

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we praise and thank You for all the love, goodness and faithfulness we have received from You. You have granted us many wonderful blessings; help us therefore to accept difficulties and trouble, and bear them in the knowledge that You are in control of all things and always leading us towards our eternal salvation. Thank You heavenly Father; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Preaching

Pray for the lectionaries and those who write them and use them. They are systematic scripture readings for use in churches on Sunday, which also provide texts for preachers.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for South Africa at a time of changing leadership*
- *Give thanks for the joy of knowing that Christ has forgiven our sins*
- *Pray for countries of the world where people are not free*

Meditation

Lord God, give us courage to act according to what we believe;

Let us show compassion because of Jesus' love for us,
Let us be brave because we trust in the Lord's protection,
Let us be peaceful because Jesus taught the way of peace,
Let us be victorious over evil because Jesus has won the battle
Let us be careful because God's Word tells us to be wise,
Let us be forthright because we believe the Gospel of Truth,
Let us be honest because Jesus respects all people.

Lord God, may we be inspired by Him to whom we owe everything,
Our Saviour and our Redeemer, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Bible Study - *Philippians 1:1,2*

¹ *Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus,*

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

Review

It may be something of a surprise to you that we begin this study with a passage as brief as this from the beginning of Paul's letter to the Philippians. Each phrase of these two verses however, is rich with meaning and is highly significant for both our understanding of scripture as a whole, and our understanding of the Church today. We are so used to reading these words as an introduction to the letter that we forget the extraordinary power they had in their day, which would have immediately arrested the attention of Paul's readers.

The church at Philippi was founded by Paul and Silas (Acts 16:11f.) just after they had met Timothy at Derbe (Acts 16:1,2). Timothy is mentioned at the beginning of the letter and

also later (2:19ff), and it is possible that Timothy was with them when the church was founded. Philippi is where Paul and Silas were imprisoned by magistrates under pressure from the owners of a woman who practiced divination, and from whom Paul had cast out a spirit (Acts 16:18). Whilst in prison, the Lord used an earthquake to release Paul and Silas and this led to the conversion of the gaoler and his household (Acts 16:25-34); and Paul later demanded an apology from the magistrates for their ill-treatment! It was a powerful and dramatic start to the life of the church in Philippi. The church was important because Philippi was a significant city of the Roman Empire, at the cross-roads of commercial traffic between the East and the West and it was the first church founded in 'Europe' (now Western Turkey). It was under constant threat of opposition, and Paul mentioned the 'mistreatment' he received there in his letter to the Thessalonians (1 Thess 2:2). The letter itself encourages the Lord's people to stand firm in the face of opposition (3:1-11), and Paul's words were heartfelt because at the time of its writing, he was in prison himself (Phil 1:12-14)!

However interesting this background may be, the words of the opening two verses of Philippians remain our proper focus of interest in this first study. Paul's description of himself and Silas as 'slaves of Jesus Christ' expresses a profoundly close relationship with Jesus as their Lord and Master, and the description of the church at Philippi as 'saints' (meaning 'holy ones') may be familiar to us, but is one of the first times that a group of disciples is addressed in this significant way. Next, Paul speaks to the 'bishops and deacons' of the church. These words hide a tragic history of division within the church concerning their meaning and use as various church offices, and we need to understand them better. Finally, the second verse contains the formal greeting of Paul to the whole church at Philippi, in which he says 'grace and peace ...', an expression so familiar today we forget that these two words create a unique sense of unity and harmony within the divided world of Jew and Gentile.

There is so much to discover within these verses, but at their heart is Paul's affectionate greeting to every member of the Philippian church, who he sees as the holy people of God present in Philippi, beloved not just by him, but by the Lord.

Going Deeper

There are a number of issues to explore further, but amongst them are the use of the terms 'saints', 'bishops' and 'deacons'. Over the centuries, people have argued about the meaning of these words here, and you may have strong opinions about this yourself. As we study this passage further, we will look at them not according to their use within the history of the church, but in the light of their use in this letter. Paul's purpose was to speak to the Philippian church about their own problems, and to encourage them to focus everything on their life in Christ.

Further Study

Paul and Timothy, slaves of or Lord Christ Jesus

Philippians begins with Paul's introduction of himself and his companion Timothy. It is well known that the two of them were close, and he regarded Timothy as a junior associate, a 'loyal child in the faith' (1 Tim 1:2), having first come across him in Derbe during his travels (Acts 16:2). Nowhere else, however, does Paul include him in his greetings to a church, and so this must be important. One explanation of this has been that Timothy was in prison with Paul at the time of writing. However, there is no historical or scriptural proof of this), or that Timothy even wrote the letter (this is at best, only an assumption). It is best to assume that Paul and Timothy were in close fellowship at the time of Paul's imprisonment, and Paul planned to send Timothy to Philippi. This is the subject of a later paragraph in the letter (Phil 2:19ff) in which Paul writes as if to commend Timothy, asking the Philippians to receive Timothy as they would receive himself (2:22).

