

## Bible Study

# Partnership in the Gospel Philippians 1:1-6

IAN BUCHANAN

## INTRODUCTION

Here is an African proverb that might shed some light on what Paul is calling the Philippians to keep pursuing: 'If a cat dreams of becoming a lion it must lose its appetite for rats'.

For us, it means that to become what God is calling us to be – that is, ambassadors for King Jesus on the front line of in his project of reconciliation with a rebellious world – we will have to keep dropping dark habits from our sin-damaged past. Imitating the Lion of Judah is our calling. Let's see how Paul reminds the Philippians of that very point in the powerful opening lines of this little letter.

Paul uses his opening greeting to introduce the reader to three themes that he will play out in the rest of this magnificent epistle. They are: let's model true humility; keep spreading the gospel; and then his

own desire: to see them constantly growing in Christlikeness (maturity and sanctification).

## HOW DOES PAUL DO THIS?

### 1. Greeting: Verses 1-2

Paul is well-known for taking the standard first century introduction to a letter (name of the sender, recipients and a brief greeting or acknowledgement) and adding some beautiful spices to our expectation of a 'simple palate cleansing hors d'oeuvre'.

We may start our emails with the necessary 'Hi Ian' or 'Dear Sally' followed by a very British comment about the weather before getting to the 'what-this-email-is-really-all-about' section. Not Paul. For him the opening lines to his letters must be packed with theologically juicy bits that he wants the readers to experience in their first bite. They are foretastes of what is in the main meal.

Modelling humility: As is typical of Paul, he expands the usual opening lines of his letter by describing himself, and his right hand man (Timothy), as 'servants of Christ Jesus'. The word he uses in the Greek is probably better translated as 'slaves'. That is a word that is linked to humility and submission.

But we must be careful. We must not link that word to that barbaric trans-Atlantic nineteenth century form of slavery. A vile trade that was aggravated by the poison of racial humiliation. The Philippians did not make that connection.

Slaves in Paul's day were not free but they could still rise in the social ranks of the Roman Empire. They had a chance to take on jobs of great importance and of incredible trust from their owners. Paul had that first century picture in mind. Christ treats us with remarkable grace and trains us for valuable ambassadorial

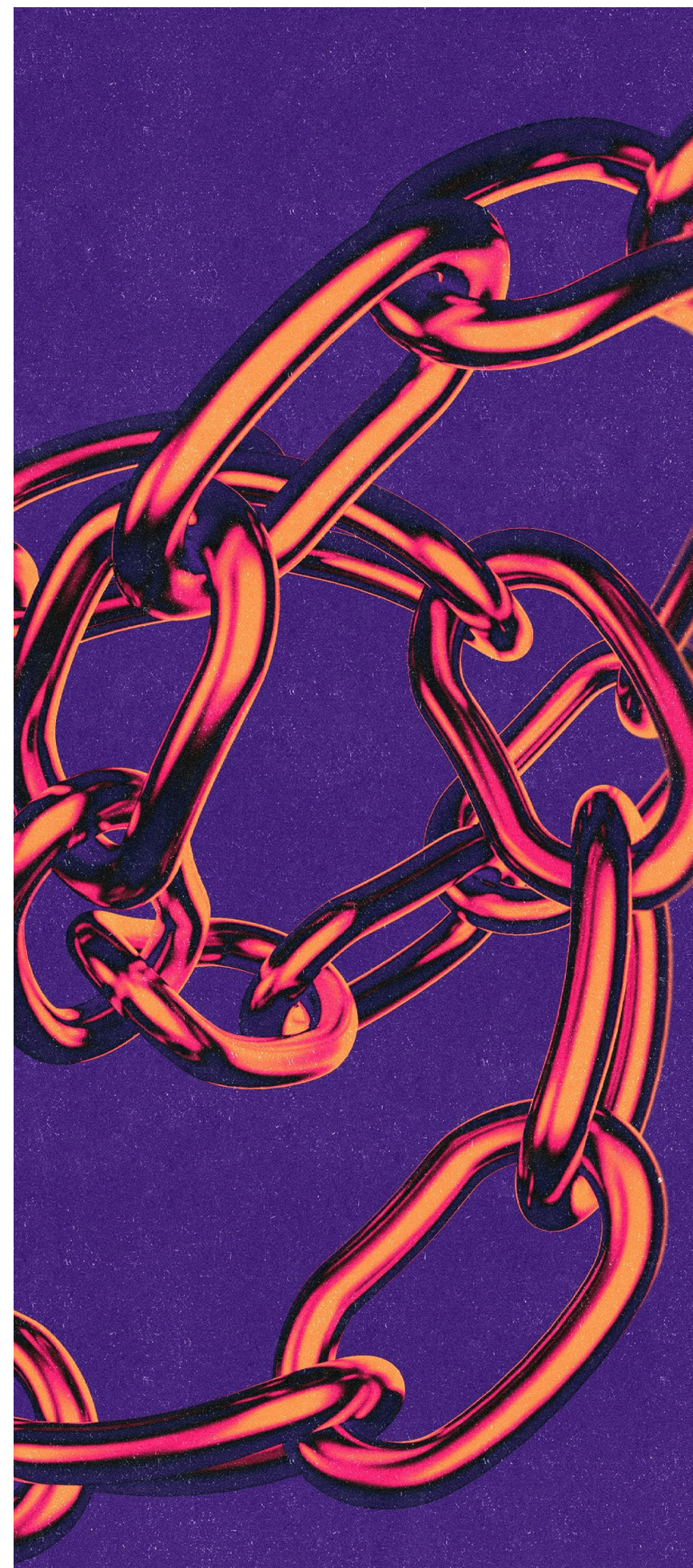
work on the front line of his mission into the UK.

