

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus. To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

—Philippians 1:1–2

LEARNING GOALS

1. To introduce the class to Paul's letter to the Philippians
2. To highlight the importance of community in the engagement of God's mission
3. To reflect together on God's communal mission in our own time

REFLECTION

The mission of God was never meant to be a solo excursion. The entirety of Scripture, both old and new testaments, bear witness to God's desire for community. God did not create only one human; God created male and female, the first community. God invited the family of Abraham and then the nation of Israel into an intimate covenant relationship. When Jesus arrived in Palestine, He did not mentor a single individual; rather, Jesus apprenticed dozens of disciples and formed a special bond with twelve men. God created humanity as a community (male and female). God has always worked with humanity in communities (the patriarchal family, the nation of Israel, the church). Have you ever wondered why God created two humans and not just one? Have you ever wondered why God chose to engage creation most often through communities of people rather than through individuals? The answers to these questions has a lot to do with God's identity. God, in God's very nature, is community (Father, Son, and Spirit). God created this world to reflect God's image; therefore, when the people of God engage God's mission together, as a community, their very relationships present a picture of God to the world.

This picture comes into focus with Paul's letter to the Philippians. In this epistle, Paul is not writing to strangers (as with his letter to the Romans), but instead to friends and partners in the mission of God, and Paul draws upon his relationship with them to encourage them and to challenge them in ways that only people in relationship are able to do. Consequently, in addition to the instruction provided by Paul, Philippians provides generations of Christians a glimpse of first-century Christians engaging the mission of God together as a community.

The Salutation (Philippians 1:1–2)

The first eleven verses of the epistle, which contain the salutation and thanksgiving, allow readers to recognize right away the special relationship enjoyed by Paul and the Philippians. The salutation, or signature, of Paul on this letter is relatively short compared to other New Testament letters. For example, in Paul's letter to the Romans, his signature took six complete verses. In that salutation, Paul took time to introduce himself and to provide his credentials as an apostle. In Philippians, however, Paul has no need to introduce himself. Paul's signature is short and concise, yet, also packed with meaning.

The letter begins: "Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus." With these few words, Paul not only introduces the Philippians to the writer(s) of the letter; Paul also sets the stage for a major theme of the letter. In describing himself and Timothy as "slaves," Paul gently dips his toe into a pool in which he will swim later on. In 2:5–11, Paul includes the so-called "Christ hymn," which describes the selfless posture of Christ during the Incarnation. Though God, Jesus took the form of a slave and died a cruel death on behalf of creation. Early in this epistle, Paul reminds the Philippians that those made in the image of God are called to follow the example of God by becoming slaves. Those engaged in God's mission do not hunger and thirst after positions of power, and they do not seek to lord their influence over others. As the founding apostle of the church in Philippi, Paul had reason to assert his authority and position over his spiritual children. Instead, however, Paul begins his letter to them by reminding them of his self-appointed position as a slave. As one familiar with the LXX (the Septuagint, or Greek Old Testament), Paul also, with this label, placed himself in

the lineage of other servants and messengers of God. The LXX describes Moses, David, Jacob, and many of the prophets with this same monicker.

In naming Timothy as co-author, Paul does not mean to imply that Timothy actually shared in the writing. Rather, Paul includes Timothy in the signature in order to highlight the communal nature of his ministry. Timothy, like the Philippians, shared in Paul's ministry. Additionally, Timothy was in Philippi when Paul brought the gospel to them for the first time, and he would be returning as Paul's emissary in the near future. Timothy's inclusion in Paul's salutation reminds the Philippians (and us) of the deep relationships that grow among those who partner in the mission of God.

Notice also how Paul routinely employs the word "all" and the second person plural pronoun "you" in these opening verses as well as throughout the entire letter. The recipient of Paul's letter was the entire church in Philippi, not just a few individuals. Just as God has routinely engaged humanity through communities of people, Paul also addresses the church as a united body of believers. Though one may faithfully digest Paul's words as an individual, one must not forget that this letter originally was read aloud to an entire congregation for the mutual benefit and edification of the entire church.

Paul concludes his salutation with his customary greeting, "grace and peace." This greeting combines Paul's Jewish heritage with his calling to spread the gospel to gentiles. "Peace" or "shalom" allowed Paul, and his audience, to recall the Jewish heritage of the Christian faith. Jesus was born into the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. With this one word, the gentiles in Philippi are reminded that their faith community extends into the deep past. "Grace" is a Christianized version of a common Hellenistic greeting. When combined, these two terms indicate that God's family has grown from its Jewish roots to include the entire world, including the faithful in Philippi.

