

## 02. Philippians 1





## Philippians 1:1

Paul and Timothy, slaves of the Messiah Jesus, to all the saints in the Messiah Jesus who are in Philippi

Timothy was with Paul on his first visit to Philippi and is well known to the community there (see 2:22).

Paul speaks of himself and Timothy as ‘slaves (δοῦλοι) of the Messiah Jesus’. At one level it is a way of speaking of Jesus as their ‘Lord’. At another level it expresses an intimate communion in obedience and in suffering with Jesus, the suffering Servant (δοῦλος) of the Lord.

He addresses the Philippians as ‘saints in the Messiah Jesus’. Through the gift of his Spirit, Christ is dwelling among the Philippians as in a temple, transforming them by sharing with them his intimate communion with the all-holy God.

‘All the congregation are holy (‘saints’), everyone of them: the Lord is among them’ (Numbers 16:3).



## Philippians 1:1

to all the saints in the Messiah Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons.

This is Paul's only letter to include in his address '**bishops and deacons**'. It is clear that the 'bishops' (ἐπισκόπος, see Acts 20:28) exercise a leadership role in the community, though Paul tells us nothing of what functions they carried out. 'Deacons' (διακόνος) carry out various ministries in the community. Note that Paul addresses the letter to the community which has been gifted with the various ministries, including those who exercise leadership. The letter is not addressed directly to the leaders.



## Philippians 1:2

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus the Messiah.

The customary Greek greeting was χαίρειν (see Acts 15:23; 23:26). Paul uses a similar sounding word, χάρις (**‘grace’**) – a greeting that reminds the Christian assembly of God’s action in their lives in drawing them to share the life of the risen Jesus – a life of communion in love with his Father through the shared bond of the Holy Spirit. Paul’s prayer for the community is that they will continue to experience the graciousness of God pouring out his love upon them.

The customary Jewish greeting was shalom (**‘peace’**, εἰρήνη). Paul repeats this greeting here, for his prayer is that they will experience the peace that is the fruit of grace: the fullness of life that happens when each member of a community contributes his or her gifts to the others in harmonious communion.



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It is God the Father and Jesus, the source of Paul's apostolic commission, who are the source of the grace and peace which Paul prays will be experienced by the community in Philippi.

Paul recognises Jesus as the '**Messiah**': the one promised by God. When Paul calls Jesus '**Lord**', he is referring to him as the Messiah raised to glory, who has demonstrated among the Philippians the power of God's Spirit, primarily by forming the community itself. The Risen Jesus is filled with the power of God – the power of God's redeeming Love (see Exodus 3:13-15).



## Philippians 1:3-4

I thank my God every time I remember you, <sup>4</sup>constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you.

As in almost all his letters, Paul follows the address with an expression of thanks. His expression of **thanks** (εὐχαριστέω) here is of an unusual intensity and affection. Note the constant repetition of the word '**all**' in verses three and four. There is clearly a special relationship between him and this community, and Paul's heart is constantly thanking God for them and remembering them '**with joy**'. The mood of this short letter is set by the word 'joy' which occurs fourteen times.



## Philippians 1:3-6

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus the Messiah.

He thanks God for the active part they have been playing in sharing (κοινωνία) his apostolic mission of promoting the gospel. Communion (κοινωνία) will also be a central theme of the letter (see 3:10). He thanks God who continues to draw them on to the goal of complete communion in Christ. The ‘day of Jesus the Messiah’ is the day, which Paul still thinks of as imminent (see 4:5), when history will have reached its goal, when the world will be judged by God, and when the risen Christ will come to gather his disciples to be with him. Paul is confident that God will have brought them to perfection by that day.



## Philippians 1:7

It is right for me to think and feel this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel.

Note the very tender way in which Paul expresses his affection for those among whom he has lived and worked. Recall his words to the Galatians: 'My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until the Messiah is formed in you' (Galatians 4:19). Recall also his words to the Christians of Thessalonica: 'We were gentle among you, like a mother tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us' (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8).



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Paul knows how deeply the Philippians love him. Clearly the love is mutual. He speaks of his feelings for them as being '**right**' (δίκαιος), for they are according to the will of God. He repeats what he has just said in verses three to five concerning their affection for him, and the way they share in his mission of defending and promoting the gospel, including his present imprisonment which he looks upon as part of his mission.



