



Philippians Masterclass

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2.0 Background to the Letter

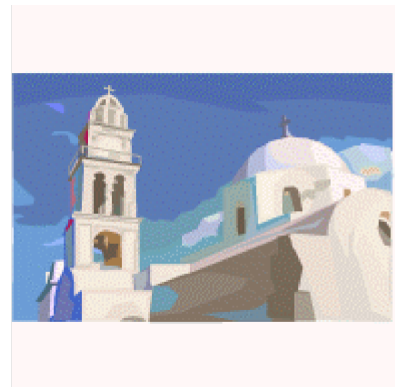
One of the first things we must remember about Philippians is that it is a letter from a man to his beloved friends and disciples. The WORD of God is like the living WORD of God – Jesus; it is fully human as well as fully divine. The WORD of God was written by men who were as real as us and who were men just like us.¹

In light of that we need to look at the man who wrote the letter and the people he wrote it to. Such investigation is warranted when looking at any correspondence between people. Let us start with finding out about the church in Philippi.

2.1 The City of Philippi

The City and therefore the church in Philippi had great strategic importance from its beginnings. It was located in Macedonia, ten miles from the Aegean Sea and originally called Krēindēs meaning Wells of Fountains. It rose to importance on account of the Macedonian gold mines which were worked from the time of the Phoenicians.

It was renamed in circa 368 BC, after Philip II of Macedon (who was the father of Alexander the Great) who rescued it from Thracian raiders and established it as a Military Outpost on account of its strategic importance: - It was separated from the sea by a sharp mountain ridge and the city of Neapolis.



It was also an important outpost along the road, known as the Egnatian Way, which being built in circa 145 BC extended from the Adriatic Sea on the western shore of Greece to the straits at Byzantium (later called Constantinople or Istanbul) to the east. The road was a major link between Italy and Asia. In Macedonia, the route passed through Thessalonica and Philippi among other cities. As Barclay summarises,

“... there was no more strategic site in all Europe. There is a range of hills which divides Europe from Asia, east from west and just at Philippi that chain of hills dips into a pass so that the city commanded the road from Europe to Asia, since the road must go through the pass.”²

¹ James 5¹⁷

² Endnotes

Letter to the Philippians: Barclay, William; © 1975 The Westminster Press, Philadelphia.



Luke tells us in Acts, it was a Roman colony. This ascension in status was following two important battles fought there around 42 BC, resulting in the defeat of Cassius and Brutus, conspirators in the assassination of Julius Caesar.

The Egnatian Way made it easier for Rome to move troops throughout the empire and it was the route that Paul travelled on from Neapolis to Philippi, Amphipolis, Apollonia and Thessalonica.

Philippi was at the time of Paul's letter a proud and prosperous city! The inhabitants were Roman Citizens and upon Paul's first encounter with the city's people, rejected him and Silas on this basis before the local magistrate,

They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice."³

It is perhaps this treasured citizenship which Paul is addressing when he reminds the saints in Philippi that their citizenship is in heaven⁴.

2.2 The Church in Philippi

2.2.1 Origin of the Church

The church in Philippi was founded by Paul and his companions during his second missionary journey in about AD 52. Luke tells us in Acts,

"During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'"⁵

³ Acts 16²⁰⁻²¹

⁴ Philippians 3²⁰

⁵ Acts 16⁹⁻¹⁰



We see the beginnings of the church in Philippi in the book of Acts. There are three chief characters in the formation of the nucleus of the church: -

Lydia - Acts 16¹⁴⁻¹⁵

The Slave Girl - Acts 16¹⁶⁻¹⁸

The Jailer - Acts 16²⁷⁻³⁴

This nucleus of the beginnings of this community of believers in Philippi were described so by Luke, by no coincidence; inspired by the Holy Spirit to record these three encounters they tell us much about the church and also much about the people God may bring among us.

Let's ask four questions about each of them ...

WHERE did they come from?

WHO were they?

HOW did they encounter Jesus?

WHAT fruit followed?