But, like us, they would have understood that slaves always have a master who could define their agenda for daily living. Sin is a vicious slave owner far worse than those who existed in the nineteenth century. Thanks to Paul's letter to the Romans, in chapter 6, we know that it was once our addiction to sin that directed our paths. Thankfully, it is now our Lord's expectation of us, on the front line of his grand project of reconciliation, that directs our daily choices – a position of incredible trust and opportunity.

After reminding them of their lowly place, Paul goes on to surprise us by elevating the congregation in Philippi. He calls them 'all the saints in Christ Jesus'. Paul sees them as a community of servants woven closely together for Royal usage. The Western concept of the lone Christian with their 'churchless faith' (me in Starbucks by myself, reading the Bible on my phone with a gospel song coming through my hidden Bluetooth earbuds) has no place in Paul's vision.

We are a community 'set-aside together' to fulfil God's great passion – his mission into this world. We are his 'chosen for mission people'. And then, to our astonishment, he calls us 'saints'. A holy priesthood set-aside for the fulfilment of the Master's grand plan. Of course, that word has an ethical dimension to it (growing in Christlikeness) but, much like the vessels in the Temple, we are 'set apart' (holy) for an honourable purpose: ambassadors designed to reflect him into this world.

In verse 2 Paul goes on to use two words typical of his Greek and Jewish background – 'grace and peace'. We know from 2 Corinthians





8:9 that Paul defines 'grace' as a way of describing our Lord's incredible choice: '...though he was rich yet for our sake he became poor'. Such humility brought about the end of the hostility that our sin had created between God and his creation. And, of course, that humble act introduced us to the 'peace' that now enters into our relationship with our Lord and Master.

Why has Paul packed so much into such a small opening line? Well, later he'll call them to imitate our Lord's humility in 2:1-11. You'll notice that Paul doesn't do his usual 'an apostle of Christ Jesus' bit when introducing himself. No, he drops titles and gets down with them into the hard and humbling work of service to the King. Service that imitates our humble Lord. Service that furthers his mission of reconciliation with his rebellious creation.

## 2. A prayer of thanks for their partnership in the Gospel: Verses 3-6

**Spread of the Gospel:** Once again it was common in ancient times for Christians and pagans to drop a little prayer into their opening lines as a reference to what they had been praying for concerning the recipient. But this time Paul uses the culturally expected prayer and adds so much more to it.

He tells them that he thanks God for them and the reasons why. And, once again, he drops in a foretaste of what he will tell them about later in the letter. He prays for them 'with joy'. He will use that statement as a springboard to numerous others references to joy in this letter, the most famous of which may be, 'Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! (Philippians 4:4).

Why is he so joyful? His joy is not because of his circumstances but because of two magnificent results

of God's work coming to light in the church in Philippi.

Firstly, Paul can see that the mission of God (the spread of the gospel) is taking hold in the lives of the Philippians. How? Well, not just the obvious 'it is changing you', but they are also becoming a springboard for the gospel into the lives of others.

That is a true 'partnership in the Gospel'. A partnership that is having a multiplying effect because Christlikeness benefits you and those around you.

