

Opening Lines

A Study of Philippians: Introduction – Philippians 1:1-2

“Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”
Philippians 1:1-2

Sometimes the opening line will set the tone for the rest of the story.

Some people will begin a conversation with, “I remember the time . . .” and some will perk up to listen and others will slump over knowing that there will be a long story to follow. Another famous introduction is, “This will only take a minute!” I have heard that one before and it never takes only a minute.

The beginning is an important part, just ask any runner. (That means you won't ask me.) They will tell you that how you finish the race is definitely important, but so is how you start the race. If you stutter or hesitate on the starting block, you will lose valuable time. Those few seconds may make all the difference in the end. Even distance runners need to set their pace at the beginning so that they have the energy and endurance at the end. If they start out too strong they will run out before they finish.

That is running and I am not experienced with it. I do know that writing and speaking are the same way. What is said in the beginning will set the tone. Paul knows this and takes advantage of it.

Has there been a time when a speaker's first words determined your thoughts towards the lecture? Why?

What are some good starting lines that you have heard?

As we look into Philippians, we will find a letter that is passionate and intense from the opening lines to the end. Paul writes Philippians from his wonderful office, while sitting in a cushy chair, and drinking a caramel macchiato. He is, no doubt, looking out on the city as he pours his heart out.

In reality, he is sitting in prison while chained to a Roman guard. He is not enjoying the comforts of a wonderful life. The church at Philippi has sent Epaphroditus to visit him and encourage him. Paul takes the opportunity to send him back with a letter of appreciation and gratitude. This letter is sent about ten years after the church has started.

It is amazing to think that Paul is sitting in a prison while he opens his letter with, “Grace to you and peace from God.”

That would not be my first thought, how about you?

Why is it that when we are in hard times that it is more difficult to praise God?

Paul was familiar with hard times. 2 Corinthians 11 is Paul's personal list of what he has gone through for the sake of the gospel. He has endured much and being in prison is not a big thing for him. He is used to it so it makes it easier for him. Right?

“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are at Ephesus and who are faithful in Christ Jesus.”
Ephesians 1:1

“Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother...”
Colossians 1:1

“Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ...”
Romans 1:1

Think about your own life. If you went through a great loss (a job, spouse, child), would a second time of experiencing that loss be easier to take? Why?

For most, loss is loss no matter how many times it happens. Paul, as he writes, has lost his freedom. He could not go anywhere without a guard because he was chained. He is in a pretty hard situation, yet he takes some time to rejoice. He takes some time to write a letter of praise and encouragement. How in the world can Paul have that kind of perspective?

Look back at those opening words.

It reads, “Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus.” In this small opening lies the answer to perspective.

Compare this introduction with other letters written by Paul (Ephesians, Colossians, Romans). What is the difference here?

Here Paul does not mention his apostleship. He does not have to proclaim his credentials because the letter is written with heart and passion for a people that are serving the Lord. Not only that, there is a stark contrast between the Greek word for servant and the Greek word for deacon.

The word for deacon means servant or minister. Some believe it comes from a similar word that means dust laborer. It is the idea of getting into the dirt to serve. It sounds like a great role in the church as we serve others. It is a word that is directed towards others.

Paul calls himself something different. He calls himself a slave, an individual who is in permanent service to someone else. The will and heart of the slave is completely given over to the master. Paul is making the distinction that his service is not focused on others. It is focused on God.

Here is the perspective. Paul is fixed on the passion and work of God, that is, the spread of the gospel to all peoples. Paul understands the prayer of Jesus in the garden when He prayed. “Father, not my will, but yours!”

So Paul opens his letter with words of passion and heart for God and a people who are serving God. Paul proclaims that he is a slave, but not to the Roman guard who sits chained next to him. He is a slave to the one true God and his life is no longer his own, but belongs to his Master.

Then, as if that is not enough, Paul cries out grace from God and peace for his readers. Paul recognizes that grace is only from God and peace comes as a result of laying hold of the grace given. Paul had perspective because he had peace. He had peace because he recognized His Master as gracious.

He proclaims all of this in his opening words as he sits next to a guard in prison.

I don't know about you, but it helps me see my life in a better perspective.

But this is just the beginning of the book!

What do you need to do in response to this lesson?

