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## A Heartfelt Greeting Philippians 1:1-2

**Intro:** 20 yrs ago, if someone were to hand you a piece of paper and say, “This is for you,” at a glance, you could tell that it was a letter. Why? Because without even reading the first word, you would recognize the format in which it was written. There would be the address of the sender (maybe letterhead); your address and certainly that dead giveaway introductory word: “Dear...;” a word used as loosely as it is widely. Of course, it is just letter etiquette, a way of being polite, like ending the letter by saying “Sincerely yours...” What does that even mean? It seems as though you’re placing yourself under an untenable obligation

Letters in the 1<sup>st</sup>-century Roman Empire also followed a set formula for greeting and ending. Paul uses the typical letter form of the times but in his hands it becomes much more than a formula. His greeting includes a prayer which becomes a heartfelt statement of faith that sets the tone for the letter that follows. In Paul’s day, Greek and Roman society placed a high value on rhetoric – the craft of speaking. People studied for years to learn how to impress people with their ability to use language. This emphasis also appeared in the letters of that day, since writing was an extension of speech and everyone always read aloud anyways. But, Paul was not writing this letter to impress a bunch of literary critics. He was writing to friends, loved-ones – brothers and sisters in Christ.

Although Philippians is a friendly letter, Paul still writes it as an apostle, meaning he has received a special ministry and authority from Jesus Christ. Paul’s apostolic authority is not being questioned by the Philippians in any way, thus Paul doesn’t feel the need to remind them of it in his greeting as he does in some other epistles but his authority will come across strongly in his warnings against false teachers in [ch3](#). The letter comes from Paul and Timothy, both referred to as bondservants (slaves) of Jesus Christ. Timothy is included because he will be Paul’s envoy to Philippi and this is a reminder to the Philippians that Timothy is his trusted friend and helper who should be seen as one who shares Paul’s work and, to some extent, his authority.

Last week we dealt with the author of the letter and how he viewed himself

in relation to his service to the Lord. Today we want to look at who the letter was written to and the benediction that is offered in Paul's greeting.

**1b** – saints - the Christians at Philippi. Saints is Paul's general term for Christians. We live amidst a religious culture that considers saints to be specific Christians who have been recognized (generally and formally) as examples of holiness. The word saints even means holy ones. But that's not the way Paul uses the term, or the Bible for that matter. The saints Paul was writing to were not special Christians; they were people like you and me. Thus, the title applies to us, as it does to every other Christian. Paul writes to the saints at Rome, to the saints at Corinth, to the saints at Ephesus, and so on. In every case he means believers.

A great deal of trouble had been caused in the church by those who wrongly assume that the Bible's definition of a saint refers to a certain level of personal holiness on the part of the individual believer. It doesn't. The one who is a saint in the biblical sense will strive to be holy, but their holiness, however little or great it may be doesn't make them a saint. They are a saint because they have been set apart by God.

The biblical word for saint refers to consecration. This is very obvious in the OT where it speaks of the sanctification of objects. In **Ex 40** Moses is instructed by God to sanctify the altar and the bronze laver in the tabernacle. Moses was to make saints of them. Clearly, the passage doesn't refer to any intrinsic change in the stones of the altar or the laver except for the fact that they have now been set apart for a special use by God. The same meaning is seen in the NT from Jesus Himself. In **Jn 17:19**, Jesus prayed for the disciples saying, And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth. This wasn't meant to imply that Jesus needed to make Himself more holy; He was completely holy. It does mean that He had separated Himself for a special task, that of providing salvation for us by His death.

In the same way the Bible teaches that those who are Christians have been set apart by God. These constitute "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (**1 Pt 2:9**). If you're a Christian, if you have responded to God's call, then you have been set apart in several ways. You now belong to God's people. You are also

different than the rest of the world in that you're now aware of God's tremendous love for you. You are set apart because you now recognize a different ultimate authority: you're a citizen of heaven, obeying its laws rather than those of mere human institutions. You are holy, not because you are a special Christian but because you now belong to God in a special way: you're His child, adopted into God's family through faith in Jesus Christ.

