



Christian Crusaders

7401 University Ave., Cedar Falls, Iowa 50613-5099
(319) 277-0924 – TOLL-FREE 1-888-693-2484

www.christiancrusaders.org

Living the Jesus Life: Beginnings and Blessings

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Rev. Steve Kramer

TEXT: Philippians 1:1-2 (ESV)

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

Dear Friends:

I'd like to take you with me to an imaginary scene, if you don't mind. The date is 60 A.D. A church service is about to begin... not in a church building though. This congregation is gathering to worship in a house church in a little town called Philippi. There's excitement in the air as the Philippian Christians come in and sit down and greet one another. In fact the congregation is buzzing with anticipation. Why is this? Well, let's listen in to a conversation and find out:

One of the people there named Octavius says to his friend Clement "I hear that we're going to hear from Paul today. He's written us a letter. Young Epaphroditus showed up with it yesterday. He's finally back. I was beginning to wonder if he died."

Octavius' little boy sitting next to him overhears his dad saying this and asked "father who's Paul?"

"Well Paul, he started this church years ago, son. If it weren't for him we may not even know about Jesus and what He's done for us. Paul is a missionary for Jesus.

He starts churches. We've been supporting him with our money and our prayers. Everybody here loves Paul and is so grateful for him."

Then Octavius turned back to his friend Clement and asks "do you know where Paul is? Is he still in prison, or has he been released?"

Clement says that "I hear he's still in prison. He's hoping to get out, of course, but who knows if and when. Poor guy spent more time behind bars, it seems, than being free from prison. Remember how he ended up in jail here, even, when he first came. And since then he's been in and out of jail for his preaching. I admire him, though, for his sticktoitiveness. He really..."

"SHHHHH!" Octavius whispers. "I think the service is about to start. The he groans and says under his breath "are we going to sing Psalm 91 again this week? I don't like that hymn. Let's just skip the singing and get to pastor Paul's letter."

After the song and a prayer, one of the deacons named Zygos stands up with the parchment scroll in his hand and walks to the front. And as he unrolls the scroll he motions to a young man. "At long last our brother Epaphroditus is back. Welcome home, brother. Epaphroditus delivered our money to support Paul during his prison stay and has brought back a letter from him. I think you'll enjoy hearing from our friend. I've read it myself already and was greatly encouraged by it." Then he pauses and he begins to read it aloud as the congregation quietly listens. "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus..."

It turns out that it really was quite a letter. The congregation, and many congregations since, had described it as moving, inspiring, instructive, practical, and encouraging. In fact, it was so good that was circulated among the many early Christian congregations until, lo and behold, by the work of the Holy Spirit, it was included in our Bible. It still has the power to change people's lives, even today. There is so much to offer the person who wants to spiritually grow in "living the Jesus life". So, for the next several weeks, I thought it would be kind of fun for us to closely look at this letter together. Today, we're only going to look at the first two lines. It's the greeting of the letter, but this greeting... it's loaded with some truth about the Jesus life. Instead of writing just "dear Philippian friends," Paul goes about teaching us, right off the bat, as he writes:

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

There are two important reminders here for us; two truths that Paul's expressing in these few words. First, he's reminding us of our new identification when we come into a relationship with Jesus. Notice the titles that are used here, first for himself: "Paul and

Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus.” That's how Paul sees himself now; he's a servant of Christ. After his conversion, which we read about in Acts 9, Paul came to realize all that Jesus had done for him: that Jesus was Lord and that [Jesus] dying on a cross to pay the debt for his sins, he was now bought with the precious blood of Christ. Paul understood that, for some reason or another, that he, who once was a terrible enemy of the Christian faith, was now called to serve the cause of Christ in the world. That's what happens when Jesus gets into a person's life. His love overwhelms, and you realize you've been bought at great cost to Jesus. You become His servant out of gratitude for all that He's done for you. You want to serve and obey Him, and stand up for Him, and put yourself out there for Him. You can't help yourself.

But notice also the other title that Paul uses as he identifies the Philippians as “saints”. That's what a person becomes when he or she trust in Jesus Christ. Now, being a saint doesn't mean you become automatically a good and perfect person. That's not what he's getting at. You see, a saint is defined as “one who is set apart for God”. Now that's what I call status in this world. You're set apart for God if you're in Christ. When Jesus comes into your life you are set apart for God's purposes. You're a saint. You have a new identity, a new purpose. So, when a person steps in a relationship with Jesus Christ, Paul's first pointing out to us you get a new ID. New identification: servant, saint. Claim it!

But then, he goes on remind us of our new inheritance as well that we have in Christ. Not only do we get a title, but there is this inheritance called “grace and peace”. He says “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Why do you suppose he reminds them of grace? Could it be that we can't be reminded enough of it, of how amazing it is? I mean, I've found in my own life that I need constant reminders of God's grace because I “leak” grace. It so easily leaks, and we go back to our old natural way of thinking, which is a dead-end street and holds no joy for us whatsoever. So Paul is longing for them to claim and enjoy God's grace in their lives, because God's grace saves, it changes, it sustains lives, doesn't it? I mean, what is saving grace? It's God's unmerited favor to us through Jesus Christ, it's a free gift. We don't deserve it, we can't earn it. Someone once said you can use the letters of grace, the word g-r-a-c-e: “God's riches at Christ's expense”, that's the definition. It's God's free gift of forgiveness and a restored relationship with Him forever. It's something that to has to be given to us because all of us have sinned and we fall short of the glory of God. God is love, but He's also just, and the guilty will not go unpunished, He tells us. If you break one commandment, you've broken them all. The wages of sin is death; that's our predicament. We can't fix it; we're incapable - spiritually bankrupt. Well here's what God did out of love for you and me, out of grace: He sent His son Jesus Christ to take upon Himself our sin. Jesus lived the perfect life of obedience, went to the cross for us

as our substitute, and then He took the hit for us. The wrath of God towards sin was poured out on Jesus His son, and God's perfect love and justice was satisfied that day at the cross. He purchased our forgiveness and a place for us in God's Heaven. It's all grace.

