

CHAPTER 11

THE PRISON EPISTLES

(Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, Philippians)

Each of these four epistles states that it was written by Paul when he was a prisoner, or “in bonds” (Eph 3:1; 4:1; 6:20; Col 4:3, 10, 18; Phlm 1, 9, 10, 13, 23; Phil 1:7, 13-14). Therefore they are referred to as the Prison Epistles. Another title is the Christological Epistles, since they emphasize the person of Christ.

The author of these epistles is said to be the Apostle Paul. Generally, NT critics agree that Paul wrote Colossians, Philemon, and Philippians. Many critics dispute Paul’s authorship of Ephesians, dating the book at the end of the first century.

Place of Paul’s imprisonment

There are three major suggestions for the identity of the place from which Paul wrote the Prison Epistles.

1) Ephesus, A.D. 51-53

There is no explicit mention in the NT of an imprisonment in Ephesus, although he was often in prison (2 Cor 11:23). Some passages in his epistles suggest that he had serious troubles during his time in Ephesus (1 Cor 4:9-13; 15:32; 2 Cor 1:8; 4:7-12; 6:4-5). The closer proximity of Ephesus to the recipients of the Prison Epistles is an argument in its favor. However, this view lacks substantial historical evidence (it is mentioned in the Marcionite prologue to Colossians). Kümmel (*Introduction to the NT*, pp. 324-32) maintains that Paul probably wrote Philippians from Ephesus, but not the other epistles.

2) Caesarea, A.D. 54-56

Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea for two years, during the rule of Felix (Acts 23-26). However, Paul does not mention Philip in his greetings (Acts 21:8; cf. Col 4:10-11), and it is unlikely that Onesimus the slave would have sought refuge there. Also the great degree of freedom Paul had in preaching during that imprisonment (Acts 28:30-31; Phil 1:12-13) does not correspond with the limited audience in Caesarea (Acts 24:23).

3) Rome, A.D. 57-59

This is the traditional view, as noted by the subscripts in MSS K and L (9th and 8th centuries). The circumstances in the epistles match best with the conditions of Paul's first Roman imprisonment, as described in Acts. This is especially true for the list of Paul's companions. Most scholars favor this solution.

Relations of the Prison Epistles

There are several features that bind three of these epistles together. Philippians, while also written from prison, stands somewhat separate from the others.

Ephesians—Colossians

Great overlap of material: Ephesians has 155 verses; 78 of them are nearly exactly duplicated in Colossians

Same messenger: Tychicus (Eph 6:21; Col 4:7)

Possible reference to Ephesians in Col 4:16

Colossians—Philemon

Same messengers: Tychicus (Col 4:7) & Onesimus (Col 4:9 & Phlm 10, 12)

Same people send greetings: Aristarchus, Mark, Epaphras, Luke, Demas

Same people mentioned: Timothy (with Paul), Archippus (in Colossae)

Philemon—Philippians

Expectation of release (Phlm 22)

Expectation of release soon (Phil 2:24)

Ephesians

Authorship of Ephesians

Claim of the epistle: written by Paul (1:1; 3:1)

Arguments against Pauline authorship considered

- a) 42 words used in Ephesians alone; but same phenomenon with other epistles
- b) Words used with different meanings (e.g., mystery, dispensation, possession); appropriate for a more general epistle
- c) “Holy apostles and prophets” (3:5) implies second generation (2:20; 3:5; 4:11); but cf. 1:1 with 3:1, 8
- d) Absence of personal greetings; but appears to be a circular letter, appropriate for many congregations
- e) Universal conception of the church (1:22-23; 3:21); but cf. Matt 16:18; Acts 20:28; 1 Cor 12:28; 15:9; Gal 1:13; Col 1:18, 24
- f) Similarities to 1 Peter, Hebrews, Revelation; but 1 Peter may have used Ephesians, and similarities to Hebrews and Revelation due to common belief

Arguments favoring Pauline authorship

- a) Statement of the text
- b) Strong external evidence of tradition
- c) Pauline style evident in Ephesians
- d) Very similar to Colossians, can be argument for common authorship, especially if Ephesians a circular letter

For a recent defense of the Pauline authorship of Ephesians, with a discussion of opposing views, see F. F. Bruce, *NIC on Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians* (rev. ed., 1984, pp. 237-40).

