



Philippians 1:1-3

For the next few weeks we are going to explore Paul's letter to the Philippians. Why Philippians? I could give you a personal reason – I've never actually done a series on it! On a more spiritual level, it's a letter of a devoted teacher, Paul to a group of people devoted to him and in looking at this we can explore a little of what it means to be church.

How did Paul meet the Philippians – God called him to Macedonia (Acts 16: 9). At that time Philippi was a Roman colony, run by Romans and dominated by Romans. Jews were rarer than in other towns and in the absence of a synagogue, Paul found Jews meeting at the river to pray (c.f. Psalm 137 – a practice started in Babylon) where he met Lydia, one of the first converts there.

Things started to happen when Paul cast a demon out of a woman who was being exploited for fortune telling. Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown into jail. The rest I'm sure you know well, their singing, the earthquake and the conversion of the jailer *"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"* *31 They answered, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved — you and your family."* Then of course the magistrates that flogged Paul and Silas without trial found that they were flogging Roman citizens – not a bright thing to do in a Roman colony where Roman law held sway. The rulers were embarrassed – so embarrassed they asked Paul and Silas to leave. Which left a healthy church in the hands of Lydia and her friends.

That's the history of it. Paul is only recorded as going back once on his third missionary journey (Acts 19). In Philippians the scene moves on a few years with Paul unable to visit them because he's imprisoned – possibly before the persecution of Nero where he may well have been under house arrest so all he would have had was his guards so that people like Timothy and Epaphroditus and other people could visit freely. But Paul couldn't circulate and preach.

Have you ever been to prison? I've only been as a visitor and can say that each time I went, I was relieved that I was free to walk out of the gates. Prison is there to deprive people of their freedom – and prison by definition is going to separate the prisoner from his or her loved ones and force a particular strict way of life on people whilst they are there. Don't have to be in jail to be separated from your friends, family or fellow believers and forced into a way of life you maybe don't want. Examples, demanding jobs, demanding families, illness. How can we grow and thrive in an environment when we are isolated? All need to face it at some point in our lives. Some facing it in the church now.

Paul was a man who had become isolated from meeting regularly with other believers in a church setting and what had been his mission. How did he cope?

Philippians, written from imprisonment to people that still had fellowship with him. This book has survival tips both for those who have started to feel isolated and those who need to minister to those in isolation. It's also a book full of thoughts and advice from someone who has become limited in what he can do to those who are not. In other words, it's a letter shaped by Paul's enforced isolation. It brings to us a dose of reality. A reminder that times change, things change, our circumstances change and we are called by a God who remains the same in all the changes of human life, to make the most of every opportunity and challenge that life throws up. As I've said a lot recently, we are more likely to grow spiritually through the setbacks of life than the good times.

So let's have a brief look at the start of the letter.

1 From Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus —

To all God's people in Philippi who are in union with Christ Jesus, including the church leaders and helpers: 2 May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.

Maybe we should have that in the NIV:

1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons. 2 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

On our letters, if they are formal we put our address, the date and then who we are addressing the letter to and right at the end we put our name. What you see here is a standard first century Greek letter and it's called the salutation. From and To and a greeting – there it is.

But even that is full of information – how does Paul describe himself and Timothy: servants of Christ Jesus to those in Union with Christ Jesus. Then who is it to – those who are in union with Christ Jesus. People of one mind speaking to those also in like mind – in Christ Jesus.

Whether together or apart, the bond that is with other believers comes because we are in Christ. We're all very different people with very different backgrounds. What on earth can we have in common – we are in union with Christ Jesus. He is the reason we are here. He is the subject and focus of our lives and it is to the furtherance of His kingdom we meet. We are in Christ.

We all know that. Problems so often arise when we fail to recognise that.

But there is a contrast of words: P & T describe themselves the words slaves of Christ Jesus – or more particularly bond servants – those that had chosen to place themselves in the ownership of Christ for service. It's interesting this one. In other letters, Paul has to stress his authority because he's writing to people where his authority and right to preach are questioned. Not in Philippians which is why I described them as being devoted to one another. They didn't question Paul's authority and all that needs to happen here is for Paul to reflect his devotion for Christ to others who were devoted to Jesus too.

The contrast is that it was written to the Philippians and that included their overseers and deacons – with the word deacon being servant – no hint of slavery here. These were the regular deacons. It also underlines the twofold leadership structure of that church which we would presume was typically Pauline. Firstly there were the episkopi. It's a Greek word for overseer or manager even. Someone who has been placed in charge of something by the person in authority. In later times episkopi became equated with bishops. We know from Paul's first letter to Timothy that overseers (equated to elders in other parts of scripture e.g. The Ephesian elders in Acts 20). Then there were the deacons – devoted from what we know of Acts to the practical tasks in the church so the spiritual leaders did not have to deal with them. It is the foundation of good management in the church. There is a division of labour between the spiritual and practical responsibilities of leadership. How on the ground that distinction is so blurred.

What is Paul's salutation: *May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.*

As a good Jew he would always wish them shalom – peace. It meant just that. Rather like the people on Star Trek who met new people “we come in peace”. I recall we mentioned this in Luke 10. Relationship was always established by the giving and receiving of peace. Paul offers them peace. We don't know what their reply to his letter was – probably the same – peace.

But of course the greeting has another element – a Christian element. The words are “grace and peace”. Paul didn't just speak shalom – he spoke grace. Why grace? Because the only ground of their relationship, the cause for them being united with Christ was because of the grace of God. The definition of grace is – unmerited favour. God has poured out His favour on us because He loves us even though we don't deserve it one jot.

So to conclude: how had these people come to be so devoted to one another – by union in Christ, because of the grace of God. Jesus was the reason they were there, God's grace was the cause of it. It was their focus.

And of course, it's exactly the same for us. We are here because of our union in Christ and that union has come because God has shown each of us grace because He loves us. Church starts and finishes with this focus. We are one in Christ with Jesus being that focus, and a healthy church comes out of that recognition. Let me end with a few words of a song by Don Moen

**We're here because of grace
A part of Your great plan
We have come to seek Your face
Not the wonders of Your hand
And yes we need Your touch
But You've given us so much
That we just want to thank You
For all You've done for us**

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MRBC Felixstowe 11/1/09
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