

INTRODUCTION

THE CITY

When Paul bypassed the seaport at Neapolis and moved eight miles inland to Philippi, he did so because Philippi, though small, was a city of some importance. The history of the city stretched back several centuries. A small village, known as Krenides, was captured by Philip of Macedon and annexed to his empire in 356 B.C. The area was attractive because of the many springs in the vicinity, and because of the nearby gold mines. Hence Philip named the city after himself, i.e., Philippi.

The city remained insignificant until conquered by the Romans almost two centuries later (168, 167 B.C.). The area was made a Roman province, and included in the first of the four districts into which the Romans divided Macedonia.

The most significant event of the pre-Pauline city took place in 42 B.C. There, on the plain of Philippi, the forces of Brutus and Cassius (Caesar's assassins) clashed with the armies of Antony and Octavian, only to go down in defeat. Thus Philippi was the spot at which the destiny of the Roman empire was set for some time to come.

Later (31 B.C.) Octavian defeated Antony. As a result of the battles of 42 and 31 B.C. a number of military veterans, from both the victors and the vanquished, were settled there. In 31 B.C. the name of the town was enhanced to honor Octavian (Caesar Augustus), its conqueror.

Philippi was made a Roman colony, a high privilege indeed for a provincial city within the empire. Rights of the citizenry included Roman citizenship, the right to own and transfer

property, and exemption from certain taxes. The city was in municipal pattern and architecture modeled on Rome, as well as in legal and administrative detail. The citizens wore Roman dress, had coinage with Roman inscriptions, and used (though not exclusively) the Latin language. Roman citizens had certain rights under Roman law, a fact that stood to Paul's advantage when he came to Philippi (Acts 16:37ff).

The city was located on the Via Egnatia, one of the major Roman roads of the time. Some evidence indicates the road in this area was in bad condition during the time of Paul's visit, so that visitors to Philippi may have used the sea route (as Paul did) with greater frequency.¹ However, bad roads, though an inconvenience to travel, did not stop it completely. When Paul left the city it was by road toward the west.

Residents of the city would have included a core of veterans of the Roman wars or their descendants. Also in residence were Greeks, descendants of the native Thracian population, and some Jews. Some read the story of the conversion of Lydia in Acts 16 to indicate there were not enough male Jews in the city to constitute a synagogue. But others argue that there was a synagogue built by the river to which Paul went to preach.

ORIGINS OF THE CHURCH

The origins of this church are recorded in Acts 16:6-40. Compare the commentary by Dennis Gaertner in this series for detailed comments. The following should be noted.

First, it was by divine impulse that the mission to Philippi and Europe was undertaken. A vision, coupled with earlier prohibitions, spurred Paul on his way (Acts 16:6-10). Paul traveled with Silas, Timothy (who had joined the party earlier), and, by assumption, Luke, who is identified by "we" in

¹Holland Hendrix, "Philippi," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:314.

Acts 16:10. This is based on the view that Acts was written by Luke. When Paul and Silas left the city, Luke was apparently left with the fledgling church, to be picked up by Paul when he passed through Philippi on his third journey (Acts 20:5).

Second, the initial convert in the city was Lydia (Acts 16:13-15), an open-minded God-fearer, whose profession (a dealer in purple cloth) and hospitality lead to the conclusion she was a person of some means. Though she is not mentioned in Philippians, two of the four specific names of Philippian Christians given in the letter are women, and it is generally thought that the women exercised significant roles in the church.

Third, a slave girl was exorcised, and this good deed destroyed her commercial advantage to her owners. In retaliation they inflamed a crowd, with the result that Paul and Silas were beaten and imprisoned in the most miserable of conditions (Acts 16:16-24).

