

Session #1: Philippians Introduction

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So we today begin our third letter in the series of four studying the letters St. Paul wrote during his months in captivity. Today we begin our study into the Letter to the Philippians. Philippi was in northeastern Greece and was an important city for Rome for three reasons:

1. It was a significant post along the trade route from Rome to points east.
2. It was set in the midst of a healthy agricultural plain.
3. It was close to the gold mines of the Pangaeus Mountains

Established in the sixth century BC, Philippi gets its name from the father of Alexander the Great who named the city for himself, Philip, after conquering and claiming the city in 360 BC. It was during St. Paul's second missionary trip that he came through Philippi. It was here that he met the rich widow who sold purple cloth, Lydia (16:13-15), healed a young slave girl (16:16-18) and, along with Silas was beaten and placed in prison (16:19-24). It is well worth reading chapter 16 of the Acts of the Apostles to remind ourselves of these events and of St. Paul's concern for everyone else above his own comfort. We see this in St. Paul's action on behalf of the prison guard also in chapter 16. An earthquake shakes the prison so severely that Silas and St. Paul are freed from their chains. But, unlike the other prisoners they do not move knowing that the guard would be killed should they be found missing. Interestingly, we will not hear anything of these individuals mentioned in the letter we are about to study.

Author

There are very few opposing voices, but the vast majority of scholarship site St. Paul as the author of this document. Because of the many personal references which conform with the life and experiences of St. Paul found in the Acts of the Apostles and his other writings, the authorship of St. Paul is not disputed. What is debated is the place and date of this document and whether it is one letter or a composite of two, possibly three pieces merged into one. The discussion of this last theory is given foundation by some suggestion that the transition between 3:1 (which, to some sounds like a natural conclusion) and 3:2 (which moves the letter into a completely different direction) is very abrupt. Generally speaking most scholars hold that this is one letter.

From Where Does Saint Paul Write?

The location of St. Paul's imprisonment while composing this letter is debated. The vast majority place the date and place of the writing as St. Paul Roman imprisonment in 60-62 A.D.

Scholars can tell by the tone of the letter St. Paul feels that death is eminent. He has been arrested for preaching the gospel and even though the future is dim, St. Paul rejoices in the faith found within the Christian community at Philippi. Most of the letter is written as an instruction regarding unity and humility within the family of faith. St. Paul also admonishes the readers to be careful of false teachers, a lesson we still need to embrace today. This letter will not only give us some insight into the life of St. Paul but into the doctrine of justification assuring our hope in the salvation of Christ.

But, once again, as we discussed in our brief study of the Letter to Philemon, scholars continue to discuss the possibilities of St. Paul write this letter to the church in Philippi during which imprisonment in Ephesus or Casarea which would date this letter to 54/55 A.D. if written in Ephesus, or 58/59 A.D. if during his imprisonment in Casarea. (See refer to my study note on the Letter to Philemon.)

There are two important clues we find in the letter itself that gives leads most scholars to believe that Rome was the home of the letter:

- *...it has become known throughout the whole praetorian guard...* Philippians 1:13. In understanding that the Praetorian Guard was an elite unit of the Imperial Roman Army whose members served as personal bodyguards to the Roman emperors who would be stationed in Rome, where else but Rome would St. Paul have access to these individuals.
- *All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.* Philippians 4:22. Scholars believe that St. Paul had converted many of the slaves and servants throughout Rome including the palace. This line would make little sense outside of St. Paul being in Rome.

For our conversation what is important is no so much the city location but the fact that St. Paul was in prison as he wrote.

Community of Philippi

We have already captured a bit about the city of Philippi in our introduction. It is worth knowing that the city of Philippi lays some 80 miles to the east of Thessalonica which was the capital of Macedonia in St. Paul's time and was a strategic place along the Egnatian Way, the major travel route connecting Italy and the west with Asia Minor and the east. Philippi, while predominantly Greek, had a Roman colony settled by Roman veterans and their families in retirement. As a result of this Roman stronghold, Philippi had a powerful and wealthy component within the community. The total population of the city around the time of St. Paul is estimated at 15,000 judging from such things as the size of its theater which seated 8,000.

