

The People and Their Apostle in Philippians 1

OPEN – THE LETTER THAT HAS EVERYTHING

PART ONE – THE SETTING IN PHILIPPI

History

During the Roman civil war that followed the assassination of Julius Caesar, Mark Antony and Octavian confronted the assassins of Caesar, Brutus and Cassius, at the Battle of Philippi. Antony and Octavian were victorious in this final battle against the partisans of the Republic. They released some of their veteran soldiers and colonized them in the city. In 30 BC, Octavian became Roman emperor, reorganized the colony, and established more settlers there, veterans possibly from the Praetorian Guard and other Italians.

Geography

Philippi sits atop the Aegean Sea on the northeastern corner of present-day Greece, near where Turkey and Greece meet. Its modern town is called Kabala.



Culture

Roman colonies were outposts of Roman culture in the midst of a native people with sometimes very different culture. These were proud Romans amidst Macedonians, Greeks, and Asians.

This fact helps us understand three bits of scripture related to Philippi.

The first is Acts 16.20-21, where Paul and Silas are arrested in the city.

“When they had brought [Paul and Silas] before the magistrates, they said, ‘These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews ²¹and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.’ ²²The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods.”

The second is further on in the Acts story. When Paul and Silas are jailed for disturbing the peace and inculcating non-Roman customs (see above), their captors treat them harshly. *“When morning came, the magistrates sent the police, saying, ‘Let those men go.’ ³⁶And the jailer reported the message to Paul, saying, ‘The magistrates sent word to let you go; therefore come out now and go in peace.’ ³⁷But Paul replied, ‘They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves.’ ³⁸The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens; ³⁹so they came and apologized to them (16.35-39).”*

Philippians 3.20, where Paul pictures Christian life as a colony in an alien world. *“But our citizenship* is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

PART TWO: PAUL AND THE PHILIPPIANS

The Philippians’ Relationship with Paul

From the letter’s opening, the closeness of this relationship is obvious. Consider Paul’s glowing prayer for the Philippians.

1. The Beginning of Paul’s Prayer for Them (1.3-5)

I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.

2. Paul's Recollections about Them in the Middle of the Prayer (1.6-7)
*I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, * for all of you share in God's grace* with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.*
3. Paul's Use of His "Staff" (2.19-30)
 - a. Timothy
 - b. Epaphroditus
4. Paul's Gratitude for Their Financial Gift (4.15-18)

The Apostle Paul's Circumstances

We do not know where he is imprisoned. We only know that he is imprisoned.

I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, ¹³so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; ¹⁴and most of the brothers and sisters, * having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word* with greater boldness and without fear (1.12-14).*

I would expect a request for commiseration or sympathy. Paul writes from prison. I would expect some sort of comparison of woes. Paul writes to people who are facing persecution themselves. Shouldn't this letter just be a collective gripe session? Paul tells his Philippians early in the letter of his own imprisonment.

I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ... (1.12-13).*

Not much later he describes the Philippians' own "suffering." We do not know what Paul is describing with the word "suffering" (Gk. *thlipsis*), but he mentions "opponents." It is likely that the Philippians are facing at least social persecution.

Paul finishes his description by linking their suffering to Christ's and to his own: "God has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well — since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have." (1.29-30)

Paul is suffering. The Philippians are suffering. This letter should be a pity party with entitlement bon bons and used tissues everywhere. In fact, it could be even more grave than that. In his book, *Chained in Christ*, Prof. Craig Wansink helps us to understand life in an ancient prison, which was no picnic. Prisoners were customarily jammed like sardines into dark and crowded cells where a horrific stench was normal. Food was terrible and barely enough to sustain existence. These were literally hell holes.

Not surprisingly, in these wretched ancient prisons suicide was common. So it may not have surprised his Philippian friends that such thoughts had entered Paul's mind. It has surprised and offended modern readers — no saint could ever consider suicide! — so much that translators avoid the thought. In Philippians 1.21-22, Paul writes, "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer." (New Revised Standard Version) The Greek word that is translated "prefer" here actually means "choose" almost everywhere else in Greek literature. That's why the old Revised Standard Version got it right: "which I shall choose I cannot tell." In a book of the Bible, Paul is actually "thinking out loud" with the Philippians about suicide.