I'm reminded of an old story of a man who died and faced the angel Gabriel at Heaven's gates:

The angel said "here's how it works: you need a hundred points to make it into Heaven. You tell me all the good things you've done, and I will give you a certain number of points for each of them. The more good there is the work that you cite, the more points you'll get for it. When you get 100 points, you get in." "Okay," the man said, "I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her, even in my heart."

Gabriel replied "that's great, that's worth three points."

"Three points!" said the man incredulously. "Well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my money and service."

"Terrific," said Gabriel, "that's certainly worth a point."

"One point?!" said the man, with his eyes beginning to show a bit of panic. "Well how about this: I opened a shelter for the homeless in my city and fed needy people by the hundreds during the holidays."

"Fantastic, that's good for two points" said the angel.

"TWO POINTS?!" cried the man in desperation. "At this rate the only way I will get to Heaven is by the grace of God!"

And Gabriel said "come on in!"

It's all grace. He offers grace to us that's received through faith. And faith is... the best picture I can give for you is a beggar holding out empty hands to receive a gift from the king. With empty hands we received the riches of God's forgiving grace and we get a clean conscience and a clean record and a clean heart. A new and full life in the present, and the promise of eternity.

Lewis Smedes writes, in one of his books, why grace is so amazing. He says

Why do we call grace amazing? Grace is amazing because it works against the grain of common sense. Hard-nosed common sense will tell you that you are too wrong to meet the standards of a holy God; pardoning grace tells you that it's all right in spite of so much in you that is wrong. Realistic common sense tells you that you are too weak, too harassed, too human to change for the better; grace gives you power to send you on the way to being a better person. Plain common sense may tell you that you are caught in a rut of fate or futility; grace promises that you can trust God to have a better tomorrow for you than the day you have made for yourself.

That's what's so amazing about Grace. Not only is there saving grace, but there's sustaining grace, as well, that is talked about in Scripture. That saving grace, that all-sufficient grace; knowing that God is with me in all circumstances. He's there to strengthen me when I am weak with His love and the working of his Holy Spirit. And when I am weak, then I am strong.

God's grace also, then, leads to peace. A peace with God, knowing where I stand with God: that I'm forgiven in His Son forever. That I'm loved and God sees me as His own. That gives peace, deep peace within. I don't have to wonder anymore. I have a Father who loves me and is with me in every circumstance, and nothing can separate me from His love in Christ Jesus. And that gives me peace. In Christ I have everything I need. I know that when I die I'm going to Heaven because of what Christ has done for me, and that's peace. A peace which we all long for - that whether I live or I die I'm His forever.

I work in prison ministry these days, leading worship at a nearby penitentiary. A couple weeks ago, the worshipers were asked by the speaker "what do you need in your life?" And he allowed them to raise her hands and respond. And a number of them said that they need peace in their lives. That it's a hard life, they needed peace. Don't we all? Well the good news is this: peace is available through the grace of God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. The Jesus life is filled, chock-full, of grace and peace.

So there you have it: that Jesus life begins with grace and peace, that's how we become saints and servants of Christ. And I want to ask you today, personally: have you received these gifts in your life and are you enjoying them? Have they perhaps leaked out in your daily living? Well it's not too late to step into the Jesus life, or step back into the Jesus life, to become saints in Christ set apart for God's purposes. To have a fresh indwelling of His grace. It's simply a matter of yielding, surrendering your heart, giving it Christ. When you give your heart to Christ you receive forgiveness and love as a free gift; grace. You just need to say "Jesus, I'm giving my life to you. I make a mess of it. I want to walk in Your grace every day. You know what makes my life work best. I want to live with You." Some of you have already done this, and right now are just saying "thank you Lord!" Or, perhaps, "God, I want a fresh experience of your grace today." Some of you have never done this, though, and some of you are thinking that your sin is too horrific to be forgiven. There's no hope for you. Let me tell you this: the good news today is there is no sin that grace cannot cover. Forgiveness comes to us through our Lord Jesus Christ. Ask, and it will be given to you.

You know, Philippians has often been described as "the letter of joy." When you read it in one sitting, you can't help but be struck by Paul's constant expressions of joy and

rejoicing. And remember this: he's in prison when he's writing. Where do you suppose that joy comes from? For Paul, and for anyone, it comes from living in a relationship with Jesus Christ; receiving His grace, which saves and changes and sustains your life. The road to a life of real, sustainable joy always begins with having the grace of God the Father, our Lord Jesus in your life. Loved ones: it's available! Grace and peace: receive it.

Amen.