Destination of Ephesians

Most Greek manuscripts at Eph 1:1 read “to the saints who are in Ephesus and the faithful ones in Christ Jesus.” Several of the oldest MSS leave out “in Ephesus,” and read, “to the saints, who are also faithful in Christ Jesus” (p⁴⁶ & B, *al.*), and this reading is attested by some early writers; the UBS hesitantly prefers this shorter reading, with a {C} rating. In this latter case, the name could have been inserted according to whatever church was reading the letter, or simply left out. The heretic Marcion’s canon lists the NT books he approved; that list omits Ephesians, but includes “To the Laodiceans.”

Ephesians appears to be a circular letter:

- Paul knows them by report (1:15; 4:21)
- They know Paul by report (3:2-4)
- No term of endearment (6:10, “my brothers” not in original Greek, only Byzantine text)
- No personal greetings
- Benediction in third person, not second as always elsewhere (6:23-24)
- Circular letters not uncommon (2 Cor 1:1; Rev 1:4)

If Ephesians was a circular letter to the churches in Asia around Ephesus, then it might have followed a route similar to that followed by Revelation (ch. 2-3). This route was the great Roman-Asian mail route (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea; cf. William Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor*, 1904). If Ephesians was read in Laodicea, it may be the same as the “letter from Laodicea” mentioned in Col 4:16. We note that Tychicus was to bring both letters (Ephesians and Colossians), and that would fit with Ephesians being a circular letter.

Background of the Ephesian churches

- 1) Briefly visited by Paul at end of second missionary journey
- 2) Aquila and Priscilla lived there for a while after Paul’s visit, taught Apollos (Acts 18)
- 3) Paul stayed there 2½ years on third missionary journey (Acts 19)
- 4) Great success under Paul’s ministry, gospel spread throughout Asia from base in Ephesus (Acts 19:10, 20 [stadium episode])
- 5) Paul left for Macedonia and Corinth, addressed the Ephesian elders briefly in Miletus, on way back to Jerusalem (Acts 20)

- 6) During Paul's first Roman imprisonment, wrote Ephesians
- 7) Later, Timothy the pastor in Ephesus (1 Tim 1:3)
- 8) Paul called for Timothy to come to him during Paul's second Roman imprisonment (2 Tim 4:9)
- 9) Later, Apostle John lived there, wrote his gospel and epistles

Points of interest in Ephesians

- Most solemn and liturgical epistle
- Called "the Epistle of the Ascension" (1:20-23; 2:6)
- Great predestination chapter (ch. 1)
- Two long sentences (1:3-14, 15-23)
- Two prayers (1:16-23; 3:14-21)
- Dispensational mystery (3:1-12)
- Unity of believers (4:1-16)
- Family relations (5:22 - 6:9)
- The Christian's armor (6:10-20; cf. William Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armour*, 1655-62, 1189 pages! This book was a special blessing to John Newton.)

Outline of Ephesians

Salutation, 1:1-2

- I. Doctrinal portion: Christ the head of the church, 1:3 - ch. 3

The book divides into two major sections. The first is primarily doctrinal, the second practical. The first shows the exaltation of Christ as the key to God's plan of redemption, and as the head of the church. Christ makes salvation available to all, on the condition of faith alone. The church itself is the mystery, in its new form as containing both Jews and Gentiles on an equal footing. Paul's ministry is to be God's tool, bringing the Gentiles into the covenant people of God.

1. Praise to God for his plan of salvation, 1:3-14

This is one sentence in Greek. Paul praises God for blessing us spiritually in Christ. God has ordained all things that happen (v. 11). He chose and predestined his people. He ordained Christ to be our Redeemer. Christ bought us through his blood, thus obtaining forgiveness for us. The Holy Spirit has brought us to Christ and has given us spiritual wisdom. This plan is God's "mystery" (v. 9), which will be more explained in ch. 3. The Holy Spirit is our seal, our down payment guaranteeing our inheritance. We now await glory with God. God does all this in order to glorify himself (v. 12).

2. Prayer for the Ephesians, 1:15-23

This is another sentence in Greek. Paul thanks God for his grace shown to the Ephesians in saving them. He prays that God will sanctify them. The power that raised Jesus from the dead and elevated him above all other spiritual powers, is the same power that is working in the hearts and lives of the believers.