Ancient context may help. There was a Stoic philosophical custom of contemplating and, if need be, committing suicide in the face of shame or the loss of freedom. For example, the second-century Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, compared suicide to walking out of a smoky room. "As you intend to live when you are gone out...so it is in your power to live here. But if people do not permit you, then get away out of life, but do it as if you were suffering no harm. The house is smoky, and I quit it. Why do you think that this is any trouble?" (*Meditations* 5)

Centuries later, a poetic argument against suicide appears in Shakespeare's famous Hamlet soliloquy.

*To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;*

*No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause. There's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life.
-- "Hamlet" Act 3, Scene 1*

Hamlet chooses not to take his own life because the afterlife may even be worse than his dreadful suffering in the present.

Paul thinks differently. Marcus Aurelius chooses un-harried death over suffering in life, and Hamlet chooses suffering in this life because he fears more severe suffering in the life to come. Faced with a choice between the peaceful life with Christ that death would bring, and the purposeful suffering of his present circumstances, Paul chooses life:

It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. ²²If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. ²³I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; ²⁴but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. ²⁵Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, ²⁶so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again. (Philippians 1.20-26)

Paul presents his example, not to draw his audience to pity him, but to bolster the Philippians amid their own suffering. Though death would be “gain,” Paul has a reason to live, a purpose given to him by God. And “since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith.” He hopes that his Philippian brothers and sisters will follow his lead.

From where I sit, the self-centered reflections of the Stoic hero Marcus Aurelius and the addled Hamlet pale in comparison. Aurelius in prison would “walk out of the smoky room.” Paul? He capitalizes on incarceration to form an international mission team. Did you notice? He is satisfied that it “has become known

throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ.” (Philippians 1.13) With the conventions of guard rotation in the ancient prison system, the soldiers who were chained to him would soon be sent out to other places. That meant that Paul was leveraging his time by converting mobile potential evangelists. One interpretation of “the imperial guard” would suggest that these guards would be sent next to far-flung parts of the empire. Paul lives to move the good news of Jesus into the world. What are iron bars to stop that?

The Philippians’ Circumstances

Paul alludes early in the letter to his own imprisonment and the Philippians’ own “suffering,” which he compares to his own. It seems they have encountered opposition:

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel,²⁸ and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God’s doing.²⁹ For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well—³⁰ since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have. (Philippians 1.27-30)

Women Leaders in the Church

It is striking that in the Acts account of Paul’s visit to Philippi and in the letter, we encounter only three names that we know belong to Philippians – and all three of them are women. In the Gospels and letters of the early Christians, we can surmise that authors mention only leaders or prominent members, as would have been customary in ancient epistles.

Lydia the Host

A story about Paul’s time in Philippi appears in Acts 16.11-40. In it we are introduced to a key member of the church in that city: Lydia.

“On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord

opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.' And she prevailed upon us (16.13-15)."

Euodia and Syntyche

In the fourth chapter of his letter, Paul asks the community to help these two women to get along. We don't know the nature of their conflict. We know that they must have been prominent members of the community, and probably leaders, for their strife to concern Paul.

"I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion,^{} help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life (4.2-3)."*

PART THREE: THE JOY

Fourteen times in this very short letter, Paul uses the term "joy" or "rejoice." That is a whole lot in any context, but in the midst of the circumstances he and the Philippian Christians are enduring, Paul's mention of joy and exhortation to rejoice are remarkable.

As you read through the letter this first time, track the theme of joy. Notice how Paul intersperses the word(s) and whether there is any indication of this joy's cause or origin.

1.4

1.18a

1.18b

1.25

2.2

2.17

2.18

2.28

2.29

3.1

4.1

4.4 (2)

4.10

It will be our project as we read to discover Paul's secret. For people whose emotions can be so easily tossed around by circumstances, there is gold in Paul's Letter to the Philippians.

CLOSE – LEANING FORWARD