

Releasing the love of Christ that dwells within us

Philippians 1:1-11

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As we read through the book of Philippians, we discover multiple treasures of scripture that have ministered to so many people throughout the years:

- Philippians 1:6, *“He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion in the day of Christ Jesus.”*
- Philippians 1:21, *“For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”*
- Philippians 2:10-11, *“At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”*
- Philippians 3:7, *“But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.”*
- Philippians 3:13-14, *“Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”*
- Philippians 4:4, *“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”*
- Philippians 4:6-7, *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*
- Philippians 4:13, *“I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”*

Paul’s letter to the Philippians is another testimony to the timelessness of God’s Word. These words were written almost 2,000 years ago, yet they apply to our lives as if Paul’s letter was written to us.

The year was around A.D. 61. The apostle Paul was in prison in Rome. One day a visitor arrived. It was a man named Epaphroditus. He was from the church in Philippi and he had traveled over 1,200 km to bring financial support for Paul and to update Paul on the condition of the church in Philippi.

In that time in history, if you were in a Roman prison, your needs were not met by the prison system. You were dependent on friends or family to meet your most basic needs. Paul was a Roman citizen, so his house arrest was likely better than a dungeon where a slave might have been, but nonetheless he still was dependent on others to meet his daily needs such as food and essential care.

The church in Philippi had heard of Paul's needs and had responded by gathering their money and sending it to Paul. Their sacrificial gift touched Paul's heart deeply, but it was not the first time they had come to his aid. Paul never asked for money from the churches that he started. Scripture even tells how at times Paul worked as a tentmaker to provide for himself, but his relationship with the church in Philippi was different. We see in scripture how they also supported Paul when he moved on to Thessalonica (Philippians 4:16) and when he arrived in Corinth (2 Corinthians 11:9). They loved Paul and he loved them.

The book of Philippians is Paul's gracious letter responding to their gift and the condition of their church. To understand Paul's relationship to this precious church in Philippi we first must know their story.

In Acts 16, we read how Paul saw a vision during the night of a man urging Paul to **"come over to Macedonia and help us"**. Sensing this was the will of God, Paul and his co-laborers set sail the next morning for the district of Macedonia. They passed through Samothrace and Neapolis and then came to Philippi, the leading city of Macedonia.

Philippi was a great commercial center during biblical times. In years past, it had been an area with gold and silver mines. It had been founded by Philip, the father of Alexander the Great in 368 B.C. Its location was of strategic importance. There is a mountain range that divides Europe from Asia. At one point there is mountain pass and it was there that Philippi was located. Because of that, whoever controlled Philippi controlled the road from Europe to Asia.

Because of its importance it was the location of the great Roman battle between Antony and Brutus and Cassius that was fought in 42 B.C. Not long after, Philippi was granted the status of a Roman colony, which was the highest designation that a Roman city could receive. In Roman colonies, former Roman legionaries were granted citizenship and were given land to secure the city's loyalty to Rome.

Roman colonies were cultural replicas of Rome. Their citizenship in the Roman Empire was their pride and they clung to Roman culture, language, dress, ceremonies, customs, and even Roman gods. They pledged ultimate devotion to Caesar as lord.

This context presented quite a challenge to the presentation of the gospel. We can hear the difficulty that it posed for Paul and Silas when we read the accusations that were brought against them, in Acts 16:20-21, when they had been arrested, **"These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice."** It was in this context that Paul boldly reminded the Christians that they were ultimately citizens of heaven and their Lord was Jesus Christ.

The story of Paul's time in Philippi is told in Acts 16. Scripture tells how on the Sabbath, Paul and those with him went outside the city gate to the riverside, where he supposed there was a place to pray. This was often the custom if a city did not have the required 10 Jewish men to start a Jewish synagogue.

There they met a woman who was a worshiper of God. Her name was Lydia. She was a wealthy seller of purple goods from the city of Thyatira. **"The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was**

said by Paul. And afterwards she was baptized, and her household as well." She then insisted that Paul and those with him come to her house to stay.

