

Wednesday Bible Study
Philippians 1

INTRODUCTION: This letter was written to the church in Philippi — a city in Macedonia — to the first church founded in Europe. To understand the theological content of the letter, it is vital to be immersed in the historical, cultural, literary, and biblical context.

A. Authorship — Paul (singular personal pronouns six times)

Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus ... Philippians 1:1a, NASB

B. Location of the letter's origin

NOTE: Based on the textual evidence, four locations are considered — Rome, Ephesus, Corinth, or Caesarea — here are some things to consider ...

1. Paul was in chains at the time (1:7, 13, 17)
2. Paul faced a trial that could end in death (1:20; 2:17) or acquittal (1:25; 2:24)
3. There was a Praetorium where he was held (1:13) and members of Caesar's household were present (4:22)
4. Timothy was with Paul when writing this letter (1:1; 2:19-23)
5. Extensive, evangelistic efforts were going on around him (1:14-17)
6. Paul planned to visit Philippi when acquitted (2:24)
7. Several trips back and forth were made by different people during this writing

QUESTION: What location best fits the biblical and historical context?

Rome

- Oldest and longest held view (since 2nd century A.D.)
- Paul was a prisoner in Rome under house arrest for at least two years and was allowed to receive house guests (see Acts 28:30)
- He was free to preach the gospel (see Acts 28:31)
- Caesar's household was present **BUT ...**
- Distance between Philippi and Rome would have made multiple trips by companions very challenging
- There was no indication that Timothy was with Paul in Rome
- Paul's intent was to visit Philippi, but earlier plan was to quit the East and focus on the West (see Romans 15:24-28)

Ephesus

- Modern scholarship makes this suggestion
- There is a reference to the Praetorium — any provincial governor
- Timothy was with Paul in Ephesus (see Acts 19:22)
- Distance between Ephesus and Philippi is minimal allowing for frequent trips by companions
- Extensive, evangelistic activity took place in this area (see Acts 19:10) **BUT ...**
- Paul refers to being imprisoned several times, yet Ephesus is NEVER mentioned
- Nothing is said about the “collection for the poor in Jerusalem” which was important during his Ephesian stay and for Paul to accept gifts for himself is inconceivable
- The church in the city he wrote from was divided (see Philippians 1:15-17) but this was not the case in Ephesus
- Paul speaks harshly about Christians around him, except Timothy — this is strange since Priscilla and Aquila were with him (friends) in Ephesus

Corinth

- Close proximity (closer than Ephesus) to Philippi
- Proconsul in Corinth (see Acts 18:12) and Praetorium/household of Caesar were present
- There was severe opposition faced in Corinth, even mortal danger, that could lead to an imprisonment, but the same objections raised against Ephesus are raised here

Caesarea

- This proposal was suggested later in life, but harmonizes well with the facts
- Luke states that Paul was in prison in Caesarea in Praetorium of Herod (see Acts 23:35)
- This was a long imprisonment (see Acts 24:27) allowing time for several communications
- Paul was in custody, but friends were given visitation rights and brought gifts (see Acts 24:23; Philippians 2:25-30)
- Philippians 1:7 indicates that Paul was given a hearing and made his defense while still in prison which lines up with Acts 24:1-27
- Paul was confident he would be released and a visit to Philippi, which would have been on his way West (Romans 1:13-15) from Caesarea, would have been possible
- Objections are few, making this the most probably location

C. Date the letter was written — between A.D. 58-60 with a Caesarea location

D. The recipients of the letter — believers in Philippi

*To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons ...
Philippians 1:1b, NASB*

1. The city of Philippi
 - a. Strategic location with a rich heritage
 - b. The Egnatian Way — trade route going to Rome — passed through Philippi (gospel route)
 - c. Roman colony/province settled by soldiers following major battles
 - d. Culture/religion shaped by Roman way — worship of Roman emperor prominent

NOTE: Declaring “Jesus as Lord,” and noting primary citizenship resides in heaven, would go against the “Roman Way”

¹¹ and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2:11, NASB

²⁰ For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ ... Philippians 3:20, NASB

- e. People took pride in their Roman citizenship, yet Paul reminds them of their heavenly citizenship (Phil. 1:27; 3:20)

²¹ and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans.” Acts 16:21, NASB