Jesus is now highly exalted, and made the head of all things, especially in the church. The church is the body of Christ, that which makes him complete as our Redeemer.

3. God's power in the salvation of the Gentiles, ch. 2

As the Jews, the Gentiles were dead in sins before they were saved. They were controlled by sinful lusts and desires. But God mercifully brought them from death to life, and elevated them spiritually to the heavenly realms with Christ. This salvation is totally by God's grace; its source is God, not the sinner. God wants it this way so that he will receive all the glory.

Since the Gentiles were apart from the covenants and promises, their salvation is most astounding. They now are fellow heirs with the Israelites, and are one body with them, "one new man" (v. 15). The cross of Christ has broken down the wall that divided them. Together we are a building that God is making, a holy temple to God's glory.

4. Paul's place in the mystery of God, 3:1-13

Paul begins a second prayer of intercession for them in v. 1; he interrupts himself in v. 2, and resumes the prayer in v. 14. What causes the interruption is his reference to himself as "the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles." This causes him to embark on an explanation of his place in the mystery of God, the bringing of the Gentiles as equals into the church.

This understanding of the church as being both Jew and Gentile, without the Gentiles becoming Jewish proselytes, was unknown in OT times, even in earlier NT times. Paul was the primary one to whom God revealed this truth, along with

other “holy apostles and prophets.” This is the mystery, a truth unknown before but now revealed. Gentiles and Jews are now equal, one body in the church; they share the same promises (v. 6). As the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul was crucial in the working out of this mystery.

5. Second prayer for the Ephesians, 3:14-19

Paul resumes his prayer suspended in v. 1. He prays with highly exalted language that the Gentile believers would appreciate and experience God’s great plan and purpose for them, the “width, length, height, and depth of the love of Christ.”

6. Doxology to God, 3:20-21

This doxology concludes the doctrinal section. It praises God for his work in the church, especially the power of his work in transforming the Gentiles.

II. Practical section: living as “one new man,” ch. 4 - 6:20

Since the church members are now included in one body with all the covenant people of God, and share in the gift of the Spirit, their lives will reflect God’s work. Paul’s exhortations to them are a means God uses to bring this about.

1. Unity of the body, 4:1-16

The mystery teaches that we are one body; therefore, we need to live as one body, “humble, gentle, patient” (v. 2). We have a common Spirit, a common Lord, a common confession.

The Lord Jesus, in his coming to earth and conquering the devil, has now obtained rewards to distribute to his saints (Paul quotes Ps. 68:18). These are spiritual gifts, which are to be used to produce unity and growth of the whole body. We thus speak to each other to edify, strengthen, and build up each other and the whole church. We are thus one body, with Christ as the head.

2. The Christian walk, 4:17 - 5:20

The Gentile Christians must now put off all the wicked works and attitudes of their unsaved past. These sins include evil speaking, evil deeds, evil desires. These are to be replaced with godly characteristics (5:1, “Be imitators of God”). The new life is compared to light from darkness, being awake from being asleep. Instead of being drunk with wine, they are to be filled with the Holy Spirit, especially revealed in the OT Wisdom literature.

3. Social relations, 5:21 - 6:9

The Christian's true nature is revealed most clearly in his day-to-day relationships, especially within the family. Paul introduces this section with the general command, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (5:21). Then follows the household code, often called in German *die Haustafeln*.

In a classic passage (5:22-33) Paul spells out the duties of husbands and wives: wives obey husbands, husbands love wives. He compares them to Christ and the church.

The following paragraphs spell out the proper relations there should be between children and parents (6:1-4) and slaves and masters (6:5-9). Paul does not preach social revolution, but rather proper submission and consideration. He seeks for us to "Christianize" our associations and relationships.

4. The Christian's armor, 6:10-20

Paul concludes the practical section of Ephesians by warning and preparing the Christians to stand against the devil's attacks. Since Paul was at the time chained to a Roman soldier, he had an illustration ready at hand. He compares our spiritual protection and weapons to the armor of the soldier. He concludes with a request for prayer, for them and for himself, that he would be faithful to "fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel" (v. 19).

Conclusion to the epistle, 6:21-24

Paul tells them that Tychicus will be bringing this epistle and encouraging them further. He closes with a benediction.