The Jewish presence in the city was minimal. We know this from the fact that there is no first-century archaeological evidence for a Jewish synagogue within Philippi. We also know this from our reading of the Acts of the Apostles. While in the city of Philippi St. Paul writes: *and on the*

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sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer. (Acts 16:13) It was in this place that St. Paul met Lydia, the merchant in purple cloth. There must be at least ten Jewish men (a quorum) living and gathering in a community to warrant a synagogue.

As for the Christian community that gathered, scholars believe those gathered would reflect, to some degree, the general population of the city with vast majority of the community being those in service (either paid or slaves) and the poor. Yet we will discover in St. Paul's letter to the Philippians that they were a generous people: *And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving except you only; ^{for} even in Thessalonica you sent me help once and again.* (Philippians 4:15-16)

Why Does St. Paul Write?

St. Paul writes to the Christian Community in Philippi for basically two reasons. The first is out of friendship. This community, as do all those that St. Paul established, remains important to him as it would for anyone with family or dear friends we have shared life with and now living some distance away. Scholars identify this letter to the Philippians as primarily a "friendship" letter with its primary purpose to further ongoing relationship between himself and the community. But there is a second reason St. Paul writes. *I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, ^{for} he has been longing for you all, and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill.* (Philippians 2:25-30) What scholars gather from the letter Epaphroditus originates from the Christian Community in Philippi and was sent to St. Paul either with a letter or to help him or both. Epaphroditus became ill in St. Paul's service and while he has gotten better needs to return home to fully recover.

The only direct concerns that St. Paul addresses in the letter is to call to resolve a personal conflict between two women of the Philippi community (Euodia and Syntyche 4:2-3) without giving a clue as to their dispute and calling the community at large to guard against Judaizing missionaries should they make their way to Philippi.

Theological Themes we will encounter

Whether it is because of his friendship with the Philippians or a fear of eminent death, the Letter to the Philippians offers some of the most profound self-revelation from St. Paul. *Apart from 2 Corinthians and parts of Galatians and Romans, nowhere else in the letters we have does Paul share so candidly his motivation for following Jesus* (Dennis Hamm). Because of this St. Paul explores several key themes:

1. What is involved in living the Christian Vocation
 - a. Joy should be the defining theme in living as a Christian. As we study we will read the word "joy" five times in this letter and "rejoice" eleven times.

- b. Identifying ourselves with Christ above all else (2:5) making Him our true model in living (2:8-9)
 - c. And if suffering because of our faith is our lot, even to the point of shedding blood, we should count this as a cause of joy (2:17)
 - d. Because our hope and belief is that our mortal bodies will become like Christ's glorious body (3:21)
2. Living as a Christian in the World
- a. While in this world we must live in a world permeated with deceit and evil, but as believers we must be motivated by high ideals not giving into worldly ways (2:14-16)
 - b. Act in a manner worthy of the gospel (1:27)
 - c. In doing so the good lives of the children of God will shine out as "lights in the world" (2:15)
3. The mystery of Jesus Christ as Redeemer
- The Apostle sets before us as our model the life of Christ. In the hymn of Philippians 2:6-11 he provides a wonderful summary of the life and redeeming work of our Lord, praising the heavenly exaltation of the man Christ, a glory which he has attained after his life on earth, inspired as it was by a freely accepted obedience, whereby he humbled himself even unto death on the cross. [The Navarre Bible](#)*

Some of St. Paul's letters, such as 1 Corinthians, Galatians and Colossians are written to address specific pastoral issues, but what we find in Philippians is more reflective thought on universal aspects of living life through Christ.

Pertinence for Today

While a short document, Philippians shares a deep expression of Christian spirituality. In it's study the hope is that we are drawn into imitating St. Paul's self-emptying service to the Father and all those he encounters, as well as animate our own desire for Christian discipleship.

Outline of the Letter to the Philippians

1. Introduction (1:1-26)

Typical of the letters written in the first century and other letters we find of St. Paul's, what we will read in an initial greeting identifying St. Paul as the author followed by a short prayer and then words of thanksgiving for the community. This section ends with a personal update.

2. Teachings (1:27-2:18)

In this section we will find the bulk of our lessons on striving to live as a follower of Christ. How each believer is called to conduct themselves in a way worthy of the gospel (1:27-2:4) by emptying themselves and living in service to others (2:5-18).

