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Philippians 1:1–11



PAUL AND TIMOTHY, servants of Christ Jesus,
To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together
with the overseers and deacons:

²Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the
Lord Jesus Christ.

³I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴In all my
prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵because of your
partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶being
confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will
carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

⁷It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I
have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending
and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with
me. ⁸God can testify how I long for all of you with the affec-
tion of Christ Jesus.

⁹And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more
and more in knowledge and depth of insight, ¹⁰so that you
may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and
blameless until the day of Christ, ¹¹filled with the fruit of
righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory
and praise of God.

Original Meaning

IN PAUL'S TIME letters typically began with the name of the sender, the name of the recipient, and a brief salutation. Occasionally these initial phrases were followed by mention of the sender's thanks to the gods and of continual prayers for the recipient's well-being. Paul's letters follow the outline of these customs, but he radically modifies the customs themselves so that they become tools for bringing the grand themes of his theology to bear on the concrete problems of the churches to which he writes. So skillful is Paul at adapting the letter-writing customs of his day in this way that the careful reader can often discover the primary concerns of his letters by examining the opening paragraphs. This means that in a Pauline letter the opening paragraphs are not meaningless pleasantries, like "Dear John" and "Sincerely yours," but powerful expressions of the gospel and critical guides to the proper understanding of the letter as a

whole. Philippians 1:1–11 is one of the best examples in the Pauline corpus of this principle in operation.

The passage can be divided into three paragraphs, a greeting (1:1–2), a prayer of thanks (1:3–8), and a prayer of intercession (1:9–11). In the first paragraph Paul modifies the standard letter form for greetings to provide a model of the kind of humility he will urge upon the Philippians in later sections. In the second and third paragraphs he reshapes the typical form of the prayer section to describe the Philippians' concern for the advancement of the gospel and his own concern for their progress in the faith. As the letter progresses beyond these initial paragraphs, it becomes clear that these themes are Paul's primary interest.

Humility, Unity, Sanctity, and Hello (1:1–2). The opening words of first-century letters followed almost unfailingly the pattern "[Name] to [Name]: Greetings (*charein*)."¹ For example, the Jewish leaders of the Jerusalem church began their letter to Gentile Christians with: "The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings" (Acts 15:23). The military commander in Jerusalem who was in charge of Paul likewise began his letter to the governor of Judea with: "Claudius Lysias, To His Excellency, Governor Felix: Greetings" (Acts 23:26). And in A.D. 40 the Egyptian Ammonios began each of four surviving letters to his friend and business associate Aphrodisios with the phrase, "Ammonios to his dearest Aphrodisios: Greetings."¹ Paul follows this pattern in verses 1–2 but, in a way completely uncharacteristic of other letters from his time, expands it to make the normally simple words of greeting theologically significant. Three changes to the standard formula are particularly important.

First, in verse 1 Paul does not simply mention his and Timothy's names but includes a descriptive phrase: They are "servants of Christ Jesus." Paul's word for "servants" (*douloi*) does not refer to hired household help but is the term commonly used in ancient times for "slaves." Although in the Old Testament the term "slave" sometimes appears as a title of honor to indicate the special relationship of great heroes like Moses, Joshua, and David to God (Josh. 14:7; 24:29; Ps. 89:3), in the Greco-Roman context of Paul and his Philippian readers, it would have had unmistakable overtones of humility and submission.² Paul's readers would probably have understood the term as Paul

1. The text of these letters appears in John L. White, *Light From Ancient Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 121–24.

2. See Dale B. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), xvi–xviii; Witherington, *Friendship and Finances in Philippi*, 30–31. A helpful and readable description of slavery in the Roman Empire can be

used it here to refer to people conscripted into the service of Christ instead of into service to sin (cf. Rom. 6:16–23; Gal. 4:1–9; 5:1).

That Paul intended to emphasize this aspect of the term becomes even clearer when we compare the opening words of Philippians to the salutations in Romans 1:1 and Titus 1:1. These are the only other letters in which Paul begins by referring to himself as a slave, and in both he follows the designation immediately with a reference to his apostolic office. "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God," he says in Romans 1:1, and in Titus 1:1, "Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ." Here in Philippians, however, the only position that Paul claims for himself and Timothy is the office of slave of Christ Jesus. The honored title "apostle" is missing.

