



Philippians: Week 1

Week 1, Day 1 - Philippians 1:1-2

¹ Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:

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

Understanding the Passage:

Thirteen books in the New Testament are attributed to Paul and almost all of them were written to address problems! The Thessalonians were overly focused on the second coming - to the point of quitting their jobs and waiting around for it. The Corinthians were divided over economic classes, idolatry, spiritual gifts, teachers, and other things. The Galatians were confused about how Gentiles could be included in the covenant. And so on.

On the other hand, Paul wrote to the Philippians not to correct them, but to cheer them on and encourage them. Paul planted the church at Philippi on his second missionary journey, probably around 50 CE, making it the first Christian church planted in Europe. His letter was written about 10 years or so after planting the church and at least 5 years after his last visit. It is clear from his letter that he loved them. He writes about sending two of his closest companions to be with them – a gesture that surely displays deep devotion.

Paul's letter format was typical of other epistles written during the Roman era, but Paul puts a Christ-centered spin on it that makes it stand apart. Let's look at some of the components of the introduction:

Paul and Timothy

Who are Paul and Timothy? Briefly, Paul was the most influential apostle in early Christianity. He was a strict Jew who was responsible for stoning and persecution of Christ followers until he had a life-changing conversion experience on the road to Damascus in which he met Jesus. He spent the rest of his life as a missionary of Christ, planting churches and preaching about Jesus. Timothy was a young man he met during one of his missionary journeys that he took under his wing and who became a co-worker in church planting.

Servants of Jesus Christ

An interesting component of this introduction is Paul's omission of the title he used to describe himself in his other prison letters: apostle. In those letters, Paul was trying to rectify an issue and he used his position of authority to influence the recipients. In this more personal letter, he's simply writing as a friend who loves them. He describes himself as a *doulos*, which is Greek for bond servant. Bond servants were completely surrendered to their own will and served at the will of their masters. Paul's implication here is that, knowing he cannot serve two masters, he has chosen to make Jesus the Lord of his life. No longer is he a slave to self or to sin.

To all the saints

The letter was written to "all the saints in Christ Jesus," which is to say, the church. Paul didn't write to just the leader of the church but to every member. His letter would have been read when everyone who was a part of the church family was gathered together and it would have been read in its entirety. Modern Christians tend to read passages of scripture in isolation rather than in

context, which often leads to missing the arc of a message or subtle themes. Philippians is a short letter and well worth reading in one sitting.

Grace and peace to you

Excluding Romans, all of Paul's letters begin and end with "grace." Paul's writings and ministry consistently emphasize the importance of grace in the life of a Christ-follower. We are not saved by our good works, but by the grace of God through Jesus.

Questions for Reflection:

1. To gain an understanding of Paul's first visit to Philippi, read Acts 16.
2. Do you think of yourself as a "bond servant of Jesus Christ"? What difference might it make to your faith if you start doing so?
3. What is your reaction to being called a "saint in Christ Jesus"?

Week 1, Day 2 - Philippians 1:3-8

³ I thank my God for every remembrance of you, ⁴ always in every one of my prayers for all of you, praying with joy ⁵ for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷ It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because I hold you in my heart, for all of you are my partners in God's grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸ For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the tender affection of Christ Jesus.

Understanding the Passage:

What do you remember from 10 years ago? Who were your closest friends then? If they aren't regularly in your life now, are you still praying for them? It's likely that the answer is no. Yet here we have Paul letting the Philippians know that he still remembers them, thinks of them, and prays for them. He invested in their lives and was tied to them in such a meaningful way that even many years of absence had not caused Paul's affection for them to wane.

Yesterday's reading introduced the motivation behind Paul's letter - to cheer the Philippians on and encourage them. But just because they don't have major problems doesn't mean that they aren't at risk for succumbing to future problems. Paul didn't assume they would always avoid the problems of the other churches just because they had in the past. We are reminded by Paul's encouragement that our faith requires diligence and intentionality. It is also a reminder that we shouldn't take for granted that folks in good seasons of their lives don't need our encouragement. Our words and prayers may be the thing that keeps someone on the right track.

Paul notes that the Philippians have been his partners during his imprisonment on house arrest in Rome. We'll learn more about this as we continue to read Philippians, but he is referencing the financial support that they sent to take care of him while he is in jail. Imprisonment was a social stigma and placed Paul at odds with the ruling authorities. It would not have been a surprise if the Philippians had cut ties with Paul, but they did the opposite. They also took up the mantle of sharing the gospel, so it's no wonder that he prays for them with thanksgiving. What's remarkable is that he prays with joy even though he was writing as a prisoner. We'll continue to see the thread of joy throughout this letter as Paul sets an example of being joyful in the midst of trying circumstances.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Is there someone about whom you can say, "I thank my God for every remembrance of you," and if so, why?
2. What does this passage reveal about healthy Christian relationships?
3. Who can you encourage this week?

Week 1, Day 3 - Philippians 1:9-11

⁹ And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰ to help you to determine what really matters, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹ having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Understanding the Passage:

We get a peek into Paul's prayer life in this passage as he offers an intercessory prayer for the Philippians. He has specific things he wants and hopes for them, so he offers those prayers to God. In Mark 2, four friends carry a paralyzed man on the roof of a house where Jesus was and lower him in through the roof because they couldn't get through the crowds at the door. The scripture says Jesus healed him when he saw the faith of the man's friends. We cannot underestimate the importance of interceding on behalf of others as we bring them before the Lord in prayer.

