

Philippians 1:1-11: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Philippians chapter 1 verses 1 to 11. Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel.

For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

The epistle to the Philippians was written to Christians in the small city of Philippi, a Roman colony in the region of Macedonia. Its inhabitants, on account of its being a Roman colony, enjoyed certain privileges.

[1 : 23] Paul first visited the city in Acts chapter 16, where he and Silas encountered Lydia, a Gentile God-fearer, and some other praying women. Lydia and her household were baptised, and a small church seems to have been formed, seemingly with Lydia and her household at its heart.

After Paul delivered a slave girl from a spirit of divination, they had been thrown in prison, where the Philippian jailer and his family were converted. Paul writes this letter from prison.

Where exactly Paul was in prison is a matter of debate. Arguments have been advanced for Ephesus or Caesarea, but I think the strongest case is still that for Rome. Paul was likely writing in the early 60s.

By this time, it would have been about a dozen years or more since he first visited the city of Philippi. Within the letter, he gives the Philippians news of his situation, commends Epaphroditus to them, and expresses his appreciation for their generous support.

The epistle is addressed from both Paul and Timothy. Their two names are alongside each other. Paul is the author, however. It differs from most other Pauline greetings by not referring to Paul as an apostle.

[2 : 32] The letter is addressed to the saints at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons. This suggests that by this point, Philippi has a rather more developed church structure. However, we should be aware of assuming too formalised in order, or too technical a meaning to such terms at this point.

The overseers were likely men especially responsible as guardians of the congregation, while the deacons were likely persons especially charged with service in practical matters on behalf of the church.

As usual, Paul wishes the recipients of his letter grace and peace. These terms should not be read as mere general pleasantries, as they come from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The grace is the grace that God shows in the gospel of his Son, and the peace is the peace that arises from that. The epistle is addressed from Paul and Timothy, but immediately Paul lapses into the first person singular, making apparent that he is the sole author.

As Paul typically does in his letters, he gives detailed thanks for the people to whom he is writing, and for what God is accomplishing in and through them. As Mourner Hooker observes, his thanksgiving expresses joy, gratitude, confidence, affection, and longing for them in succession. [3 : 46] The memory of them is a source of joy to him and a spur to thankful prayer. For Paul, one of the great benefits of seeing God at work in other people and their situations is the way in which it encourages many to express thanksgiving.

He speaks of their partnership in the gospel. While this might refer to the way that the Philippians supported him in their prayers and some of them served alongside him, it is likely that Paul has in mind chiefly the particular financial support that the Philippian church had given him in his labours. Paul writes of this more directly in chapter 4 verses 15 to 19. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only.

Even in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs once and again. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. I have received full payment and more.

I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

[4 : 57] In chapter 4, as here in chapter 1, Paul makes clear that he regards such giving less as something given to him personally than as a partnership in his mission, as a herald of the gospel message.

They will receive their reward, not in thanks and indebtedness from Paul himself, but from the hand of God. He expresses his confidence in the fact that what God first began in that small prayer group by the river in Philippi with Lydia would be brought to a glorious completion on the last day, when Christ will be revealed.

Paul's joy, gratitude and confidence in the Philippians are appropriate as he shares with them in grace and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel. It isn't just a sharing in the experiences of struggle and persecution, but a sharing in the reception of the gift of God in Christ through and in those things and sharing in the mission of Christ that they are all labouring in together.

Ultimately, the suffering we experience in our Christian calling is sharing in God's grace and in the fate of the gospel itself, which prospers in and through us as God has granted us to be partakers in its mission.

Paul's feelings for the Philippians are intense and he longs for them all with an affection that comes from Christ himself, not just an affection of human friendship, but an affection that we feel towards those to whom we are joyfully united in the Messiah.

[6 : 20] He concludes this introductory section of his letter by expressing his prayer for the Philippians. His prayer is for their growth, a growth that flows from the abounding of their love, both for God and for others.

This love should develop into a greater maturity as they grow in knowledge and insight so that they are able to perceive and approve those things that are good. As a result of such abounding love and deepening moral discernment, they will be prepared for the day of Christ's revelation and judgment, pure and blameless before him, bearing a rich harvest of God's work within them in a way that brings glory and praise to God.

A question to consider, how is Paul's understanding of his and the Philippians' participation in the gospel and its fate a source of encouragement, joy and confidence?