In verse 1 we come across the phrase 'slaves of Christ Jesus' which jars on our ears because it is not language we would use today. It would be possible to translate this 'servants ...', but it would not do justice to the word itself or the depth of meaning that this sentence contains. Slavery is outlawed today, though it does exist in various insipid forms throughout the world; but in the Roman Empire, slavery was a fact of life and scripture mostly accepts it as such. While this may offend us, we should be careful not to throw out what scripture means when the word is used, particularly when describing an aspect of our relationship with God.

Paul knew, as did anyone of his day, that slavery meant total subjection to the will of another person; a servitude in which there were no rights or freedoms because a slave was not simply at the mercy of a master for the purposes of work, but also for food, clothing and living. When Paul used the term 'slave of Jesus Christ', he meant that he placed himself voluntarily and totally at the complete service of his 'master' Jesus Christ. Indeed, the normal word for a 'master' who owned slaves in Greek was 'kurios' which we now translate and use as 'Lord'; and we all know that Paul frequently called Jesus 'Lord' and have copied him by doing the same! In this title, Paul talked of himself and Timothy as such slaves, as an example to all others who called Jesus 'Lord' (see also Romans 6:18-22; 7:1-6; Gal 4:8,9), and as an example to us.

The 'saints' at Philippi

Paul began his letter by introducing himself and his colleague Timothy; but he went on to address the whole church at Philippi, beginning not with any of the leaders, but with the whole congregation which he called 'all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi'. The first word in the Greek sentence was 'all', which emphasised the church as a being unity. In this way, Paul made it clear that his message was not just for church leaders or for one group of Christians or another; it was for the whole church, without distinction or exception. The leaders had no priority, because all were slaves of Jesus Christ, and all other roles were secondary; would that the church today expressed this truth with such clarity!

Paul described the whole of the church as 'the saints', in other words, 'the holy ones'. Up to this point in time, holiness was regarded in the Old Testament as a special gift of God. For example, the priests were regarded as 'holy' because they had a special role in the life of God's people (Ex 29:30 etc.), and the city of Jerusalem itself was described as 'holy' because it was the special dwelling place of God (Is 60:14). Holiness was a property of God that he granted to people or things which had some special purpose. Paul, for the first time in history, expressed the truth of what Jesus had done for all on the Cross by describing all believers as God's 'Holy' people, in other words, His 'saints'. Holiness is therefore not about goodness or other human qualities, but the gracious gift of God to all believers. It is utterly tragic when people persist with the view that sainthood is some spiritual quality attained only by a few; it is the gift of God to all who believe.

In the same sentence, Paul describes the 'saints' at Philippi as being 'in Christ Jesus'. This is a unique phrase of Paul's which he uses more than 160 times in his letters to summarise everything he meant about our relationship with God through Jesus. To say we are 'in Christ' means that we are in unity with our Lord and His purposes for the whole world, and we are a part of our Lord's work as His instruments. It also means that we find our fulfilment and destiny in Jesus because of His salvation, and in this sense we are 'in Christ', and not 'in Adam'. Paul used these words throughout his letters to convey these deep and abiding truths, and he did this so successfully that Christians use the phrase today almost without thinking!

The bishops and deacons

The words 'bishop' and 'deacon' conjure up pictures of people of grand church office. That is not as true for deacons as for bishops, but the reasons for these developments are

historic. The word 'bishop' comes from the Greek word 'episcopos' meaning 'overseer', and the word 'deacon' comes from the Greek 'diakonos' meaning 'helper'. The role of bishops has developed through history, and commonly means the most senior church official in an ecclesiastical region (often based on a city or town). The word deacon has been used variously by churches for centuries, and has generally refers to a junior official or 'helper' within a church. Frankly, the origins of these words and the offices they may represent are far removed from our modern practices.

The bishops and deacons in Philippi were certainly leaders, but they were regarded by Paul as slaves not just of Jesus Christ, but also of all the 'saints'; that is, of everyone. Such leadership was true to Jesus' teaching about servanthood (John 13:1-11, for example), and utterly foreign to the pomp associated with these offices today despite the great humility of some who have held them over the years. Some churches insist that there can only be one bishop within any area, yet even this bears no connection to Paul's words here in Philippians, which refer to many bishops (plural) at Philippi. Church officials with such titles were regarded as people who performed the necessary duties of organising the church, whether in money, for the distribution of alms or in the exercise of the gifts of leadership (see Ephesians 4:11). It is certainly noticeable that bishops, deacons and elders (various church leaders today) are not included in any of the famous lists of spiritual gifts (e.g. 1 Cor 12:4-11).

