



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to everyone

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“A Father’s Blessing”

Philippians 1:1-11

Series: *Philippians for Friendship*

(Father’s Day)

Congregational Elections

Welcome to the first of our studies of Philippians, the Apostle Paul’s love letter to his friends in the Greek city of Philippi. Each summer I try to open up one Bible book with you, to listen for God’s voice, and this summer, it’s Philippians. I’m calling the series, “Philippians for Friendship”, and I hope indeed you will hear God’s voice speaking to you in these mornings to come.

Let’s begin in Philippians, chapter 1, verses 1 and 2. **Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

This the traditional form letters took in those days. We usually end our letters with a signature that identifies us, but in that time, many letters were dictated to a scribe, and they identified the sender right at the top. Those of you who use email: when you see in your “inbox” a message from some strange person, you’re likely to suspect it is “spam”—a mass mailing and possibly a scam. I just delete those or put them in a “suspect spam” category; I don’t waste my time on those things. But when I see a message from someone I know, I’ll read it, and soon. And if it’s someone I really love, I’ll read it right then and there. As we go, we will feel Paul’s closeness to these Philippian Christians.

After the “return address”, as we might say it, comes the “addressee”—“to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi.” Another thing to keep in mind when it comes to the letters of the New Testament—they were meant to be read aloud to a group. Remember, all correspondence was written on parchment or papyrus or leather in those times. There were no copy machines. So there was only one document that was usually hand-carried around. And in the case of some of Paul’s letters, it was his intent that his letter be shared with other churches—circulated around deliberately.

And one more preliminary thing: “church” meant something different in those days than it means in our time. When we hear “church”, we think of a building like this, with people like you, listening to someone like me. You see the backs of the heads in front of you; it’s assumed to be a group thing. But in the early years of the church born on Pentecost Day after Jesus had been raised from death, “church” always meant a small circle of believers meeting in someone’s home. Sometimes there were groups of such groups, especially in an urban location like Philippi, and they were collectively known as, say, “the church in Thessalonica”, or “God’s people who live in Ephesus”. But it was always small group based; there were no buildings like

this where more than 130 were gathered together. Again, this meant a letter had to be taken around from house to house, and then later, from town to town.

Every one of those believers was a “saint”—someone so valuable because they knew what a price their salvation had required.

We know the author—actually the senders are two: Paul AND Timothy. If you read Paul's letters to this Timothy, you'll sense again a special warmth between these guys. In his first letter to the Corinthians Christians, Paul calls Timothy “my dear child”—not that Paul was Timothy's biological father, but that through Paul, Timothy grew in his faith by leaps and bounds. Tim had been born to a Greek father and a Jewish mother, but the father never converted, so Tim had never been circumcised. When Tim became a Christian, should he be circumcised as Jesus had been circumcised? It had not happened by the time Paul met him.. But when Paul came into his life and Timothy felt called to join in an apostolic ministry with Paul, there were likely going to be problems over this. In his ministry, Paul dealt with both Jews and Gentiles, and the Jews had been told to be a special people, and not mix with Gentiles. How would Tim's presence impact the ministry among the Jews? It seems to me that it was Tim who volunteered to go through that painful Jewish initiation rite, just to avoid raising a barrier in the ministry with the many Jewish Christians, and especially with any unconverted Jews they might come upon in ministry. But whoever suggested this, it is clear that Paul was forever proud of Tim because of this, and so much more. Bottom line: Tim is Paul's “right-hand man”, whom Paul sends on missions and errands to other places, mostly in Greece. Paul is Tim's “father”—a theme that is great for this Father's Day, and we'll return to it in a minute. “From Paul and Timothy”.

The “to” in this letters mentions not only the congregations (plural) at Philippi, but also “the overseers and deacons”. The word for “overseer” is “presbuteros”, which can mean “elder”, or “bishop”, as well. But “overseer” seems best here. Remember the decentralized nature of the churches in those days. Each house-sized group had a “presbuteros” responsible for their spiritual growth, and a “deacon” who made sure the people in that small group were supplied with the practicalities of life. A “bishop” was the person who was the contact for all the little churches in a given area; he or she supervised the work of the “elders”.

Of course, “presbuteros” is also the root from which we get, “Presbyterian”. To be called a Presbyterian church, you have to have a government structure with “presbyters”, or elders, as we do. I have to say that most Presbyterian churches I know see their elders as decision-makers for the institution—“governing board members” would be the way the world would talk about them. For years now, I have been doing just about all I can to move our elders in this church to a capacity for spiritual leadership, which is a very different set of skills and temperaments.