Colossians

The Colossian church

Colossae was one of three towns in the Lycus Valley in the province of Asia (Laodicea, Colossae, and Hierapolis) located between the churches of southern Galatia and those in and around Ephesus. Paul may have traveled through these towns on his second and third missionary journeys (cf. Acts 16:6-8; 18:23; 19:1), and may have founded the churches there. But it appears more likely that he had not been there personally (Col 2:1), and that the churches in the Valley were founded by others, perhaps converts from his ministry in Ephesus. We especially note Epaphras, their pastor (Col 1:7; 4:12-13); Philemon, one of their lay leaders (Phlm 1-2, cf. 19); and Archippus, probably the son of Philemon and leader of the church in the absence of Epaphras (Col 4:17; Phlm 2).

The “Colossian heresy”

The book of Colossians primarily is concerned with bringing the people back to simple faith in Christ and Christian brotherly love. They had been led astray to some extent by false teachers who promised great new insights into an advanced Christian understanding and life. This mix of beliefs and practices has been called “the Colossian heresy,” because in this book Paul mentions these false tendencies:

- 1) Jewish element: circumcision, food laws, new moons, Sabbaths, etc. (2:11-16)
- 2) Ascetic element: denial of bodily needs and pleasures (2:20-23)
- 3) Speculative element: special knowledge, angels, mystical experiences, etc. (2:8, 18)

These elements can all be found in various Jewish mystical movements of the day. They are found in the Essene movement, in the Qumran community by the Dead Sea, and in the so-called *merkabah* mysticism practiced by Jewish groups. Apparently, these teachings were affecting the members of the Colossian church, and Paul needed to warn them accordingly. Some writers have maintained that these beliefs were not prominent until Gnosticism came to the fore in the second century, demanding a later date for Colossians; but this evidence of Jewish beliefs during the first century makes this late date unnecessary.

Circumstances of writing

As Paul in prison wrote the circular letter Ephesians, he sent this letter of Colossians at the same time by the hand of the same messenger, Tychicus (Col 4:7-8; cf. Eph 6:21-22). Since Tychicus would be taking that circular letter to Laodicea, it would be convenient for him to deliver also the letter to Colossae. Along with Tychicus Paul sent Onesimus the runaway slave

back to his home in Colossae (Col 4:9). Onesimus also carried Paul's private letter to Philemon and the church in his house.

Points of interest in Colossians

- Deity of Christ (ch. 1)
- True reconciliation (1:20-23)
- Man-made rules (2:20-23)
- Family life (3:18 - 4:1)
- Mark restored to Paul (4:10)
- "Epistle from the Laodiceans" (4:16)

Outline of Colossians

Salutation, 1:1-2

I. Doctrinal section: Christ the head of the universe, 1:3 - 3:4

Just as Ephesians, which this book closely parallels, Colossians divides into two parts. While Ephesians emphasizes Christ as the head of the church, in Colossians the emphasis is even broader: Christ is the head of the whole universe, as well as of the church.

1. Person and work of Christ, 1:3-23

Paul immediately broaches the subject. The "Colossian heresy" apparently tended to reduce the importance of Jesus Christ both objectively in his person, and subjectively as the center of the Christian's faith. Paul begins by expressing how central Jesus is in all creation and in the church.

Paul gives thanks to God for the faith of the Colossians, news of which has reached him even in Rome, as Epaphras has reported to him. The gospel is doing its work in their midst, even as it is everywhere it is preached. Paul mentions the Holy Spirit only in verse 8, the only place in the book, since the emphasis is not to be on "spiritual experiences," but on simple trust and obedience to Christ. In his prayer for them Paul asks God to fill them with true understanding, the knowledge of Christ and his will. Basic Christian living is superior to all earthly attempts at wisdom.

Paul continues with a beautiful hymn in honor of Christ (vv. 15-20). Christ is exalted over all as God's agent of creation ("firstborn" in v. 15 means "the one having the primacy"), the one who holds the universe together; he is the head of the church; he is the one who reconciles us to God through his blood.

The believers have been reconciled by Christ to God; now we must be faithful to him and not seek another way.

2. Paul's ministry, 1:24 – 2:7

Having exalted Christ in his prayer and then in the hymn and exhortation, Paul turns his attention to his own ministry in more detail. He is the one that God entrusted the mystery to. This mystery is not something learned from the heretical teachers; rather, it comes through Paul's gospel, as God has revealed it to Paul. The mystery is Christ, in his corporate person, with all his glory and sufficiency; and the church as Christ's body, with Jew and Gentile as equal partners. Paul's ministry in bringing the gospel to the Gentiles, leading to the salvation of the Colossian Christians, is a part of his duty in administering this mystery. They need no more than the gospel.