It is best to make no connection between the way Paul speaks of bishops and deacons in Philippians and our use of these words today, but to find in them a general reference by Paul to those who had administrative and pastoral roles in the church, stressing that they were 'slaves' of Christ. His reasons for doing this become clear later, as his letter increasingly emphasises the unity of believers.

Grace and Peace; God and Jesus

In the second verse of the first chapter of Philippians, Paul makes his greeting to the Christians at Philippi, again using words which have become very familiar to us today; 'grace and peace ...'. If we could time-travel back to ancient times this phrase would seem strikingly odd to us. The word 'grace' is the Greek word 'charis' which was generally used in the Gentile world as a greeting which expressed favour and good will. In the Jewish world (as well as other more oriental cultures), the favoured greeting was the word 'peace' which we know as 'shalom' in Hebrew. By putting the two words together, Paul expressed a greeting which brought together the ancient and the modern, the oriental and the Greek. The words would have sounded most odd in the ears of those to whom he spoke; yet it was Paul's favourite greeting, used at the beginning of nearly all his letters (Rom 1:7, 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3 etc.).

Paul added to this greeting that he brought it as from 'God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ'. In saying this, he made a statement of faith that the Jesus he believed in was indeed the Son of God, and was also the 'Lord', for whom his life was given in slavery. It is also thought that Paul specifically described God as 'the Father' because Jesus mostly spoke about God in this way; as we see, for example, in the Lord's prayer (Matt 6:9-13). The whole greeting was a powerful expression of Paul's own faith and his belief that the message of the Gospel was for all peoples, Jew and Gentile alike; and that through mutual service within the church as slaves of Christ Jesus, the Lord's commission to spread the Good News would be fulfilled.

Application

There is so much rich Christian theology within these verses, I must confess that I have had to limit myself considerably in writing. Fortunately, there are plenty of pointers from these two verses which we can apply to our own circumstances with ease. Firstly, Paul gives an example here and in his other writings (particularly the letters to Timothy) of how to mentor a younger leader. His letter is clearly his, but he writes as from himself and Timothy. There is no substitute

for such close fellowship and mentoring within the church of God, and many good quality leaders within the church, whatever their job title, testify to the importance of those who have guided them and taken a personal interest in assisting them in good practice.

Secondly, Paul gives us a simple example of a key quality of Christian leadership by the way that he addresses the Philippians. He places the service of the Lord and love for the people at the forefront of his ministry. Any leadership of God's people that has lost sight of this has lost its way. Leadership within the church, whatever the titles and roles that are necessary because of the way the church functions, needs to 'touch base' with scripture such as this if the church of God is to fulfil its mission in the world.

Lastly, we should be inspired by the powerful way in which Paul expresses the truths of Christian faith in the words of his greetings. The challenge to all of us is to use words not simply because of culture or history, but because they express in fresh ways the truths of the Gospel which we seek to declare in the world today. Paul said 'grace and peace' to his hearers, and there is no reason why we should not use these words today. What words, however, would our world today recognise as radically inclusive and compellingly loving? As often in the writings of Paul, the challenges we face from his writing are strikingly powerful.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. How easy do you find it to think of the people in your church as 'saints'? Is it always right so to do?
2. After reading this study, discuss with others what you feel about the role of bishops (overseers) in the life of the church today.
3. What words can we use today within a greeting which demonstrate the open love and acceptance of God to all who respond to him?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

God's church is a very precious thing, because the Lord does His will on earth through it; but I am conscious that in many places it has a very negative press. When Christians call for a return to the days of the early church, I hope they mean not only the joy and liberty in the spirit which appears to have characterised some, but also the generosity of heart which made God's people optimistic about their fellowship in Christ.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *What do you think about the church? Is it a 'structure' imposed upon people, which has little contact with real world? Is it a building where worship takes place which testifies to the whole community? Come before the Lord in penitence and prayer to let Him guide your attitude towards the church.*
- *Spend some time writing down some of the common attitudes towards the church you have come across. Compare these with what is to be found in scriptures, at least in this text, and ask yourself whether there is anything you should do to try and bridge the gap between what people think and what scripture says.*

Final Prayer

Keep me in Your presence this day, O Lord. Keep me close to Your side as I walk the path before me; then, when difficulty comes, may I have confidence to deal with everything in the way You would wish of me. Thank You Lord; AMEN