

1. A PERSONAL LETTER

Can you imagine receiving a handwritten letter from the **apostle*** Paul addressed to you personally? How excited you would be to receive a piece of inspired writing from the leading spiritual teacher of the day. That is precisely what the early believers in Philippi must have felt when this correspondence was delivered to them. There was Paul's name on the **epistle***—and their name right beside it! We can count on both hands the number of churches in history that have been so privileged—and the Philippians church was one such body of believers.

Yet in a broader sense, every authentic church in every generation has been so privileged. Far more than this being merely an ancient letter, this letter is intended for every church and every Christian in every generation. In this letter, God himself is still speaking to each one of us today. Though this letter was written two thousand years ago to the church at Philippi, it finds itself in the Bible for our spiritual good and growth, preserved for you and me and our benefit as well. This epistle is for you and me even today. As we begin this study of the book of Philippians, it is my prayer that there will be ignited within your heart a growing closeness to the Lord, and a new joy in him. In this chapter, we will consider together the first two verses of this highly personal epistle, which form the opening section known as a salutation.

* Words in **gray** are defined in the Glossary (page 231).

The Servants

In the very first word of this letter, Paul begins by identifying himself as its author (**v 1a***). It was typical in the first century for the writer of a piece of correspondence to record his name first rather than placing it at the end as is our custom today. In inscribing his name first, Paul is not being self-centered. Rather, he is simply letting the Philippians know that this letter is from him, a common practice of the day.

“Paul” is the Roman or Greek name of this towering figure, who was previously called by his Hebrew name, “Saul.” Many would insist that the apostle Paul was the greatest Christian who ever lived. He was so active for the Lord that it could well be said he lived the life of nine men. He was a dynamic missionary, church planter, powerful preacher, caring pastor, gifted **evangelist**, astute **theologian**, brilliant teacher, **itinerant** speaker, and prolific author—all merged into one extraordinary person. This is the same Paul who authored thirteen epistles in the New Testament. It was something special to receive this letter from the chief apostle in the church.

In **verse 1**, Paul states that he is accompanied by “Timothy,” his young co-worker, about whom we will discover more when we reach the second half of Philippians 2. Timothy served Paul on many levels as his travel assistant, trusted companion, and constant supporter. The apostle was the primary human instrument in the spiritual development of this younger man. Similarly, every one of us needs to have a Timothy in our life. We all need someone who is a partner with us in serving God. It may be a prayer partner or a personal encourager. It may be a spouse, an old friend, or an older mentor. It may be a teaching assistant. Whoever this person may be in your life, there is great blessing in pursuing this kind of relationship—a trusted associate like Timothy in serving the Lord. “Two are better than one” (Ecclesiastes 4:9).

Both Paul and Timothy are identified as “bond-servants of Christ Jesus” (Philippians **1:1**). At the outset of his other letters, Paul often

* All Philippians verse references being looked at in each part of the chapter are in **bold**.

refers to himself as “an apostle” of Christ Jesus (Romans 1:1; 1 Corinthians 1:1; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:1; Ephesians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; 2 Timothy 1:1; Titus 1:1). Paul certainly held such a position of spiritual authority in the early church. But with the Philippians, there appears to be no need for him to remind them of this elevated credential. Presumably, they are already mindful and respectful of his lofty spiritual responsibility. Instead, the emphasis he chooses to make is relational and personal. He humbles himself and stresses his commitment to serve them. This serves as a great reminder that all authentic leadership in the church must be servant-leadership.

The word Paul uses is “bond-servant” (*doulos* in the original Greek), which actually means “slave.” A slave is assigned an even lower position than a servant. In the first century, a servant would have owned a few possessions and have been protected by certain rights. He would have been hired for a certain project and then was able to return home to his normal life. But this was not the case with a slave. A slave actually belonged to his master like a piece of property. He did not have a life of his own. Further, a slave did not own anything. He was entirely dependent upon his master to meet all his needs. Neither could he travel anywhere without his master’s consent. His entire life existed to please his owner.

The point here is that “bond-servant” is precisely how Paul saw himself. And so, this is how he presented himself to the Philippians—as a slave-leader: a slave of Christ who had been bought by his master to be his possession. Of course, to serve such a master—the Master who died out of love for his “bond-servants”—is neither restrictive nor an imposition. It is a privilege and a joy, for the great **paradox** is that such slavery brings true freedom—freedom from fear, futility and death. The chief aim of Paul’s whole life was to please the Lord Jesus Christ. This humble-yet-wonderful position is not restricted to Paul and Timothy. Every believer in Christ is designated as his slave. In other passages, we are identified as joint heirs with Christ and children of the King. But here we are designated to be his slaves. As the slaves of Christ, we belong to him and exist to

serve and glorify him. To be sure, no slave ever had a more benevolent Master than do we. He freely provides every **grace** we need to live abundantly. But our Master he is.