The Thanksgiving (Philippians 1:3–11)

Aside from Galatians, all of Paul's New Testament letters include a Thanksgiving section, and in addition to expressing his thankfulness, each of these sections also foreshadow the most significant topics that will be discussed in the body of the letter.

The nine verses of the Philippian Thanksgiving find their organization around the relationship between Paul and the Philippians. Verses three to six center on their relationship in the past, verses seven and eight describe their relationship in the present, and the final three verses look to the future.

Paul begins his Thanksgiving with the words, "I give thanks." After expressing the blessing of receiving God's grace in his greeting, the obvious response of Paul is thanks. These two words, "grace" and "thanks" are quite similar in Greek: *charis* and *eucharisto*. Sometimes Paul uses the same word for grace and gratitude. As a general rule, if the action is from God to us, translators most often render the word "grace." If, on the other hand, the action is from us to God, the word is most often rendered "gratitude." With his use of these terms, Paul reminds us of the reality that giving and receiving are very much alike, and one word can define both.

In verses 3–6, Paul expresses his thankfulness for two specific things: his remembrance of them and his partnership with them in the gospel. Paul penned the letter to the Philippians from prison. These opening words of his Thanksgiving call attention to the ways in which memories sustain us in difficult times. Most of us have experienced difficult moments in our lifetimes (the death of a family member, a severe or chronic illness, the loss of a close relationship). Consider how memories of our parents, children, vacations, retreats, births, and siblings ushered us through the pain often associated with those valleys. Paul's remembrance of his dear Philippian friends provided a balm to the pain he was experiencing as a prisoner.

The word Paul uses for partnership, *koinonia*, is most often translated "fellowship," but such a word does not accurately describe the relationship implied by Paul in this Thanksgiving. In our time, fellowship can describe the common conversation that takes place between acquaintances before Bible class begins. Paul seems to describe a much deeper partnership with the Philippians. The word, elsewhere in the New Testament and in antiquity, often described a financial partnership. We know the Philippians provided financial assistance to Paul (II Corinthians 11:8–11), so they did enjoy a financial partnership. Additionally, however, the *koinonia* Paul mentions in verse 5 signifies a much deeper relationship, a partnership in the mission of God. Philippians

will highlight the ways in which Paul and the Philippian church have labored in the gospel together, sharing in its joys and in its sufferings.

These opening verses of Paul's Thanksgiving also introduce readers to another key theme that will dominate Philippians, namely joy. This word occurs in Philippians more than any other Pauline letter. Many commentators have questioned why Paul mentions joy so frequently. Perhaps Paul wanted to express to the Philippians that even though he was in chains, his spirits remained high. Perhaps he believed that they worried too much for him. Or, it remains possible that the Philippians were enduring some kind of hardship on their own. Whatever the specific case might have been, Paul seems intent here, and throughout the letter, to encourage the Philippians to find joy. The frequency at which this word is mentioned seems also to indicate that joy was lacking in the Philippian community for some reason. The conflict mentioned in 4:2–3 may provide a clue to at least one source of turmoil.

Verses 7–8 describe the present context of Paul's relationship with the Philippian church. In these verses, Paul expresses his affection for his friends with extremely strong and emphatic language. His feelings for them are so strong, in fact, that Paul feels the need to justify them: "It is right for me to feel this way about you...". The relationship has grown deeper because of their common mission. Paul and the Philippians have been "fellow sharers" or "fellow partakers" in the grace of God—that is the gift from God. The gift to which Paul is referring is the ministry of the gospel. Because both Paul and the Philippians have received this gift, they share in the joy and suffering associated with it.

Fred Craddock, and other commentators of Philippians, believe Paul's strong language here may actually indicate some kind of conflict between Paul and the Philippian church. They argue that Paul goes overboard in describing his affection for them, because perhaps his affection for them was in question. Perhaps Paul had been close to some of them, but not all of them (notice the emphasis on "all" in the Thanksgiving). Perhaps other congregations had been critical of Paul's close relationship with the Philippian church, and this favoritism had created some sort of conflict. We know Paul accepted money from the Philippian church and not others. Did this acceptance of their gift cause hard feelings? Whatever the case may have been, it is clear that Paul's

relationship with the Philippians was important to Paul, and it is equally clear that their relationship was complex. As Craddock writes, "Doctors and lawyers have clients and they have friends, but only ministers have congregations."

