

## Philippians Lesson 1 Articles

Timothy, Paul's son in the ministry, was with Paul at the time of this writing, and is, therefore, included in the greeting. There was no need for Paul, as was his custom, to identify himself as an apostle. There was no debate about this in the church of Philippi. The people there gladly acknowledged Paul's apostleship and the authority this entailed. Paul was content, therefore, to refer to himself and to Timothy as 'servants of Jesus Christ' (v. 1).

We might be inclined to feel sorry for Paul. A life of servanthood! What a depressing thought! But the truth is we are all servants throughout our lives. We are either servants of the devil or servants of the Lord. The service of Satan is hard and oppressive, but the service of the Lord brings joy and peace.

Paul addresses his letter to 'the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons' (v. 1).

The word 'saints' means 'set apart.' All Christians are saints. God in grace has set them apart from people in general and made them his own special people for his own special purposes.

The 'bishops' refers to the pastors of the church, those who were responsible to watch over the church. The 'deacons' were those who had been selected to serve the church by giving attention to practical matters so the pastors could give their time to the Word of God and prayer (see Acts 6:1–7).

To all of these Paul extends his wish for 'grace' and 'peace' from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace is, of course, the spring or fountain from which all of God's blessings flow, and peace is one of the greatest of those blessings. Because believers have peace with God, they also have the peace of God, that is, a deep and abiding sense of peace within.<sup>1</sup>

The greeting reveals that Paul chose to write this in a letter (epistolary) format. Epistles may be formal or informal.<sup>2</sup> Formal epistles tend to reflect forethought in subject matter, stylized writing, and an organized presentation. Informal letters generally contain a tone of warmth and spontaneity and, at times, reflect an intimacy regarding specific contexts that leave the modern interpreter puzzled.<sup>3</sup> Philippians is informal. This conversation between friends suggests two important truths. First, the letter is not systematic. This means that much of the writing simply flowed from Paul's mind. At no place in the epistle did Paul sustain a fully developed, systematic presentation. The closest to it is in Phil 2:5–11, which has the marks of more formal writing, but it illustrates another point. Second, the letter is occasional. Some specific situation(s) prompted Paul to write. The letter is "theology in street clothes." Paul answered the Philippians' specific concerns in ways that they could understand. That is the beauty of such portions of Scripture: they are applied theology. At the same time, that approach brings some frustration to modern readers, and the interpreter must always ask what lay behind the writing.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ellsworth, R. (2004). *Opening up Philippians* (pp. 15–16). Leominster: Day One Publications.

<sup>2</sup> These categories need revision because of the many ways epistles are being classified, but they serve adequately the point made here.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., when Paul wrote in 1 Thess, "We have no need to write to you" (stated in various ways, but see 4:9; 5:1). At other times the "in house" references are not so explicit.

<sup>2</sup> Melick, R. R. (1991). *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* (Vol. 32, p. 46). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.