## Philippians 1:8

For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of the Messiah Jesus.

These words witness not only to the depth of Paul's feeling for the Philippians but also to the depths of his communion with Jesus. Paul recognises the depth of feeling (σπλάγχνον) which he experiences for them as his sharing in the love that moves the heart of Jesus. Jesus was profoundly moved (σπλαγχνίζομαι) by the leper (Mark 1:41), by the blind men (Matthew 20:24), by the widow whose only son had died (Luke 7:13), and by the harassed and dejected crowd (Mark 6:34; 8:2). Jesus spoke in the same terms of the reaction of the Good Samaritan to the man whom he found by the wayside (Luke 10:33), and of the father when he welcomed home his wandering and wayward son (Luke 15:20). The 'spiritual life' – that is to say, the life of the Spirit – is meant to affect our whole being, transforming our feelings and emotions as well as our thoughts and decisions.



## Philippians 1:9

This is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight

Using one of his favourite words, ‘**overflow**’ (περισσεύω), Paul prays that their ‘**love may overflow more and more**’. Paul uses περισσεύω when he prays: ‘may the Lord make you increase and **abound** in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you’ (1Thessalonians 3:12). Likewise, when he writes to the Corinthians: ‘God is able to provide you with every blessing **in abundance**, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share **abundantly** in every good work’ (2 Corinthians 9:8). To the Ephesians he speaks of ‘the riches of his grace that God **lavished** on us’ (Ephesians 1:8). Here it is their ‘love’ that he wants to ‘**overflow more and more**’.



## Philippians 1:9

This is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight

In speaking of ‘love’, Paul is referring to the communion of the risen Jesus with his Father. To love another person in the sense in which Paul uses the word here includes the way in which we see others in the light of the gospel, and the way in which we decide, on the basis of this recognition, to give our lives for others as Jesus gave his life for us. Love, therefore, requires ‘knowledge’ – significantly, knowledge of what God has revealed in Jesus. It requires ‘full insight’, for it is about judgment and decision as to how best to give oneself in love to others, according to one’s grace, according to the other’s need, and in sensitive obedience to the inspiration of Jesus’ Spirit living in us



## Philippians 1:10-11

In the day of the Messiah may you be pure and blameless, having been filled with the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus the Messiah for the glory and praise of God.

This kind of loving will keep us ‘**pure**’, not by virtue of our own efforts, but because it is the love of Jesus’ Spirit in us. This love will fill us [πληρόω] with the fruits which come ‘**through Jesus the Messiah**’. We think of Paul’s words to the Ephesians about the church being the body of the Risen Jesus, ‘the fullness of him who fills all in all’ (Ephesians 1:23), and his prayer that they ‘be filled with all the fullness of God’ (Ephesians 3:19). He assures the Colossians: ‘you have come to fullness in him’ (Colossians 2:10). The fullness of the fruits of which Paul is speaking to the Philippians include the fruits of the Spirit named by Paul in Galatians 5:22-23, the fruits of the righteousness which is God’s gift (Galatians 2:15-21), and which leads to the ‘**glory and praise of God**’.



## Philippians 1:12-13

I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is in the Messiah

Paul's beloved friends are concerned about his condition. He assures them that God has used his situation to advance the gospel. He speaks about the 'imperial guard' (πραιτώριον). This is a word borrowed from Latin where it was used for the praetorian guard in Rome. It was also used for the official residence of the governor in an imperial province. We have an example in the New Testament in Judea where the governor was in fact a military prefect (see Mark 15:16).

Paul's imprisonment is **in the Messiah**. He is in prison because of his carrying out the commission given him by the Risen Jesus. Furthermore he is sharing in the sufferings of Jesus, and it is because he is 'in the Messiah' that he is able to bear his imprisonment.



## Philippians 1:14-18

Most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear. Some proclaim the Messiah from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. These proclaim the Messiah out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defence of the gospel; the others proclaim the Messiah out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. What does it matter? Just this, that the Messiah is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.

Some are happy to see Paul in prison. However, in spite of their ‘**envy**’, ‘**rivalry**’ and ‘**selfish ambition**’, they are proclaiming Jesus, and for Paul that is all that matters. Their feelings towards him are a secondary matter. That he even mentions this rivalry is an indication of the special relationship which he has with the Philippians to whom he feels free to speak about his personal hurts.



