

LETTERS FROM PAUL

Philippians, Colossians, Philemon

by Phillip Eichman



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Introduction

Paul's writings make up a large and important part of the New Testament. These writings are composed of letters that Paul wrote to various churches and individuals. Much of what we know about the Christian faith comes from the letters written by Paul.

In this study we will be looking at three of Paul's letters. Two of these, Philippians and Colossians, are letters that Paul wrote to churches, encouraging the Christians in these churches to be faithful to God. The other is a personal letter that Paul wrote to a fellow Christian named Philemon about a unique situation involving a slave and a master.

As we study these letters from Paul, we will see that even though he was writing twenty centuries ago, much of what he had to say is still relevant for us today. The challenges we face in living a faithful Christian life are not entirely unlike those faced by Christians in the first century.

About the Author

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Lesson 1

A Greeting and a Prayer

Philippians 1:1–11

Key Verse:

“Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi” (Philippians 1:1a).

WARM UP



Even though most of us write fewer letters these days, we all know the various parts of a letter. A letter begins with a greeting such as “Dear Grandma,” “Dear Mom and Dad,” or “Dear Bob.” Following the greeting is the body or the main part of the letter. At the end of the letter there will be a closing and signature such as “Sincerely, Bill;” “Yours truly, Betty Brown;” or “Love, Jimmy.”

Letter writers living in the first century followed a format that is similar in many ways to our modern style of letter writing. We see this format in the letters found in the New Testament. These letters begin with a salutation that identifies the person who sent the letter, the recipient of the letter, and a greeting. This was usually followed by words of thanksgiving or prayer. The body or main part of the letter came next, followed by some words of encouragement or exhorta-

tion. After this, a conclusion and final greetings would end the letter.

As we begin our study of Philippians, we will see that this was the style that Paul used in writing to the believers in Philippi. Although he was an apostle and was guided by the Holy Spirit, Paul still wrote letters in a style and format that was commonly used at the time. This helps to remind us that Paul was a real person, he was writing to real people, and that his letters were similar to others written in the first century.

WORK OUT



A Greeting from Paul and Timothy (1:1–2)

The city of Philippi was located in Macedonia and had been founded in about 356 B.C. by Philip II, the father of Alexander the Great. The region was later conquered and was under Roman rule at the time that Paul visited there. Philippi was located on the Egnatian Way, the main route from the Aegean Sea westward to Rome, and was a major center for commerce and education. At the time that Paul visited Philippi, the population would have been made up mainly of Greeks and Romans, with others from various parts of the world.

Paul had planted a church in Philippi during one of his mission trips. He had originally planned to go somewhere else, but was guided to Macedonia and Philippi by a vision from God (Acts 16:6–10).

Several years later Paul wrote a letter to the church in Philippi. Some of those in the church were friends that Paul had made in his earlier visit. This may account partially for the personal nature of his letter.

Paul began by identifying himself and Timothy as “servants of Christ Jesus.” The word translated as “servant” means literally a “slave,” and it is likely that Paul intended the more emphatic meaning of a “slave” of Christ.

In most of Paul’s letters, he began by establishing his authority as an apostle. This was not necessary here because he was not writing to correct some problem in the church. He also had a good relationship with the church in Philippi. He was writing to his friends and identified himself not as an apostle, but as a fellow servant of Christ.

Along with Paul was Timothy, a young man that Paul had met shortly before his visit to Philippi (Acts 16:1–5). Throughout the later chapters of Acts, Timothy was a frequent traveling companion of Paul. He was also with Paul at the time of the writing of this letter. Many believe that he served as a secretary, taking down Paul’s words by dictation.

The recipients of the letter are called “the saints of Christ Jesus at Philippi.” “Saint” is a term that Paul sometimes used to identify Christians. The word “saint” comes from the same root word as “holy.” Christians are not “saints” because of something that they have done themselves; rather they are “saints” because they have been made “holy” by the blood of Jesus.

Paul’s Prayer for the Christians in Philippi (1:3–11)

Paul’s love and appreciation for the church in Philippi is evident throughout the letter. It begins in verse 3, where Paul wrote that he prayed for them regularly and gave thanks to God every time he remembered them. Paul’s thankfulness for these fellow Christians was in part due to the support that they had given him and their “partnership in the gospel.” The word is often translated as “fellowship,” but “partnership” helps us to see the sharing relationship that Paul was

describing. The “gospel” or the “good news” was the message that had been proclaimed from the beginning of the church, that Jesus had died and been raised again, and that he had conquered death and made possible the forgiveness of sins. This was the message that Paul had brought to Philippi, and it was his ministry of taking this good news to others that was shared by the believers there.

In verse 7, Paul mentions that he was “in chains.” Paul had been imprisoned many times, and it was during one of these imprisonments that he wrote this letter to the Philippians. The traditional view is that Paul wrote this letter, as well as Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon, during his imprisonment in Rome that is described in the later chapters of Acts (Acts 21:1–28:31). We read there that Paul was in Rome for at least two years. It is thought that he wrote these letters during that time.

In verses 9–11, Paul prayed specifically for the Christians in Philippi. He prayed first that their love “may abound more and more.” Love for others should be an obvious characteristic of the Christian life. Jesus had said to “love one another” and even beyond that to “love your enemies” (John 13:34–35; Matthew 5:44). It was Paul’s prayer that they would continue to grow in this love.

Coupled with this, Paul prayed that they might also grow in “knowledge and insight” and “to be able to discern what is best.” Philippi was a diverse city. Along with this came various cultural practices and the worship of numerous gods and goddesses. Paul’s prayer was that they would “discern what is best,” and remain true to the Christian faith and not be drawn away by these other beliefs and ideas.

Paul also prayed that they remain “pure and blameless.” This expression does not imply sinlessness. “Pure” can also translated as “sincere.” The word “blameless” means to not be offensive. Thus, Paul was praying that they might live sincere lives and not be offensive

to others, and that their behavior would attract others to their faith, rather than repelling them.

Finally, Paul prayed that the Christians in Philippi would be “filled with the fruit of righteousness.” This is a theme that Paul expanded elsewhere with the list of various fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23). These included love, joy, peace, and others that would exemplify the life of a Christian.

COOL DOWN



The account of Paul’s ministry in Philippi hardly seems successful (Acts 16:6–40). After healing a girl who was possessed by a demon, Paul and his companion Silas, were attacked by an angry mob, beaten by the city officials, thrown into prison, and finally told to get out of town. On the other hand, Paul was able to baptize several people, including Lydia, the jailer, and others from their households. So even though Paul’s short time in Philippi may not seem initially to have been very successful, he did leave behind a group of believers who continued to follow his teaching and later wrote this very positive and encouraging letter to the Christians who lived there.

Discussion Questions:

1. Paul called himself and Timothy “servants” or “slaves” of Christ. What does this tell us about Paul’s attitude? How can we have this same relationship with Jesus?
2. Why do we generally avoid using words like “saint” or “holy” when referring to Christians? How could Paul use these terms so often? What is it that makes us “holy”? (See Hebrews 10:10.)
3. What do you think it meant for the Christians in Philippi to know that someone like Paul was praying for them?
4. Paul must have had a very long “prayer list” and frequently mentions that he prayed for others. What are some ways that we can make our own prayers more focused on others than on ourselves?
5. What are some ways in which we today can be “partners in the gospel” like the Christians in Philippi?
6. In verse 6, Paul spoke of the “good work” that God was doing in their lives. How does God work in a person’s life? What sort of changes can take place when a person devotes his or her life to God?