

PHILIPPIANS INTRODUCTION

[these notes taken mostly from notes in the Life and Epistles of Paul]

Background from the book of Acts

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 (1:27; 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; Php. 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 again, while Paul was in prison in Rome, they gave again generously to him (Php. 4:14-19).

Second missionary journey details

[in Philippi late summer of AD 49]

Paul, Silas, and Timothy came to the corner of Asia Minor, the city of Troas, a prominent commercial center. Instead of working in Asia, Paul was to jump ahead in his plan and establish churches in Europe, in Macedonia and Achaia. On the third missionary journey he would be allowed to spend time in Ephesus. Apparently here in Troas Paul was joined by Luke the doctor, because a “we-section” begins at this point in Acts and continues until the party leaves Philippi in Macedonia.

At night the Lord gave Paul the famous vision of the man from Macedonia, who said, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” Thus Paul received from the Lord two *no*’s and one *yes*.

In this way he was led to bring the gospel into Europe—a momentous step in the history of the church.

With a good wind, it normally took only two days to sail to Macedonia (Acts 16:11; with a contrary wind, it took five days, Acts 20:6).

After landing at the port city of Neapolis, Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke traveled to Philippi, which Luke describes as “a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia” (Acts 16:12; some suggest this was Luke’s home town, since he stayed behind here and seems to have civic pride).

In Philippi Paul followed his custom to speak first to the Jews; but since there were not sufficient Jewish men for a synagogue there, they met by the river as a place of prayer; women are mentioned specifically (Acts 16:13). Lydia, a prominent businesswoman (Thyatira was known for selling purple material), was converted, and entertained the missionaries in her home. Note Luke’s “Calvinistic” view of her salvation: “whose heart the Lord opened” (v. 14). Other women converted in Philippi may include Euodia, Syntyche, and perhaps Syzygus (if a proper name; Php. 4:2-3). It has been pointed out that Macedonian culture allowed more prominence to women than many other parts of the empire.

After healing the demon-possessed girl, Paul and Silas roused the hatred of her pagan owners and were beaten with rods (cf. 2 Cor. 11:25) and thrown in jail with their legs in the stocks. Paul later wrote of this experience as “shameful treatment” (1 Thess. 2:2; cf. Php. 1:30). Their cheerful testimony under trial convicted the jailer, who was saved after the miraculous earthquake. As Lydia had done, so the jailer had all his family baptized immediately; this was a sign of continuity with the covenant sign in the Old Testament, here given to Gentiles, one who had been a Jewish proselyte, the other a pagan.

The little church in Philippi was to be one of Paul’s favorites, and was to care for him through the coming years (cf. 1 Thess. 2:2; 2 Cor. 8:1-5; Php. 4:10-19).

Third missionary journey details

[in Philippi fall AD 53 and spring AD 54]

Paul planned to visit Macedonia and Achaia after his ministry in Ephesus. He would be able to see how the Corinthian church was reacting to his strong letters to them. Not only that, but he could complete personally the offering he was collecting for the church in Jerusalem. He planned to winter in Corinth, and to either send or take the offering back to Jerusalem. If he were to send the offering, then he himself would be free to continue his missionary journey to Rome (Acts 19:21; 1 Cor. 16:3-7).

As time went on in Ephesus, Paul was more and more concerned about the Corinthian church. It is possible that Timothy returned to Paul in Ephesus, saying that the initial reception of 1 Corinthians was not too good (cf. Goodwin, App. 9). Paul sent Titus and an unnamed

“brother” to see how the church fared and to report back (2 Cor. 12:17-18). They were to return to Ephesus by traveling through Macedonia.

Paul could no longer maintain his patience to hear from Titus, so he set out in the fall of AD 53 to meet him in Troas or Macedonia (Acts 20:1; 2 Cor. 2:12-13). Probably Timothy traveled with him (cf. 2 Cor. 1:1). In Troas he preached effectively, but his concern to meet Titus caused him to go on into Macedonia.

