday in-between holidays. Today we want to talk about Jesus, the King of the in-between times. Like that article from the New York Times, the key for us in the waiting is to keep busy; the key is *what we do* while we are waiting. And thankfully, God has given us his Word, which is filled with instructions on how to live with and for Him while we wait for Jesus' return. I want to focus today on one brief passage in a small letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to a man named Philemon.

You can turn there if you want (start at the center of your Bible and go right. If you get to Hebrews you've gone too far. If you get to Revelation, turn around and go back – you've missed it altogether.).

But before we look at the particular passage that is going to teach us today, I want to give you the context of this little letter that is so small it doesn't even have chapters. It's good stuff to know, and it also helps us understand what this instruction today is about.

The letter is written by the Apostle Paul to a man by the name of Philemon, as well as to a woman named Apphia and another guy named Archippus, and then also to the church that these three belonged to.

In the introduction, Paul identifies himself as a prisoner for Christ. This actually means two things: one, that he probably was actually in jail for preaching about Jesus. But he also means that he is a "prisoner for Christ" in the sense that he is a prisoner, or a slave, of Jesus. That's a term he's used before, and by it he means that Jesus Christ owns him completely – his whole life is owned by Christ so that he only does what Jesus tells him to do. That in itself is example enough for every Christian. That's important to remember as we see what the point of this letter is.

Okay, so Paul, along with his disciple Timothy, were sending this letter in care of a man named Onesimus. Onesimus was a slave, or a former slave, of Philemon. So while the letter was meant to be shared with the church that met in Philemon's house, the business of the letter pertained specifically to Philemon and his relationship to a slave named Onesimus.

Philemon was a strong believer – he hosted the church in his home. He was a person of wealth and influence, and so likely treated his slaves well. But Onesimus was a slave who either fled, or was sent on business and hadn't returned. In the meantime, Onesimus became a Christian himself. So Paul was attempting to step in on Onesimus' behalf by sending him back to Philemon, along with a letter of explanation. This was also an opportunity for Paul to teach Philemon and the church that met in his home that they now live by a different set of standards in how they relate to each other and how they do business.

Paul is encouraging Philemon to welcome Onesimus back without punishment, because now they have a relationship that supersedes their employment relationship; they are now brothers in Christ, and Onesimus needs another chance.

Paul was pretty savvy when it came to how he dealt with people, so he started by affirming all the great qualities and his deep love and friendship that he has for Philemon. Paul isn't blowing smoke and he's not buttering him up; Paul is genuine in his affection for Philemon, and he articulates why.

Paul lists what he genuinely appreciates and values about Philemon, and it is these characteristics that are the example for us today. What Paul saw in Philemon is also a list of what we ought to be busy doing during these in-between times – during this time between advents.

Would you stand with me as I read this passage to us? It's in Philemon, and it is verses four through seven:

“I always thank God when I am praying for you, dear Philemon, because I keep hearing of your love and trust in the Lord Jesus and in his people. And I pray that as you share your faith with others it will grip their lives too, as they see the wealth of good things in you that come from Christ Jesus. I myself have gained much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because your kindness has so often refreshed the hearts of God's people.” (Philemon 4-7, tlb)

Thank you – you can have a seat again. Paul is listing three characteristics of Philemon that are so obvious in his life that, every time Paul prays for Philemon, Paul can't help but thank God for Philemon; what Paul says about Philemon in those verses is the very first things that come to Paul's mind when he thinks about Phil.

Okay, in this short letter that contains this short passage lies significant instructions for us on what we need to be practicing and what we want to be known for while we wait for Jesus' return in our in-between times, starting with...

1. ***Faith*** in the Lord Jesus.

In the first sentences of this letter, when Paul said “you” he used the plural form to refer to all the recipients of the letter, including the church that meets in Philemon's home – very much like what people in the south mean when they say, “y'all.” But now he turns the plural into singular; now he is addressing Philemon in particular, and he's identifying Philemon's faith in Jesus, as he's well known for. It is important to note though that Paul didn't differentiate between faith and love; Philemon loved Jesus and was faithful to him; he had faith in Jesus.

This kind of faith we're talking about is an ability to trust Christ in any situation we're in – good or bad, calm or crisis.

Hebrews 11:1 says:

“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” (Hebrews 11:1, niv)

What do we hope for? What can't we see? Many of you have exercised incredible faith during this advent season. We've had folks in our church family who have said goodbye to loved ones due to death. Our community held a memorial service yesterday here at our church, reflecting on the life and tragic loss of little two-year-old Lucas Jacobson. Another family in our church braced themselves in faith for their four month old baby who faced major surgery, and even though their outcome is very positive, they were still praying for those in that Seattle hospital who were not, and might not ever, come home. Some of you faced heart surgery, strokes, and cancer diagnoses and treatments over these holidays.

And yet in all those cases, as I spoke to the people involved, to a person, they never wavered in their love and faith in Jesus.