That partnership was so much more than only praying for Paul, as important as such communication is. It also took the form of tangible support. Again, a foretaste of what is to come in Philippians 4:10-15. When Paul was low and no one supported him, the Philippians stepped in. And they had been with him 'from the first day until now'. That is a truly committed partnership.

**Grow in Christlikeness:** Secondly, he knows that what God had begun in them will be brought to 'completion at the day of Jesus Christ'. The Lord who started that work in them will also be the One who brings it to completion. To the words of 'joy and thankfulness', I'd probably add 'relief'. What a relief (and joy) to know that salvation is not dependent on the recipient but on the Lord who is at work in us until the 'job is done'.

The progress of the work of transforming us (growing in Christlikeness) will reach its completion when our Lord appears, once again. The work is his, and our work on the frontline of his mission, is simply evidence (to us and to others) of our genuine belief and commitment to his grand project, for which he alone will receive all

the glory. Evidence that we are the 'chosen for mission people'.

Once again Paul is dropping very loud hints of what he will say later in this letter. Whether Paul is pointing to 1:28 and their commitment to 'keep on keeping on' in the face of persecution; or his admonition in Philippians 2:12-13 to keep on 'working out your salvation with fear and trembling'; or Paul's own confession in 3:12 that 'I have not already obtained all this, nor have I already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me', we hear him reminding us of that high call to grow in Christlikeness. As is fitting for an ambassador of Christ Jesus whose life is a 'free sample of Jesus' to all who want to 'taste and see' what our God is like.

Well, this cat is still dreaming of becoming a lion, a lion who reflects the Lion of Judah. So, once again, it's time for me to 'put to death the deeds of the flesh' or, as that African proverb puts it, to keep suppressing that vile appetite for rats.

## IAN BUCHANAN

*Ian Buchanan, CEO of LWPT (The Leaders of Worship and Preachers Trust). Ian studied for a BSc in Engineering Metallurgy and then a MTh for church ministry. Ian found his niche in Christian charities who need to combine business acumen with theological insight.*



**The Leaders of Worship and Preachers Trust**



## Ian Buchanan, CEO of LWPT outlines the role of LWPT

**LWPT (The Leaders of Worship and Preachers Trust)** was started by Methodists in order to support those ministering in UK churches for the benefit of God's mission into this world. In the early 21st century we were asked to take our Methodist passion (investing in every-member ministry) and make it a reality through lay and clerical Christians in the UK, but this time to all denominations. In 2005 that dream became a reality.

**Why is that Methodist passion so important?** At LWPT, we believe that the Methodist commitment to every-member ministry must spread to all denominations in the 21st century. For most denominations and many churches, the luxury of just having a few paid ministers is no longer an option. They need to give their congregations the confidence they need to minister effectively on the front line of ministry. In other words, the 21st century is our Kairos time, the ideal time.

**Is there a defining core to the ministry of LWPT that shapes all we do?** The incredible value of God's word, intended for all people on the front line of his mission into the UK, drives us. This incredible treasure needs to be communicated well through people who love the Author and understand how well it shapes all of life.

**What is the big picture that shapes LWPT?** Much like all of God's people, we believe that we exist for the same reason that God's ambassadors and his church exist ... for the furtherance of God's mission into this world.

We want to give the church in the UK the tools and confidence to be able to communicate well, knowing that they are well-resourced and well-trained for all that God calls us to do.

**LWPT supports the churches in the UK through three distinct ministries:**

### Better Bible-based communication training.

Whether your ministry is leading the church in worship, preaching from a pulpit, leading a house group, teaching the Bible or simply using God's word in counselling or evangelism, LWPT wants to help you to communicate well. We offer online webinars and workshops FREE to all. See our YouTube gallery at [youtube.com/@PreachMagazine/videos](https://youtube.com/@PreachMagazine/videos)

### Better Bible-based resources for individuals and churches.

We produce items that churches will find useful for their daily ministry. If you are interested in being better prepared for your local church-based ministry, LWPT wants to help. Take a look and subscribe or purchase at: [lwpt.org.uk](https://lwpt.org.uk)

**1. Better access to tuition grants for further Bible-based studies.** We offer tuition grants (up to £2,000 for tuition and £500 for books/resources) to people who wish to study further. We offer grants to people who are studying certificates, diplomas and undergraduate degrees in UK learning institutions. However, in keeping with our Methodist concern, we also have restricted funds set-aside for Methodist applicants only. If you want to invest more in your church-based ministry through further formal studies, please consider applying at: [lwpt.org.uk/vocational-grants](https://lwpt.org.uk/vocational-grants)