Fourth, this incarceration served to make the faith of Paul and Silas shine more brightly, as they sang praises to God from their cell, rather than uttering the groans of pain that might have been expected. An earthquake so devastated the prison that the prisoner's cells were opened and their bonds loosed. The jailer, contemplating suicide because he thought his prisoners would have escaped, was reassured by Paul and Silas that they were all still there. More importantly, he found Christ, and he and his family became Christians in what is one of the remarkable conversions of the New Testament (Acts 16:23-34).

Finally, the release of Paul and Silas from prison and the embarrassment of the Philippian officials when they learned they had afflicted Roman citizens is told with a touch of humor. Paul and Silas, apparently taking their time, finally left the city, no doubt much to the relief of the city authorities (Acts 16:35-40). But their companion Luke stayed behind, with a group of believers whose ties to Paul through the years were especially affectionate. Though the first convert was a God-fearer, evidence indicates the church was composed predomi-

nantly of Gentiles who had not necessarily been sympathetic to Judaism. The date for these events is generally considered to be from A.D. 49-52.

PAUL'S LOCALE

Paul nowhere in this letter names the place of his imprisonment. A long held tradition, dating as early as the second century, identifies Rome as his locale. In recent years two other main options have been advanced: Ephesus and Caesarea. In considering this issue there are basic data to be kept in mind.

(1) Paul was a prisoner (1:7) and did not know the outcome of his trial (1:19f; 2:17).

(2) The place from which Paul wrote was also populated by those of "Caesar's household" (4:22).

(3) Timothy was with Paul (1:1; 2:19ff).

(4) The Christians in Paul's locale were engaged in evangelism (1:14ff).

(5) Paul hoped to visit Philippi if circumstances allowed (2:24).

(6) There was frequent communication between Philippi and Paul. The Philippians had heard Paul was in prison and sent Epaphroditus, who became ill. This news reached Philippi, and their anxiety reached back to Paul. The letter Paul wrote would be sent to Philippi, to be followed by visits from Timothy, and later (if possible) Paul himself (2:19-28).

A theoretical Ephesian imprisonment meets some of these criteria, but founders on others. Most telling is the fact that though Acts says Paul was in Ephesus for some time (Acts 19:8, 10) there is no record of an imprisonment there.

Paul was imprisoned for at least two years at Caesarea (Acts 24:27), but again that imprisonment does not account for all the statements in Philippians. One of the reasons for objection to Rome as the place of origin was that the distance between Rome and Philippi was too great for all the trips indicated by Philippians. But the distance was just as great to

Caesarea. Actually the journey from Rome to Philippi took about forty days. Thus a major objection to a Roman imprisonment, and justification for a Caesarean, is removed.

Two major objections to Rome have to do with the amount of time needed for travel, just discussed, and the change in Paul's travel plans from his announced intention to visit Spain (Rom 15:24, 29) to his intent to visit Philippi (Phil 1:25-27; 2:24).² Given Paul's unexpected changes in circumstances due to his arrest and imprisonment (Acts 21), a change of intent should not be found too surprising.

Though Rome cannot be proved to be the place from which Paul wrote, it does seem to fit the circumstances better than the alternatives. If from Rome, the date of writing was probably the early 60s. While holding this view, students still should not close themselves to evidence suggesting other possibilities. Despite the details in Acts and his biographical statements in the letters, there is still a great deal we do not know about Paul's activities.

REASONS FOR WRITING

Hawthorne lists a number of reasons Paul wrote this letter. From his list we may select the following as the most obvious.³

First, there was the matter of Epaphroditus and the gift sent to Paul by his hand. Paul wished to respond to their generosity (4:10-20). He also wished to allay their apprehensions about Epaphroditus (2:25-30), with whom he doubtless sent the letter.

Second, he took the opportunity to share certain news about himself and his situation. He especially told them of a problem he faced because some brethren hoped to create trouble for him by preaching Christ out of envy and rivalry (1:14-18). At the same time he addressed the issue of his imprisonment and his possible future (1:19-30; 2:24).

²See the comments on Philemon 22.

