

October

Refresh

Sweet tea on a sunny day. Dipping your toes in a cool creek on a hot day. Crisp fall air. A pretty song. Watching kids play. A meaningful conversation with a friend. Reading the Psalms. These are things that refresh me in different ways. The word refresh means to reinvigorate, energize or strengthen—all necessary to live a faithful and thriving life.

There are things I do alone that refresh my soul, and there are things I do with others that also bring refreshment. We need community and solitude in our lives to practice giving and receiving God's refreshing love. It is essential to develop rhythms and routines in our lives, so we can faithfully and sustainably serve the Lord.

To experience refreshment, one must know what exhaustion or fatigue feels like. Recognizing what refreshment and exhaustion feel like spiritually, mentally, and physically is crucial. There is a consistent need to be refreshed in our journey of following Jesus. In Exodus 23:12, rest is related to refreshment as a part of the Sabbath. Paul speaks of the Christian life being a race (2 Timothy 4:7). Maintaining a pace and prolonging endurance are important when running a race. Human bodies have specific needs; water and food maintain stamina and health. Likewise, in our spiritual journey, we need nourishment and refreshment. Scripture alludes to refreshment and growth in Psalm 23:3, Proverbs 11:25. The nourishment Christians need can come through reading Scripture, meditating on it, and encouraging each other in love through words and prayer.

David explains refreshment coming from God (Psalm 23:3). Paul mentions refreshment coming from people (1 Corinthians 16:18). In 1 Samuel 16:23, David played his harp, and Scripture says, "Saul was refreshed and was well." Examples of refreshment even come from Jesus' interactions in the Bible. Jesus offers the woman at the well "living water" in John 4:10.

At the heart of many of these relational refreshments is a personal relationship. In the examples of mutual

refreshment in Scripture, a personal relationship allows one person to speak to another and offer words or actions bringing about deeper healing and refreshment—sometimes physically, sometimes spiritually. Discernment is needed about how we approach providing refreshment to others (depending on the closeness of our relationship with them). When we read the Gospel of Luke, we see numerous examples of Jesus offering spiritual and physical healing. He was discerning in every single interaction. Addressing physical and spiritual needs demonstrates God's concern for our spiritual and physical needs.

In the book of Philemon, Paul mentions how Philemon has refreshed "the hearts of the saints" (verse 7). Paul speaks of a spiritual refreshment within the body of believers. He must know what it feels like for a relationship to be exhausting if he can identify his relationship with Philemon refreshed him. The book of Philemon offers some insight into how Christians might approach others who are different or who might have unique needs. Philemon, a slave owner, and Onesimus, a slave, were from two different social positions.

Paul acknowledges the way Philemon has been refreshing to believers (verse 7) and asks he continue offering refreshment to Paul through the news of how he is treating others (verse 20). The book of Philemon can be an example of how we can be the refreshing aroma of Christ to those around us (2 Corinthians 2:15-17).

Paul wrote the book of Philemon while he was imprisoned in Rome or possibly in Ephesus. The book was written to Philemon, who might have been Colossae's leader or one of the church leaders. Paul addresses Philemon regarding his slave, Onesimus, who presumably escaped, encountered Paul, and was converted. It would have been common for slaves to run away and live in a bigger city to avoid being found. Another possibility is Philemon sent Onesimus to Paul for some intended purpose. The passage does not mention if he was a runaway slave or if Philemon had sent him to help Paul.

Paul commands reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus. Paul addresses Philemon as the slave owner, recognizing the power dynamics at play and the responsibility Philemon has for Onesimus, not just as a slave master, but as a brother in Christ (Galatians 3:28). Paul could have written the letter to Onesimus and encouraged him to return to Philemon. Instead, we see Paul admonishing Philemon as the slave owner with the most authority to take action.

We do not hear Onesimus' voice in this letter. We don't know if he asked Paul to write the letter on his behalf. We do not know if Onesimus was being returned to Philemon against his will. We do know, Onesimus had a relationship with both Paul and Philemon. We aren't sure of the nature of the relationship, but we know Onesimus is at the heart of the message of Philemon. Paul's relationship with Onesimus and Philemon propelled him to write this meaningful letter. Beyond the earthly relationships present, we see the spiritual relationship with the Lord compelling the love present in the words Paul wrote.

Paul communicates how he is interceding for Onesimus. He has heard of the love and faithfulness to the Lord that Philemon's love has demonstrated for his brothers and sisters. Paul also commends him for the refreshment he has brought to those around him. Philemon was in a position of power since he was a slave master. He used his position to bless those around him and did so lovingly. Paul highlights the loving community Philemon is a part of as a sign of their relationship with Jesus.

Paul expresses himself boldly when he asks Philemon to consider how he sees Onesimus. Paul shows his profound love for Onesimus when he appeals to Philemon saying he is sending his very heart (verse 12). Here, we see the love Paul has. In verse 16, Paul asks Philemon to see Onesimus as a brother through the lens of the gospel of love. Philemon and Onesimus might be in different social positions, but Paul urges Philemon to put those differences aside. In verse

20, Paul asks Philemon to continue to refresh him through how he interacts and sees Onesimus.