The final verses of Paul's Thanksgiving center on the future. Paul opened his Thanksgiving by expressing his thanks for two specific items; here he closes the Thanksgiving with a twofold petition. First, he prays that the Philippians will grow and mature in love. The word "love" is used so often, we may not fully understand Paul's meaning here. In describing the specific kind of love Paul had in mind, Craddock writes: "not a love that is sentimental and easy and grins at the wrong time; not a love that shrinks from truth-telling and tough engagements; but a love that is joined to knowing and understanding, to probing and discerning, to putting itself to the test in real-life situations, and making moral choices that count." The love that exists between partners in God's mission is not casual or superficial. Rather, that love is strong and refined through suffering and laboring together.

Paul's final petition is that the Philippians might be blameless and pure on the day of Christ. The "day of Christ" is a Christianized version of the "day of the Lord" prevalent in the Old Testament, especially among the prophets. By this phrase Paul means the second coming of Jesus Christ. On that day, Paul hoped the Philippian church would be ready to meet the selfless Christ whose mission led Him to the cross. James Thompson and Bruce Longnecker write, "The goal of the church, as Paul indicates, is to be a community that has progressed from the self-seeking manners of its culture to ever-increasing love for others."

The brief salutation and Thanksgiving of Paul's letter to the Philippians foreshadows many prominent themes that will dominate the remainder of the epistle. From these few verses one is given a picture of a God who gifted His church with a powerful mission to model selflessness, humility and joy in the face of trial to a world otherwise dominated by a thirst for power and influence. As Paul indicates in his this letter, God intended for the church to participate in this world-changing mission together, as a community shaped by the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

LESSON PLAN

1. Engage

- a. Introduce the series.
- b. Locate a well known letter from history (one written by a famous personality).
 - i. Read the letter aloud to the class.
 - ii. Ask the Questions:
 1. What are we able to tell about the sender?
 2. What are we able to tell about the recipient(s)?
 3. What are we able to tell about the relationship between the sender and recipient(s)?
 - iii. This morning, we will be examining a letter from the New Testament. Pay attention to these same questions as they apply to Paul's letter to the Philippians.

2. Involve

- a. Read Philippians 1:1–2
 - i. This is the salutation portion of Paul's letter.
 - ii. It contains the most basic elements of a letter: sender, receiver, signature.
 - iii. Drawing upon the Reflection section above for guidance, ask the following questions of the class:
 1. What do we learn about Paul, the Philippians, and their relationship with each other in these two verses?
 2. Paul & Timothy are "co-authors." What does this mean?
 3. What is significant about Paul using the terms "grace" and "peace" in his signature?
 4. Why does Paul refer to himself as a "slave"? What are the implications of this term for disciples of Christ?
- b. Read Philippians 1:3–11
 - i. The Thanksgiving portion of the letter may be divided into three parts:
 1. Paul's relationship with the Philippians in the past (verses 3–6)

2. Paul's relationship with the Philippians in the present (verses 7–8)
 3. Paul's relationship with the Philippians in the future (verses 9–11)
- ii. Verses 3–6: The Past
1. Drawing upon the Reflection section above, ask the following questions of the class:
 - a. What two things is Paul thankful for?
 - b. What does Paul mean by the term "fellowship" or "partnership"?
 - c. There is a significant use of the term "joy" throughout Philippians. Why do you suppose Paul writes so much about joy?
 2. Is there anything discernable about the relationship between Paul and the Philippians based upon these few verses?
- iii. Verses 7–8: The Present
1. Drawing upon the Reflection section above, ask the following questions of the class:
 - a. What do we learn here about Paul's relationship to the Philippians?
 - b. Some have suggested that Paul goes "overboard" in his description of his affection for them. Why might that be the case?
 2. Why might Paul's relationship with the church in Philippi be complicated?
- iv. Verses 9–11: The Future
1. Like many of his letters, Paul concludes his Thanksgiving with a look to the future.
 2. Drawing upon the Reflection section above, ask the following questions of the class:
 - a. What two hopes does Paul have for the Philippians?
 - b. What does Paul's Thanksgiving tell us about the mission of God?

3. Challenge

- a. What does this letter tell us about the mission of God, past and present?
- b. What do we learn about community in these few verses?
- c. If Paul were going to write a letter to our church, what theme(s) do you think he would include to help us engage God's mission in our own time?

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