Paul is concerned that the Colossians appreciate his ministry, and are not led away by false teachers. The Colossians must keep the official traditions they have been taught by the apostles.

3. The Colossian heresy dealt with, 2:8 – 3:4

By properly understanding and loving Jesus Christ, the Christian will be protected from this heresy. He will realize that this false teaching is only human tradition, and does not measure up to the dignity and power of Christ.

Jewish circumcision is nothing now, but we must be spiritually circumcised, spiritually baptized. Christ's death has freed us from all Jewish regulations, and has defeated all hostile spiritual powers in the universe. Therefore, we are free from all human commands for asceticism, external regulations, and concern about angels' worship. We are in Christ, a part of his body.

We have died with Christ; therefore, we are not concerned about external, nonmoral commands. We have been raised with Christ; therefore, we look by faith to him alone for salvation.

II. Practical section: living for Christ alone, 3:5 – 4:6

Instead of being worried about esoteric doctrines, we are to live normal Christian lives, "putting off" our sinful habits, and "putting on" our new way of life (3:8, 10).

The Colossians must put off their former sins, and even now the sins of the tongue, which especially afflict those who think they are “spiritually advanced.” They are to recognize their equality before the Lord.

They must put on a humble, gentle heart, not puffed up in pride. They must live together in humility and love, encouraging one another with spiritual songs from the Word of God.

The “house code” (*“die Haustafel”*; 3:18 – 4:1) discusses the duties of husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves; it is closely parallel to that of Ephesians. One noticeable difference is the increased emphasis here on the responsibilities of slaves, perhaps written because of what Onesimus had done.

Paul concludes the section with an exhortation to live alertly, both regarding their own fellowship, and their testimony to those outside.

III. Personal notes and conclusion, 4:7-18

Unlike Ephesians, Colossians is quite personal, with many individuals mentioned, both as sending and as receiving messages.

Paul introduces Tychicus to the Colossians, since he will be bearing the letter; and he mentions Onesimus, “who is one of you,” who will be returning to them. He includes greetings from his companions in prison in Rome (three Jews: Aristarchus, Barnabas’s cousin Mark, Jesus-Justus; three Gentiles: their pastor Epaphras, Luke the doctor, Demas). He then sends greetings to them and to the church in Laodicea, especially the house-church of Nympha (he tells the Colossians to exchange letters with the Laodiceans). He encourages Archippus, and concludes with his personally signed greeting and benediction.

Philemon

Paul's circumstances

Since Philemon is so closely linked to Colossians (see notes on introduction to the Prison Epistles), it is apparent that it was written at the same time. While some hold that it is more natural that Onesimus would flee to Ephesus, and Paul would visit Philemon from Ephesus, Ephesus being much closer than Rome, the bulk of evidence from the Prison Epistles as a group is still that they were written from Rome. Therefore, we date this epistle from Rome ca. AD 58.

Occasion and content of Philemon

Onesimus, a slave of Philemon, had escaped from his master and apparently had stolen from him in the process (vv. 11, 18). Onesimus made his way to Rome, where he met Paul. It would seem that Onesimus purposely met Paul there. Paul won him to the Lord (v. 10); and Onesimus served Paul during his imprisonment (v. 11). Onesimus has now repented of his sin, and desires to return to his master. Normally harsh punishments awaited runaway slaves (OT law was more humane; cf. Deut 23:15-16). So Paul writes this letter to ask Philemon to receive him graciously and to forgive his offense (vv. 17-18). Some suggest that Paul even is hinting that Philemon send Onesimus back to help Paul (vv. 13-14). Since Paul was already sending Tychicus with the letter to the Colossians, it was an appropriate time to send Onesimus with him (Col 4:7-9).

The letter itself shows great tact, warmth, and skill. Philemon was a leader of the Colossian church, which met in his house (v. 2). He had shown Christian love and charity, which had blessed the saints before (vv. 4-7). Paul now calls upon him to exercise this gracious quality in an even greater way by receiving back Onesimus (cf. vv. 17-21; note the phrase “refresh my heart”). Paul assumes responsibility for any debt Onesimus incurred with a handwritten IOU (v. 19); but he gently reminds Philemon of his debt to Paul for bringing him the gospel.

