

THE LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

Background

The city of Philippi was a Roman colony. It was established after the Roman conquest of Macedonia. In the first century Philippi was a leading city for its strategic position on the Egnatian Way, the main travel route connecting Italy and the West with Asian Minor and the East. In spite of a strong Roman influence, the city's religious life was quite diverse. It included monuments reflecting emperor worship, plus Greek gods and their Roman counterparts. There was a small Jewish community, but probably not a regular synagogue congregation which would have required ten men. Instead, several women met outside the city on the Sabbath for prayer (Acts 16:13).

The Church at Philippi

The Gospel came to Philippi sometime around 49 to 52 AD. On the Second Missionary Journey, Paul and Silas were "kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia" (Acts 16:6). They tried to go into Bithynia, "but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them" (Acts 16:7). They finally reached the coast at Troas, where Paul had a vision of a Macedonian begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9). Paul took this as God's call.

In Philippi, Paul and Silas met some women praying on the Sabbath at the river, led by Lydia, "a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshipper of God" (Acts 16:14). She welcomed Paul's message, was baptized with her household, and invited the missionaries into her home, where the tiny church began to grow. One day they were met by a slave girl who prophesied from an evil spirit. Finally Paul turned to her and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her." With their slave girl no longer able to prophecy, her owners had Paul and Silas flogged and thrown in prison for "throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice" (Acts 16:20-21). At midnight an earthquake opened the prison doors and the jailer was converted and baptized with his household in the middle of the night. At daylight, Paul and Silas were thrown out of town, but not before a church had been established.

Paul kept in touch with the Macedonian churches through Timothy (Acts 19:21-23; Philippians 2:19-20) and visited them probably during the autumn of 54-55 and again in the spring of 55-56 (Acts 20:1-3).

The church at Philippi provided financial and material support several times during Paul's journeys and they shared with Paul a "partnership in the gospel from the first day" (Philippians 1:5). Paul recalls, "In the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need" (4:15-16). The warm Letter to the Philippians is strong evidence to this deep love between the apostle and some of his dearest converts.

Date and Place of Composition

The letter to the Philippians was written by Paul when in prison about the year 57 (1:7, 13, 14), possibly in Ephesus during his third missionary journey (1:20-24, 30; 2:17). Even though there is no personal confirmation of an imprisonment in that city, Paul does refer to several imprisonments in 2 Corinthians 11:23.

Occasion and Purposes

Paul's concerns in writing this letter are to recommend to the Philippians Epaphroditus, who had come to help him in prison, but had fallen ill and was being sent home; to let the Philippians know about the current state of Paul's welfare; to prevent the Judaizers from persuading the Christians to submit to circumcision and to encourage the Philippian believers to solve their dissention and be united.

Through the letter, however, Paul provides the inspiration and encouragement of a friend, mentor, and fellow believer who finds Christ's strength and peace while struggling with opponents, anxiety, physical needs, and fear for his life. This letter is very relevant for us today because Paul shows how a Christian, an apostle, meets obstacles and overcomes them in Christ.

The Structure of the Letter

Greetings, Thanksgiving and Prayer: 1: 1-11

Personal News and Exhortations to Unity: 1:12-2:18

Travel Plans of Paul and His Collaborators 2:19-3:1

Dangers of False Teachers and the Need for Unity: 3:2- 4:9

Gratitude for the Philippians' Generosity 4:10-20

Farewell: 4:21-23

Themes of the Letter

Joy

Paul presents Christianity as a religion of joy and love in fact joy and rejoicing are frequent words in Philippians and they occur 14 times. Paul urges the Philippians "to rejoice in the Lord." 3:1

"In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy...." 1:4

"The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice...." 1:18

"But, even if I am poured out as a libation upon the sacrificial service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with all of you." 2:17-18

"But, even if I am poured out as a libation upon the sacrificial service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with all of you." 4:1

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" 4:4

For Paul, joy is a key component of the Christian life. It is not just a present joy in the midst of trials, but a joy that will reach its completion in the future Kingdom of God.

Fellowship

Fellowship is used often to describe relationship with God and with others in the Christian community.

Sometimes it is "participation, sharing," as in 3:10 "sharing his sufferings"; 1:5 "I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now."; "... All of you share in God's grace with me." 1:7

"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings....".

Unity and Selflessness

The Philippians have some dissention going on. In 1:15-17 Paul tells about Romans preaching with envy and rivalry in order to speak to the Philippians about the same issue in their midst. So he exhorts them: "Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel." "Stand firm in one spirit, with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel." 1:27. "Complete my joy by being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing.

Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for his own interests, but (also) everyone for those of others." 2:2-4

"Jesus' self-humiliation and exaltation by the Father used as an example of humility needed within the church." 2:5-11.

In Christ

One of the recurring phrases in Paul's letters is "in Christ" or "in the Lord", as we see it in Philippians. Paul centres all of the Christian life in Christ, as in 1:1 "To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi...." - 1:26 "Your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me" - 2:19 "I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon...."

2:24 "And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon." 2:29 "Welcome him in the Lord with great joy...." 3:1 "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord!"

3:14 "I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

4:7 "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

COLUMN

Paul in his own words

"I give thanks to my God at every remembrance of you, praying always with joy in my every prayer for all of you, because of your partnership for the gospel from the first day until now.

I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus.

It is right that I should think this way about all of you, because I hold you in my heart, you who are all partners with me in grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel.

For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus." 1 Philippians 1: 3-8

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