

# **Philippians 1:1-11**

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### **Introduction**

Philippi was a Roman colony and was named after Philip of Macedonia, the father of Alexander the Great. It was a popular retirement place for Roman soldiers as well. Its importance though lay in the fact that it was on the main trade route between Rome and the eastern provinces.

The church at Philippi was established by Paul himself during his second missionary journey as documented in Acts 16. While Paul and his companions were at Troas (in modern day Western Turkey) Paul had a vision of man from Macedonia calling to him and so they left Troas and went to Philippi in Macedonia (in modern day North-Eastern Greece). In Philippi, Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth, was the first person to believe. Shortly after that they were followed around by a daemon possessed slave girl who had the power of divination and who followed them proclaiming "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation" (Acts 16:17 NET). Paul eventually became annoyed with her following them and commanded the daemon to come out of her, which it did. However, her owners weren't very happy now that they had lost there means of making money and they grabbed Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the authorities. In the ensuing uproar Paul and Silas were beaten with rods and thrown into jail and the magistrate commanded the jailer to guard them securely.

During the night while Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns there was an earthquake and the doors to the cell were broken open. The jailer woke up to find the prison doors open and was about to kill himself when Paul and Silas called out that they were still there. You need to remember that under Roman law the jailer would be punished, and very probably put to death, for allowing prisoners to escape, hence his decision to kill himself. When he found Paul and Silas still there he fell down at that feet in gratitude and asked what he must do to be saved. He then took Paul and Silas to his house and cleaned their wounds and fed them.

The next morning the magistrate gave the order for them to be released but when the jailer came and told them Paul basically said no, not unless the magistrate himself came and escorted them out. What the magistrate hadn't bothered to find out was whether Paul and Silas were Romans citizens or not. Roman citizens had a lot more rights than everyone else and those rights were backed by the full might of the Roman empire. Beating a Roman citizen without a trial would almost certainly result in the magistrate at the least losing his job. This was why when the jailer returned to the magistrate with the news that they were Roman citizens he was there apologizing, escorting them and asking them to leave the city.

So Paul and Silas went to Lydia's house, encouraged the believers there and then left and headed towards Thessalonica. And that was how the church in Philippi came into existence.

The question of when Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians is a bit more difficult to determine. Traditionally it has been thought that it was written during his imprisonment in Rome (circa AD 61-62) but there have been some scholars who have suggested otherwise. Other possibilities are Paul's imprisonment in Cesearera (Acts 23:23-26:32), while others have suggested he was imprisoned while in Ephesians and he wrote it from there (though the Scriptures make no mention of Paul being imprisoned in Ephesus).



## Salutation

> <sup>1</sup> *From Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the overseers and deacons.* <sup>2</sup> *Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! (Philippians 1:1-2 NET)*

The letter is written from both Paul and Timothy. It is quite possible Paul dictated the letter and Timothy did the actual writing but we don't really know. As mentioned in the introduction, the church at Philippi would have known Timothy well as he was with Paul when Paul established the church there. Note that they refer to themselves as slaves of Christ Jesus, or more accurately, bond-servants of Jesus Christ, those that have willingly sold themselves into slavery to Jesus Christ. For most of us that's not a very appealing idea. We don't want to be slaves to anyone but the reality is that by being a slave to Christ we can be truly free. It's something that is very easy to say but very hard to do. Personally it scares me and I think that is probably true for most of us. We don't like the idea of being a servant of someone else - our pride tends to get in the way.

Paul and Timothy address the letter to all the saints, the holy ones, in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons. If Paul was writing to us today he would use the same term - the saints. Today we tend to think of saints as those Christians who have become famous and have been canonized by the Catholic church. But that is not what the Scriptures means when it refers to saints. In the Scriptures it means you and I, believers in Jesus Christ. We are the holy ones, the saints. It's not that we no longer sin, it's rather that we have been made perfect in Christ and God is the one who sees us as holy because of the work our Lord Jesus Christ has done. You and I are the saints. We are the saints in Christ Jesus, together with the overseers and deacons. Other translations have elders and deacons, while older translations like the King James have bishops and deacons.

