

## The Salutation of Paul's Letter to the Philippians

### Philippians 1:1-2

Philippians 1:1-2: *"Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, 2 To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."*

#### Background Notes

Philippians is one of the "Prison Epistles," because it was written during the Apostle Paul's first imprisonment in Rome. After Paul's three missionary journeys he was arrested in Jerusalem and imprisoned in Caesarea. He appealed his case to Caesar, so he was brought by ship to Rome and placed under house arrest while he awaited trial.

Acts 28:16 & 30-31: *"Now when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard; but Paul was permitted to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him." "Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him."*

Paul was not in a dungeon. He was in his own rented house, but he was chained to a Roman guard. It was from this situation that he wrote the four letters that we call the Prison Epistles: Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians and Philemon.

The date for the writing of Philippians was the early 60s AD. The church at Philippi was founded on Paul's second missionary journey in the early 50s AD, so it was about 10 years old at this point.

Acts 16 gives the account of the founding of the church in Philippi. After receiving the vision of the man from Macedonia who asked Paul to bring the gospel to Europe, Paul, Silas, Luke and Timothy sailed across the Aegean Sea and came to Philippi. Timothy had joined Paul and Silas and the missionary team right before this strategic move of taking the gospel to Europe, and that's why Paul mentioned Timothy in the greeting of his letter to the Philippians. Timothy was well known by the Philippian believers.

Let's pick up the story of the founding of the church in Philippi in Acts 16:13, *"And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there. Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household were baptized, she begged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.'" So she persuaded us.* Lydia's household would certainly have included her servants; so all this household became believers. This is the beginning of the Philippian church.

However, it wasn't long before trouble arose, because the gospel will always disrupt the world's way of living. Paul and Silas were thrown into prison. But they knew that God was in control, and you probably remember their reaction: they sang in prison!

*Acts 16:25: "But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were loosed. And the keeper of the prison, awaking from sleep and seeing the prison doors open, supposing the prisoners had fled, drew his sword and was about to kill himself. But Paul called with a loud voice, saying, "Do yourself no harm, for we are all here."*

*Then he called for a light, ran in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas.<sup>30</sup> And he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" So they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized. Now when he had brought them into his house, he set food before them; and he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household."*

Once again, the "household" would have included slaves as well as the jailer's children - and they all believed.

After Paul and Silas were released by the city officials, Acts 16:40 says, *"So they went out of the prison and entered the house of Lydia; and when they had seen the brethren, they encouraged them and departed."* Thus the church at Philippi was founded.

About ten years later Paul wrote this letter back to the growing Philippian church. The occasion for writing was that Epaphroditus, a believer from Philippi, had come to visit Paul in Rome, and he had brought Paul a financial gift from the church at Philippi. He also brought some news of how the church was doing there. In Philippians 2:25, Paul referred to Epaphroditus as a messenger from the church at Philippi, and in Philippians 4:18, he thanked them for their gift that he had received from Epaphroditus.

Epaphroditus brought both good news and bad news of the church at Philippi. The good news was that the church was growing, and there were no doctrinal problems. The bad news was that a division was developing in the church. We don't know what the issue was. It seems it was not a major doctrinal problem. Maybe it had to do with the music in the church. Maybe it had to do with the order of services. Maybe it had to do with their evangelistic plans for reaching out to the city of Philippi.

We don't know what the issue was, but whatever it was, two "parties" were beginning to form in the church. It seems that two women were quite involved in the rift, since Philippians 4:2 says, *"I implore Euodia and I implore Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord."* Throughout this letter, Paul urged the Philippian believers to work hard at coming to unity. Small disagreements can grow and they can end up splitting a church apart if they're not caught and dealt with when they're still small.

“Of course that would never happen in *my* church fellowship. We’re so unified here that we would never disagree about the music program, or the order of services, or the color of the new carpet! We would never rock the boat about such matters!” I’m being facetious, of course. We all know that small disagreements on insignificant issues can grow and get out of hand. We all know that molehills can become mountains.

This, then, is a brief summary of the background and occasion of the book of Philippians.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. It is significant that the term, “overseers” is plural.

*“Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the overseers (or bishops) and deacons” (v1).* Notice that there are “saints, overseers and deacons.” All the believers at Philippi were saints, and some of these saints were overseers, and some of these saints were deacons.

“Overseers” and “deacons” are church offices. Overseers are responsible for spiritual guidance, teaching and discipline of the flock. Deacons deal with the more temporal matters of church upkeep and benevolence. That does not mean that overseers are more spiritual than deacons – it’s simply a matter of their gift and their area of responsibility.

Acts 20 indicates that “overseers” are the same as “elders” or “pastors.” In Acts 20 Paul was returning from his third missionary journey. He stopped at Miletus, and called for the elders of the church at Ephesus to visit him. *“From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church” (Acts 20:17).*

Here is what he said to this group of church leaders: *“Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (v28).* So the “overseer” (or “bishop,” as the King James translates it in Philippians 1:1) is the same as an elder or a pastor. Overseers, elders and pastors are to care for and shepherd the flock.

The significant point here is that the term “**overseers**” is **plural**. The church at Philippi did not have just one pastor, or one overseer, or one elder. There was a plurality or group of church leaders or elders. It’s significant because that is what the Bible teaches about church government. There is no idea in the Bible of one man presiding over many churches - or even one man presiding over one church! According to Scripture, the line of spiritual authority proceeds from Jesus Christ down to the spiritual leaders (**plural**) of the local church. It is significant that the term “overseers” is plural.

### 2. It is significant that only two church offices are mentioned – overseers and deacons.

The idea of a Church officer who would preside over, or control, the overseers of a local church, or over the overseers or elders of a certain area, is not found in the New Testament. That type of arrangement came into the Church about in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century - but it’s not in the Bible. It is significant that only two church offices are mentioned.

## Practical Application

### Are you a saint, or an “ain’t”?

Paul addressed *all* the believers at Philippi as “**saints**.” He didn’t mention a category of believer such as “saints-in-training” or “would-be saints.” No, *all* of them were already saints! If they were Christians, they were saints.

“But,” you may say, “I thought saints were holy people.” That’s right. The word “saint” comes from the same word as “holy.” When you become a Christian, you become holy in God’s sight - not because of what *you’ve* done, but **because of what Christ has done for you**. God sees you as clothed with the righteousness of Christ.

God sees every Christian this way. We’re saints as far as our spiritual position before God goes. We have been set apart for God’s use. And in practice, we should try to **be what we are, holy people**.

So you’re either a saint or an “ain’t.” If you’re a Christian, you’re a saint. If you’re not a Christian, you’re an “ain’t.” As God looks down on those who are listening to this Talk, even though there are many differences between us as far as background goes, and age, income, etc., God sees only two categories: saints and “ain’ts.” I trust we are all saints!

Even though “ain’t” is bad English, it gets the point across. In God’s sight, there are only saints and “ain’ts.” Are you a saint or an “ain’t”?