I remember when our youngest, Brenden was so ill during his first few years of life, someone asked me, “How can you have faith in Jesus when your baby is suffering?” I said, “How can we *not*? What other choice do we have? It’s easy to have faith when things are going great. The true sign of faith is to trust him when things are not going the way I want them to.”

This faith in Jesus is not a blind, simplistic, or selfish faith. It’s not a faith that thinks there will always be a happy ending the way I want it. It’s not a faith that thinks, “If I just believe hard enough, or get enough people to pray with me, then I’ll get what I want.”

There’s been a social media story that went viral in the last couple of weeks, maybe you’ve been following it. There is a mega-church in California, and one couple on their staff helping lead worship, recently experienced the trauma of having their little girl, named Olive, die of unexpected causes. In their grief, they declared that their daughter, who was being held in the morgue, would be raised from the dead. They posted their declaration on social media with the hashtag, #WakeUpOlive. Thousands of people, including Christian celebrities, jumped on board and made their online declarations. I can understand the love and the desperation that would lead parents to desperately want their baby back from the dead.

But the problem stems from their church’s theology. The church they belong to is part of a modern movement of Christianity called the “Prosperity Gospel.” They teach that, if you believe something strong enough, and boldly declare it, God is obligated to do it for you. In fact, getting the answers you want is proof that your faith is strong. So the particular church that they belong to sends people out in teams who go into busy urban areas, confronting people with sickness and declaring healing over them. They even have what they call “resurrection teams,” who go out and pray for the dead to come back to life. Unfortunately for her parents and friends and some steamed up social stalkers, Olive woke up in heaven, not here on earth. That’s the miracle they already had, and should have accepted in the first place.

It’s not that we shouldn’t pray to a God who can, and sometimes does, the unexpected and miraculous. Can God raise the dead in this life? Of course he can – he’s done it before. But he didn’t do it for everyone. Will he raise the dead in this life? Not usually. And he certainly won’t do it because we selfishly demand it from him, even if our prayers are driven by deep pain and grief.

I’m not saying this to pick on these poor grieving parents. But they decided to go social with their declaration, and that provides us a teaching opportunity to learn what real faith is.

Our faith is one that hopes for and is certain of the character of Christ; that he loves me and you without fail, even if and when there does not appear to be any happy endings. It is faith and love that says, “I’ll trust – I’ll believe – I’ll be certain – of his character and nature, which is Love. That means therefore that I can be confident that he will comfort and strengthen me, he will not leave me, he understands my grief and my needs, and he will supply what I need, when I need it, but not always what I want. I can trust that he will

work things out for my best, even if there are no dollars dropping from the sky or dead dearly departed digging themselves out of their graves.

Ours is a faith that says, like the Old Testament person named Job, who had incredible faith in the midst of devastating suffering and no answers:

“Even if God slays me, yet will I hope in Him...” (Job 13:15, niv)

That is trust – not trust in circumstances, not trust in answers, not even trust in the strength of my belief or trust in how many people pray with me; it is trust in Jesus alone, regardless of circumstances or answers or my faith or whether I’m praying alone or with a crowd. When people think of *you*, do they immediately think of your faith in Jesus, or does something else come to their mind?

The second thing that Paul acknowledges about Philemon, and that we want to be known for as we live between advents, is our...

2. Love for all the saints.

This is a vital part of what it means to be a Christian, it is how well we love each other in the family of God – how well we love our fellow brothers and sisters in the church, in Christ.

Maybe you heard the story of the sick man who went to the doctor’s office with his wife. The doctor examined the man and ran some tests while his wife waited in the reception area. When the doctor came out, he had a concerned look on his face, and the wife became anxious. She said, “Doctor, is my husband going to be okay?” The doctor said, “I’m afraid your husband is very ill; he has a rare form of anemia. If it is left untreated, he will most certainly die from it. However, there is a cure. With rest and proper nutrition, the disease will go into remission and your husband should live for many more years. Here’s what I want you to do: take your husband home and treat him like a king. Fix him three home-cooked, healthy meals a day. You’ll need to wait on him hand and foot. He’ll need bedrest, so you’ll have to bring his meals to him in bed. Don’t let him do anything that you can do for him. If he needs something, you take care of it. He’ll need you to give him massages every day. Oh, and one more thing – because his immune system is weak, you’ll need to keep the home spotless at all times. Do you have questions?” She shook her head, “no.” The doctor asked her, “do you want to break the news to him, or shall I?” The wife said, “I will.”

She walked into the exam room where her husband was, and he sensed something was wrong, so he said, “It’s bad, isn’t it? What did the doctor tell you?” His wife answered, with a tear in her eye, “The doctor said you are going to die.”

Brothers and sisters in the church: if we don’t back up our words with genuine actions of love for each other, then in essence we are saying to each other, “Too bad – you are going to die.”