Lydia	Slave Girl	The Jailer
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Asiatic - from the city of Thyatira. 2. Wealthy (equiv. To a Merchant Prince) dealer in purple cloth (a costly substance in the ancient world). 3. A worshipper of God she was looking for more of him and so God opened her heart to Paul's message. 4. She and her household were baptised, with her home becoming a base for the church as she persuaded Paul to stay and teach them. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Native Greek 2. As a slave, in the eyes of the law she was not a person and had no legal rights - the bottom of society. 3. She recognised the authority of Jesus in Paul and his companions and what they had to offer. 4. She was delivered into freedom from the spirit by the power of Jesus; and possibly absconded when Paul and Silas were dragged away! 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A Roman Citizen 2. The middle class of society from whom was drawn those in civil service for the Empire. 3. Faithfully carrying out his duty - God broke in on his life powerfully demonstrating his Lordship. 4. The jailer responded to the power of God - convicted of sin (like those at Pentecost) he and his family embraced repentance and baptism.

The church in Philippi then represents a challenge for us today in terms of whom we welcome into our midst – do we look for certain types of people? Do we secretly feel uncomfortable with certain types of people? Do we see the future of our church as a certain type of person?

We see in the nucleus of the Philippian church pointedly people from different geographical regions and from different races. They were also from different social classes – bound together by their experience of God's power that stopped them as surely as he had stopped Paul those years before on the road to Damascus.

2.2.2 Characteristics of the Church

The church had many distinctive qualities: -

- Least Jewish of the Churches

There are no Hebrew names mentioned at all in the letter. It seems that there were few Jews in Philippi generally. There was no synagogue at Philippi, but a little company of Jews gathered for Sabbath worship at "a place of prayer" (proseuche) ⁶, about a mile to the West of the city gate on the shore of the river Gangites.

- Prominence of Women

Perhaps in accordance with the position accorded to women in Macedonia, women seem to figure prominently in Philippi. There is the obvious example of Lydia. Euodia and Syntyche are mentioned in the epistle, two women who were fellow-labourers with Paul in the gospel. Some have said that this may have been one of the reasons that the church at Philippi was so mindful of Paul's comfort.

- Soldiers amongst the ranks

It seems there were Roman Soldiers amongst the Saints. This is inferred by the writers of the International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia,

"He sends them greetings from the saints that are in Caesar's household ([Philippians 4:22](#)). He prays that he may hear of them that they stand fast like an immovable phalanx, with one soul striving athletically for the faith of the gospel ([Philippians 1:27](#)). He knows that they will be fearless and brave, in nothing affrighted by the adversaries ([Philippians 1:28](#)). He speaks of his own experience as a wrestling-match, a conflict or contest ([Philippians 1:30](#)). He joys in the sacrifice and service of their faith ([Philippians 2:17](#)). He calls Epaphroditus not only his fellow-worker but his fellow-soldier ([Philippians 2:25](#)). He likens the Christian life to a race in which he presses on toward the goal unto the prize ([Philippians 3:14](#)). He asks the Philippians to keep even, soldierly step with him in the Christian walk ([Philippians 3:16](#)). These metaphors have their appeal to an athletic and military race, and they bear their testimony to the high regard which Paul had for this type of Christianity and for those in whose lives it was displayed. We do not know the names of many of these men, for only Clement and Epaphroditus are mentioned here;"⁷

- Generosity

⁶ Acts 16¹³

⁷ International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia: Orr, James, M.A., D.D. General Editor; © 1915



The Saints in Philippi were incredibly generous and over the years sent many gifts to Paul to support him. In fact he states that they were alone amongst the churches in Macedonia supporting him and they sent him provision when he was in Thessalonica⁸. He tells them that this is an acceptable sacrifice (monetary offerings are an act of worship to God) and in response to this God will meet all their needs. When we look at the wider context of Paul's other letters we find further reference to the Philippians in Paul's letter to the Corinthians: -

"... we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability."⁹

As you will note from the map up above the Macedonian churches included of course the Philippians who led the way as we have seen from Paul's letter to them.

- A Persecuted Church

From the very first time Paul preached in the City there was trouble. Paul and his companions had to leave the city after a storm of persecution and illegal imprisonment. This did not stop when Paul left, for we find in this letter to the Philippians, Paul refers,

"for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me."¹⁰

2.2.3 Gateway to Europe

We also find in the church in Philippi in part due to its key geographical location that it was a gateway into Europe for the early church.

In Acts we find that Paul travelled throughout the regions of Phrygia and Galatia (see map above). The Spirit had already kept them from preaching in the province of Asia. Instead Paul tried to go north to Bithynia which borders the Black Sea, but again the Spirit would not allow them to. They decided therefore to go down to the port of Troas – we are not told why, but it is more than likely the Spirit of God led Paul down to that port.

