

HE BEGAN A GOOD WORK, AND HE WILL FINISH IT**Philippians 1:1-11**

Intro: A number of years ago I was digging through some old files in the church office in search of a particular document we needed for a particular project we were working on. In those documents I found a letter that I wrote when I was ABC's still "wet behind the ears" chairman of the trustees. It was in about 1984 or 1985 and it was to a roofing company that had done work on the flat roof above our lobby.

I believe the work had been done the year before and the roof was already leaking. The letter was very formal. The kind of letter that you write in a business kind of situation—which it was. It was also kind of stern because I wanted to get our point across that we were not satisfied with the company's less than acceptable work, and we were asking for satisfaction.

I don't remember what the outcome of that roof was. I do know that when I came back some 20 years later in 2005 to serve as ABC's pastor, we still had trouble with that roof, until, finally, a year or two after I got here we finally found a company that did the roof correctly, and we've had little or no leakage since then. But, that's beside the point. My point is that my letter was very formal and businesslike.

Letter writing is much less prevalent now, but there are times when I might get a letter or an email from someone that asks a question about some kind of issue or Bible passage. To these I reply giving my best biblical view on that particular thing and it becomes a letter that turns into more of a treatise which is a fancy for a religious essay.

And then there are the letters that I wrote to Kathy when we were a new item 47 years ago, when she was at Messiah College and I was living at my parents' home near Philadelphia – some 90 miles away. Yes, we made phone calls, but maybe only once a month, because long distance was EXPENSIVE. So we wrote letters. Even though we saw each other on the weekend, every weekend, we wrote letters in between. We were both in college with lots of writing to do, but we took the time to write to each other. And those letters were full of sweet nothings, and promises of forever love. They were just sweet, if I say so myself.

Paul wrote many letters and we have most of them recorded in the New Testament. His letter to the Romans, for example, was more like a treatise. It was more official, even though it wasn't as business-like as my letter was to the roofing company. But it certainly was more formal. A good reason for this was that Paul hadn't actually met the Romans yet. He knew of them, he had heard good things about them, and so he wrote them a letter to provide some teaching that would help them grow until he finally got there in person. It's a powerful letter, as we know, but it's not exactly a love letter.

We don't know who wrote the Book of Hebrews – it's one of those books of the Bible that doesn't say at the beginning who wrote it. I just finished reading Hebrews in my devotions this past week and I thought to myself that this really sounds like a letter more than a book, and more than that, it really sounds like Paul is the one who wrote it. Again, we really don't know, but, we do know that it is definitely more like a formal treatise than a "Hey how are you doing?" letter full of familiarity.

Finally we get to the letter from Paul to the Philippians we will be looking at over the next several months. This is a love letter. Paul is writing to a favorite group of people, so it's full of affection and familiarity. Several commentators have described the letter, ("epistle" is an old term for letter) as "The Epistle of Excellent Things", and also the "Epistle of Joy". When I read Philippians I can picture that Paul is writing to the church in Philippi with a big smile on his face.

In fact, as I thought about it as I was preparing this talk, and as I saw Paul's deep affection for the church in Philippi, I decided that this is a kind of letter I would write to ABC. You are my favorite group of people and if I wrote you a letter, it would be an Epistle of Joy like this.

Some of the history of Paul's involvement and ministry in Philippi is recorded in Acts 16. Even though I have my preaching schedule for Philippians plotted out until the end of March, I've been thinking that when I get to the parts where Paul refers to his history with the Philippian Church, that just maybe I would preach a message or two from Acts 16, since it includes, among other things, Paul and Silas's arrest and jailing, and the conversion of the Philippian jailer, We'll see . . .

Paul planted the church around AD 52 when he was there with Silas. It was not an easy place to be a Christ Follower, especially a Christ following preacher. This is because Philippi was a proud Roman Colony. In short, Roman Colonies were special cities that had been set up by Caesar to reward his most faithful soldiers. For

this reason Philippi was full of Roman patriotism and beliefs and upstart religions that competed with their worship of their Caesar, whom they regarded as a god, were not welcome. By the time Paul wrote the letter it is about ten years later (AD 62 – 64) and he's a prisoner waiting to meet Caesar in Rome.

In addition to being a love letter, Philippians is also a thank you note which is evident as we read through it, and we'll get to it eventually, that he's thanking them for sending a Philippian named Epaphroditus to help Paul in his imprisonment. He is also assuring the worried folks in Philippi who had heard that Epaphroditus was sick, that he was healed and doing well. He also wanted it to be a letter of encouragement for the people in Philippi and also for Epaphroditus. Finally, Philippians is also an appeal for unity. As we continue through this study, we will learn all of these things and see what I'm talking about.

