
Contents

Introduction	4
1. Background of Philippians	8
2. Survey of Philippians	15
3. Thanksgiving and Prayer	21
4. The Advance of the Gospel	28
5. Christ Our Pattern	34
6. Christ Our Goal	43
7. Final Exhortations	50
8. Personal Notes and Salutations	55
Bibliography	58

Lesson 1

Background of Philippians

Get to feel “at home” in the epistle to the Philippians with this background study. You will find your time had been well invested as you prepare for the following lessons in this book.

Whenever Bible references are cited in the lesson, be sure to read these in your Bible.

I. AUTHOR

Paul was the author of this epistle. He names his co-laborer Timothy (Timotheus) in the salutation of 1:1 because Timothy was with him when he wrote the letter. (Cf. Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:1; Philem. 1.)

II. DESTINATION OF THE EPISTLE

A. The City of Philippi

The opening verse of Philippians identifies its destination as a congregation of the city of Philippi. Let us first consider the city itself.

1. *Geography*. Refer to the map on page 7, which shows the geographical setting of this epistle. Observe the following:

(a) Philippi was a city of the province of Macedonia.

(b) The city was just inland (about ten miles) from the coastal town of Neapolis. (Read Acts 16:11-12, which records Paul’s stop-over at Neapolis on his first visit to Philippi.)

(c) Observe that Philippi is located on a major overland route of Macedonia called the Egnatian Way. When Paul sent Epaphroditus back to Philippi from Rome (2:25), his trip no doubt was via the Appian Way through Italy (see map), followed by an eighty-mile boat trip across the Sea of Adria, then a land journey on the Egnatian Way.

(d) Observe other coastal cities that Paul visited after leaving Philippi on his second missionary journey: Amphipolis, Apollonia, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth.

2. *Name*. In 350 B.C. the city was named Philippi, after Philip of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great. Its former name was *Krenides* (Little Fountains).

3. *Political status*. The city became a Roman colony in 42 B.C. “It was a miniature Rome . . . exempt from taxation and modeled after the capital of the world.”¹ Luke recognized its popular acclaim by calling Philippi “the chief city of that part of Macedonia” (Acts 16:12).²

4. *Population*. Estimates range from 200,000 to 500,000 residents, as of Paul’s time. Most of these were Greeks, with a smaller contingent of Jews and Romans. Read Acts 16:13 and observe where Paul held his first evangelistic meeting in the city. May this suggest that there was no synagogue (Jewish place of worship) in Philippi, since Paul usually had his first public contacts with the people in the synagogue?

One writer has described the typical citizen of Philippi thus: “The Macedonians, like the old Romans, were manly, straightforward and affectionate. They were not skeptical like the philosophers of Athens, nor voluptuous like the Greeks of Corinth.”³

5. *Economics*. Philippi was a relatively wealthy city, known for its gold mines and exceptionally fertile soil. A reputable school of medicine was located there. It is interesting to associate this latter fact with the view held by many that Philippi was Dr. Luke’s hometown.

B. The Church at Philippi

When Paul wrote Philippians, the congregation at Philippi was about ten years old. Here is a thumbnail sketch of the congregation:

1. *Origins*. The first converts were Lydia, a dealer in crimson fabrics; and the town’s jailer. Read Acts 16:13-15 and 16:23-34 for the account of these conversions. Observe that the other members of the two families were also saved at this time. Luke identifies Lydia as one who “worshipped God” (Acts 16:14), which indicates that she was a proselyte to the Jewish religion when Paul first met her. The first meeting place of the new Christians at Philippi was probably the home of Lydia (cf. Acts 16:15, 40).

1. Robert H. Mounce, “The Epistle to the Philippians,” in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 1319.

2. Actually Amphipolis was the capital of the district that included Philippi.

3. Quoted in J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*, 6:181.

2. *First church of Europe.* Philippi is commonly referred to as “the birthplace of European Christianity,” since the first converts of any organized missionary work in Europe were gained here. The occasion was Paul’s second missionary journey of A.D. 49-52, recorded in Acts 15:36–18:22. The year of Paul’s first contact at Philippi was around A.D. 50.

3. *Membership and organization.* Most of the congregation were Greeks, though the fellowship included some converted Jews. The average family was of the middle class, of moderate financial means. By the time Paul wrote the epistle, the church had an organizational structure that included the church offices of bishops (overseers) and deacons (read Phil. 1:1.)

4. *Early days.* When Paul left the new Philippian converts after his first ministry in Philippi, his companion Luke remained behind and no doubt helped in a follow-up ministry of encouraging and instructing the new Christians. Read the following passages, which support this observation:

Acts 16:10-13: Luke joins Paul’s missionary party at Troas to go to Macedonia, as indicated by the repeated pronoun *we*. (Luke was the author of Acts.)