- f. Leading city of Macedonia

¹² and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia, a Roman colony; and we were staying in this city for some days. Acts 16:12, NASB

- g. Diverse city — Roman and Greeks, Latin & Greek, Men & Women

2. The Church in Philippi

- a. The origins — Vision (Acts 16:9-12)
- b. The origins — First Converts (Acts 16:13-15)
 - i. Ministry didn’t start in the synagogue (see Acts 14:1) but outside the city gate, by the river, where women (God-fearers) gathered to pray
 - ii. First convert — wealthy merchant Lydia and household and possibly a slave girl (Acts 16:16-19)
- c. The growth and expansion

READ: Acts 16:22-34

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d. The location of the gathering — Lydia’s house

⁴⁰ They went out of the prison and entered the house of Lydia, and when they saw the brethren, they encouraged them and departed. Acts 16:40, NASB

e. Affectionate and generous church

⁵ in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. Philippians 1:5, NASB

¹⁵ You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; ¹⁶ for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs. Philippians 4:15-16, NASB

Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, ² that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. ³ For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, ⁴ begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, ⁵ and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God. 2 Corinthians 8:1-5, NASB

E. The Reason for the Letter

1. Exhort the church to “stand firm” and “contend for the gospel” in the midst of opposition and suffering (Philippians 1:27-30; 2:17)
2. Disarm postures of internal unrest that could stunt gospel advancement (Phil. 2:1-4, 14-15; 4:2-3)
3. Warning against embracing “old ways” or “enemies of the cross of Christ” (Phil. 3:2-3)

NOTE: Judaism became a protected religion from Roman persecution, which would have made it enticing to return

4. Give thanks for their generosity in partnering with him in gospel advancement (Phil. 1:3; 4:10-18)

F. Theological themes addressed

1. The Gospel: Specifically the advancement (Phil. 1:5; 4:15; 1:7, 12, 16, 27)
2. The Centrality of Christ (Christ-Hymn, Phil. 2:5-11)
3. The Eschatological Framework — “Already but not yet” (Phil. 1:6, 10; 2:16; 3:10, 12-14, 20-21)
4. The call to joy in suffering (Phil. 4:4)

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Now to the letter and its content ...

I. Paul's "Friendly-Letter" Introduction (Philippians 1:1-11)

A. The Salutation (1-2)

NOTE: Common letter-writing practices in Paul's days included a three-part greeting: Name of sender, name of recipient, and a brief salutation — occasionally a thanksgiving and/or prayer. HOWEVER, Paul radically modifies this custom to highlight powerful expressions of the gospel and guides to understand the heart of the letter.

1. Added descriptive phrase of sender: "bond-servants of Jesus Christ" (1a)
 - a. Greek: "douli" = slave to Greek audience
 - b. Speaks of submission and pictures those conscripted into the service of Christ

Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God ... Roman 1:1, NASB

Paul, a bond-servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the faith of those chosen of God and the knowledge of the truth which is according to godliness ... Titus 1:1, NASB

- c. Emphasizes the "all-sufficiency" of Christ

2. The specificity of his addressees (1b)

All the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons ... Philippians 1:1b, NASB

- a. Addressed to "all" the saints
 - b. Recognizes the leaders with specific titles (unique to this letter)
 - c. Refers to them as "saints" or "God's holy people" called out and set apart

⁵ Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; ⁶ and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel." Exodus 19:5-6, NASB

Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called ... Ephesians 4:1, NASB

3. The expanded greeting (2)

- a. "Grace" = sum total of God's activity given to God's people

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⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich. 2 Corinthians 8:9, NASB

b. “Peace” = “Shalom” or the sum total of the benefits received by grace

B. The Prayer of Thanksgiving (3-8)

NOTE: Only in Galatians will you find a Pauline letter that has no “prayer of thanksgiving” following the greeting

1. Paul prays for Philippians “with joy” (4)
 - a. Affirms his affection for Philippians (special place in his heart) ALSO
 - b. Communicates a theological theme: believers should be joyful (demonstrated here by Paul and later he admonishes them to cultivate it)

Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you. Philippians 3:1, NASB

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! Philippians 4:4, NASB

“For Paul, joy is not the result of finding himself in comfortable circumstances but of seeing the gospel make progress through his circumstances and through the circumstances of the Philippians, whatever they might be” (Frank Thielman).

