

FINDING JOY

Paul's Encouraging Message to the Philippians

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PAUL'S INITIAL GREETINGS

Philippians 1:1, 2

It is easy to skip over the first couple of verses of one of Paul's letters. Some names and seemingly standard words of greeting do not appear to hold a lot of interest or theological significance. But do not skip over these words too quickly, or you might miss some nuances that hold clues for understanding the rest of the letter. Paul never limits himself to the standard letter-writing conventions of the day, even though he starts with them. His active pastoral mind is already working even in these initial greetings.

Getting into the Word

Prepare a page in your Philippians journal or computer file for use in your study of this chapter. Begin by looking at Philippians 1:1, 2 in three or four different translations, and write out answers to the following questions.

1. Compare the initial greetings in this letter with those in the other letters that bear Paul's name (Romans through Philemon). Do you see anything that is unique in the greetings in this letter? Are there elements usually present that are absent here? Make a list of what you find, and then, in a paragraph or two, discuss the possible explanations for any variations you find.
2. What is Paul trying to say about himself and Timothy with the designation "servants" or "slaves"? Use a concordance to find where Paul uses this expression elsewhere in this and other letters. List the various meanings the term can have.
3. Why does Paul call the Philippian believers "saints"? What does this

- term mean? Use a Bible concordance to find and examine passages where it is used. Write a summary of its meaning. Compare your findings with those of a good Bible dictionary. Is this an appropriate term for Christians today?
4. Explain the significance of the phrase “in Christ Jesus.”
 5. Why does Paul mention the “overseers” (elders) and “deacons” at the beginning of this letter? To whom did these terms refer? Use a Bible concordance to examine how these terms are used and defined in the New Testament.

Exploring the Word

When I write a letter to my daughter (something I should do more often), I begin with the words *Dear Laura*. Yesterday, I wrote a letter to a total stranger who had inquired via voicemail about a matter. I began the letter “Dear” followed by the person’s name. Doesn’t it seem a bit strange that I use the same word—*Dear*—to address someone I love deeply and someone I do not even know? But that is the way we begin letters in this society. On the other hand, we are less formal with emails and often begin with a simple “Hi.” But letters tend to be formal in our culture. And we are not unique. Though the specifics vary, almost every society has standard conventions for letter writing. The first-century Greco-Roman world in which Paul lived was no exception.

In Paul’s day, letters usually began with a three-part introduction. First came the name of the sender (or senders), then the name of the recipient (or recipients), and finally, the word *greetings*. So, if I lived in the first century and were to send a letter to my daughter, I would probably begin with these words: “John, to Laura his daughter, greetings.” Although Paul followed this basic formula, he always expanded or modified it. The initial greetings in Philippians are shorter than usual but also contain some interesting features that are worth noting.

The senders

Paul. Paul almost always adds a designation to his name in his initial greetings to a congregation. (Only 1 and 2 Thessalonians, which are quite possibly Paul’s first two letters, lack this feature.) His most frequent

designation is “apostle,” but Philippians, along with Philemon and the two Thessalonian letters, lacks this title. On the other hand, Paul calls himself a “servant” or “slave” here, something he only does elsewhere in Romans and Titus. In both of those letters, however, he combines “slave” with “apostle.” Are there any reasons why Paul might omit the term “apostle” and include the word *slave* in this letter? Both features have precedent in other letters but are not Paul’s usual way of writing.

Let us reserve the discussion of the term “slave” for later and address the absence of the term “apostle” at this point. Paul probably felt that he did not have to include the designation “apostle” in this letter since his apostolic authority was not in any way under question in Philippi. Paul usually included the term to affirm that, even though he was writing actual letters to real people, he wrote with a sense of authority as one who spoke for God. Certainly, Paul had no idea that his letters would eventually be collected or come to be a part of the Christian Scripture known as the New Testament, but he did know that he was writing as one commissioned (an *apostle* is one who is commissioned or sent) by God. But the Philippians needed no such reminder. No congregation had been closer to or more supportive of Paul.