In addition, Paul plans to visit Colossae when he is released, perhaps because of his concern about the Colossian heresy and about his own reputation in Asia (cf. 2 Tim 1:15). This letter asks Philemon to prepare lodging for Paul (v. 22).

Paul and slavery

Paul in his epistles does not seek to overthrow the institution of slavery, rather to “Christianize” it. He tells slaves to remain and serve God in that office, and masters to treat slaves with consideration (1 Cor 7:20-24; Eph 6:5-9; Col 3:22 - 4:1). Thus he sends Onesimus back (Phlm 12), yet at the same time elevates his standing with Philemon as “not only a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother” (v. 16). Onesimus is to be loved and respected because

he is a man, and a Christian brother (v. 16). This attitude between slaves and masters was revolutionary in the Roman Empire.

General Christian principles worked themselves out in society, as it became more apparent that the institution of slavery, as practiced in most nations, denied the image of God in man and the equality of believers before the Lord. For one thing, it was difficult for slaves of unsympathetic masters to fulfill their Christian duties in the church, and even in their own families. Often Christian masters would manumit their slaves (cf. 1 Cor 7:20-23, esp. 21). Thus the book of Philemon, while promoting the duties of Christians who found themselves to be slaves, at the same time provided the moral ground for the eventual elimination of slavery in nations influenced by Christianity.

[For an excellent study on slavery conditions in NT times, see K. R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire* (Oxford, 1984). For a good discussion showing how Paul's letter to Philemon agrees with the anti-slavery position, see John W. Robbins, *Slavery and Christianity* (1982).]

Philippians

The Philippian church

Philippi was located in Macedonia on the Egnatian Way (as was Thessalonica). It was a Roman colony (Acts 16:12), which meant that its citizens were automatically citizens of Rome. Paul taps into that pride of citizenship in his epistle (verb form in 1:27; noun form in 3:20).

Paul founded the Philippian church on his second missionary journey, and it was his first church in Europe (Acts 16:11-40). Perhaps Luke was left there to encourage the church (no “we-section” between Acts 16 and 20:4, where Paul passes through Philippi on his way to Jerusalem). Paul visited Philippi twice on this third missionary journey (Acts 20:1-6).

The Philippians were some of Paul’s most faithful supporters. They sent offerings to him twice when he ministered in Thessalonica, and once when he ministered in Corinth (2 Cor 11:9; Phil 4:15-16). In addition, they gave sacrificially for Paul’s Jerusalem offering; they did this in spite of their own poverty and persecutions; Roman civil war and taxation had taken a heavy toll in that region (1 Cor 16:1-6; 2 Cor 8:1-5; cf. comments in commentaries on 2 Cor: Plummer *ICC*, p. 233; Hodge, pp. 193-94). And now, while Paul is in prison in Rome, they give again generously to him (Phil 4:14-19).

Authorship and unity of Philippians

Generally today critics recognize Philippians as Pauline. In the past some have attacked the book as presenting views of church government (“bishops and deacons”) and of the person of Christ, along with arguments concerning language, which fit better with a later date. These objections, however, are overcome by the statement of the text itself, the strong evidence from the church fathers, the warm, natural Pauline style of the book, and its historical tie-ins with Acts and the other Prison Epistles.

Some have questioned the unity of the book. Polycarp, in his epistle to the Philippians (ca. AD 150) says that Paul, “when absent from you, wrote you letters” (*Php.* ch. 3, *ANF* 1:33); did Paul write two letters to them? Some, noting the break at 3:2 suggest that our Philippians is a composite of two letters:

Letter 1 Phil ch. 1 – 3:1, and 4:21-23

Letter 2 Phil 3:2 – 4:20

However, this division of the book seems forced. Polycarp’s statement can be explained by either a non-canonical letter being written in addition to Philippians, or by understanding Polycarp’s statement as referring to a single letter, or to other canonical letters (as is done in the footnote in *ANF* 1:33, n. 22).