¹⁸ What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice. Philippians 1:18, NASB

¹⁷ But even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all. Philippians 2:17, NASB

2. Paul’s reasons for joyful thanks
 - a. Partnership since day one (5)
 - b. Confidence God will complete good work started in Philippians (6)

¹² So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³ for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. Philippians 2:12-13, NASB

¹² Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Philippians 3:12, NASB

NOTE: Paul is joyfully thankful because he sees God at work in their lives through their participation in Kingdom work

c. Deeply-felt affection for Philippians (7-8)

“Have you in my heart” – stuck with me always

C. The Prayer of Intercession (9-11)

NOTE: Content is a petition for spiritual growth

1. Paul’s request (9)
 - a. Express their love in a way that shows the knowledge to obey God’s will AND
 - b. How to make moral decisions based on God’s will in everyday life
2. The results of possessing this “increased love” (10-11)
 - a. Ability to discern “that which really matters” from competing positions (10)
 - b. Ability to consider all things as loss compared to Christ (3:8)
 - c. Desires to keep church on “straight and narrow”

QUESTION: What competing ideas do we have to guard against?

- d. Such devotion will keep them pure and blameless and will bear righteous fruit (11)

TRUTH:

- The church should faithfully (consistently) and sacrificially partner with those specifically called to advance the gospel (missionaries, church planting) for the result is eternal
- Spiritually mature believers should instruct/disciple those who are younger in the faith so they don’t give in to competing ways (1 Tim. 3:6; Titus 1:9; 2:3-5)
- Christian community is vital to the spiritual health of believers since accountability and corporate expressions of love can be extended especially to those who have strayed morally

II. The Significance of Paul's Present Circumstances (Philippians 1:12-26)

A. The Gospel advances through Paul's imprisonment (12-18a)

NOTE: In a friendship letter, it was customary to inform recipients of your situation especially since Philippians were concerned about his imprisonment (2:25; 4:10, 14)

"I want you to know that ..." (1:12a)

NOTE: Ultimately Paul desires to report on the advancement of the Gospel — man with a single passion

1. The Gospel progresses through Paul's imprisonment (12-14) How?
 - a. Paul was no ordinary prisoner — took every opportunity to communicate the Gospel (13)
 - b. Stirred greater confidence in the Lord in nearby believers and bold proclamation of Gospel because of his condition (14)

A courageous, Christ-focused life can motivate and stir in others a passion for God's Kingdom

TRUTH: How we respond to suffering will impact our influence and witness

TRUTH: WE must look for ways to transform our circumstances into a vehicle to preach Christ

2. The Gospel progresses through the preaching of Paul's rivals (15-18a)

When our joy is connected to the advancement of the Gospel rather than to our physical condition or to the responses to us, it remains firm, even when our circumstances stand against us.

(ILL) – Jim Elliot and 4 missionaries

QUESTION: Are we people of a single passion?

B. The Future — For the Glory of Christ and the Good of the Philippians (18b-26)

1. Paul's ambition — That Christ be glorified (18b-20)
 - a. Paul indicates that his joy will continue on into the future (18b) WHY?
 - b. He expects to be "saved," "delivered," or "vindicated," through their prayers and supply of the Holy Spirit
 - c. Resulting — whether in life or death — in the exaltation of Christ
2. The desired outcome — to be with Christ (21-24)

- a. Paul notes regardless of outcome (life/death) he wins since Christ is single passion
- b. A dilemma of two choices
 - i. Death = eschatological joy, be with Christ
 - ii. Life = fruitful labor and better serves the “progress and joy of Philippians faith”
 - iii. Knowing life means the progress of people, he is convinced this will be his outcome
 - iv. Example of “putting others first” which appears in 2:1-4

TRUTH:

- If our single aim/passion is Christ, it will radically change our perspective and shape how we relate to others
- Part of our prayer practices should include time spent interceding for others
- While we have breath in our lungs, we still have a mission, a task, given to us by God — preach Christ — that should be our priority until death

CONCLUSION:

- Ends chapter 1 by focusing in on the Philippians progress in the faith (Philippians 1:27; Ephesians 4:1)
- Charge to remain steadfast (like him) in midst of persecution from outside (Phil. 1:27-30)
- Govern your lives according to the gospel not societies standards
- Live as citizens of the Kingdom — different set of values (see in chapter 2 how this is fleshed out)

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