The way Paul includes Timothy’s name with his own in this letter is interesting. All but five of Paul’s letters (the three Pastoral Epistles, Romans, and Ephesians) list coworkers along with Paul as the sender, but only in Philippians does Paul include himself and a coworker together with a single designation. Usually, Paul gives his name, the added designation (or designations), and then mentions the coworker (or coworkers), but here he puts himself and Timothy together as “slaves of Christ Jesus.” This is probably a tribute to Paul’s high regard for Timothy, who held a special place in Paul’s heart and ministry.

Timothy. Timothy is listed as the cosender of 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon and as the recipient of 1 and 2 Timothy. Thus, eight of the thirteen letters of Paul also include Timothy in one way or another. By comparing Acts with Paul’s letters, we can see what an important role Timothy played in Paul’s ministry.

According to Acts 16, Paul first encountered Timothy when he came to Lystra on what we have come to call his second missionary journey.

Timothy was a “disciple,” whose mother was a Jew and whose “father was a Greek” (Acts 16:1). Believers spoke well of Timothy, and Paul decided to include him on the mission team. Paul circumcised him to avoid unnecessary prejudice against their ministry and took him along when Paul and Silas responded to the vision and crossed over to Macedonia. Thus, Timothy was present when Paul first visited Philippi.

In Acts 17:14, 15, we discover that after their visit to Philippi, when Paul was escorted out of Berea, Silas and Timothy stayed behind, planning to join Paul soon. Acts 18:5 records that Silas and Timothy later met Paul in Corinth, still on the second missionary journey. According to 1 Thessalonians 3:2–6, however, it appears that Timothy had met Paul in Athens before he reached Corinth and had then been sent back to Thessalonica to strengthen the new believers there in the faith. Timothy carried out this mission and met Paul in Corinth (this corresponds with Acts 18:5) with good news about the continuing faith of the Thessalonians. Thus, very early in Timothy’s association with Paul, he was sent by Paul on a significant mission.

This became the pattern in Paul’s ministry. Timothy was also with Paul in Ephesus on his third missionary journey, where Paul stayed for three years (Acts 19:22), and as Paul revisited Macedonia (Acts 20:4). But when there was trouble or a sensitive mission, Timothy often got the call. From Ephesus, Paul sent Timothy to Corinth and called him “My son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 4:17). When we come to Philippians 2, we will see more of Paul’s appreciation for Timothy. It is no surprise, then, that Paul refers to Timothy and himself together as slaves of Jesus Christ.

According to Hebrews 13:23, at some point in time, Timothy, like Paul, became a prisoner and was released.

Slaves of Christ Jesus. Although the New International Version and many other translations use the word *servants* at this point, the Greek term Paul uses here actually signifies a slave. Slavery, of course, was common in Paul’s day. Certainly, some of the members of the Philippian congregation would have been slaves. Paul consistently taught that Christianity transcends the difference in status between slave and free (Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11; 1 Corinthians 12:13).

Throughout his letters, Paul also uses the practice of slavery as a metaphor in various ways. In Galatians 4, for example, he contrasts the pre-Christian life of slavery to evil with the Christian life of being an heir and a child. In Romans 6, on the other hand, Paul contrasts slavery to sin with slavery to God (Romans 6:20–23). The former, he says, leads to death and the latter to eternal life.

In Philippians 1:1, the phrase “slaves of Christ Jesus” stresses total submission to God’s will as Paul and Timothy carry out the mission God has given them. Paul is also aware, however, that the term was commonly used for the prophets of the Old Testament. Amos 3:7 reads: “Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing / without revealing his plan / to his servants the prophets.” It is impossible to say whether Paul had this Old Testament usage in mind, but it is quite possible.