On another occasion, they were going to the place of prayer and were followed by a slave girl who had a *"spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling"*. Paul commanded the evil spirit to come out of her and she was delivered immediately. Her owners were enraged and seized Paul and Silas and dragged them before the magistrates. They then were stripped and beaten with rods and thrown into prison. The jailer then *"put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in stocks."*

The story continues in verse 25: *"About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, and 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 bonds were unfastened."* The story then tells how the jailer saw the damage, and thinking that the prisoners had escaped, drew his sword and was about to kill himself. But the apostle Paul cried out, *"Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.' And the jailer called for lights and rushed in and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?'"* Paul responded with these words, *"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."* Later that evening the jailer and all of his household were baptized.

Those three stories show the birth of the church in Philippi. It was a remarkable beginning. Paul and Silas were Jews who were also Roman citizens. Lydia was Asian and was the equivalent of a merchant princess, from the upper class. She and all of her household were baptized. Second, we see a Greek slave girl, possessed by an evil spirit, who would have been seen as nothing more than a living tool to be used and abused. Through Christ, she was delivered from the evil spirit. Third, we see a jailer who was a Roman citizen from the middle class. He and all of his household believed and were baptized as well.

This was the beginning of the Philippian church. It was an extraordinary cross section of ancient society. Different nationalities, different social classes, different cultures, and yet the gospel proved itself to not belong to merely the Jews, but sufficient to save people from every tribe and tongue, even in the most difficult of settings. It was with these people that Paul shared true Christian love and affection.

With this background in mind, let us now turn to Philippians 1:1-11. This is Paul's letter to his brothers and sisters in Philippi that was written about 10 years after the beginning of the church in Philippi, and about 30 years after Christ's ascension.

¹ Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: ² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1:1-2)

Paul started out stating that the letter was from he and Timothy. Timothy was a young, upcoming pastor, to whom Paul was willing to lend his time and even his name. In this we see Paul's practice of not ministering alone. For the sake of making disciples, raising up leaders, moral protection, and greater fruit in ministry, time and again we see Paul serving alongside others.

Paul then referred to he and Timothy as **servants** of Christ Jesus. The word “servants” was the Greek word *doulos*. It was the word for slaves. It was the lowest status that someone could have in the Roman Empire. As Paul and Timothy presented themselves, they could have called themselves children of the King, because that was true as well, but instead they chose the humble term of slaves to Jesus Christ, reminding the Philippians of the humility of the Christian faith. They were not their own. They had been bought with a price. They now were under the complete lordship of Christ. They were His absolute possession. Their life was in His hands and whatever Christ required of them they would give freely and joyfully, for His glory.

Paul then addressed those in the Philippian church as **saints**. The word for “saints” meant holy, like “*santa*” means holy in Spanish (*Semana Santa* – Holy Week). Paul was not referring to some super Christian status for people who have done miracles and had great spiritual success on earth. In this passage Paul was using the word “saints” to refer to the entire church or group of believers in Philippi, who were very likely at different levels of spiritual maturity. They were now in Christ and growing in holiness, but to some lesser extent they, like us, continued to sin even though they were now in the faith. With this in mind, how could Paul refer to imperfect people as saints?

One verse that helps us understand what Paul was thinking is 2 Corinthians 5:21, ***“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”*** They were not saints because of their own righteousness. That would be unthinkable. They were now saints because, as the verse says, they are in Christ. Christ had paid the penalty for their sin. They had put their faith in Jesus and now they were forgiven and counted as innocent. When God looked upon them He now saw the holiness of Jesus.

This holiness was their new identity in Christ. They would now be drawn out of sin and into greater sanctification and greater holiness, as their actions gradually conformed to their identity. This is one of the best indicators if one is truly in the faith. As one grows in outward holy living it will confirm that one possesses an inward holy identity.

The word “holy” literally means “set apart”, and this is what the church in Philippi was to become. Although they lived in Philippi, the gospel was supposed to set them apart as a people living under the lordship of Christ, not the lordship of Caesar.

Paul then included the overseers and deacons in his greeting, showing that the church, which was now about 10 years old, had now matured to the point that disciples had been made, and leaders had been developed to lead this young congregation.

