

GRACE AND PEACE

The Book of Philippians #1

Today we begin our study of Paul's letter to the Philippian church. But before we so let's start with a little review of the city of Philippi and what Paul encountered during his time there.

Philippi was located in Macedonia, about ten miles inland from the Aegean Sea. It was known as a miniature Rome, its inhabitants enjoying the privileges of Roman citizenship. It was also known as the gateway to Europe because it lay on the main road between the eastern provinces and Rome. Rome made Philippi the political and commercial center of eastern Macedonia. Its seaport was Neapolis, ten miles to the east, to which Paul sailed.

Over the last several weeks as we looked at Paul's journey to and from Philippi we saw that the Spirit of God called Paul over to Macedonia through a vision. Once there, he sought out a place of prayer and was able to lead one woman to the Lord. Her name was Lydia and she invited Paul and his companions, Silas, Timothy and Luke, into her home for the duration of their stay.

Shortly thereafter Paul cast out a spirit of divination from a slave-girl. This angered her masters because the prophet from whom they gained their profit was no longer able to predict the future or provide them a steady stream of income. So they dragged Paul and Silas into the marketplace and accused them of disturbing the peace. This caused the magistrates to have them beaten with rods and placed in jail.

About midnight, as Paul and Silas were singing hymns of praise to God, an earthquake struck which opened the door of every prisoner and unshackled their chains. Yet no one sought to escape. As a result of these miracles, the jailer inquired of Paul how to be saved. After Paul explained the gospel to him and his family, all were saved and baptized.

The following morning the magistrates sought to release them privately, but Paul insisted they be escorted out of jail publicly by those who had wrongfully imprisoned them. After saying their goodbyes to the believers meeting in Lydia's home, they departed Philippi.

This ends our review. So let's now read what Paul has to say to these new believers and see if we can glean any information as to the state of the church in Philippi since he departed. We'll start by reading the first 11 verses of the opening chapter which is really his initial greeting to those in Philippi.

PHILIPPIANS 1:1-11

“Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me. For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.”

In this initial statement to the church at Philippi, Paul identifies himself as the writer along with his fellow companion Timothy. He says, *“Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus.”* Using the term “bond-servant” would have a double meaning to those in Philippi because this is precisely what the demon-possessed slave-girl called Paul and Silas when they were in Philippi. She said, *“These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation.”* So it’s interesting that Paul would begin his letter to the Philippian church with these words.

But most living in Philippi would likely connect the term “bond-servant” to slavery since it was so prevalent in the ancient world. In fact, the slave-girl herself was a slave to her masters. So by identifying himself and Timothy as slaves it would drive home the point that Paul and Timothy were in bondage to Christ who owned the title deed to their lives.

But this would not have been simply a ploy to catch the attention of the believers in Philippi. They were speaking the truth. They knew they had been bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6:20). And they knew that this was not their title alone but one that belonged to all believers. And that I believe is Paul’s point. This will become clearer as we read further into this letter.

When I looked up the Greek word for “bond-servant” I was struck with its definition. It defined a bond-servant as *“one who gives himself up to another's will; one whose service is used by Christ in extending and advancing His cause among men; one who is devoted to another to the disregard of his own interests”*. As I thought about Paul I felt this definition accurately described him. But as I thought about myself and of others who call themselves followers of Christ, I thought that I and they fall woefully short of this term.

I don’t know if this spoke to the members of the Philippi church who received it, but Paul’s use of the word “bond-servant” spoke to me. And it said, *“This is My standard of measure for those who would follow after Me. All who claim me as their Lord and Master must be measured against this standard. So take inventory of your interests and determine where your true devotion lies. See how you measure up to this standard. Then decide how willing you are to place My interests above your own.”*

If a bond-servant is *“One who is devoted to another to the disregard of his own interests”* I am not sure I could use this term to describe me. Because I don’t know about you but I have a lot of interests and they are not all clothed in a spiritual garment. And my love of these interests rarely includes disregarding them so that I might devote myself to Christ. I don’t always give myself up to God’s will. In fact I probably give myself over to my own will more often than to God’s will.

So this really had me “tweaked”. This simple greeting, these eight words, were causing me to see how out of alignment my interests were with the interests of God. And I was getting a little uncomfortable with it.

Let me give you a simple example of what I am mean by “tweaking”. Occasionally my back gets painfully out of alignment; it gets “tweaked”, so I visit the chiropractor. I don’t really relish going to the Chiropractor because it costs a lot of money for such a short visit. And I would rather spend my time and money elsewhere. Normally my time and monetary interests would override the need for the chiropractor. But when self-medication, messages and back braces do not alleviate the pain I seek out the Chiropractor to find relief. Now if I have put this visit off for several weeks (or several months) then my recovery time is longer and more expensive because I must come once a week for several weeks (or months) in order to realign what had been allowed to remain unaligned. In other words, if I delay treatment I may find some immediate relief from my pain but complete recovery will take some time.