The kind of faith and love duo that we are supposed to have for each other was repeated by Paul in his letter to the Colossians:

“We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God’s people—the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God’s grace. You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.” (Colossians 1:3-8, niv)

Here’s something interesting: you might want to ask yourself, if this letter that Paul wrote was intended to be a private matter between a slave owner and his slave, why did Paul address it to the *entire church* that met in the slave owner’s home? Because Paul knew that if we are going to live out our faith, it is going to be lived out in the community of believers. We need each other to help us stay true to our love and faith in Jesus and each other. To have faith in each other means we believe in each other – we believe the best, we hope for the best, and we help each other reach the best. So there is accountability in our relationships with each other. Paul knew that what Philemon was being asked to do was much different than the norm – you see, Onesimus was a slave. In their country and culture slaves had no rights, they had no claim to rights, and they didn’t deserve any rights. But Paul was stepping into this private matter between a slave owner and slave, because they were both under a higher authority, a different kingdom, and different set of values than their allegiance to their country. Philemon knew that by law he could punish or even kill Onesimus. He had that right; Onesimus did not have the rights of citizens; he was a non-person. But Philemon lived by the Kingdom of God that declared Onesimus as a fellow human being who was now a brother in Christ. That meant that Philemon, and the church, needed to work together to treat Onesimus like a brother, not a slave – even though Onesimus still had legal obligations to fulfill. And, after all, all of us are slaves of Christ now, so we obey Jesus first. Does that make sense?

Paul also knew that Philemon would need the accountability of his church. So do you and I; *that’s why small groups are so important* – we need each other’s help to live in ways that show our allegiance to Jesus, even if we could legally justify a different attitude or action. We need each other.

Jesus plainly told his disciples:

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”
(John 13:35, niv)

Apparently, our influence in this world for the Gospel will be made by the way we love each other. Or not.

When people think of you, do they immediately think of your faith and love for Jesus and the people in your church? Because let me tell you, the way people in our community who are not Christians will believe in Jesus is when they can see in us our love and faith in Jesus and each other. That’s why Paul immediately moves to the third thing, which is that you would be...

3. *Active in sharing your faith.*

This is the natural result of the first two, because if we love Jesus and each other, and have faith in Jesus and each other, our hearts will also be turned toward others who need to know this kind of loving Savior and loving community called the Church.

When Paul wrote about Philemon's love for and faith in Jesus and one another, the logical next thought in his mind is that we need to have these same kinds of demonstrations of love and faith toward others outside the Church, because he knew well the greatest commandment in the entire Bible. Paul was a well-trained Jew, so he knew the commands of the Old Testament and he knew the greatest command of all. Paul was also a devoted follower of Jesus, so he knew that Jesus also emphasized this same command:

“You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:37-40, nlt)

There was no difference in Paul's mind, nor in Jesus' mind, between love for God and love for others.

I find it interesting that what Paul describes as “sharing our faith” did not include debating, arguing, judging, calling out people's sins, or condemning people. He didn't tell them to stand on street corners and shout at people. He didn't tell them that sharing their faith meant to have little pamphlets with the plan of salvation in four easy steps. Paul's formula for sharing our faith meant that we love and trust Jesus, because people will notice how we deal with life – especially adversity. It meant that we would love each other as the family of God, because people watch how we treat each other. And it meant that we would demonstrate that same kind of love to those *outside* the church.

Many times we fall into the trap of thinking that we have to grow in our understanding *before* we can share our faith; we have to acquire a certain degree of knowledge of the Bible first. So we have to go to classes and Bible studies and Sunday School first. Not that those things are bad, but Paul doesn't seem to say that at all. In fact, this passage seems to say that if we will be like Philemon and have love and faith in Jesus and each other and love others in action, *then* we will grow in our faith. In another translation, verses 6 and 7 say:

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

Do you see that? That as we “partner” with Paul by living out our faith in these ways, we will gain a deeper understanding of everything good thing we have in Christ. *That* is how we grow as Christians.

Paul says that is also how we refresh each other's hearts. Actually, I have to tell you that, in the original language, that isn't what the last part of that passage says *exactly*; it is a colloquialism that has been changed so that we understand it. Actually, what Paul originally wrote was, “...because the bowels of the saints are refreshed through you.” Literally, when we live our lives this way, we freshen up each other's bowels. Isn't that

great news? Paul wasn't giving them a formula for gastro-intestinal health, or that happiness is a healthy colon, although that is a good thing. They believed the center of a person's passion and determination was the bowels – today we would say it is the heart. But that original thinking is where we still get phrases like “having a gut-instinct” or “go with your gut.” It's the same thing for us when we refer to our “heart” or character or passion or drive; that's why it is translated that way.

So let's go into this new year, and let's live between the Advents in ways that give each other healthy digestion (?).

Better yet, ask *yourself*: what do you want to be known for? There are lots of things that you could have a reputation for – having a certain amount of money or a certain job or a certain amount of influence or having certain political views or even being a law-abiding citizen. I don't want to be known for my career or my educational degrees. I don't know about you, but I would much rather be known as a person who has love for and faith in Jesus and love for and faith in you, my church. And that I do that to such a degree that I generously demonstrate that love toward folks *outside* the church, too, so that they might also share in this great faith. And if your bowels are refreshed by that, all the better!

Pray