

Philippians

Introduction

I. Introductory Matters

A. *The City of Philippi*

1. Located in the heart of Macedonia, Philippi connected the Middle-east with Europe via the Egnatian Way (The main land route, built by the Romans, across northern Greece into Italy). It sat 10-miles inland from the port city of Neapolis in the Aegean Sea and became a politically and geographically strategic city for Rome.
2. Philippi was populated with discharged veterans of Roman wars and granted full rights as a Roman colony in 27 B.C by Octavian. It was a “mini-Rome” in architecture with a Forum, Acropolis, Agora (marketplace), and Amphitheater. The official language was Latin, but Greek was the predominant language of commerce and daily life. Nero was the emperor of Rome at the time of the Philippian letter.
3. Because of its status as a Roman colony, the populace had the privileges of Roman citizenship and enjoyed buying and selling property, no land or poll tax, and all the civil protection of Roman law (Rom. 16:20-21).
4. Its inhabitants were primarily Romans, secondarily Macedonian Greeks, and a very small Jewish representation. All were proud of their Roman citizenship and thought of their city as more prominent than the Macedonian district capitol of Amphipolis (Acts 16:12). Twice Paul appeals to the Roman pride of the Philippian church to live as God’s citizens (cf., 1:27, *politeusesthe* “conduct yourselves” literally means to live as citizens; also 3:20 *politeuma* “citizenship”). Moreover, Paul used Roman civil liberties to insist upon an apology from the Philippian magistrates who wrongly had Silas and him beaten and imprisoned without a trial (Acts 16:37).
5. The cultural climate included anti-Jewish sentiment (indicated by the accusers of Paul and Silas) and a mixing of pagan religions with commerce. Most likely the on-going persecution of the Philippian church indicates the degree of secularization in Philippi (Acts 16:16-24; Phil. 1:27-30).

B. *The Church at Philippi*

1. The church was founded by Paul on his second missionary journey, ca. A.D. 50 (Acts 16:9-12). It was the first city of Europe to hear the Gospel.
2. Those who accompanied Paul on his 2nd missionary journey were Silas (Acts 15:40), Timothy (Acts 16:3), and probably Luke (inferred from the beginning of the “we” passages; cf., Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-21; 27:1-28:16).
3. It is possible that Luke remained in Philippi after Paul left, since the first of the “we” passages ends at Acts 16:17 and picks up again at Acts 20:5-6.
4. Apparently there was not a large enough Jewish population to form a synagogue in Philippi (10 men were required). Therefore, an informal place for prayer on the Sabbath was located at a nearby river (Acts 16:13).
5. Philippian women seemed to have played a significant role in the church and were involved with evangelism (Philip. 4:3). The beginnings of a house church probably met in Lydia’s home (Acts 16:15, 40). However, there were overseers/elders and deacons (Philip. 1:1), most likely made up of men.
6. The fellowship was quite caring and generous and made a lasting impression on Paul and his companions by meeting their material needs (2:25-30; 4:10-20; Acts 16:15).

C. *The Author of Philippians*

1. Elements of the letter that require Pauline authorship include: disclosure of personal feelings (1:18-24, “I,” “me,” “my,” occurs fifty-one times), details of his present circumstances (1:12-13), names of friends and co-workers (2:19-24), references to gifts sent to him (4:15-16; Acts 17:1-9; 2 Cor. 8:1-5), opposition of false teachers (3:2-19; 2 Cor. 11-13).
2. Early Church Fathers assign Paul as the author when quoting from Philippians (Iraeneus, Polycarp, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian).
3. There are no compelling reasons, therefore, to question the author as anyone but the Apostle Paul.

D. *Date and Place of Writing*

1. Place of Writing (Rome, Ephesus, Ceasarea?)

- a) Paul was in prison (1:7, 13, 17) and facing a trial that could end his life (1:19-20, 2:17). From Acts we can be certain of the following imprisonments/detentions of Paul:
 - (1) In Philippi (Acts 16:23-40)
 - (2) At least two years in Caesarea (Acts 24:27)
 - (3) The voyage to Rome (Acts 27-28:16)
 - (4) Two years in Rome (Acts 28:30)
 - b) There was a praetorium/palace guard present (if in Rome this would number 9,000+), as well as those who belonged to Caesar's house (1:13; 4:22). This strongly suggests Rome as the place of writing.
 - c) Several time-consuming journeys between the place of writing and Philippi are presupposed by the letter. At least four trips were completed and more were planned.
 - (1) News of Paul's imprisonment was taken to Philippi (1:30)
 - (2) Epaphroditus traveled from Philippi to Paul's prison (4:18)
 - (3) News reached Philippi of Epaphroditus's illness (2:26)
 - (4) News reached Epaphroditus of the Philippian's concern for him (2:26)
 - (5) Epaphroditus was departing for Philippi with Paul's letter (2:25, 28)
 - (6) Paul planned to send Timothy to Philippi (2:19-23)
 - (7) Paul hoped to return to Philippi after his release (2:24)
 - d) If Paul were in Rome while writing Philippians, there must have been ample time for the first four journeys to take place (distance from Rome to Philippi is approximately 1200 miles). A one-way trip would take about 7-8 weeks (though some suggest 4-6 weeks). This would mean as many as 64 weeks (16 weeks x 4 trips) were spent journeying back and forth out of 112 total weeks in two years.
 - e) Thus, Paul's two-year Roman imprisonment would allow for at least the 4 trips that had already been completed (see items 1-4 above).
 - f) Paul had substantial freedom in the Roman prison with others visiting him and delivering correspondence (Acts 28:30-31).
 - g) Therefore, the Roman imprisonment best fits the majority of evidence for the place of writing.
2. The Date of Writing
- a) The earliest dating would be ca. 57 A.D., but this presupposes some other place than Rome for Paul's imprisonment (Note: This dating assumes Acts is chronologically reliable).
 - b) Since at least 4 trips were made between Rome and Philippi by the time the Philippian letter was written, the date is likely near the end of Paul's Roman imprisonment (ca. 61 A.D.).