Paul concluded his greeting with these familiar words: ***“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”***

It was mainly the common greeting that would have been found in letters in Paul’s day, except for one variation. Usually people used the word “*chairein*” to mean greeting. In Paul’s greeting he used the same root word, but changed the ending to slightly change the meaning. Instead of “*chairein*” Paul used the word “*charis*”, which meant **grace**. It changed the word “greeting” to the word “grace”. For the Christians it was still a greeting, but it was a reminder of the grace that they had so undeservedly received through Christ.

It is interesting to note that the word for **peace** came from the word which meant “to join”. As they were joined with Christ they had access to a state of tranquility, harmony and well-being. It does not mean they had no struggles, but in Christ they had access to an eternal peace that still can bring calm to our spirit even when the storm rages around us.

They were connected to God the Father through Christ Jesus, who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, the creator of heaven and earth, the head of the body –the church–, the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, the one in whom dwells the fullness of God and through whom all things will be reconciled to God, making peace by the blood of His cross. It is He who could calm their nerves, could quiet their hearts and could renew their spirit.

Grace was what they were given, so that their sin could be removed, so that they could be reconciled with God. Peace was what they now walked in as they drew near to the Christ who lived within them. Until one knows and takes hold of grace, he or she have no access to the peace that only comes from God our Father through Jesus Christ.

As Jesus proclaims in John 14:27, *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”*

³I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, ⁵because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶And 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 1:3-6)

These were sweet words from Paul. This was a treasured friendship that continued to be such a blessing and source of joy for him. Those in the church in Philippi naturally came to his mind often, and when they did, like a father with his children, his heart was drawn to gratitude and prayer as the most beneficial act that Paul could do for them.

The reason for their camaraderie was their continued partnership in the gospel. They were not just partners in sharing the gospel. They were partners in experiencing the riches, power and advancement of the gospel. It was not just the countless hours they had spent together, the financial gifts that they had shared, or even the trials they had endured together. They were bound by something more. They were partners in the gospel. It was not based on ethnic background, culture or even social status, because, as we have already discussed, it was a church of great diversity. Their deep friendship, partnership and love for one another was based on their new identity in Christ.

In Christ they were now forgiven and freed from the slavery of sin. They were liberated from their old lives and now made new. They were no longer strangers, foreigners and spiritual orphans. Through Christ they had each been reconciled and adopted into the family of God. Together they now bowed their hearts and their lives to their one true Savior and Lord, and this united them as one.

In verse 6, Paul then writes these encouraging words: *“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.”*

It is interesting to see the words that Paul used in this verse. These Greek words for “began” and “complete” were often used when talking of the process of offering a sacrifice. In many ways that is

what salvation is. When one puts their faith in Jesus Christ, they are surrendering their lives, placing themselves on the altar, as an act of worship to Christ. It reminds us of Romans 12:1, where Paul instructs his readers to ***“present their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.”***

At salvation God begins to work in one’s life to conform them to the likeness of Christ (Romans 8:28-29). It is a day-by-day, life-long process. It is filled with successes and failures. God shines His holy light into our dark places. He claims lordship over more and more areas of our lives. He bears the fruit of the Spirit in our lives in an increasing manner. He convicts us of sins we were not aware of and uses us in ways we would never have expected. On our best and worst of days this is our assurance. It is God who does the work in the lives of all who are His.

For all who belong to Christ our confidence is that God will refine, remake, renew, and sanctify us so that at the day of Christ Jesus, God will have brought to completion His good work in us and we will be that living sacrifice which is holy and acceptable to God. At times we struggle to walk in the ways of Christ, but rest in the fact that ***“He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”***

These are words of encouragement for some, but are also words of warning to others. With this truth in mind, it is impossible to be a believer who does not become more like Christ. Yes, we as believers have moments, days or even seasons that we falter, but God will discipline and draw back to Himself those who are His. There is no place in scripture that teaches of a follower of Christ whose general, permanent direction of his life is not towards Christ. A follower of Christ will follow Christ.