Probably our best clue to Paul’s meaning comes at the one other point in this letter where he uses the same term. In Philippians 2:7, Paul says that Jesus Himself took the very nature of a slave. As Christ humbled Himself and became a slave for our salvation, Paul emphasizes here, at the beginning of the letter, that he and Timothy now give themselves in service for Christ.

The recipients

All the saints. To Paul’s original readers, the term “saint” did not convey images of pious souls from the past in stained-glass windows as it sometimes does to us. In fact, it was not primarily an ethical term. The central idea was that of being set apart. It could refer to God as the One set apart and different from humans. In other words, it spoke of God’s transcendence. But it could also refer to prostitutes, who were set apart from ordinary society. In a Christian context, it signified those set apart to belong to Christ. Within that context, it does take on ethical overtones. Christians, who belong to God, are to live in harmony with God’s character and will.

Paul uses the term to refer to all Christians, not to some special or superior variety of Christians. He could even refer to the Corinthian believers as saints (2 Corinthians 1:1) at a time when he was not terribly pleased with their conduct. The Philippians are saints because they have

been set apart as those who belong to Jesus Christ.

Paul goes on to situate these saints in two ways. Although the New International Version uses two prepositions—*in* and *at*—in Greek, the word is the same. The Philippian believers are “in Christ Jesus,” and they are “in Philippi.”

In Christ Jesus. For Paul, to be in Christ Jesus is nothing less than to participate in a new reality. It means much more than an individual, mystical relationship with Christ. It means standing in the atmosphere of grace that God made possible through Christ. As we will see in much more detail later, in Philippians 3:9, Paul outlines something of what it means to be “in Christ.” It means not having a righteousness of one’s own but having a righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. It means sharing in Christ’s suffering in the hope of the resurrection (3:10). It also means sharing in the fellowship of believers in Christ.

When one reads what Paul says about the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12, it is evident that being in Christ is being part of His body—in a sympathetic relationship with other members of the body. The new reality in which Christians participate is made concrete in the fellowship of the church.

In Philippi. Although Christians participate in a new reality that includes the hope of the resurrection, they also live in the present world. They are in Christ, but they are also in Philippi—a real spot on the map in the real world. And their fellowship with Christ takes on concrete specificity as they participate in a particular local congregation located in a real place: Philippi.

Some have wondered why Paul does not refer to the “church” at Philippi as he often does in letters to other congregations. But Paul is simply not consistent on this matter, and it is, therefore, best not to attach any particular significance to the absence of the word. Paul uses the term “church” or “churches” in the introductions of 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon, but it is missing in Romans, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians (and, of course, the Pastoral Epistles, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, which are addressed to individuals).

Together with the overseers and deacons. It is unusual for Paul to

mention church officers as he addresses a congregation, and therefore, this reference at the beginning of Philippians has led not only to speculation about the meaning of these terms but even to the view that this is an interpolation (a later editorial addition). But there is no evidence to suppose that this expression was not part of Paul's original letter. It is not easy, however, to know precisely who these individuals were or why Paul mentioned them in this letter.

Although the term translated “overseer” (*episkopos*) was used in later Christianity for the bishop of a congregation or group of congregations, it did not have that meaning in the New Testament, where it is used only five times. In one case, it is used for Christ (1 Peter 2:25). In Acts 20:28, Paul told the “elders” (Greek *presbyteroi*) of the church at Ephesus, whom he had called together (Acts 20:17), that God had made them “overseers.” In both 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:7, the term refers to leaders in the church who are to be chosen, and in both passages, qualifications for them are listed. The verbal form of the noun *overseer* may well suggest the significance of the term for Christian ministry. It means “to care for” and is the term used in James when he admonishes: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to *look after* orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27; emphasis added). This shows that the overseer is not a religious authority figure but rather a caregiver or servant.