David was an adulterer, but in God's eyes he was a saint because God had set him apart unto Himself. Jeremiah was a rebellious prophet, but in God's eyes he was a saint, for God had set him apart unto Himself. The church at Philippi had a woman who was a merchant, one who was a formerly demon-possessed slave girl, and a man who had been a violent soldier. Yet these were saints in Christ. Are you a Christian? If so, you are a saint regardless of your status. You are so, not because of what you've done, but because you've been separated unto God in Jesus. This is Paul's favorite description of Christians because it stresses the obvious and overriding fact of Christianity – that it's centered on Jesus. It's Christ who makes us what we are. He's both the source and goal of our salvation.

Besides this general greeting to the saints, Paul then specifically addresses the church officers: bishops (overseers) who were the pastors of the local congregations, and deacons, officers elected to care for the needy and the sick. These officers labored with local believers in spreading the gospel and in strengthening believers.

These offices were always present in every church and in a completely natural way. They didn't exist because of some special revelation from God or through a carefully developed theory of church structure. They existed because they were needed. If the church was to be guided, there must be those who could oversee the work. These were bishops, overseers. If the poor were to be helped, there must be men entrusted with that work. These men became known as deacons. All of these worked together.

The most important word in this phrase is the small word with. Many who hold these offices want to dominate those in their charge. They want to be over them, or be considered before them in terms of prestige or honor. It should never be that way with Christians. Paul says that the officers of the congregation worked with the believers; he even subordinates his own role

and Timothy's by picturing both of them as the servants of them all. This is the secret of forward progress for any Christian congregation. Saints must be servants, and there's a division of labor that must be coupled with a working together in Christ for sharing the gospel and strengthening the Body. This was God's way of blessing the little church at Philippi. It's God's way of blessing our church. You don't need to be a deacon or an overseer. You can work together with all of God's saints for spiritual ends. God wants you to do this. He wants you to be a witness for Christ and work with others to help those who need your spiritual and material assistance.

**2** – These words communicate a warm Christian greeting. Yet, they sound strange to modern ears, mainly because few of us really know what grace or peace means. If grace means anything to most people, it refers to charm, good manners, or attractiveness. Peace only refers to the alternative of war. But, the words actually mean so much more. In the way Paul uses them, they refer to the deepest of spiritual realities.

The words Paul uses here were quite common in his day. Grace was a normal gentile address that simply meant greetings. Also, the common greeting among Jewish people was peace (shalom). How thoughtful of Paul to combine the 2 in his characteristic greeting to Jewish-Gentile churches! Still, we should understand that these words are transformed in Paul's hands so that they carry Christian meanings. Paul's use of grace meant more than just greetings. In his letters, it was always associated with the grace of God. Paul was saying, "God's grace be with you." In the same way, peace shouldn't be taken as just a common salutation. When Paul uses it, it always has a reference to the fruits of justification, the result of the reconciliation of the believer with God.

The first greeting Paul extends to the saints in Philippi is grace and he uses it with its full Christian meaning: God's grace – the unmerited favor of God towards humanity! It may seem redundant to mention that grace is unmerited, since that's the very definition of grace. But, not only should we mention it, we should emphasize it. Man always seems to think that God loves him for what he is. We think God is gracious to us because of what we've done—our piety, good deeds or virtue. But God doesn't love us because of those things and He's not gracious to us because of them. Paul says that "God demonstrates His own love toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (**Rom 5:8**). Christ died for people who were

hideous in His sight because of sin. We're just like that. If we're ever to understand the grace of God, we must start with the knowledge that God has acted graciously toward us in Christ entirely separated from any human merit. The reality of this is evident in Scripture and throughout church history!

God's grace is unmerited, but we should understand that it is also abounding. **Rom 5:20** says where sin abounded, grace abounded much more. It's like working for minimum wage, struggling to make ends meet, only to discover that you have inherited \$100 million. That's what God's grace is like, only much better because it can't be lost, stolen or confiscated by greedy government agencies. God tells us we don't have the slightest claim on Him. We deserve hell and anything He does for us, however insignificant, is grace. But God's grace is not insignificant, and it doesn't stop at a single act. It's not a minimum wage grace. It's a grace that's made us better than millionaires in Christ.

Plus, the Bible teaches that God's grace will go on overflowing throughout this life and then on throughout eternity. It was by grace that the stars and planets were hung in space and the earth was made suitable for human life. By grace, the world was filled with life. By grace, we were made in God's image with every capacity for fellowship with Him. By grace, biblical revelation was given after the fall. It was grace that sent Jesus to live a life that revealed the Father and to die for human sin. Grace leads us to trust in Christ. Grace sent the Holy Spirit to be our teacher and guide. Grace has preserved the church through the ages. Grace will usher in the final resurrection. Grace will sustain us throughout eternity as we live in unbroken fellowship with God and grow in the knowledge of Him.