3. Plans and News (2:19-30)

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There is a movement in content, such as with any family letter, as St. Paul offers news that he will soon be sending Timothy (2:19-23) with hopes to come himself as well (2:24). But until then please welcome Epaphroditus return and help him in his continuing recovering (2:25-30)

4. Continue Striving for the Goal (3:1-4:9)

As St. Paul moves towards the conclusion of this letter he moves back into a pastoral role calling the Philippians and all who read this letter to continue to strive to live in the faith, especially in the face of opposition (Judaizers saying believers in Christ must return to the Mosaic law (3:1-6). St. Paul reminds all that the law can NOT provide justification. Salvation has been won through Jesus Christ, now we must live as children who believe that (3:7-12). St. Paul ends this section by first exhorting all to press on toward the goal (3:13-21), and then a call to perseverance (4:1-9)

5. Thanks and Final greetings (4:10-23)

The letter ends as all first century letters did by offering thanks for the kindness and help the Philippians have shown him through Epaphroditus.

Opening Address 1:1-11

After a familiar opening (1:1-2), St. Paul will once again begin his letter with a prayer of praise and thanksgiving (3-11). We will read of his enthusiasm in the Christian commitment in the community in Philippi as well his gratitude and desire for their continued growth in faith.

1:1 Paul and Timothy Our letter opens with the authors identifying themselves, St. Paul and St. Timothy. Scholars believe that St. Paul was the primary author but believe that St. Timothy may have contributed as well. As we already know, St. Paul was the founder of the community in Philippi (Acts 16:11-15). Since the community is well aware of who St. Paul is, Paul has no need to assert his apostolic authority but goes on to stress his service to Christ. St. Timothy was originally from Lycaonian city of Lystra in Asia Minor. He was born of a Jewish mother who became Christian and a Greek Father. St. Timothy and St. Paul met during the second missionary trip (Acts 16:1-5) and became St. Paul's traveling companion and co-worker in their missionary work. St. Timothy would go on to write two letters (1 & 2 Timothy) as well as become the 1st Bishop of Ephesus.

with the bishops and deacons This is the only time in any of St. Paul's letters do we see such an address to the hierarchy of the community. Scholars all say that we are not to understand "bishops" in the way we do today. It is most probably that in those early days of establishing the Church (remember this is only about 25-30 years after the resurrection of Jesus), identifications and title were fluid. It is almost certain that those St. Paul calls here as "bishops" functioned as the priests of the community fulfilling the priestly and pastoral ministries for the congregation – leading worship, teaching, counseling and administration. Those that served as deacons would assist the bishops/priests as well as work with the poor and orphaned.

1:2 Grace to you and peace This was a standard greeting of St. Paul's and can be found in many of his introductions (Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3).

1:3 making my prayer with joy

Here we encounter the first of five times in this letter the word “joy”. As share in the themes section of this first class we will come across “rejoice” eleven time. Joy, according to St. Paul (Galatians 5:22) is the first fruit produced in us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

1:6 day of Jesus Christ

A phrase used by St. Paul (Romans 2:16; 1 Corinthians 1:8) to mean at the end of all days here on earth, when Jesus Christ will return again in glory.

1:8 For God is my witness

This is an abbreviated oath-formula that St. Paul uses (Romans 1:9; 1 Corinthians 1:8) to assure his readers that he is sincere in what he is writing in his affections for them.

1:9 your love may abound

St. Paul is not speaking here of the romantic emotion but of the commitment that comes from grace to serve all those we may encounter. It is the opposite of selfishness and self-interest.

Reflection Questions:

1. What are your hopes and expectations for this study?
2. Reread verses 9-11. In your own life how do you understand *love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment*? Give some practical examples.
3. How do you understand what it means to be *filled with the fruits of righteousness*?

Catechism of the Catholic Church

Prayers of Petition: 2629-2633

Prayers of Intercession: 2634-2636

Fruits of the Holy Spirit: 1832

Charity/Love: 1822-29

Bibliography:

- The Catholic Study Bible NAR
- The New Daily Study Bible: The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon by William Barclay
- The Navarre Bible: Captivity Letters
- New Collegeville Bible Commentary: First and Second Timothy, Titus, Philemon by Terence J. Keegan
- Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: Philippians, Colossians and Philemon by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch
- Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: Philippians, Colossians and Philemon, by Dennis Hamm, SJ