Please hear Paul’s words again: ***“He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”*** Paul then continues with verse 7:

⁷ It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸ For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:7-8)

Paul yearns for them ***“with the affection of Christ”***. It is in this phrase that we find the center point of this entire passage. There are various circumstances that have nurtured Paul’s feelings of love and partnership towards those in the Philippian church, but his love and yearning for them, the reason that he holds them in his heart, originated not from his own desires, and not even from what they had done for him, but from the “affection of Christ Jesus” that dwelt within him.

Multiple times in the Gospels this same word, translated “affection” here, was used to describe Jesus’ compassion for people. Matthew 9:36 tells us that, ***“When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”*** Jesus felt the same affection and compassion for the blind men that he encountered in Matthew 20 and the leper that he healed in Mark 1:41. We see it again in Luke 7, when Jesus encountered the funeral procession of the widow whose only son had died.

The love of Christ dwells within every believer, because every believer is in Christ, and Christ is in them. We love because He first loved us.

Paul loved them with the love of the Lord. It was not a love that even Paul could take credit for. In the words of Markus Bockmuehl, *“Paul’s deeply emotional expression of Christian affection in this verse is not primarily the sign of a gushing temperament, but of a gushing Christology!”*¹ It was more than a personality trait. It was the gospel that had taken away the heart of a violent persecutor and replaced it with a heart of Christian affection.

Many Christians may hear these words and question them based on their own Christian experience. If the loving affection of Christ dwells in me, then why am I not more loving? If the loving affection of Christ dwells within the church, then why is the church not more loving and affectionate? Paul’s next verses help with those questions.

⁹ And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Taking for granted that love of Christ was already present in the Philippian’s hearts, Paul prayed that their love would continue to overflow with knowledge and discernment. That their love would not be just a convenient, superficial, sentiment when life went well, but that it would be the driving, constant characteristic of their lives. In good days and bad days. That it would not be a blind love, but a love that was based on a true knowledge of God both in mind and in heart. That their love would flow out of a thorough understanding of God and His truths, as well as a relational intimate knowledge of God based on the experiences they had had with Him.

Paul also prayed that their *“agape”* love would be discerning and wise. That they would be able to sense what was truly loving in each moment. That they would be able to discern what was ultimately best for another person and act on it. Whether it be a gentle love or a tough love. Whether it be a shoulder to cry on or a word of exhortation. That they could perceive God’s understanding of the situation and express the *“affection of Christ”* that dwelt within them.

Let’s now return to the pressing question. The Spirit of Christ lives in us. The love of Christ dwells in us. So, how do we become more loving? Like Paul, how do we release the affections of Christ that already dwell within us?

Our tendency is to ask what we have to do to make ourselves more loving, but the love of Christ is already in us. The more correct question is, how do we get out of love’s way? The love of Christ, when unhindered and nurtured, will be the natural overflow of our lives. So, what is blocking our flow of love? Maybe it is bitterness, pride, selfishness, or unforgiveness. Maybe it is surrounding ourselves with the things of the world, and the flow of love in our lives is being blocked by greed, seeking our own glory, pleasing others, or our self-centered desire for pleasure and comfort.

In Hebrews 12:1-2, we read: ***“Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.”***

¹ The Epistle to the Philippians, By Markus Bockmuehl, Black’s New Testament Commentaries, p. 65.

We are to remove the obstacles and fix our eyes on Jesus.

It may be that the Holy Spirit is already bringing to mind what you need to make right or remove. For some, the changes are specific, for others it might be a change of your spiritual attitude. It may be an issue of lordship. As long as we still want to debate with God about when to obey and when not to, then our intimacy with Christ and thus His love in our lives will be obstructed. In John 14:15, we see a direct connection between love and obedience. Jesus said, *"If you love me, obey my commandments."* That is where we need to start.

We love because Christ first loved us (1 John 4:19). It was our sin and His sacrifice that showed the extent of His love for us. By faith may we bow our hearts to Christ and ask Him to lead us towards an ever increasing obedience. May forgiveness drive away bitterness. May grace heal our wounds. May peace remove our anxiety. May joy remove our weeping. May God's faithfulness bring an end to our doubt. And may the love of Christ flow, unhindered, from our lives for the glory of God.