Traditionally these roles have been seen as the spiritual verses the practical, with the overseers responsible for the spiritual well being of the church, the teaching and preaching and rule of the church, and the deacons being responsible for the physical welfare of the church, looking after the distribution of, money, food, etc. 1 Timothy 3:1-13 gives an overview of the type of people Paul thought they should be. The whole area of church leadership and roles is a huge topic so it's not something I intend to get into here other than to quote what Matthew Henry has to say on this verse.

*He mentions the church before the ministers, because the ministers are for the church, for their edification and benefit, not the churches for the ministers, for their dignity, dominion and wealth (Matthew Henry's Complete Commentary on the Whole Bible)*

This is probably a word in season given some of the churches we currently see in the world which seem to indeed be more for the ministers dignity, dominion and wealth than for the edification and benefit of the church.

Verse 2 has traditionally been referred to as the apostolic benediction and occurs in most of Paul's letters. Paul wishes on the saints at Philippi the grace and peace that comes from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace is God's unmerited favor. Some people find the acronym God's Riches At Christ's Expense helpful to remember what grace is.

Grace and peace. Many of us want peace. The reality is though that without grace we won't find peace. It's in knowing that God loves you, cares for you and has forgiven you that we can find peace. And that's only possible because of what the Lord Jesus Christ has done on the cross. So



grace and peace do indeed come from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Prayer for the Church**

*> <sup>3</sup> I thank my God every time I remember you. <sup>4</sup> I always pray with joy in my every prayer for all of you <sup>5</sup> because of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. <sup>6</sup> For I am sure of this very thing, that the one who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. <sup>7</sup> For it is right for me to think this about all of you, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel all of you became partners in God's grace together with me. <sup>8</sup> For God is my witness that I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. <sup>9</sup> And I pray this, that your love may abound even more and more in knowledge and every kind of insight <sup>10</sup> so that you can decide what is best, and thus be sincere and blameless for the day of Christ, <sup>11</sup> filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1:3-11 NET)*

Paul had a great concern for the church, both those he had planted and even those he hadn't. We see this concern coming out in these verses. Every time he remembered the church at Philippi he gave thanks to God for them. And when he prayed for them he prayed with joy because of their participation in the gospel from the first day until now. Here is an interesting question for us. How many of us pray with joy? I battle just to pray, let alone pray with joy. Yet for Paul prayer seem to have come naturally and he could pray with joy for the people at Philippi and elsewhere. Technically it should be easy for us to pray - after all prayer is just having a conversation with God. But for many of us, myself included, the daily business of life gets in the way and we don't stop and make time to spend with God, either to read his word or to spend time in prayer to him. But we need to. We can even combine the two and while reading through a passage of Scripture ask yourself what does this mean for me and stop and listen to hear what God is saying. I think that is one thing that all the modern technology around us has taken away from us - silence - and we are the poorer for it. When was the last time you sat in silence and meditated upon God? And if you have done so recently, how long did you last. One minute? Two? I suspect most of us would battle to get to five minutes.

The aim of these questions is not to make you feel guilty but rather to make you think about where God fits into your life. I think it is true to say that most of us what to grow in our faith but if we don't spend time learning and meditating and listening to God, how are we going to grow? Sadly growing in faith in God doesn't come through osmosis. It would be really nice if it did but unfortunately God didn't make it quite that easy. The big old word that we don't use much these days for this growing in faith in God was sanctification. God wants us to be holy like he is holy and that requires work. That bringing our will, our thoughts, our pleasures, our entertainment into alignment with what God would want of us - that is sanctification. It's something we should really want to do. Christ gave his life for us. Is it too much for him to ask of us to be holy as he is holy?

If you feeling discouraged let's look at what Paul wrote next. For the people at Philippi and for you Paul is sure of one thing - that the one who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Jesus Christ. We do not do the work of sanctification alone. God works with us. Is that not a huge encouragement to know that the God of this entire universe is working with you.