Second, Paul modifies the standard letter opening by referring not merely to "the believers in Philippi" (cf. Acts 15:23) but to "all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons." He wants the Philippians to know that the letter is addressed to them *all*, although he also wants to recognize the leaders of the church in a special way.³ Among Paul's thirteen canonical letters, only three others—Romans, 1 Corinthians, and 2 Corinthians—use the term "all" in the greeting, and only Philippians refers to the leaders of the church by their official titles in the opening section of the letter.⁴

Paul also follows his usual custom of calling his readers "saints" (*hagioi*). This term refers to the status of these believers as the people whom God has called out from among others and set apart, a position that carries with it the ethical responsibilities of the new covenant, just as in former times it carried the ethical responsibilities of the old covenant (Ex. 19:5–6; Lev. 11:45; Eph. 4:1; 5:3).

found in Paul Veyne's essay on "The Roman Empire," *A History of Private Life From Pagan Rome to Byzantium*, ed. Paul Veyne (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 51–70.

3. The terms "overseers" (*episkopoi*) and "deacons" (*diakonoi*) probably refer to two distinct offices of leadership within the Philippian church (cf. 1 Tim. 3:3–13), although precisely how they were distinguished from one another in Philippi is not clear. Since the "overseer" is elsewhere described as someone "able to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2; cf. 5:17; Titus 1:9; cf. Acts 20:28–31), a quality not required of the deacon (1 Tim. 3:8–10), and since the word "deacon" in its unofficial sense referred to one who waited on tables, it is possible that overseers were charged with teaching and guarding Christian doctrine whereas deacons were responsible for administrative matters. See Hermann Wolfgang Beyer, "διακονέω, κτλ." and "ἐπισκόπτομαι, κτλ.," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76), 2:81–93, 599–622.

4. It is probably not insignificant that the Roman and Corinthian communities were, like the Philippian church, having trouble with divisiveness. See, for example, 1 Cor. 1:12–13; 3:4; 6:1; 8:10–12; 11:17–19; 12:12–26; and Rom. 14:1–15:13.

What can account for this combination of features in Paul's opening description of the Philippian church, particularly for Paul's unique reference to the church's "overseers and deacons"? An answer lies close at hand if we couple Paul's description of the Philippian church in the salutation with his own description of himself and Timothy. Paul provides a model of the humility and concern for the interests of others that he will soon urge on the Philippians (2:1–11). Although Paul is God's apostle, set apart and called by him to his task (Rom. 1:2; Gal. 1:1, 15), and although Timothy is an approved coworker with Paul in this important service (Phil. 2:22; cf. 1 Cor. 4:17), Paul refuses to mention these high qualifications in the letter's opening. He prefers instead to emphasize his and Timothy's common role as slaves of Christ Jesus. He is careful, on the other hand, to give the leaders of the Philippian church their appropriate titles of dignity. By constructing his greeting in this manner he has, in a small way, showed concern not for his own interests but for the interests of others (cf. 2:4).

As the rest of the letter shows, Paul hopes that when the Philippians adopt this attitude of humble service to others, their "complaining [and] arguing" (2:14) will cease and individual church members at odds with each other, like Euodia and Syntyche, will "agree . . . in the Lord" (4:2). Paul's statement that he writes the letter to "all the saints" in Philippi adds additional punch to this subtle but powerful message. Although he singles out the leaders of the church for special recognition, he does not write only to them; and although either Euodia or Syntyche may have been delighted to have Paul on her side, Paul refuses to play favorites. The letter is addressed instead to the entire church. Moreover, the term *saints* reminds the Philippians that they are united with one another not by their own decision but by God's having chosen them out of all the peoples of the earth to be his treasured possession (cf. Ex. 19:5–6).

Third, as in all but two of his other letters, Paul expands the typical greeting by transforming the term "Greetings!" (*charein*) into the term "grace" (*charis*) and by adding the Jewish salutation, "peace" (v. 2).⁵ Paul's change of *charein* into *charis* shows that he does not intend for either of his two words of greeting to function as a simple salutation but to carry a deeper significance. By "grace" Paul means "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ," who "though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). This is the "grace" in which believers now stand, since through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, God has atoned for their sin and brought the hostility that sin engendered

5. In 1 Tim. 1:2 and 2 Tim. 1:2, Paul varies his custom slightly by inserting the term "mercy" between "grace" and "peace."

between God and his creation to an end (Rom. 3:24–25; 5:2). Similarly, the “peace” Paul commends to the Philippians is the blessing of reconciliation that has resulted from God’s gracious work on their behalf (Rom. 5:1).

In the first two verses of this letter, then, and in a part of the letter that might have been left formal and theologically bland, Paul has compressed the elements of a profound message that he will unpack as the letter progresses. He has provided a model of what it means to put the interests of others and of the gospel ahead of one’s own (cf. 2:3–4, 21–22), he has reminded the Philippians that their status as “saints” implies their unity as the people whom God has called to be his treasured possession (cf. 1:27; 2:14–16; 3:20; 4:2), and he has recalled the essence of the gospel for which he is in prison, whose progress the Philippians have supported, and for which he wants the Philippians to contend (1:5, 7; 2:27; 4:3, 15). This work of foreshadowing the primary themes of the letter continues in a more obvious way within the prayers of thanksgiving and intercession that follow.