In her book *Redeeming Power, Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church*, Diane Langberg highlights:

In Isaiah 61:4, God promises, 'They will rebuild the ancient ruins...raise up the former devastations, repair....the desolations of many generations' (NASB) This promise follows a description of Christ, who came for the poor, the brokenhearted, the incarcerated, and the enslaved. In coming to 'them' he rebuilt ruins and healed generations. In Zechariah 8:4-5 we read 'Old men and old women will sit in the streets of Jerusalem....and the city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there.' The most vulnerable—the elderly and the young—will be safe in the streets. God will restore a place of safety and laughter and blessing for all. No exceptions. Bearing God's image means responding to ruin where we find it and pouring our blessing in that place so that it can be transformed.

This depicts what the Kingdom of God looks like for those who have suffered immeasurably, but also what it looks like to offer refreshment to others as God's children. There is safety, there is joy, and there is blessing. When working with survivors who have experienced trauma, safety is one of the foundations of the healing process. Many individuals lose a sense of safety because they have had to fend off threats for so long. Building emotional and physical safety is so important when interacting with trauma survivors. Diane Langberg reminds us of the role we can play in bringing refreshment to those around us who are suffering or might need an encouraging word. We can build emotionally and physically safe spaces allowing individuals to grow and experience true refreshment.

I have been trained as a Clinical Social Worker. I work at a non-profit agency providing therapy and advocacy services to survivors of sexual assault. We are encouraged to practice self-care to mitigate burnout. I must constantly examine what is in my heart and how much I have to give. I often ask myself, "Am I being refreshed so I can offer that same refreshment to

my clients?” Sometimes I must remember the things that nourish my soul and find ways to build those into my daily rhythm. To identify how I am receiving and giving nourishment, I need to find time and space to reflect on how my soul is doing. If I do not carve out intentional time to reflect, I am in danger of losing sight of how I am giving and receiving refreshment.

Because we do not have the same forms of slavery that existed in the Roman Empire, it can be challenging to relate to Paul’s interceding on behalf of Onesimus. However, there are modern forms of slavery, like human trafficking. I spent four years in Bolivia working for an organization helping women who were in the sex trade. We often partnered with International Justice Mission (IJM) to support their work to bring about freedom from sex trafficking. The mission of the International Justice Mission is “to protect people in poverty from violence by rescuing victims, bringing criminals to justice, restoring survivors to safety and strength, and helping local law enforcement build a safe future that lasts.” At times I experienced incredibly refreshing hospitality from those who had escaped slavery through the work of IJM. It took time to build relationships with those freed from slavery or their family members. The foundation of the relational refreshment was a shared desire to be of service to each other. Those individuals knew I was far from home and wanted to offer hospitality. I knew the individuals needed to experience freedom and God’s refreshing love.

Throughout the Bible, there are numerous examples of refreshment. Refreshment should be a part of our daily walk. The book of Philemon offers a glimpse into what refreshment can look like for people who might be different from one another. As Christians, we are called to be refreshment to the world.

The hymn “Give Reviving,” written by Albert Midlane and Chelsea Scott, speaks to the relational aspect of giving refreshment through gospel-centered interactions:

1. Father for Thy, promised blessing,
Still we plead before Thy throne
For the times of, sweet refreshing,
Which can come from Thee alone
Blessed earnest, Thou hast given,
But in these we would not rest
Blessings still with, Thee are hidden,
Pour them forth and make us blest!

2. Prayer ascendeth to Thee ever,
Answer! Father, answer prayer
Bless oh bless each, weak endeavor,
Blood-bought pardon to declare
Wake Thy slumbering, children wake them,
Bid them to Thy harvest go
Blessings O our, Father make,
Round their steps let blessings flow

3. Let no people be forgotten,
Let Thy showers on all descend
That in one loud blessed anthem,
Millions may in triumph blend
Give reviving, give refreshing,
Give the looked-for Jubilee
To Thyself may, crowds be pressing,
Bringing glory unto Thee

May we be women who seek to advocate for those different from us; may we have the courage to encourage our siblings who need refreshment. May we find ways to refresh those around us through God’s love.

About the Writer:

Alicia Bunch Vargas is a licensed clinical social worker. She currently lives in Nashville, TN. She enjoys reading, gardening, and spending time with friends and family.

PRACTICAL TIPS:

Are there people in your life you can intercede on behalf of as Paul did for Onesimus?

Who are the people you can receive spiritual refreshment from?

How are you demonstrating communal love and refreshment to those around you?

What rhythms or routines do you have that bring refreshment to your soul?

Are there individuals who might live in a different context than you that you can “refresh” through building a personal relationship (Widows, orphans, imprisoned, homeless, abuse survivors)? *W*