Grace unmerited! Grace abounding! It's this grace Paul writes about: "Grace to you!" Yes, grace be multiplied!

The 2nd word in Paul's greeting is peace. Just as Paul had a deeper meaning in mind for grace, so he had a deeper meaning in mind for peace. Shalom in Paul's letters is never used merely as a common salutation for peace comes from God. Grace is the unmerited and abounding favor of God toward men and peace is the result of that favor. It's the result of the reconciliation of man and God through Jesus' death—peace is obtained at the cross of Christ.

In the NT, it's interesting to notice all the significant moments in the life of Christ where the promise of peace occurs. It occurs 1<sup>st</sup> at the birth of Jesus in the words of the angels: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men! (Lk 2:14). The angels declared that we would know peace through Him. Jesus speaks of peace to His disciples just before His crucifixion: Peace I leave with you; My peace I give you, not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid (Jn 14:27). Finally, peace is the 1<sup>st</sup> word Jesus speaks to the disciples after His resurrection when He meets them in the upper room. He said, Peace be with you (Jn 20:19).

Peace with God! Think of it. We're not naturally at peace with God. We begin life at war with God and increasingly so, either passively or actively, as we continue through life. And, since we're at war with God we're also at war with each other and ourselves. That's why we experience so much misery and why there's so much unrest in the world. But God gives peace, perfect peace. He does it in Christ. He will give you peace if you will come to Him in Jesus.

Most of this applies mainly to the unbeliever. But it also applies to our everyday lives as Christians. Christians trust God for their salvation from the penalty of sin. They must also trust Him for daily victory over sin and for constant provision for all needs; that alone brings the peace that passes all human understanding. Paul writes a little later in this epistle: Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication (petition), with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses (transcends) all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds through Christ Jesus (4:6-7). Do you know this peace of God? Or are you filled with anxiety? If so, you need to trust completely in what God has already done for your salvation and then learn to lay all your requests before him. If you'll do that, the peace of God will guard your heart and mind through Christ Jesus.

The final point we need to see is simply this: grace comes before peace. Paul didn't just write it this way out of habit; it was deliberate! In God's order of things, God's hand is always there in grace before any other spiritual blessing can be extended. This is so that salvation might be entirely of Him.



We see this throughout Scripture. In [Gen 6-8](#) we read of the great flood and of God's intervention to save Noah and his immediate family. We read of Noah's sacrifice and of God's promise never again to destroy the earth by water. All these things are marvelous. But before any of these wonderful things ever happened in Noah's life, we read of God's grace. "But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD" ([Gen 6:8](#)).

Genesis also tells of God's great blessing upon the life of Abraham. Abraham was to be the father of many nations. He was the first to receive the rite of circumcision. God promised that in his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed. We're told that because of Abraham's faith in God, God accounted him as being righteous. But before any of these things—before the promise, before the sacraments, before faith—God came to Abraham in grace, calling him out of Mesopotamia into the land of Canaan and establishing a permanent relationship with him.

Exodus tells of the blessing that came to Israel at Sinai and later in the Promise Land. The young nation received the law and a kingdom. But before any of this we read of God's gracious deliverance of Israel from captivity in Egypt. Thus Moses writes, You in Your mercy have lead forth the people whom You have redeemed ([Ex 15:13](#)). So it's been in every age. It's the story of Moses, David, Solomon and the prophets. It's my story and yours, if you're a believer in Jesus Christ. Did you seek God? Did you find any of the fruits of salvation before God Himself was at work in your heart? Of course not! If you did anything, you ran away from God. He had to pursue you like the hound of heaven. We never seek God. When we find God, it's only because God first meets with us in grace.

Maybe God is meeting with you in this moment. If so, you must respond to His grace for you cannot be neutral. You must either accept it wholeheartedly or reject it in utter rebellion. If you accept it, God will pour out not only peace but also love and joy, and He will grant you access into His presence and the sure hope of life beyond the grave. How do you respond? Do you accept God's grace or reject it? Your eternal destiny will be determined by your response!

For believers, we are saints in fact but are we saints in practice? May the holiness that the Lord gives to us in our calling be revealed in the way we live and work and worship! Do we trust Him enough for that? 😊