When we first come to Christ we recognize that we are “tweaked”. We are out of alignment with the God who made us and we need Him to “straighten us out”. So we come to the Great Physician who examines us and gives us our initial adjustment. As we progress through our lives we occasionally fall out of alignment again. So we seek out the Great Physician again for an adjustment. But there are times when we decide not to immediately go to this heavenly Doctor and instead avoid this visit by administering self-remedies. Eventually, due to the Spirit living within us, we experience enough spiritual pain that we decide to go to God for relief. But like neglecting the Chiropractor, when we neglect the spiritual discomfort that God is using to get our attention, our recovery period will be longer and the pain of adjustment will be greater.

Sometimes it is a verse like the first verse of Philippians which can bring us up short. By the simple inclusion of the word “bond-servant” God exposes how out of alignment we are in our walk with Him. And the sooner we let God examine us in the light of His word, the better off we will be. Ignoring this spiritual discomfort will only cause the pain to increase and our lives to grow further out of adjustment.

We are going to be looking further into this idea of giving up our interests for the sake of pleasing Christ as we dive deeper into the book of Philippians. But for now Paul is just setting the stage for his teaching on this subject.

In order to be ready for what lies ahead though, I thought we should take a moment here to pause and reflect on what Paul is saying and begin to prepare our hearts to hear further discussions on what it means to be a bond-servant of Christ; Over the next several weeks, as Paul presents his perspective on this issue , I would encourage each of us to let the Holy Spirit examine our lives to see whose interests have priority – those of Christ or those of self. I suspect there may be some “ouch” moments ahead for us as Paul goes deeper into this subject later in the book. But I don’t think it will hurt as much if we prepare ourselves for them. So for now, let’s contemplate the idea of being a bond-servant but move on to see what else Paul has to say.

As Paul is writing his letter to the Philippians he addresses it “*to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons.*” I think this is another place to pause and reflect. This church has come a long way since Paul’s initial visit, growing from two converts – a woman who made purple dye and a Roman jailer – to a congregation who now has both overseers (elders) and deacons. Remember, when Paul first visited there were not even 10 Jewish men in Philippi to open up a synagogue. And now they have a sufficient number of believers to have overseers and deacons. To see how impressive this is let’s take a look at the timeline of Paul’s visits..

Paul visited Philippi twice. The first visit was in 51 AD. He visited again about 7 years later in the spring of 58 AD. In verses 7, 14 and 17 Paul speaks of his imprisonment. The fact that Paul speaks to the Philippians about his imprisonment will help us to determine the length of time between Paul’s first visit to Philippi and the writing of this letter. But first we have to determine from which prison he was writing.

We know from Scripture that Paul was imprisoned four times – overnight in Philippi (51 AD), two years in Caesarea (58-60 AD), at least two years in Rome (61-63/64 AD), then finally he was imprisoned again in Rome where he was eventually martyred (66-67AD).

Paul would certainly not have written his letter to the Philippian church while staying overnight in the Philippian jail, for there was no need to write a letter when you are in the very place you are addressing. Besides, they were too busy recovering from their wounds, singing praises to God, preaching the gospel

to the jailer and his household, and baptizing these new believers.

Since it was not from the Philippian jail that he wrote, it would have been during his time in either the Caesarean or the Roman jail. Since Paul mentions the Praetorian Guard in verse 13 it must be assumed that Paul was in a Roman prison since the Praetorian Guards were known as the bodyguards of the emperors. Other clues in the letter suggest this was his first time in this prison. So the date this letter was written would likely be somewhere between 61-64 AD and approximately 10-13 years after Paul's initial visit to Philippi and 3-6 years after his last visit.

Considering the fact that Paul was away from the city for 7 years before he returned the second time and he had been gone for another 3-6 years prior to this writing it must have been very encouraging for him to see the growth that came out of his obedience to a vision. This says a lot about the depth of Paul's teaching while there but it also speaks to what is possible when we obey the Lord's direction as Paul did after seeing the vision and going immediately to Philippi.

Now how do you suppose the growth of this church came to be if Paul and his companions were away from this area for years at a time? It had to initially be the strength and determination of the two converts he left behind at Philippi. The witness of their words and their lives were the only tools they had to bring others to Christ. They had no great teacher for Paul and his companions had left town. And considering that both Paul and Silas were imprisoned for demonstrating the power of God in the midst of this idolatrous city, the strength and determination of these believers is even more impressive.

Paul addresses his letter to "all the saints". He has used this type of greeting only one other time in Romans 1:7 where he said, "to all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints." Since we know there were many house churches in Rome Paul's use of this phrase here may suggest that there were many believers meeting in multiple and various private homes in Philippi as well. If this is the case then the church outgrew Lydia's home.

If we were to compare the average church in America to the church at Philippi what would we see? What are their similarities and what are their differences? Both are located in cities where people worship idols. Though America's idols are far less noticeable it can be truthfully stated that a large number of Americans worship self and pleasure far above the Maker of heaven and earth. And both had strong representative governments. Whereas the persecution of the Roman government grew to be a grave threat to believers, the American government is already exercising its authority by stating in some areas that the government's will must override the will of God. In other words, we too must now bow to Caesar or suffer the consequences.

