

p 11 WEEK 2: THANKFULNESS AND PRAYER FOR THE PHILIPPIANS

Philippians 1:1–11

The Place of the Passage

Paul begins Philippians much as he does his other letters: a quick salutation, an expression of thankfulness, and a prayer. Within these first 11 verses there are hints of what's to come in the rest of the epistle. That was a common structure for letter writing in Paul's time.

The Big Picture

Paul celebrates God's genuine work of grace in the Philippians, warmly thanking them for their partnership in the gospel, and praying for their future growth in the faith.

p 12 Reflection and Discussion

Read through the passage for this study, Philippians 1:1–11. Then consider and answer the following questions. (For further background, see the *ESV Study Bible*, pages 2280–2281, or visit www.esvbible.org.)

Knowing what you do about the major themes of Philippians (see Week 1), read verses 1–11 with those in mind. Do you see any ways in which these verses foreshadow what's to come in the rest of the letter?

Paul addresses this letter to “all the saints in Christ Jesus ... with the overseers and deacons” (v. 1). Look at the first couple of verses in other letters that Paul wrote to churches, such as Romans through 2 Thessalonians. What is unique about how he addresses the Philippians? What might be behind this?

Paul's various arrests, imprisonments, and trials stretch through eight chapters in the book of Acts (Acts 21–28). He writes Philippians while imprisoned and with execution looming. Amazingly, his focus is squarely on the Philippians' welfare. Do you see any indication in verses 1–11 as to why and how Paul can focus on thankfulness, joy, and the welfare of others, instead of on his own hard circumstances?

p 13 Paul's language is extremely warm and personal in these verses (especially vv. 3–5, 7–8). Why? Was it mere courtesy? Was it based on time spent together? Or was there a still deeper

connection? (Hint: notice the connecting language in vv. 5, 7, which introduces his stated reasons—e.g., “because ...,” “It is right ... because ...,” “for ...”)

The Greek word behind “partnership” (v. 5) is sometimes translated “fellowship.” Unfortunately, for many Christians today “fellowship” has connotations of merely getting together for food. So “partnership” is a better word, especially here. Remember, the Philippians prayerfully and financially supported Paul’s missionary work. They shared the *gospel* and shared in *gospel work* (see 3 John 6–8 for similar language). Remarkably, they even indirectly shared in Paul’s “imprisonment and ... defense and confirmation of the gospel” (v. 7). What are some implications of this for you, your church, your giving, etc.?

In verse 6, Paul assures the Philippians that their spiritual state is proof of God’s “good work” in them. He also insists that if God “began a good work” in them, he “will bring it to completion.” How might these statements be simultaneously *confidence-building* and *pride-crushing*?

p 14 List some of the things that Paul is thankful for in the Philippians, in verses 3–7, and the things that he prays for them, in verses 9–11. Then read Paul’s prayers in Ephesians 1:15–23, Colossians 1:9–14, and 2 Thessalonians 1:3–12. What similarities do you see among these prayers?

Having looked at several of Paul’s prayers, what things do you see Paul emphasizing in his prayers? What *kinds* of things is he praying for? Why? How might Paul’s prayers differ from our prayers?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections may have for you.

Gospel Glimpses

SALVATION BELONGS TO THE LORD. That is what Jonah concluded after God sent him to the Ninevites to preach repentance and had him swallowed by a fish when he ran away from the task (Jonah 2:9). God’s saving plan for them and for us began in eternity past (Eph. 1:4–5). Salvation starts with God, not us. If left to ourselves, we would never seek God (Rom. 3:11). Paul was not in search of Jesus that day on the road to Damascus; Jesus went looking for him (Acts 9:1–6). So too the Philippian Gentiles were not searching for the true God when the gospel was first preached in their city (Acts 16). Lydia, though **p 15** religious, believed Paul’s message only because the Lord “opened her heart” (v. 14). The same is true of you, if you’re a Christian: it was God who *began* the work in you, and thus it is he who will surely *complete* it (Phil. 1:6).

