



MOMENTS TO PONDER
UNVEILING JOY:
EXPLORING THE BOOK OF PHILIPPIANS

Episode 85: Greetings (Philippians 1:1-11)

Hi Friends! Welcome to Moments to Ponder. This is a podcast designed to help you spend a few moments in God's Word wherever you are and take away something to ponder.

We live in a loud, busy world that can make it hard to find the time to get into God's word and I'm grateful for these moments we have together to explore this series on the book of Philippians I've titled Unveiling Joy. I'm Betsy Marvin and this is episode 85.

Can I ask you something?

When was the last time you received a hand-written letter in your mailbox? Or even a card in the mail? How did you feel when you saw that envelope in the mail box? I don't know about you, but I get a feeling of anticipation when I open the mailbox and see real mail...not the ads and bills, but real mail with a handwritten address and a colorful stamp.. We call it snail mail cause it takes soooo much longer than an email to send, and if we want an even quicker option, we text. Or, if you're of the younger set, you just send a pic over snap chat – a picture being worth a lot of words... But the wonder of letter writing is becoming a lost art, just ask someone under 20 years old to address an envelope and a large percentage of them won't know how. Thank goodness for thank you notes, right?

I started dating my husband in the 80s while we were in college. We attended different schools about an hour apart, so we wrote letters. I still have them. There is something about a letter – we can go back and reread it, carry it with us, and share it. Yes, we can do that email too if you print it off, but when you hold a letter – it's just different.

In this new series, we are going to be exploring a letter that was hand written and hand delivered to a group of people that would share it and cherish it because it came from someone they loved and who loved them. It is a letter full of joy, a secret, and advice.

It's a personal letter that wasn't written so that it would end up in Scripture one day, it was written to friends to say thank you and give encouragement to the church in the city of Philippi by an apostle named Paul and it became part of the New Testament, known as the book of Philippians.

That's part of context, so here's a bit more: the letter was written around 61-62 AD, Nero is the Roman Emperor, and this 30ish-year-old belief system called Christianity has begun to spread.

The church is in the city of Philippi along the coast of the Aegean Sea, north of Greece, in an area that was called Macedonia having been named after Philip the II of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great. It was a Roman colony with a large military force due to its strategic placement along the Roman road called Via Egnatia, which was on the land route that connects Greece with Asia. Today the city is called, Filippi.

It was a walled city with an marketplace, arena and full of the wonders of Greek culture yet with the safety of Roman citizenship. It would have been a city of non-Jewish people worshipping the Emperor and other Roman gods. If you google the area today, you'll see that the city is nestled between a mountain range and farm land with a river running alongside. It's a beautiful place.

We first hear of Philippi in Acts 16 after Paul dreams of a man from Macedonia asking him to come and bring the good news of Jesus to them. This led Paul to go there on his 2nd missionary journey and it became the first place in Europe to hear about Jesus.

From the Acts account, we discover that Paul's time in Philippi was pretty eventful. There he and Silas, a fellow missionary, meet a business woman named Lydia, whose home becomes the first house church in the city. They also encounter a young slave girl in need of rescue from demons leading them to a run in with her owners which lands them in prison. While in prison, they are visited by an angel who unlocks the prison cell but instead of running, they share Jesus with the prison guard and he and his whole family are baptized. To fully understand who Paul is writing to, I encourage you to read the whole story in Acts 16. According to one commentary, it has been about 11 years since Paul was with them.

As Paul writes this letter, he is again in prison. There is a bit of a challenge as to whether Paul was in prison in Rome or in Ephesus due to the full accounting in Acts, but wherever he was, his situation would have been close to the same. He was chained to a guard and living under house arrest with the Roman palace guard. He was able to have visitors and speak with them, but he was not fed or cared for at all by those in charge, he depended on family and friends for food, warm clothes, and other needs.

I think that sets us up, so let's get started.

Paul begins his letter with: *This letter is from Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus. I am writing to all of God's holy people in Philippi who belong to Christ Jesus, including the church leaders and deacons. May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.* Phil. 1:1-2 (NLT)

He starts with a greeting and we can see from the very first verse that Paul was not alone. Timothy, his disciple, and Epaphroditus (ep-af-rod'-ee-tos), were with him. He calls himself and Timothy slaves of Christ Jesus – other versions say bondservants or servants. I'm not sure this

translates for us today. Slavery is a harsh, negative, evil situation in our current world. Yet, Paul wants to make it clear that they are devoted, body and soul by Christ – bonded to him. He also gives us insight into the church there – he writes to the church leaders and deacons, showing us a church that has become more organized with deacons in positions to serve and the church leaders as the overseers. By addressing all three audiences, we will discover that he has something to say to everyone.