There is something else we need to note about the people at Philippi as well. Paul tells us that they had participated in the gospel from the first day right until now. In chapter 4 verse 18 we read that Epaphroditus has brought Paul a gift from the church at Philippi, so despite the fact that Paul was in prison we know the church at Philippi had not given up on him and had in fact been supporting Paul



ever since he had established the church at Philippi. This was a congregation that loved Paul as well.

So Paul can say that it is right for him to think of them with joy and to hold them in his heart because no matter what has happened they have stood by him. And in standing by him they have become partners with Paul in God's grace, both in Paul's imprisonment and in his defense and confirmation of the gospel. And so he can say that he loves them with same love as Jesus Christ and is so confident of this that he can even call on God to be his witness.

I think that this particular passage has another lesson for us as well. Although we are called upon to bear witness to what we believe, not all of us can leave our homes and families and go either near or far to be missionaries as we understand that word today. But I believe that Paul is telling us here is that when we support missionaries, and ministers for that matter, in whatever way, by money, by prayer, by letters or any other means. their works become ours as well. We partake of God's grace together with them.

Now Paul turns to what he actually prays for them and what he prays for them is quite incredible. He prays that their love (Greek here is agape - unconditional love) may abound even more and more in knowledge and in every kind of insight so that they can decide what is best and thus be sincere and blameless for the day of Christ Jesus.

Paul often tells the people he is writing to what he is praying for them. This serves two purposes. Firstly it encourages them that someone like Paul is praying for them. They haven't been forgotten. Letting other people know you are praying for them (if you genuinely are) is not a platitude - it's an encouragement. And secondly it teaches them what to pray for themselves and also what we should be praying for ourselves as well.

The first of those things he prays for is that their love may abound more and more. It is good for the brethren to love one. After all, didn't Jesus say the whole law is summed up in these two commandments:

*<sup>37</sup> Jesus said to him, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." <sup>38</sup> This is the first and greatest commandment. <sup>39</sup> The second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>40</sup> All the law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."* (Matthew 22:27-40 NET)

So why then does Paul qualify how their love should abound? After all, knowledge is not something we normally associate with love. In fact, quite often we associate it with the opposite of love. And yet Paul doesn't. Because I was to ask everyone in this room to define love I suspect we would get as many answers as there are people. OK. So let's try to narrow down what real love is (remember we're talking agape - unconditional love here).

Firstly, you cannot love someone you do not know. Think about it. If I were to show you the picture of some random stranger could you say you love them? Of course not. If I were then to tell you their life story then there would be parts that you could empathize with and parts you couldn't. There would be parts that might make you respect them and parts that might repulse you. At the end of the story you would have a much better idea of whether this was a person you would want to meet, or a person you would want to stay away from. All based purely on what I've told you. But you still wouldn't love them. Faith may come by hearing though - as Paul says in Romans 10:17.



So does love mean we don't see other people's faults? Definitely not. If you talk to couples that have been together a long time it's not that they don't know their partner's faults - they do, only too well - but rather that they choose to love them despite their faults. It's often the same with families. They know each others faults all right but they still choose to love each other. On the other hand some families can't overlook each others faults and the result is a breakdown in the family. God is very aware of our faults, far more in fact than we are, yet he still loves us.

So does love mean that putting the other person first? Maybe, depending on what you mean by always putting them first. If it means you letting your spouse abuse you then no. If it means putting your child in a rehabilitation centre because there is nothing else you can do, then yes. If it means staying by your spouses side while they die, then yes. Life is complicated and so is love.

To truly love we need to see people and ourselves through God's eyes. We are all unique, we all have incredible worth, and we are all broken. And that is why we knowledge and insight when we love. Love doesn't mean letting everyone do what they like. Sometimes it is more loving to step in and say that's not right. Paul had to do that with the churches on numerous occasions. Jesus told to go and sin no more. Doing it in a way that in non-judgemental though is really, really hard. We often all too quick to judge rather than to understand.

And with that type of love the natural result will be that they, and us, will be filled with the fruit of righteousness, the righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ. And that will result in glory and praise to God.