SUPERNATURAL CONFIDENCE, JOY, AND LOVE. Especially in light of his many persecutions and present imprisonment, it is astounding how steadily joy-filled, thankful, and selfless Paul is in Philippians. As we shall see throughout Philippians, these were supernatural realities for Paul, attitudes tied to his experience of God’s grace and the innumerable benefits that were his in Christ. His confidence and joy were rooted in eternal truths, not mere circumstances. He was unswervingly confident because Christ is unshakably faithful. And Paul was effervescent in his love for other believers because the gospel showed him Christ’s love and taught him to love in imitation of it.

Whole-Bible Connections

THE DAY OF JESUS CHRIST. Paul assured the Philippian church that their salvation would be brought to completion “at the day of Jesus Christ” (1:6). He also prayed that the Philippians would be found “pure and blameless” in “the day of Christ” (1:10). For hundreds of years before Jesus’ birth, the Old Testament promised the hastening of this day—“the day of the LORD” (Isa. 13:6; Joel 2:1; Amos 5:18). The prophets spoke of this “day” sometimes as a day of *salvation* and sometimes as a day of *judgment*. The New Testament reflects this distinction. In Acts 2:16–21 Peter insists that the “last days,” spoken of by Joel, have now come with Jesus and his Spirit. In that sense, the “day of the Lord” has already come. However, the apostles also wrote of this “day” as still a future event (Phil. 1:6; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10). This is the day of Jesus’ return, his second coming. Just as the cross was a day of *salvation* and *judgment* (as Jesus paid for mankind’s sins by bearing God’s wrath), so his second coming will also be a day of final *salvation* for some and final *judgment* for others (2 Thess. 1:7–10).

FOR GOD’S GLORY AND PRAISE. God saves us for his “glory and praise” (Phil. 1:11). Paul uses the words *glory* and *praise* like a repeated chorus in Ephesians. There he writes that our adoption is “to the praise of his glorious grace” (Eph. 1:6) and our inheritance and saving hope are “to the praise of his glory” (vv. 11–12). Of course, this is not unique to Paul or the New Testament. It was clear throughout the Old Testament that *glory* and *praise* are, and always were, integral to God’s character, and, hence, integral to his plan. For instance, he said through the prophet Isaiah, “For my name’s sake I defer my anger, for the sake of my *praise* I restrain it for you” (Isa. 48:9). This will also be the eternal anthem of heaven: “Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory” (Rev. 19:7).

p 16 Theological Soundings

PRAYER. What is prayer? On one level, prayer is simply talking to God about what is in one’s mind at the moment. But on a deeper level, there are many things going on that are very theological because they are essentially responses to God. For starters, prayer is possible only because of the intricate, eternal, historical plan of God to save sinners in and through Jesus. Prayer is speaking to God in praise about who he is—and he is infinitely glorious. Prayer is thanking him for what he has done—and he has done innumerable wonderful things. Prayer is speaking to God about his plan, asking him to do what he promised to do. Paul’s prayer in Philippians 1 is a model of a loving, worshipful, thoughtful, God-centered prayer. In many ways, he simply fleshes out

what our Lord taught us to pray: that God’s name would be hallowed, his kingdom keep coming, his will be done, and we be kept from temptation (Matt. 6:9–13).

PERSERVERANCE OF THE SAINTS. Paul assures the Philippian church that the saving work that God began in them would be brought “to completion at the day of ... Christ” (Phil. 1:6), and he also *prays* for the same (v. 10). In the following chapter, he speaks of the same concept in a slightly different way: he prays that the Philippians will always be found “holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ” he would not prove to have “run in vain” (2:16). These verses reflect a tension between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility that is felt all through Philippians (see also, e.g., 2:12–13). On the one hand, God will powerfully preserve all true believers to the end. On the other hand, those very same believers have a genuine responsibility to hold fast to the word, to see to it that they not “run in vain.” That’s why Paul assures the Philippians that their salvation is as good as done yet also prays for that very thing and bids them to stand firm in it (1:27).

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of Philippians 1:1–11 for your own life today. Consider what you have learned that might lead you to praise God, repent of sin, and trust in his gracious promises. Make notes below on the personal implications for your walk with the Lord of the (1) *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

p 17 2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Philippians 1:1–11

As You Finish This Unit ...

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord’s blessing and help as you continue in this study of Philippians. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on a few key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and perhaps to highlight and underline these things to review again in the future.