As we move through this book, I want us to remember that we have become part of Paul's audience. Whether attender, servant, or leader within the body of Christ, this letter has something for us today starting right in at verse 3 as he continues,

*Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God. Whenever I pray, I make my requests for all of you with joy, for you have been my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now. And I am certain that God, **who began the good work within you, will continue** his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns. Phil. 1:3-6*

These verses set the tone for the entire letter, every time I think of you – I'm grateful - which leads me to pray and when I pray for you, it's with joy.

How would you feel if you got a letter that started like that?

Imagine the faces of those in the church as this letter was read. They would hear, I'm so thankful for you, you bring my joy. Joy. This letter will use the word joy so many times! We'll go into this more later, but let's remember that Paul is writing from prison, chained to a guard, unable to move about freely, humbly in need of the care of others to survive.

And in verse 6 Paul says, *And I am certain that God, **who began the good work within you, will continue** his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns."* These words are the key to the whole letter – to the joy! God started a good work and the work will continue until Jesus returns. It brings to mind another verse from a letter to the Romans, "*And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them..*" Romans 8:28

I wonder why Paul wrote those words to this group? Were they wondering if God has stopped working for their good? Have you ever felt that way? Like, how can God use your current situation for good? Maybe you've found yourself wondering if God really does work for the good of those who love him?

I think these are common questions for so many of us. Life hands us a hard situation or we see bad things happen to those we love and we think – what's up God, don't you care about us? It can sometimes feel like God has stepped out for a bit when it comes our lives.

What I'm learning from Paul, as I work on this series, is that in those moments of hard and hurt he held onto what he knew of God; that God is good, knows the WHOLE story, and that having Jesus is enough. We can do the same and hold onto what we KNOW of God and remember that God's work doesn't mean we'll be happy or comfortable. His work is to make us more like him and becoming more like him, the work of transformation, isn't easy, no great work is – but it leads to being whole, forgiven, free, and sharing his Good News...and that's good work that will continue until Jesus returns.

I know for me it can be easy to lose sight of the true good work he has done for me and in me when I look at my circumstances, or think of all the disease and abuse in our world and think – this isn't good – and those things aren't good. Yet, I think the work of God being spoken of here isn't circumstantial or health or even safety – it's the internal, eternal work of transformation within us, and that is his good work.

Paul is reminding us and the church in Philippi that God never leaves work undone. When we are discouraged, we need to remember that God never gives up, he promises to finish his work, and he is good. Paul is telling us: Don't let your current situation rob you of joy, that is the joy of knowing Jesus and his love and forgiveness, and freedom.

He goes on in verse 7-8:

So it is right that I should feel as I do about all of you, for you have a special place in my heart. You share with me the special favor of God, both in my imprisonment and in defending and confirming the truth of the Good News. God knows how much I love you and long for you with the tender compassion of Christ Jesus.

Can you hear the personal words as Paul shares his love of them all? We have no idea how much time he really spent with them. According to Acts 16, he had only been there a few days, and in Acts 19-20, we read of another visit to Philippi. However short or long, this church had stood with him in hard times and from the words in 2 Corinthians 8, 9, and 11, we can see that the Philippian church had supported Paul over the years in a variety of ways.

They were precious people and filled Paul's heart with love and compassion. So much so that he continues in verse 9: "I pray that your love will overflow more and more, and that you will keep on growing in knowledge and understanding."¹⁰ For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return.¹¹ May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation—the righteous character produced in your life by Jesus Christ—for this will bring much glory and praise to God." Phil. 1:9-11

What a blessing and charge from Paul, their spiritual mentor and guide. They are words that tells us this is who they were – people who loved well, that were growing and learning while also seeking to live lives that honored Christ.

Dear one, in whom do you find joy? Who do you thank God for? ... Take a few moments to ponder these questions as you go through this day.

And now,
May God fill you with a love overflowing more and more that grows in sincerity and intelligence. May you live for what really matters, with character and purity, living a life that Jesus will be proud of, helping others see him through the fruit of your life.
And, May you do it all to bring glory and praise to God.

Amen.