Did the Philippian church grow because they met faithfully every Sunday morning and people just wandered into Lydia's house because they heard singing? I don't think so. I think it grew because people were in love with Jesus and wanted to share this good news of salvation with others. And they shared their personal testimonies of how God had totally transformed their lives. Certainly they could have initially capitalized on the miracle of the slave-girls deliverance and the ruckus caused by her masters. Anyone who heard of these events would have known where Paul and Silas stayed while they were there. But news dies quickly and is soon replaced by more exciting news.

So how do American churches grow? Through advertising? Word of mouth? Personal invitation? Programs? Music? Teaching? Television, Radio and Billboards? There are certainly some tools we have which the early church did not have. But what did they have? They had committed believers who dared to

share the gospel in the midst of persecution.

What did the Philippian church know that we don't know? What did they do that we don't do?

We'll never know because it is not recorded. All we have done so far is make some basic assumptions. But what we can surmise is that they did not remain silent even in the midst of the persecution going on around them. They wanted others to know the joy of being reconciled to a God of love; that all their human pursuits seeking for love and acceptance were in vain and needless because God had already done the work. God loved in spite of man's disregard for Him. And He proved it by sending His Son to die that all might have the opportunity to know rest from their labors.

No, I don't think they stayed in the home of Lydia hoping for others to somehow find their way to them. I think they went looking, just as Jesus went looking, for the lost and lonely men and women of that city. And I think they shared the good news of the gospel with them in spite of personal danger. And that I believe is what sets this church apart from many churches in America today.

Would they have invited people to come to the home of Lydia and perhaps others to see what all the fuss was about? Most certainly. Would they have emphasized the singing or the teaching or the food or the fellowship? Sure. But I think it also took the determination of the believers to share the gospel with others that caused the church to grow. They were not ashamed of the gospel nor were they afraid to share it with others.

What about us? What about the Refiner's Ministry? How do we measure up? What can we learn from the church at Philippi regarding church growth? I think it's a question worth asking. But let's save this question for later because we don't yet have the full picture of what the church at Philippi looked like. Nor do we know what corrective measures Paul may have inserted into his letter. So let's keep this question in mind but move on to verse 3.

In verse 2 of his greeting to the Philippian church Paul says, "*Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*" This phrase, "*grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*", was something Paul used in every letter he wrote. Even Peter and John used this greeting. But let's think of the significance of this greeting in terms of the cities Paul was writing to. All of the cities to whom Paul wrote were Gentile cities located in the Roman empire. As the head of this empire, the Roman emperor was portrayed in imperial propaganda as "the world's greatest savior and benefactor". What a contrast the grace and peace from God and Christ must have been compared to that which was granted by Rome's so called "savior".

The peace Roman emperors brought to their subjects was called PAX ROMANA. It was built on the backs of conquered peoples who had to submit to political oppression, religious crackdowns, and impoverishing taxation in order to live and experience the Roman form of peace. Whoever rebelled against the power of Rome lost their freedom and frequently their life. In contrast, the peace of Christ did not come through the death of many but through the death of one. As the ultimate expression of God's fatherly love Jesus sacrificed Himself so that we might have true peace – a peace that reconciles us to God and to one another.

The world may promise peace and may even grant you their definition of grace. But the grace of God and the peace which this grace brings is far greater than any government or world leader can ever give. Why? Because it is not theirs to give. They cannot give what they do not have.

True grace and peace come only from God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ. There are no substitutes, only counterfeits. We are told to pray for all who are in authority over us but that is so we may lead tranquil and quiet lives in all godliness and dignity. This is a form of peace because it is without conflict. But God's peace comes even in the midst of conflict.

Paul will speak more about this later in his letter. But suffice it to say that even in this simple greeting Paul is making a profound statement. Grace and peace come from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. It can come from no other source.

In John 14:27 Jesus said, *“Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful”*.

People and governments may promise peace and offer grace but they can neither deliver the peace nor the grace that God Himself brings. The sooner we recognize where the true source of grace and peace lie, the less likely we are to seek them from other unfulfilling sources. Paul is right. Grace and peace come only from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

So we have asked three questions coming out of the first two verses of Paul's letter to the Philippians.

1. What does it mean to be a bond-servant of Christ?
2. How does a church grow in the midst of persecution and without its founder?
3. Where do grace and peace come from?

We have answered the last question. Grace and peace come from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We have not yet answered the first two. But over the course of the next several weeks Paul will provide the answers for us as we read further in the book of Philippians. In the meantime prepare your hearts to be challenged. Paul has some heavy things to say that might tweak you out of your comfort zone and force you to take a closer look at yourself.

And here is my advice going forward. When you feel tweaked by the words the Holy Spirit spoke through Paul, don't try to make it better yourself. Go immediately to the Father for an adjustment. Don't delay. Don't prolong the pain. The relief God brings when we submit ourselves to Him will not only bring us into alignment with His will, but will also allow us to experience the grace and peace which come only from Him. And as the old commercial used to say, “Oh, what a relief it is!”

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