Circumstances and time of writing

Evidence in the book itself gives the following set of circumstances:

- 1) Paul is in prison in Rome (1:7, 13-14)
- 2) News of Paul's imprisonment reaches Philippi
- 3) The Philippians send Epaphroditus to Paul with an offering; Epaphroditus is to help Paul while he is in prison (4:14, 18)
- 4) While at Rome, Epaphroditus gets very sick; news of his illness reaches Philippi (2:25-27)
- 5) The Christians in Philippi are concerned; they do not want Epaphroditus to be a burden to Paul; news about their attitude and concern reaches Epaphroditus back in Rome (2:26, 30)
- 6) Epaphroditus' health has improved, and Paul now sends him back to Philippi with this letter, to assure a kind reception for him (2:28-30), and to thank them for their gift (4:14-19)
- 7) Paul plans to send Timothy soon to them with more news, and he even expects to be released soon himself to visit them personally (2:19-24)

Since Paul expects to be released soon, and since these time-consuming activities and journeys have already transpired since Paul has been in prison, we conclude that this letter was written near the end of his first Roman imprisonment, ca. A.D. 59.

Points of interest in Philippians

- Emphasis on joy and rejoicing (1:4, 18, 25, 26; 2:2, 17, 18, 29; 3:1; 4:1, 4, 10)
- No rebukes (except perhaps 4:2)
- Church government: bishops and deacons (1:1)
- Sanctification a sure thing (1:6)
- Heavenly citizenship (1:27, πολιτεύομαι *politeuomai*, "live as a citizen," from πολιτεία *politeia*, "citizenship"; 3:20, πολίτευμα *politeuma*, another word for "citizenship")
- Christian servant in life and death (1:20-26)

- *Kenosis* passage (2:5-11; v. 7, ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν *heauton ekenosen*, “himself he emptied”)
- Strong criticisms of false teachers (3:2, 17-19)
- The Christian’s peace (4:6-7)
- The Christian’s thoughts (4:8)
- The Christian’s strength (4:12-13)

Outline of Philippians

Salutation, 1:1-2

I. Paul’s situation in Rome, 1:3-30

Paul thanks God for the fellowship the Philippians have with him even while he is in prison. God’s providence and power are shown by the way the gospel is progressing, even because of Paul’s imprisonment. Even Paul’s personal enemies are spreading the gospel in their own way. In this Paul finds reason to rejoice. While he does not fear death, desiring to be with Christ, he believes that God has more work for him to do.

II. Godly humility, 2:1-18

Paul encourages the church members to have a tolerant and loving attitude toward each other (cf. the problem in 4:2). Using a beautiful Christian hymn, he gives the example of Jesus, who humbled himself, even to death, not insisting on his prerogatives as the Son of God; as a result, God has highly exalted him as the Messiah and Lord of the universe.

This famous *kenosis* passage (2:6-11) does not teach that Jesus gave up his deity, but rather, the privileges of his deity. He did not treat his position as “something to be held onto”—ἄρπαγμός *harpagmos*, translated “robbery” in KJV, better as “a thing to be grasped” in NIV.

In the same way, we should humble ourselves, and live as an offering to God.

III. Paul’s companions, 2:19-30

Paul commends two men to the Philippians: Timothy and Epaphroditus. Timothy is his own “son,” and Paul is sending him to bless them. Epaphroditus, the Philippians’ messenger, has been an outstanding example of Christian sacrifice and service; he came close to death to supply the service they could not. They

should be proud of his ministry to Paul, not ashamed of his sickness. They should grant him a worthy reception when he returns to Philippi.

IV. The Christian life, ch. 3 – 4:9

Paul encourages the Philippians to press on to Christian maturity and holiness. He himself has given up that which the world admires; he has cast it away as nothing. His one desire is to obtain that which Christ desires for him. The Philippians are to follow his example.

On the practical level, they should help each other (Euodia and Syntyche are to stop fighting, 4:2), always be rejoicing in the Lord, trusting in him in times of anxiety, and thinking godly thoughts. In this way they will receive God's peace, which passes understanding.

V. Thanks to the church, and conclusion, 4:10-23

Paul thanks the Philippians again for their generosity in sending Epaphroditus and the gift. Although God supplies all his needs, and Paul can rejoice in all situations, yet it is good to receive their gift. God, in turn, will bless the church at Philippi.

Paul sends greetings, even from members of Caesar's household (4:22). The gospel is indeed making progress in Rome! He closes with the same benediction he wrote to Philemon.