Thanksgiving for the Philippians’ Partnership (1:3–8). In the year 168 B.C., an Egyptian woman named Isias wrote to her husband, Hephaestion, to ask him to return home from a period of religious seclusion at a temple in Memphis. After greeting her husband in the customary way, Isias wrote,

If you are well and your other affairs turn out in a like fashion, it would be as I have been continually praying to the gods; I myself am also well and the child and all in the household are continually thinking of you.⁶

Mention of prayer to the gods for the recipient of a letter was common in the private correspondence of Paul’s time. As with his initial greeting, Paul follows the conventional pattern (vv. 3–11), but once again transforms it with the gospel. In the first part of this section (vv. 3–8) he reports to the Philippians his continual thanks to God for them and gives the reasons for his thankfulness. In the second part he tells the church that he intercedes for them with God and describes the content of that intercession (vv. 9–11). As with the greeting, Paul’s prayer report foreshadows the letter’s most important themes.⁷

6. White, *Light From Ancient Letters*, 65. On the functions of the opening thanksgiving prayers in Paul’s letters, see Paul Schubert, *Form and Function of the Pauline Thanksgivings* (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1939); Peter Thomas O’Brien, *Introductory Thanksgivings in the Letters of Paul* (Leiden: Brill, 1977).

7. Schubert, *Form and Function*, 161–64, 180, points out that thanksgiving prayers in ancient letters outside the New Testament often introduce the subject of the letters in which they occur. But it is fair to say that Paul’s thanksgiving prayers anticipate the themes of his letters in far greater detail than do the thanksgiving prayers in most private letters from his time.

Paul begins the description of his prayers of thanksgiving in verses 3–4 with the comment that he prays for the Philippians “with joy.” His primary intention for this description is simply to affirm his affection for the Philippians; but it also announces a theme that runs throughout the letter: The believer should be joyful (1:18; 2:5; 2:17–18, 29; 3:1; 4:4; cf. 2:2; 4:1). Here we find Paul once again modeling for the Philippians a quality that he will later admonish them to cultivate among themselves (3:1; 4:4). For Paul, joy is not the result of finding himself in comfortable circumstances but of seeing the gospel make progress through his circumstances and through the circumstances of the Philippians, whatever they might be (1:18; 2:17). Thus, Paul, is joyful when he remembers the Philippians in prayer because God is at work in their midst for the advancement of the gospel. The two reasons he gives for his joyful thanks show this clearly.

Paul’s first reason is that the Philippians have entered into “partnership” with him in the work of the gospel from the time that he first preached it among them to the present (v. 5). The term “partnership” (*koinonia*) means more than “fellowship” (KJV) or even “sharing” (NRSV). It refers to the Philippians’ practical support of Paul’s efforts to proclaim the gospel and meet the needs of other believers. Thus Paul uses the verbal form of this noun later in the letter to commend the Philippians for entering into partnership with him (*synkoinoneo*) in his troubles by means of their gifts to him during his imprisonment (4:14). He also uses it to recall their willingness to participate (*koinoneo*) “in the matter of giving and receiving” during his ministry at Thessalonica and elsewhere (4:15; cf. 2 Cor. 8:2). The “partnership” of the Philippians for which Paul thanks God in verse 5, therefore, is their practical assistance of his efforts to proclaim the gospel.⁸ The apostle is particularly thankful, moreover, for the consistency of this support. The Philippians have given it “from the first day until now,” even when no other church did so (4:15) and even though the church itself was not wealthy (2 Cor. 8:2–3).

Paul’s second reason for joyful thankfulness to God is his confidence that God will complete the good work he has begun in the Philippians (v. 6). This work, which must be identified with the Philippians’ salvation, will reach its consummation only at “the day of Christ Jesus.” It is a work that God alone accomplishes, but the notion that it is not yet complete shows that it involves a progressive transformation of the lives of believers. The “good work” of salvation, then, includes God’s gift to believers both of the will and of the ability to do good works. The presence of these good works in turn

8. See J. Hainz, “κοινωνός,” *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990–93), 2:303–5; Witherington, *Friendship and Finances in Philippi*, 37–38.

provides evidence of real belief—evidence that God has begun and will complete the work of salvation in the person who displays them. Thus Paul says in 1:28 that the Philippians' steadfastness in the midst of persecution serves as a sign of their future salvation, and in 2:12–13 that whereas the Philippians should "work out" their "salvation with fear and trembling," God is the effective power behind this work. This thought also lies behind Paul's confession in 3:12, that he presses on "to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me." It is only because God in his grace has taken hold of believers and works within them to produce a life consistent with the gospel that they can in any sense "take hold" of salvation on "the day of Christ Jesus." In other words, those who will be saved in the future live holy lives in the present, but the holiness that characterizes their lives is God's work from beginning to end.⁹