³Gerald Hawthorne, *Philippians* (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), pp. xlvii-xlviii.

Third, he wished to address a serious problem of division within the church. He names two women (4:2), but we suspect the problem was of wider dimension. There are touches throughout the book directed to this need, but it is addressed most powerfully in 2:1-11.

Fourth, Paul wished to warn about those he calls “dogs,” “men who do evil,” and “mutilators of the flesh” in 3:2. Later in the chapter he laments about “enemies of the cross” (v. 18).

EMPHASES

In addition to these central purposes there are certain notes sounded throughout the book which can enrich pursuit by the serious student. The joy motif through the book has been often observed (cf. the reference at 1:4). Though some have argued the church was a joyful one, we believe that not to have been the case. Paul’s repeated exhortations indicate their lack of joy, and we suppose that a capturing of the “joy of the Lord” would go far to resolving the Philippians’ problems.

Another noteworthy emphasis is the repeated use of the forms of the root φρον- (*phron*; references at 1:7). From examining these it can be discerned how Paul’s call was for a whole approach to life, not just to superficial thought or action. Study of this term makes it clear that Christianity was a deep and total commitment to the Lord and to a way of life.

In addition the reader might examine the texts listed under “all” (1:1), “partnership” (1:5), and “in the Lord” (4:1).

DEVOTIONAL TEXTS

Some of the great devotional New Testament texts are found in Philippians (see 1:21; 2:5-11,12f; 3:7-11; 4:4-7,8f, and 11-13). Often these verses are taken out of context, and are given an independent existence. We note this to stress the fact that Paul did not write Philippians (or any letter) so it

could be the subject of a commentary – though commentaries have real value. To follow Christ meant to live a life, not to judiciously make detailed observations about grammar, word meanings, syntax, etc. So if a commentary enhances understanding, that is a noble thing. But understanding may stop short of salvation. As Paul wrote to enhance discipleship, so this author hopes this work will have the same effect! To God be the glory!

OUTLINE

SALUTATION – 1:1-2

I. THANKSGIVING AND PRAYER – 1:3-11

A. Thanksgiving – 1:3-8

B. Prayer for Love Growing toward Glory – 1:9-11

II. PAUL’S SITUATION AND ATTITUDE – 1:12-26

A. The Influence of Paul’s Chains – 1:12-14

B. Opposite Motives for Preaching Christ – 1:15-18a

C. To Live Is Christ, to Die Is Gain – 1:18b-26

III. ONENESS THROUGH SERVICE – 1:27-2:18

A. Exhortation to a Unified Stand – 1:27-30

B. Attitudes Producing Unity – 2:1-4

C. The Example of Christ (the Christ Hymn) – 2:5-11

D. Exhortation to Obedience – 2:12-18

1. Work Out Salvation – 2:12-

13

2. Become Faultless Children

– 2:14-18

IV. PAUL’S CO-WORKERS – 2:19-30

A. Regarding Timothy – 2:19-24

B. Regarding Epaphroditus – 2:25-30

V. WARNING AGAINST “EVIL WORKERS” – 3:1-3

VI. PAUL’S CHANGED LIFE – 3:4-11

A. Paul’s Former Confidence – 3:4-6

B. From Loss to Gain – 3:7-11

VII. PRESSING ON TO THE GOAL – 3:12-16

A. “One Thing I do” – 3:12-14

B. The Mature Viewpoint – 3:15-16

VIII. TRUE AND FALSE MODELS – 3:17-21

IX. EXHORTATIONS TO STEADFASTNESS,

**UNITY, PRAYER, AND PROPER
THOUGHT – 4:1-9**

A. Standing Firm – 4:1

B. Euodia and Syntyche – 4:2-3

C. Joy, Prayer, Peace – 4:4-7

D. Think and Do – 4:8-9

X. RESPONSE TO THE PHILIPPIANS'

GENEROSITY – 4:10-20

CONCLUSION – 4:21-23