Acts 16:40; 17:1-4: Luke is not part of Paul’s party that left Philippi. Conclusion: Luke must have remained behind.

Acts 20:5-6: Luke rejoins the group when Paul passes through Philippi on the last part of his third missionary journey, about six years later (A.D. 56).

III. PLACE OF WRITING AND DATE

Paul wrote Philippians from his prison quarters at Rome, around A.D. 61-62.⁴ Read Acts 28:16-31 for Luke’s report of those two years of imprisonment. Other New Testament epistles written about the same time were Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon.

IV. OCCASION FOR WRITING

Paul had two main reasons for writing to the church at Philippi at this time. One was circumstantial; the other was instructional.

1. *Circumstantial.* Read the following passages and record what message Paul wanted to relay to the Philippians:

2:19-24

4. References to the “palace” (1:13) and “Caesar’s household” (4:22) are evidence that the letter came from Rome.

2:25-30

4:2-3

4:10-19

2. *Instructional.* All of Paul's epistles fulfill the purposes described in 2 Timothy 3:16-17. Some of the things that the apostle wanted to share with the saints at Philippi were:

(a) encouragement to put Christ first in everyday living. It is perhaps correct to say that nowhere in the New Testament is the Christ-centered life more vividly portrayed than in this letter. Read 1:20-21 and 3:7-14.

(b) appeal to beware and to correct spiritual problems (e.g., 4:2-3)

(c) instruction in Christian doctrines (e.g., 2:6-11)

These and other purposes of the letter will be studied in detail in the lessons that follow.

V. MAIN SUBJECTS

A theme for Philippians will be developed later in survey study. Some of the main subjects that appear in the letter are:

1. joy in Christ—the words *rejoice* and *joy* appear seventeen times in the epistle

2. unity of believers in Christ—key passages are 1:27–2:18 and 4:1-9

3. keeping *above* hard circumstances of everyday life

4. growing in the Lord

5. the gospel—the word appears nine times in the letter.

VI. CHARACTERISTICS

Philippians has been called Paul's love letter to the saints at Philippi because its informal, personal style reveals so much of the apostle's character. The epistle contains less censure and more praise than does any other epistle.

Because Paul's purpose in writing was more practical than doctrinal, no detailed outline is apparent in the structure of this personal letter. However, Paul does teach about the Person and work of Christ in Philippians.

THE PLACE OF THE CHRISTOLOGICAL EPISTLES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

CHART A

NEW TESTAMENT				APOCALYPSE
HISTORY	EPISTLES			General
	Pauline			
	EARLY	LATER		
MATTHEW				
MARK	during missionary journeys	after arrest at Jerusalem		JAMES
LUKE		FIRST IMPRISONMENT ('"prison epistles"')	RELEASE	HEBREWS
JOHN			SECOND IMPRISONMENT	JUDE
		CHRISTOLOGICAL	PASTORAL	1 PETER
ACTS	1 THESSALONIANS			2 PETER
	2 THESSALONIANS	COLOSSIANS	1 TIMOTHY	1 JOHN
	1 CORINTHIANS	EPHESIANS	TITUS	2 JOHN
	2 CORINTHIANS	PHILEMON		3 JOHN
	ROMANS	PHILIPPIANS	2 TIMOTHY	

Paul does not quote the Old Testament in his letter, and the vocabulary includes sixty-five words that are not found in any of Paul's other epistles.

VII. PLACE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Philippians is one of Paul's prison epistles, along with Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon. Chart A shows its place as a Christological epistle in the New Testament canon of twenty-seven books. Note that Philippians was the last of the four prison epistles to be written.

Each of the twenty-seven books has particular functions in the volume of Scripture. Some of the purposes of Philippians have already been discussed. We will be studying these in more detail as the lessons proceed.

H. C. G. Moule has compared Philippians with other Pauline writings thus:

Looking at the other Epistles, each with its own divine and also deeply human characteristics, we find Philippians more peaceful than Galatians, more personal and affectionate than Ephesians, less anxiously controversial than Colossians, more deliberate and symmetrical than Thessalonians, and of course larger in its applications than the personal messages to Timothy, Titus, Philemon.⁵

* * *

Review Questions

1. What made the geographical location of Philippi a strategic one?

2. How would you describe a typical citizen of this Macedonian city?

3. What was Paul's first contact in Philippi?

5. H. C. G. Moule, *Philippian Studies*, p. 5.

4. What picture do you have of the Philippian congregation when Paul wrote the epistle?

5. How many years had intervened between the first conversions at Philippi and the writing of the letter?

6. What was Luke's interest and ministry in Philippi?

7. Where was Paul when he wrote Philippians?

What persecution had he experienced in Philippi on his first visit to the city?

Relate these two observations to the keynote of *joy* in the epistle.

8. What were Paul's purposes in writing Philippians?

9. List some of the main subjects discussed in the letter.

10. What are some distinguishing characteristics of Philippians?