The term “deacon” is also used for a church office along with qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:8, 12. It is often used in a more general sense of “servant” or “minister,” however. For instance, Paul refers to himself as a servant or minister, using this term in 1 Corinthians 3:5; 2 Corinthians 3:6; 6:4; Ephesians 3:7; and Colossians 1:23, 25. When Paul uses it for his coworkers, it is not clear whether he is speaking of an office or is using the term in a general sense. He uses the term for Phoebe (Romans 16:1), Tychicus (Ephesians 6:21; Colossians 4:7), Epaphras (Colossians 1:7), and Timothy (1 Thessalonians 3:2). The term is even used in a general sense in 1 Timothy 4:6, which is just one chapter after the one place where it is clearly used in a more official sense.

All of this means that it would be a mistake to try to be too precise about the meaning of the terms here. All we can say for sure is that Paul

refers to leaders in the local congregation at Philippi. Two things are noteworthy. First, there are multiple leaders. Paul does not point to any individual leader. Second, Paul does not primarily address the leaders. He addresses the congregation, together with these leaders.

The greeting

As we noted above, the typical letter written in Greek in Paul's day would begin with the term "greetings." But Paul regularly modifies this typical greeting and begins with the term "grace" instead (1:2). In Greek, the two terms are similar, with only two letters difference. Thus, Paul uses one of his most important theological terms to begin his letters. Paul uses the term "grace" one hundred times throughout his correspondence. The term does not, however, play a major role in Philippians. Besides the standard greeting here, and the standard conclusion in Philippians 4:23, it appears only in Philippians 1:7. *Grace* is the term Paul uses to present God's free initiative to save humans apart from their own efforts or achievements. It refers to God's free gift of acceptance and love.

The second word Paul uses in his standard greeting is "peace." The Hebrew word for "peace" was the standard word for greeting among Jews. It also is an important theological term throughout Paul's letters, appearing more than forty times. It is a richer word than our English equivalent, for it signifies not only the absence of conflict but a total, holistic well-being. In Philippians, we will encounter this term in the first part of chapter 4, and we will discuss its meaning there.

Paul generally mentions both God the Father and Jesus Christ as the source of grace and peace in his introductions. Although he often expands this greeting (see the beginning of Romans, for example), the introduction here is short, with only two verses. As we begin verse 3, we move into the next section of the letter.

Applying the Word

1. Do I think of myself as a "saint"? If I spend some time meditating on Paul's use of the term for early Christians, how might it instruct my own Christian self-understanding?
2. Am I both "in Christ" and "in" my local community? From which

- am I most in danger of separating myself? Why? How should this realization affect my Christian walk?
3. How do I react to thinking of myself as a “slave” of Christ? In what specific ways does the concept speak to my walk with Christ?

Researching the Word

1. Use a good Bible concordance to look up the words *grace* and *peace*. Pick out a selection of passages, and see how Paul uses these terms and what they mean for him.
2. Use a Bible concordance to look up the passages in Acts where Timothy appears. Read these passages, and develop an outline in your journal that traces Timothy’s ministry. Compare your discoveries with a good Bible dictionary’s article on Timothy.

Further study of the Word

1. For the view that “overseers and deacons” may refer to the same group, see pages 7–10 of *Philippians* by Gerald F. Hawthorne.¹
2. For the characteristics of the opening of Paul’s letters, see pages 29–31 of *Letters in Primitive Christianity* by William G. Doty.²
3. For examples of more than eighty personal letters from the Greco-Roman world, see pages 269–395 of *Select Papyri*, volume 1, by A. S. Hunt and C. C. Edgar.³
4. For the characteristics and various types of Greco-Roman letters, see *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* by Stanley K. Stowers.⁴

1. Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Word Biblical Commentary 43 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 7–10.

2. William G. Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1973), 29–31.

3. A. S. Hunt and C. C. Edgar, *Select Papyri*, vol. 1, *Non-literary Papyri, Private Affairs*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), 269–395.

4. Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, Library of Early Christianity (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1986).