It was after all there that Paul was given a vision of a man in Macedonia calling him to come across the Aegean Sea to Macedonia and the seeds of the church in Europe were sown. Sometimes God will shut doors, sometimes in our faces and we may not be sure of why or what is coming next, but if we trust him he can lead us into something much more successful than we ever expected. For Paul this was the beginning of something new!

⁸ Philippians 4¹⁵

⁹ 2 Corinthians 8¹⁻³

¹⁰ Philippians 1⁷

2.3 Occasion

2.3.1 Thanks the Gifts

Paul refers toward the end of his letter¹¹ to the ample gifts the church supplied him with. This may not have been the main reason for the letter as it mentioned toward the end.

2.3.2 Epaphroditus

We find part way through the letter¹² Paul refers to his good friend Epaphroditus and wants to send him back to the Philippians. Perhaps Paul sent him back with the letter. Although we shall come back later in our studies to look at men like Epaphroditus, but needless to say Paul valued him highly as did the Philippians and on account of his illness sent him back to the Philippians so that they might honour him, because he had nearly died, as Paul says, for the work of Christ¹³. The succession of journeys back and forth is hence traced opposite by Guthrie¹⁴.

Journeys

- Philippians receive news of Paul.
- Epaphroditus arrives in Rome with gift for Paul (4¹⁸)
- Epaphroditus falls ill after ministering to Paul and a report of this reaches the Philippians(2³⁶)
- Paul receives word from Philippians of their distress.
- Epaphroditus takes the letter to Philippi
- Timothy is soon to visit Philippi and is to report back to Paul (4¹⁸)

2.3.3 Future Visits

It is apparent that Paul was planning to visit his friends and a visit from Timothy was imminent. Like Epaphroditus Paul evidenced his paternal feelings for the church in wanting to send them pastoral provision. This is perhaps further evidence that there were areas of immaturity in the Philippian church. Although we don't necessarily see the conspicuous problems of the Corinthians or the Galatians, they were not the perfect church, which is one of the factors in the next reason listed below.

2.3.4 False Teachers

¹¹ Philippians 4¹⁸

¹² Philippians 2²⁵

¹³ Philippians 2³⁰

¹⁴ The Pauline Epistles – New Testament Introduction: Guthrie, Donald; © 1966 The Tyndale Press, London



As in other letters, Paul has to give guidance to his sheep to prevent them from falling into the traps of false teachers; perhaps in this case from Judaizers with whom Paul had come into conflict with previously.

2.3.5 Unity

It is possible that there were some strained relationships in the church and for this reason amongst others, Paul has to encourage them into unity of the Spirit. He urges them not to look to their own interests but to each others' instead. As an example he is planning to send Timothy to them 'who takes a genuine interest in your welfare'. Indeed Paul even makes a specific reference to Euodia and Syntyche who were in disagreement with each other over some matter: the fruit of their unity Paul tells them is that they will have no fear of those looking to their destruction (we mentioned the persecution above [2.2.2]) – on the contrary it will only sound the death bell of their very own destruction.

2.4 Place and Date of Writing

Although this is not crucial to our studies and so shall receive cursory attention, the date of Paul's letter, although not known for certain, depends upon from where he wrote it. The date can only be important to the layperson in the sense that it tells us something of Paul's circumstances at the time of writing.

Remember, as we have said, the WORD of God, like Jesus, is fully human as well as fully divine. Although it is Holy Scripture we read, we are also reading correspondence from the Apostle at a point and place in his life which will have affected the way he said things and what he said – based on his own experience and maturity to date. Paul like the other authors the Holy Spirit chose to inspire, had progressive revelation¹⁵.

There are three theories regarding the place and hence date of writing:

- Caesarea.
- Ephesus.
- Rome.

All of the above were all places of imprisonment with arguments in favour of each of them. Traditionally the main consensus seems to have been toward Rome. This would set the time of writing as toward the end of the two-year imprisonment mentioned in Acts,

¹⁵ God is progressively revealed himself throughout history, as Paul points out at the start of his letter to the church in Romans through the nature of things that could be seen, but also in the Old Testament primarily through the prophets and finally through his Son. As the writer to the Hebrews says, *"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son"* [Hebrews 1¹]



“For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.”¹⁶

This puts Paul’s letter at around AD 63-64, a few years before (it is believed) Paul’s own death ¹⁷... for the work of Christ.

¹⁶ Acts 28³⁰⁻³¹

¹⁷ Estimated to be AD 67-68