E. Purpose and Themes

1. Paul does not explicitly state his purpose for writing. However, the following observations give some viable options and will highlight various themes that run throughout the letter.
 - a) To commend Epaphroditus and Timothy (2:19-30)
 - b) To express thankfulness for their repeated generosity (1:3, 5; 4:10, 14-19)
 - c) To report on his own circumstances (as a missionary newsletter, so to speak)
 - d) To encourage them to stand fast in unity through humility despite their suffering (1:27-28; 2:1-11; 4:2). Some commentators see 1:27-28 as the heart of the letter.
 - e) To inspire hope in the believer's sure future (1:6, 10, 21-24; 2:9-11, 16; 3:12-14; 4:5)
 - f) To instill joy in the midst of suffering (1:14, 18, 25, 26; 2:2, 17, 18, 29; 3:1, 17; 4:1, 4, 10)

"What is most noticeable in this letter is . . . the infrequency of the explanatory "for," which is always a dead giveaway that Paul is involved in heavy argumentation. Thus, there is not a single occurrence of one of the verbs for "salvation" in the letter . . . If this were the only Pauline letter to have survived, it would be well-nigh impossible to reconstruct his theology . . . the single most frequent word group in the letter is "joy," which comes as often by way of imperative . . . the concern here is with Christian experience, how to live in the face of suffering, not with correct "doctrine," as it were."
(Paul's Letter to the Philippians, NIC, Gordon Fee, pp. 20-21).

2. Themes include:
 - a) The greatness of Christ and his condescension (2:6-11)
 - b) The priority of Gospel preaching, despite the fact that some do it with wrong motives
 - c) Joy in the midst of suffering (Joy = quiet, inner conviction that God is in control, despite the circumstances), *chara*, “joy” occurs 5 times and *chairein*, “to rejoice” occurs 9 times
 - d) Unity for the sake of advancing the Gospel (this is an endearing letter of Christian harmony)

II. Paul’s Opening Greeting (1:1-2)

A. The Writer

1. “Paul and Timothy”
 - a) Though Paul includes Timothy, it is clear from the prolific use of the personal pronoun that Philippians comes from the hand and heart of Paul alone (conversely, compare Col. 1:1, 3).
 - b) It is likely that Paul used Timothy’s name as a gesture of their friendship and because Paul hoped to send Timothy to the Philippians in his name.
 - c) Timothy accompanied Paul at the time of this writing, but was not incarcerated with him (2:19-24).
 - d) The Philippians would have been familiar with Timothy, since he was with Paul when he first passed through Philippi some ten years earlier (cf., Acts 16:1-12. Timothy’s presence in Philippi is implied).
 - e) In seven of his thirteen letters, Paul includes his associates in the opening address (1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philemon, Colossians, and here), which indicates his strong sense of partnership in ministry (cf., 1:5).
2. “servants of Christ Jesus”
 - a) The word for servants is “*douloi*” and to the Greek mind this would have only meant “*slave*.” The word carries with it a sense of “belonging to another.”
 - b) Paul and Timothy were Christ’s slaves, bound to Him as servants to a master.
 - c) For the proud Philippian society, and ours, the title of “slave” is not an honorable one. But, lest we think it is a dishonor to be slaves to God, we should remember that Paul used the same word to describe Jesus’ incarnation (Philip. 2:7)! Moreover, the same term is used of Moses, Joshua, and David in the LXX (Neh. 10:29; Jos. 24:29; Ps. 89:20). Thus, it is an honor to be servants/slaves after the likeness of our Lord and His people.

B. The Recipients

1. “To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi”
 - a) “Saints” or *hagioi* (lit., “holy ones”) was a common designation for all believers in Paul’s letters (cf., Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:2). The expression goes back to OT times to indicate God’s chosen people of the Old Covenant (Ex. 19:6; Lev. 11:45) and carried over into the New Covenant (cf., 1 Pt. 2:9-10).
 - b) This is a comprehensive phrase intending to denote the entire Christian community in Philippi.
 - c) It is only “in Christ Jesus” that we find our holiness.
2. “together with the overseers and deacons”
 - a) Paul singles out the leadership of the Philippian church as well, probably because they had something to do with collection of the gifts sent to Paul delivered by Epaphroditus.
 - b) The primary duties of “overseers” were set out in Acts 20:28 (same group called “elders” in Acts 20:17; see also 1 Pt. 5:1-2).
 - c) It is significant that there were a plurality of overseers and deacons, as was true in all the churches (cf., Acts 14:23; 20:28; 1 Thess. 5:12-13; Heb. 13:17). Polycarp, writing some fifty years later to the Philippians, addresses the plurality of leadership in using “elders” *presbuteroi*. New Testament churches know nothing of a “senior pastor” model.

C. The Greeting

1. “Grace” is “the free, spontaneous, unmerited love of God to sinful humanity . . . reaching its consummate expression in the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Martin, *Philippians*, p. 60).

2. “Peace” is the “fruit of such gracious activity in the experience of sinners, and its main characteristic is reconciliation to God through Christ” (*ibid.*). There is no peace without first the reception of God’s marvelous grace. Hence, the Greek word order, “Grace to you, and peace” *χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη*.
3. Because “grace” and “peace” are theologically rich terms for Paul, he uses this formula frequently in his epistles (cf., 2 Corinthians; Romans; Philemon, and Ephesians).
4. Naturally, both grace and peace are “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”