## Philippians 1:19-20

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus the Messiah this will turn out for my deliverance. It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, the Messiah will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death.

The only thing that Paul wants for himself is to be with Jesus to enjoy the intimate love-communion which Jesus has with the Father. Paul does not want his beloved friends to be worried about him, but he does want them to surround him with their prayers and to hold him up to God that he might be more and more open to the gift of the ‘**Spirit of Jesus the Messiah**’ who is constantly inviting him into closer communion. He is confident in ‘**deliverance**’ (σωτηρία) - not in deliverance from prison (though he thinks that will happen), but in ‘**salvation**’ (see 1:28).



## Philippians 1:21-26

For to me, living is the Messiah and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with the Messiah, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in the Messiah Jesus when I come to you again.

Paul's '**eager expectation and hope**' is that he will remain faithful to the commission given to him. Then, whether he lives or dies is irrelevant, so long as people come to know Jesus' love through him and welcome the salvation which Jesus is offering them. As he said to the Romans: 'I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith' (Romans 1:16). Life in union with Jesus means communion with Christ crucified.



## Philippians 1:27

Only, live your life as citizens (πολιτεύομαι) in a manner worthy of the gospel of the Messiah

We have here a privileged insight into what Paul chooses to stress when writing to a community with whom he shares a deep mutual love. The one thing he urges is that they live in a way that is worthy of the gospel of Christ. He will bring out certain aspects of what this means in the section which begins here and goes to verse eighteen of the following chapter. The Philippians were understandably proud of being citizens of a Roman colony – which is picked up by Paul in using the word πολιτεύομαι. The ‘gospel of the Messiah’ is the good news about God which Jesus revealed in word and especially in his manner of life. It is also the good news about Jesus: about his communion with God which not even death could break; and about his longing to share this same communion with us.



## Philippians 1:27-30

Only, live your life as citizens (πολιτεύομαι) in a manner worthy of the gospel of the Messiah, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one Spirit, striving side by side (συναθλέω) with one mind (ψυχή) for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in the Messiah, but of suffering for him as well since you are having the same struggle (ἀγώνα) that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

They will need to ‘**strive side by side**’ (συναθλέω). Their communion and unity is not a superficial one, but is ‘**in one soul**’ (ψυχή). We recall Luke's description of the first Christian community in Jerusalem: ‘the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul’ (Acts 4:32).



Paul has heard that there is trouble in Philippi. The Christians were experiencing a continuation of the opposition which he himself encountered when he was there (see Acts 16:19-24). By withdrawing from civic religious cult, Christians were seen by other citizens as neglecting the gods and so as endangering the city. They may also have been experiencing pressure to join the Jewish community, since Jews were protected under Roman law. In this way they could avoid trouble. Whatever the source of the pressure, Paul urges them to hold on to the faith which has its source in the gospel. The behaviour of their opponents shows that they are heading for destruction. The steadfast faith of the Christian community is a sure sign that they are on the way of salvation.



From his own experience Paul knows that they will need a lot of encouragement if they are going to ‘**stand firm**’. He knows, too, that they cannot succeed if they attempt to trust their own resources, and so he focuses their attention on God, the source of all encouragement. It is God who has granted them the grace (χαρίζομαι) of believing in Jesus. Paul assures them that their suffering, too, is a gift of their gracious God, for, like Paul and with Paul, they have been given the privilege of being in communion with Jesus in his suffering. If they keep loving in such difficult circumstances, they will also share the consolation of Jesus’ Spirit sustaining them in their communion of love with God.



Paul will call those who are opposing the gospel ‘enemies of the cross of Christ’ (3:18). They do not understand the power of love that holds on through suffering. The Christian is not asked to seek suffering, any more than Jesus sought it. But if we are obedient to God’s will and suffering comes our way we are asked not to stop believing or loving because of it, but to hold on to our faith, and to remain loving, as Jesus did. Such love is redemptive. While we work against the injustices that cause so much suffering, let us unite our pain to that of Jesus on the cross, that we may share his faith, his hope and his love. Embracing him in his sufferings, we will experience the joy of being embraced by him.



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