After “the front of the envelope”—the senders and the intended recipients—we get the “salutation”—the greeting—the place where we'd usually write, “Dear Family,” and then start our message. Here's Paul's “salutation”: **Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.** “Grace” was a common greeting in the Greek world—and especially among Greek Christians who had experienced God's grace in God forgiving their sins and giving them new life in Jesus. “Peace” was the common greeting in the Jewish world—“*Shalom alechem*”—Peace to you!. In those few strokes of a pen, Paul shows he moves in both Greek and Jewish worlds, and wants to bring good news to people in both the Greek and Jewish worlds. And “the best” is God who made himself known in a carpenter from Nazareth, who is Lord.

Even though everyone then lived under the rule of Rome, Emperor Caesar wasn't "Lord" for Christians. They had a "Lord" already--Master Jesus—and there can be only one "Lord", or "top authority", in your life. Thus, for Christians, "God" comes before "Country". If there's a conflict between "God" and "country", "country" will have to take second place, and we who claim Jesus is our Lord will have to suffer whatever consequences the "country" will impose. Isn't it amazing how much Paul is putting into just these few words at the start of his letter?!

And now we're into the letter, itself: **I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.**

Paul loves these people—they have been a huge support to him in his ministry—they are his partners. Boy, that means a lot when you're in ministry. Ministry can be a lonely calling, especially when you're starting new churches from scratch, which was Paul's major mission. It really helps to remember that you have partners out there, or "back there", who pray for you, who care for you, and may even support you with gifts. When you tell me you pray for me every day, I truly feel your love, because I depend on the flow and the direction of God's Spirit to keep at my ministry with full focus and dedication. You are my partners in ministry.

One special note here: Paul says he is *confident that the One who began a good work in you is able to bring it to completion until Jesus comes*. Do you get the "growth message" from Paul? You and I are to be in a constant "school for saints", learning, knowing, growing into Christ. In these next verses, Paul points to the "growth areas" he hopes for each of us: **And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.**

This is how Paul wants his people to grow, isn't it? Growing in our ability to love like Jesus, growing in more knowledge of Jesus, seeing things through Jesus' eyes so that you and I can see what is best and most godly in every situations. Producing fruit that makes God happy.

What has God been teaching YOU? How are you more like Jesus this week than you were a year ago? Do you have a greater love for God our Father on this Fathers Day than you had for God the Father last Fathers Day?

In my prayer journal, I will often conclude, "In Jesus, for Jesus, with Jesus," as I have been looking forward to the parts of my day, and imagining Jesus already there, with HIS PRIORITIES and HIS COMPASSION for those people and the work he wants me to do. So when I DO get to that meeting, I have a clear sense of what God wants, and I can do it with a mindfulness that makes me more effective in ministry. (That's on my best days, mind you . . .)

How do you become more mindful of "God with you"? Write that question in your "notes" area of your bulletin. How do you become more mindful of "God with you"? . . .

That's as far as I want to go today, except for underlining this "fatherly" relationship between Paul and Tim. Every man should be a father—not only to his own daughters and sons, but also to other younger people. In a lot of split families, the father is not in the home; the families do "the custodial shuffle". But even in a lot of "intact families", the father may not be present emotionally for his kids, for whatever reason. (Being a parent can be overwhelming.) So, men, who are you fathering?

I am fathering three guys I can think of, and may add a fourth. I have been fathered by Dr. Howard Rice for years, and now I get to pass that on to other younger men. I see God growing these guys, and I can hardly contain my excitement!

Of course, if you're going to gift the gift of your presence to these younger women and men, you have to have something to give. How could you encourage in faith a younger man or woman, a boy or girl who does not live under your roof? What do you need from God and from other guys in order to give this?

After worship, we will have one of the shortest congregational meetings on record, and then I'll dismiss you to our goodie time. The fathers are getting chocolate chip cookies today, to recognize and affirm your role in fathering—your own children, and younger children of our Heavenly Father. We hope the cookies will be a delight for you, and remind you to delight others with that same affirmation. Younger people need that from older people.

Who will you "father" this week? Who will you draw closer to God? Write these questions in the "notes" section of your bulletin. Who will you "father" this week? Who will you draw closer to God? . . .

We speak this to you, "to the glory and praise of God".

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on June 21, 2009, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]