While in Macedonia Paul preached effectively in the churches. Even though they were poor at the time, these churches contributed generously to Paul’s collection; they also sent representatives to accompany Paul on to Corinth and then to Jerusalem (Acts 20:4; 2 Cor. 8:1-5; 9:4).

In spite of his good reception in Macedonia, Paul was still worried about the church in Corinth. Finally Titus arrived and brought a good report about the church. This greatly refreshed Paul’s spirit (2 Cor. 7:5-7, 13-16). In this happy time he wrote 2 Corinthians, sending it ahead with Titus and two other men (2 Cor. 8:16-24; 9:5).

It is possible that at this time Paul managed to go further west than Macedonia and preach in Illyricum (Rom. 15:19-20). “Round about” to Illyricum indicates Paul’s strategy of evangelizing the main centers of population all around the Mediterranean Sea, the “Roman lake.”

Arriving in Achaia near the end of AD 53, according to our chronology, Paul remained there three months (Acts 20:2-3). During this time he enjoyed the fellowship of the church, which had now received his rebukes and instructions and had reaffirmed its love for him. This fellowship would have been enhanced by all the representatives from the different churches that were staying along with Paul in Corinth.

While in Corinth, Paul wrote to the church in Rome, which he had never yet seen. That church seems to have been large even then, having started perhaps as early as the year of Peter’s Pentecost sermon (cf. Acts 2:10; note number of people in Rom. 16). By this time Paul had decided to personally take the offering to Jerusalem, and then to visit Rome, and beyond them, to Spain (Rom. 15:23-26).

When the spring of AD 54 arrived, Paul was able to travel to take the offering to Jerusalem. He desired to hurry, in order to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the feast of Pentecost (Acts 20:16). He had planned first to sail directly to Syria (the province included both Antioch and Jerusalem), but a Jewish plot to kill him interfered; instead, he traveled overland back through Macedonia (Acts 20:3).

In Philippi Paul met Luke, who, according to the “we-section” of Acts, stayed with him all the way back to Jerusalem (from Acts 20:5 through 21:18). They were in Philippi during the days of the Jewish Passover (Acts 20:6). Fifty days later it would be Pentecost.

Going against the wind it took five days to sail from Macedonia to Troas. They stayed there seven days. Then it was Sunday, when the Christian celebrated the Lord's Supper (Acts 20:6-7).

One piece of evidence for the Pauline chronology is this fact: that the Passover Paul spent in Philippi was eleven days before Sunday, i.e., on a Thursday. Ramsay has discussed this at some length (*Pauline and Other Studies*, 1906), and the argument has been refined by C. H. Turner ("Chronology of the NT," *HDB*). Nisan 14 (Passover) could have been on a Thursday in AD 54, 56, and 57; it probably would not have been in AD 55, 58, or 59. Our chronology places this Passover in AD 54, which is agreeable to this evidence.

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 *Php.* ch. 1 - 3:1, and 4:21-23

Letter 2 *Php.* 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. AD 59.

Points of interest in Philippians

- 1) emphasis on joy and rejoicing (1:4, 18, 25, 26; 2:2, 17, 18, 29; 3:1; 4:1, 4, 10)
- 2) no rebukes (except perhaps 4:2)
- 3) church government: bishops and deacons (1:1)
- 4) sanctification a sure thing (1:6)
- 5) heavenly citizenship (1:27, πολιτεύομαι *politeuomai*, “live as a citizen,” from πολιτεία *politeia*, “citizenship”; 3:20, πολίτευμα *politeuma*, another word for “citizenship”)
- 6) Christian servant in life and death (1:20-26)
- 7) *kenosis* passage (2:5-11; v. 7, ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν *heauton ekenosen*, “himself he emptied”)
- 8) strong warnings (3:2, 17-19)
- 9) the Christian's peace (4:6-7)
- 10) the Christian's thoughts (4:8)

11) 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."

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.