

## 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

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Reflect on those things that have done wrong in recent days. Repent before the Lord and seek where possible to put right what has gone wrong*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray about worship.** *Pray about the way that worship is conducted at your church. Pray for those involved and its leadership*
- *Give thanks for the pleasure given to many through music and the arts*
- *Pray for people who are fleeing persecution and genuinely need refuge and asylum*

## Meditation

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

Let us be loving because our Saviour has first loved us,  
Let us be considerate because God has kept us in mind,  
Let us be calm because Jesus has taught the way of peace,  
Let us be careful because God's Word tells us to be wise,  
Let us be brave because we trust in the Lord's protection,  
Let us be victorious because Christ has defeated all evil,  
Let us be honest because Jesus respects all people.  
Let us be forthright because we believe the Gospel of Truth,

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

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## Bible passage - *Philippians 1:1,2*

<sup>1</sup> Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus,

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

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## Bible Study

### Review

***The opening of Paul's letter to the Philippians reflects a warm and friendly relationship between Paul and the Christians there. Paul had founded the church there a decade or so earlier.***

It may be something of a surprise to begin this study with a passage as brief as this. However, each phrase within these two verses at the beginning of Philippians is rich with meaning. We may be used to reading these words quickly, but we should not forget the extraordinary power they had in their day. They would have immediately arrested the attention of Paul's readers.

To begin with, Philippi itself was a significant city. It was an important Roman administration centre for the region of Macedonia, standing at the cross-roads of commercial traffic between East and West, on the northern shores of the Aegean Sea. It was a city of great contrasts, with people of many different beliefs, and the story of the founding of the church (Acts 16:11f.) describes considerable opposition to the Gospel.

Paul and Silas founded the church at Philippi (Acts 16:11f.) after being obedient to a vision to go to Macedonia. They had just met Timothy at Derbe (Acts 16:1,2), and it is likely that he travelled with them to Philippi; this could explain why Timothy is mentioned here and also later in Philippians (2:19ff). Paul and Silas were famously released from imprisonment at Philippi by an earthquake (Acts 16:18), and this led to the conversion of the gaoler and his household (Acts 16:25-34). It was a dramatic start to the life of the church at Philippi, and the beginnings of a warm relationship with their founder, Paul.

The letter begins with Paul describing himself and Timothy as '*slaves of Christ Jesus*' (1:1). Firstly, this emphasises the supreme importance of Jesus Christ to the Gospel and to all Christians. Paul keeps this focus throughout the letter, which contains one of the most remarkable descriptions of the work of Christ found in Scripture (2:1-11). Secondly, by calling themselves '*slaves*', Paul and Timothy presented themselves as wholly committed to the Lord and the service of the Gospel. In their day, people understood that slaves lived in bonded service to their masters for the whole of their lives.

In comparison to this, Paul then addressed the Philippian Christians as '*saints*' (1:1). This means 'holy ones', and does not refer to special Christians with great faith! In Paul's day, all who accepted Christ by faith and were baptised were '*saints*', and this reminds us that God makes His people holy in His sight. We should not distance ourselves from this blessing!

Verse 2 goes on to address the '*bishops*' and '*deacons*' at Philippi. Now today, these titles define clerical positions within the church, but there is a vast difference between this and Paul's use of the words here. The word '*bishop*' simply means '*overseer*', and the word '*deacon*' means '*helper*', in the sense that the Philippian church was run by a combination of people who had oversight and those who helped to do things. There is much wisdom in this effective principle of organisation, and this is far removed from the complex status issues surrounding those who bear these titles today. Scriptures certainly point us towards a far more healthy concept of church leadership than is sometimes found today, and it is based on the holiness of all Christians and the humble oversight and service of its leaders.

Lastly, the second verse contains the formal greeting of Paul to the whole church at Philippi, in which he says '*grace and peace ...*'. These words are found at the beginning and end of almost all of Paul's letters, and they are clearly a special signature of his writing. The two words combine the traditional Greek greeting of '*grace*' implying favour and generosity, with the ancient Hebrew greeting of '*peace*' (Hebrew '*shalom*') meaning everything from '*good health*' to '*quiet living*'! The phrase '*grace and peace*' is very familiar to Christians today but it is worth remembering that together, these words create a unique sense of harmony within the divided world of Jew and Gentile.

There is much to be found in these verses. However, we must not forget that they are Paul's warm greeting to every member of the Philippian church, people he regarded as the holy people of God at Philippi, beloved not just by him, but by the Lord.

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Paul and Timothy, slaves of our Lord Jesus Christ
- The '*saints*' at Philippi
- The bishops and deacons
- Grace and peace, God and Jesus

## 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.

### ***Paul and Timothy, slaves of our 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 far more Christian theology and teaching within these verses than we might think, and this is because simplicity often disguises depth and quality of thinking. Paul did not write these words casually, but from the wisdom of his soul was able to write succinctly and profoundly. We should at least dwell on the fact that Paul loved and valued the church at Philippi, and in an age in which it is fashionable to dislike the church and put it down, his warm words of greeting remind us to think again about our often negative attitude towards the people of God.

Firstly, Paul demonstrates key qualities of Christian leadership in the way he addresses the Philippians, for his opening words indicate that he places the service of the Lord and love for people at the forefront of his ministry. Any leadership of God's people that has lost sight of this godly priority has lost its way. Leadership within the church, whatever titles and roles are necessary because of the way the church functions, needs to keep close to this scriptural wisdom if the church of God is to fulfil its mission in the world.

Secondly, Paul's brief comment about bishops and deacons has often been used as a 'proof text', quoted in support of the idea that the office of bishops and deacons is scriptural. How sad it is that we use scripture like this! A plain reading of scripture quickly yields the fact that Paul says nothing here about the structure of Christian leadership in the early church. He simply refers to the leaders of the Philippians church as people who have oversight of the work of the church and help it do its tasks. There is a vast gap between the utter simplicity of this reference and the inordinately complex church offices that are conjured in our minds today by these words.

Next, Paul's characteristic greeting of 'grace and peace' has much to teach us today. At the very least, they challenge us to have an open attitude of graciousness and peace towards all who we meet today, even if they are people we think of as cultural enemies. Elsewhere in his writing Paul explains that God Himself has this attitude of acceptance towards sinful people, so we should take His example and follow His lead. The words themselves are extensively used in Scripture and can teach us much.

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## Discipleship

### **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 of greeting can we use today to demonstrate our open and loving approach to others, and also God's acceptance of all who turn to Him in faith?

### **Personal comments by author**

*It is often thought right to aim to practice the simple truths of the early church. However, it is possible to be led astray by this quest if this means turning our backs on the spiritual lessons learned by our ancestors. So when Christians call for a return to the days of the early church, I hope they mean not only joy and liberty in the spirit, but also a generosity of heart and warmth of fellowship such as found in Philippians. True fellowship is a precious thing, and it is not elusive if people accept that it is found in Christ, and Christ alone.*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *What do you think about the church today? 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 prayer to submit to Him your attitudes and feelings towards the church.*
- *Write 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.*

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## 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

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