Right now I'm excited to finally begin this study of Philippians. Let's look at the opening section, the first eleven verses of chapter one. Listen as I read:

(Read Philippians 1:1-11)

Right off the bat we see this is a letter that is. . .

To SAINTS From SLAVES

- *Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus* Philippians 1:1a. The term is almost always translated as servants, and that is accurate, but the word has a stronger meaning that implies slave. A servant has a boss, but a slave has an owner who owns him completely. Paul's implication, by using the particular word he chose is that he and Timothy were completely God's property, heart, soul, and body. Paul isn't reserving this for he and Timothy only, he is implying that all Christ Followers are slaves, heart, soul and body in the possession of God.
- But he doesn't call the Philippians slaves. Instead, he calls them saints: *To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:* Philippians 1:1b.
 - Who can be a saint?
 - What is a saint?
 - Right way we might think of a little carving in a niche in a cathedral or in a book about Saint Francis or Mother Theresa. You might think of a wonderful Christian teacher who impacted your life. They have to be saints, right? Well, yeah, but SO ARE YOU! Saints are not people wearing halos – they are regular people like you and me. Yep, any Christ Follower is a saint. Saints by their very definition are set apart for God to be as holy as they can be. Saints are different. 1 Peter 2:9 in the King James says that we are a peculiar people – which means different. We are not like other people. William Barclay writes, *“What makes a Christian different is that he is always and everywhere conscious of the encircling presence of Jesus”*
- What is a saint? YOU!
- And then Paul launches into . . .

The best greeting ever

- *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.* Philippians 1:2. The word Paul uses that we have translated as “grace” means that he is wishing upon them joy, pleasure, brightness, and beauty. This is why the name Grace is such a beautiful name for a little girl. Then he wishes peace upon them. This comes from the Hebrew concept of Shalom which means absence of strife, but more than that, complete well-being. What a greeting!
- But wait, there's more. Long before there was Bob Hope, Paul was saying, THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES – *I thank God in all my remembrance of you.* Philippians 1:3. Remembrance and gratitude together – what a great combination!
- Then Paul continues with: *always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy,* Philippians 1:5 and it's one of the reasons I picture him writing with a smile on his face, and it is one of the main reasons this is called an Epistle of Joy – Paul is praying for his good friends with joy. What a greeting!
- Paul's joy was there because in the Philippians he knew that . . .

The best kind of church is a partnership

- Actually, it's probably truer that the ONLY kind of church is a partnership. . .

- Listen, *because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now*. Philippians 1:5. He wasn't buttering them up because Paul had experienced this first hand with the Philippians – a prime example was that they had sent Epaphroditus to assist him. There are other examples including all the way down in chapter 4 where it's evident they sent him financial assistance. The Philippians looked for ways to serve, and they were right there serving along with Paul. They loved to! They wanted to! They jumped at the chance to jump in and help. It's no wonder Paul yearned for them with the affection of Christ Jesus. (verse 8).
- This is you ABC! I'm not buttering you up – I've experienced this first hand. A healthy church is a pastor and congregation and a congregation and God and all working together. That is us ABC – but I digress. I need to finish this. . .
- Along the same lines . . .

The best kind of church is growing together

- Paul confidently tells his friends in Philippi, *And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ*. Philippians 1:6. He is growing us to completion. I'm not talking numbers here – I'm talking about growing into greater love and holiness and joy and grace. And, do you know what? When that is happening, our numbers do grow as people see Jesus in us and they are drawn to him through us. One commentator writes, *"All who are concerned to serve Christ must be concerned with the task of making known the Gospel."* Ask yourself – am I growing?
- Listen again to the last three verses as I wrap this up, *And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God*. Philippians 1:9-11.
- Paul is telling the Philippians (and us) to put first things first and not to get worked up with the non-essentials. Allow your love to abound. He began a good work and he will complete it – The life of every Christ Follower is a sacrifice to be offered to Jesus. Paul said it elsewhere, *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship*. Romans 12:1 and it's just as true.

Conclusion: It comes down to this, *whatever God begins, will have a perfect ending*. His good word means a joyful and mutual partnership. We will be partners in grace, we will be partners in the work of the Gospel, and we will be partners in suffering for the Gospel (something we will look at in the coming weeks). And most of all, we will be partners with Jesus Christ. Remember this today: God began a good work in you and he **WILL** finish his good work in you. Count on it. Amen.