If this represents a correct understanding of verse 6, then Paul's first two reasons for joyful thanks to God are probably bound to one another by a profound theological truth. Paul thanks God for the Philippians' partnership in the gospel not only because of the practical assistance it provided for the advancement of the gospel but also because it stands as a confirmation that God is at work in the lives of the Philippians (cf. 4:17). Paul knows, moreover, that if God has begun a work of grace in the Philippians, he will complete it, for he has the power "to bring everything under his control" (3:21); he is thus confident that God will conduct the Philippians safely into the realm of salvation on the day of Christ Jesus. This, he feels, is reason enough to rejoice.¹⁰

But there is another, more personal reason for thanks as well. In verses 7–8 Paul affirms that his joyful thanks to God is justified by his own deeply felt affection for the Philippians. He has them in his heart (v. 7a) and longs for them "with the affection of Christ Jesus" (v. 8). He feels this way about them because of their consistent partnership in his ministry through thick and thin (v. 7b). Paul describes this faithful commitment in terms that reflect his present position as a prisoner for the gospel. Whether he is in chains, he says, or "defending" and "confirming" the gospel, the Philippians have stood

9. The comments of Silva, *Philippians*, 50–52, on this aspect of v. 6 are especially helpful.

10. See 2 Cor. 9:6–15, which provides an illuminating parallel to this passage. Here Paul urges the churches in Achaia to give to his collection for the needy believers in Jerusalem by reminding them that God in his grace will give them both the resources and the desire to "abound in every good work" (v. 8). The result, Paul says, will not only be the meeting of the needs of God's people but "many expressions of thanks to God" (v. 12; cf. v. 11). This kind of obedience, which lies in the future for the Achaean, lies in the past for the Philippians and has already resulted, according to Phil. 1:3–8, in Paul's frequent prayers of thanksgiving.

with him. The terms Paul uses for “defending” (*apologia*) and “confirming” (*bebaiosis*) are technical legal terms for providing a speech of defense before an official (Acts 22:1; 2 Tim. 4:16) and giving a guarantee that something is true (Heb. 6:16). Paul’s imprisonment and impending trial (1:13, 17, 19–26) may have suggested these terms to Paul, as many commentators believe; but the Philippians’ support of the apostle is not limited to his legal battles (cf. 4:15–16), and so his meaning here cannot be confined to that context. Whether he is in chains or persuading hearers of the truth of the gospel outside prison walls, Paul says the Philippians have stood with him.

They have been, literally, “fellow participants [*synkoinonoi*] with me of the grace.” The NIV, along with most other translations, takes this to mean that the Philippians have shared with Paul in the benefits of God’s grace, presumably his saving grace. But since Paul has just spoken of the Philippians’ gifts to him as their “participation” (*koinonia*) with him in his ministry of preaching the gospel (v. 5), and since he often uses the word “grace” about himself to refer to his calling to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (Rom. 1:5; 12:3; 15:15–16; 1 Cor. 3:10; Gal. 2:7–9; Eph. 3:2), he is probably referring in verse 7 once again to the Philippians’ practical support of his ministry.¹¹ Because of this practical support in a variety of situations, the Philippians hold a special place, perhaps unique among Paul’s churches, in Paul’s heart.

Intercession for the Philippians’ Spiritual Growth (1:9–11). Paul next describes for the Philippians the content of his intercessory prayers on their behalf—that they might grow spiritually, with the ultimate result that God will receive glory and praise. Paul first expresses his basic request for the Philippians and then mentions the results that he hopes God will produce in them in answer to his prayers.

His basic request is that the Philippians’ love will steadily increase “in knowledge and depth of insight.” The term “love” is not further limited or defined, although if it bears the meaning here that it has in the rest of the letter (1:16; 2:1–2), it refers to the love believers should have for one another. Since this meaning fits well with the theme of unity pervading the letter and already introduced in subtle ways in verses 1–2, it is probably the correct meaning. Paul prays that their love for one another will increase first in “knowledge” (*epignosis*), a term that always refers elsewhere in his letters to religious knowledge, whether knowledge of God (Rom. 1:28; Eph. 1:17; Col. 1:10; cf. 3:10), of God’s righteousness (Rom. 10:2), of his Son (Eph. 4:13; cf.

11. The KJV takes the phrase “with me” as the possessive pronoun “my” and translates, “ye all are partakers of my grace.” Although this is probably not the best rendering of the Greek (“grace” should go with “partakers,” as the NIV has it), it nevertheless correctly captures Paul’s meaning.