Take a look at the contents of Paul's prayer. The priority of his prayer is love. It's not just a feeling, but an actionable love that brings fruit. He links love with knowledge and insight - in other words wisdom. In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul warns of having love without wisdom as it amounts to emptiness. Here he warns of the opposite. As the pastor Stan Mast wrote, love without wisdom "can lead to foolish decisions or to well-intentioned actions that actually do harm. Neither the heartless Tin Man nor the brainless Scarecrow will do."

Note the things that are missing from Paul's prayer - he isn't praying for career advancement, relationship success, health, or other temporal needs. Of course, these are valuable prayers and we shouldn't avoid praying for those things for ourselves or others! In fact, the book of James instructs us to pray for the sick. But Paul shows us that it's critical that we pray for spiritual growth, for character, and for the fruit of the Spirit.

He ties the harvest of righteousness to Jesus - he says it comes *through* Jesus. It's not something we harvest based on our own hard work or by pulling ourselves up by the bootstraps. We can only achieve righteousness by staying close to Christ. Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches." It is in staying connected to Christ that we grow in love and knowledge. This should be our prayer for ourselves and for others.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What is the primary content of your prayer life? Is it for yourself or for others?
2. Whom do you need to lift up intercessory prayer today?
3. What is the relationship between love and wisdom?

Week 1, Day 4 - Philippians 1:12-14

¹² I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually resulted in the progress of the gospel, ¹³ so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ, ¹⁴ and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.

Understanding the Passage:

Rather than letting the Philippians worry about his imprisonment and the implications for sharing the news about Jesus, Paul reassures them that his being in prison has actually brought about positive results. Contrary to their concerns that it would hinder the spread of the gospel, it has actually increased it - and to people who may not have heard about Jesus otherwise.

Paul uses the Greek word *prokopē* to describe the progress, or advance, of the gospel. Think of it like blocking and tackling so the ball can continue to advance up the field. The theologian William Barclay explains that the word was mostly used to describe the work of those who would be sent in front of an army to cut down bushes or trees as they advanced across tough terrain. *Prokopē* is the work that has to go first so that something can advance behind it. The gospel will spread even more now because Paul's imprisonment and witness to the imperial guard is clearing the way for the good news.

Note that he doesn't say being in prison is a good thing. It is not a good thing. Even with the privileges of being a Roman citizen, being a Roman prisoner was not a good situation to find oneself in. He would have surely suffered beatings, he didn't have reliable food, and he was facing the possibility of death as an ultimate punishment. But even in a bad situation, Paul can see the good in it.

Romans 8:28 says, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." There is a fine line between God purposing something bad and God bringing purpose out of something bad. Paul recognized that his imprisonment was the latter and he wanted to make sure the Philippians understood that as well.

It is a mistake for us to interpret our circumstances as good or bad based solely on our own judgment, motives, and desires. At best, it is self-absorbed. At worst, it is a denial of God having greater vision than we do. We make judgements based on a narrow focus – how something affects us. Paul could have complained about how being in jail affected him. Instead, he trusted that God had a greater vision that would be brought to fruition in spite of, or maybe because of, his current circumstances.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Why isn't Paul upset by his imprisonment?
2. Do you have a situation that seems like it would be awful but has resulted in something positive?
3. Read verse 14. What has been the unexpected result of Paul's imprisonment?

Week 1, Day 5 - Philippians 1:15-18

¹⁵ Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry but others from goodwill. ¹⁶ These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; ¹⁷ the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. ¹⁸ What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true, and in that I rejoice.

Understanding the Passage:

With Paul in prison, a vacuum has developed. Where Paul used to be the primary missionary, teacher, and evangelist, there is now space for others to take his place – or at least try to do so. Paul explains that some folks have taken to proclaiming Christ out of goodwill and love. Their goodwill is a sincere desire to help people get to know God through Jesus Christ. They have a deep love for God, for others, and for Paul. While he can't participate in sharing the gospel through missionary journeys, they want to make sure the work continues. Paul commends these folks.

On the other hand, there are some who have taken advantage of the situation. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul also criticizes bad teachers. He is frustrated by preachers who are "throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ." He says that they should be accursed. But his concern about bad teaching here seems to be different – these folks are not perverting the gospel or teaching false things. It is their motivation, not their content, that is sinful. They see the

vacuum left by Paul's imprisonment as an opportunity to become famous, and possibly even rich. They may have been soliciting support for their ministry as a way to make money rather than fund missionary journeys.

The difference in Paul's reaction to the two types of bad teachers implies that he is more deeply angered when the gospel is presented as faulty than when the person who presents it is full of faults. His conclusion is essentially "what does it really matter as long as people are finding out about the grace of Jesus?"

This attitude also requires a measure of humility. Paul shows us how to value the most important thing and to let other things fall away. He could have taken each one of the selfish teachers down, but he is choosing to let them continue because he believes that they will continue to bring people to Jesus, even as they profit off of it. It is not an ideal situation, but the alternative is less people preaching the gospel.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What are some ways that folks may preach Christ out of "envy and rivalry" these days?
2. Have you ever done the "right" thing with the wrong motivations? How did it end up?

Video Discussion Questions:

1. What do you think it takes to rejoice no matter the circumstances?
2. Do you agree with Tom's statement, "We can't expect God to break our chains until we learn to sing in them"? Why or why not?
3. How do you take the long view on hard situations, knowing that God is working in the midst of them, rather than letting ourselves succumb to defeat?
4. Have you seen someone do the right thing for the wrong reasons? How did it work out?
5. What is the relationship between love and knowledge and full insight?
6. How is our overflowing love a sign of righteousness?
7. How can you tell if you're making progress in your faith?
8. What was the most encouraging portion of the scripture that you read this week?

Prayer requests and other notes.