This self-identification is how Paul humbly opens this letter. He reveals himself and his son in the faith, Timothy, as slaves. No author ever began his correspondence by assuming a more lowly posture. This is the **meekness** of mind which each one of us must assume. In being chosen to serve the Lord, we have a high calling to a lowly position.

The Saints

Paul next designates to whom he is writing: “all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi” (Philippians **1:1b**). This identifies all the believers as “saints in Christ Jesus.” Every genuine Christian is a “saint,” which means “a holy one.” The words “holy,” “hallowed,” “saint,” and “**sanctification**” all come from the same Greek root. These four words sound different in our English language, but they are similar in the Greek language. “Saint” is the most common word Paul uses to address believers in the early church. With this understanding, this phrase could be translated as “to all the holy ones in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi.”

The word “saint” is drawn from the word “holy” (*hagios* in the Greek), which refers to one who is set apart from the moral pollution of this world and set apart unto God. To be a saint means that by the operation of grace, a Christian no longer lives a life of pursuing sin in the evil world system and, instead, is pursuing moral purity. This involves both a negative and a positive separation. This is the dramatic change that takes place in every believer’s life when they are converted to Christ. They are immediately set apart by God from their old life of sin, negatively, and are engaged to a new life of purity, positively.

As saints in their historical time and geographical place, these Christians stood out in the corrupt world of the Roman Empire like bright stars on a dark night (2:15-16). They were easily distinguished

as they lived in an unholy culture. These believers were traveling a different path and headed in a different direction than the immoral society around them. They had a radically different standard of morality that produced an entirely different lifestyle. Everything about them was different from the polluted world in which they lived. Their families were different, their businesses were different, and their conversations were different.

At the same time, Paul stresses that every believer in Philippi was, **positionally**, “in Christ Jesus.” Before their conversion, they belonged to the evil world system with its anti-God agenda. But they had been delivered out of the kingdom of darkness and brought into vital union and communion with Christ Jesus. They were washed in his blood and given a new standing in his grace. They were made citizens of the kingdom of God. This little **prepositional** phrase, “in Christ Jesus,” makes all the difference to everything.

The same is true for all believers in Jesus Christ. We, too, are vitally connected to Christ and have entered into a personal relationship with him. The fullness of his all-sufficient life is flowing into our lives.

Grace upon grace is being multiplied in our souls. All that Christ is and all that he possesses belongs to us. Being in Christ Jesus makes all the difference to everything. And so Paul begins this letter by reminding his first readers, and Christians through the ages, that they have this privileged position in Christ Jesus. As the late British theologian Alec Motyer wrote:

“The exclusive place which the Lord Jesus Christ occupies in relation to the Christian has three aspects, which Paul indicates here by the words in, of, and from: a saint in Christ Jesus, a servant of Christ Jesus, and grace and peace from ... the Lord Jesus Christ.” (*The Message of Philippians*, page 26)

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The Setting

Paul next identifies the geographical location of these “saints” as being “in Philippi” (1:1b). In the first century, this ancient city was in eastern Macedonia, which is modern northeastern Greece. As a Roman colony, it enjoyed a different political status from the typical city in that day. Philippi had a close identification with Rome, so much so that it was called “Little Rome.”

“As such it was a Rome in miniature, a reproduction on a small scale of the imperial city.”

(William Hendriksen, *Philippians*, page 6)

The citizens enjoyed full Roman citizenship with many special privileges. They were exempt from paying the heavy taxes that citizens in other cities paid. They were excused from certain military service. They also received bolstered military protection because Philippi was an outpost for Roman soldiers.

As a thriving Roman city, Philippi enjoyed the stunning beauty of Roman architecture. The people proudly wore the Roman style of clothing. They spoke Latin, the language of educated cultured citizens, rather than Greek, which was so prevalent within the empire. Proud of its connection with Rome, Philippi boasted of its status as a colony of the empire.

Even so, when on his second missionary journey Paul had visited Philippi and preached the **gospel** (Acts 16:14-34), God opened the heart of a woman named Lydia, who was converted to Christ along with others. Paul’s powerful preaching, along with the liberation of the demon-possessed slave girl and the ensuing loss of income for her master, created a riot which caused him to be arrested, beaten and thrown into prison. But Paul kept preaching. At midnight, God sent a powerful earthquake that led to the conversion of the Philippian jailer and his entire household. In the aftermath, a church was spontaneously birthed, the church to which Paul now writes this letter. This dramatic beginning produced a tight bond between Paul and the Philippians.

Here we see the importance of the local church. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you should be an active member of a local church wherever you live. Christianity was never intended to be lived in isolation from other believers. God's design for healthy spiritual living is for us to be a functioning part of a church where the word is preached.

Questions for reflection

1. "In this letter, God himself is still speaking to each one of us today." How does this affect how you will approach your time reading the letter to the Philippians?
2. Given who Christ is, why is it a privilege, rather than oppressive, to be one of his "bond-servants"?
3. How are you, as a "saint," living a set-apart life in your particular place and time, in what you pursue and what you refrain from?