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Philippians

Scripture: Philippians

Code: MSB50

Title

Philippians derives its name from the Greek city where the church to which it was addressed was located. Philippi was the first town in Macedonia where Paul established a church.

Author and Date

The unanimous testimony of the early church was that the Apostle Paul wrote Philippians. Nothing in the letter would have motivated a forger to write it.

The question of when Philippians was written cannot be separated from that of where it was written. The traditional view is that Philippians, along with the other Prison Epistles (Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon), was written during Paul's first imprisonment at Rome (ca. A.D. 60–62). The most natural understanding of the references to the "palace guard" (1:13) and the "saints ... of Caesar's household" (4:22) is that Paul wrote from Rome, where the emperor lived. The similarities between the details of Paul's imprisonment given in Acts and in the Prison Epistles also argue that those epistles were written from Rome (e.g., Paul was guarded by soldiers, Acts 28:16; cf. 1:13, 14; was permitted to receive visitors, Acts 28:30; cf. 4:18; and had the opportunity to preach the gospel, Acts 28:31; cf. 1:12–14; Eph. 6:18–20; Col. 4:2–4).

Some have held that Paul wrote the Prison Epistles during his two-year imprisonment at Caesarea (Acts 24:27). But Paul's opportunities to receive visitors and proclaim the gospel were severely limited during that imprisonment (cf. Acts 23:35). The Prison Epistles express Paul's hope for a favorable verdict (1:25; 2:24; cf. Philem. 22). In Caesarea, however, Paul's only hope for release was either to bribe Felix (Acts 24:26), or agree to stand trial at Jerusalem under Festus (Acts 25:9). In the Prison Epistles, Paul expected the decision in his case to be final (1:20–23; 2:17, 23). That could not have been true at Caesarea, since Paul could and did appeal his case to the emperor.

Another alternative has been that Paul wrote the Prison Epistles from Ephesus. But at Ephesus, like Caesarea, no final decision could be made in his case because of his right to appeal to the emperor. Also, Luke was with Paul when he wrote Colossians (Col. 4:14), but he apparently was not with the apostle at Ephesus. Acts 19, which records Paul's stay in Ephesus, is not in one of the "we sections" of Acts (see Introduction to Acts: Author and Date). The most telling argument against Ephesus as the point of origin for the Prison Epistles, however, is that there is no evidence that Paul was ever imprisoned at Ephesus.

In light of the serious difficulties faced by both the Caesarean and Ephesian views, there is no reason to reject the traditional view that Paul wrote the Prison Epistles—including Philippians—from Rome.

Paul's belief that his case would soon be decided (2:23, 24) points to Philippians being written toward the close of the apostle's two-year Roman imprisonment (ca. A.D. 61).

Background and Setting

Originally known as Krenides ("The Little Fountains") because of the numerous nearby springs, Philippi ("city of Philip") received its name from Philip II of Macedon (the father of Alexander the Great). Attracted by the nearby gold mines, Philip conquered the region in the fourth century B.C. In the second century B.C., Philippi became part of the Roman province of Macedonia.

The city existed in relative obscurity for the next two centuries until one of the most famous events in Roman history brought it recognition and expansion. In 42 B.C., the forces of Antony and Octavian defeated those of Brutus and Cassius at the Battle of Philippi, thus ending the Roman Republic and ushering in the Empire. After the battle, Philippi became a Roman colony (cf. Acts 16:12), and many veterans of the Roman army settled there. As a colony, Philippi had autonomy from the provincial government and the same rights granted to cities in Italy, including the use of Roman law, exemption from some taxes, and Roman citizenship for its residents (Acts 16:21). Being a colony was also the source of much civic pride for the Philippians, who used Latin as their official language, adopted Roman customs, and modeled their city government after that of Italian cities. Acts and Philippians both reflect Philippi's status as a Roman colony.

Paul's description of Christians as citizens of heaven (3:20) was appropriate, since the Philippians prided themselves on being citizens of Rome (cf. Acts 16:21). The Philippians may well have known some of the members of the palace guard (1:13) and Caesar's household (4:22).

The church at Philippi, the first one founded by Paul in Europe, dates from the apostle's second missionary journey (Acts 16:12–40). Philippi evidently had a very small Jewish population. Because there were not enough men to form a synagogue (the requirement was for 10 Jewish men who were heads of a household), some devout women met outside the city at a place of prayer (Acts 16:13) alongside the Gangites River. Paul preached the gospel to them and Lydia, a wealthy merchant dealing in expensive purple dyed goods (Acts 16:14), became a believer (16:14, 15). It is likely that the Philippian church initially met in her spacious home.

Satanic opposition to the new church immediately arose in the person of a demonpossessed, fortune-telling slave girl (Acts 16:16, 17). Not wanting even agreeable testimony from such an evil source, Paul cast the demon out of her (Acts 16:18). The apostle's act enraged the girl's masters, who could no longer sell her services as a fortune-teller (Acts 16:19). They hauled Paul and Silas before the city's magistrates (Acts 16:20) and inflamed the civic pride of the Philippians by claiming the two preachers were a threat to Roman customs (Acts 16:20, 21). As a result, Paul and Silas were beaten and imprisoned (Acts 16:22–24).

The two preachers were miraculously released from prison that night by an earthquake, which unnerved the jailer and opened his heart and that of his household to the gospel (Acts 16:25–34). The next day the magistrates, panicking when they learned they had illegally beaten and imprisoned two Roman citizens, begged Paul and Silas to leave Philippi.

Paul apparently visited Philippi twice during his third missionary journey, once at the beginning (cf. 2 Cor. 8:1–5), and again near the end (Acts 20:6). About 4 or 5 years after his last visit to Philippi, while a prisoner at Rome, Paul received a delegation from the Philippian church. The Philippians had generously supported Paul in the past (4:15, 16), and had also contributed abundantly for the needy at Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8:1–4). Now, hearing of Paul’s imprisonment, they sent another contribution to him (4:10), and along with it Epaphroditus to minister to Paul’s needs. Unfortunately Epaphroditus suffered a near-fatal illness (2:26, 27), either while en route to Rome, or after he arrived. Accordingly, Paul decided to send Epaphroditus back to Philippi (2:25, 26) and wrote the letter to the Philippians to send back with him.

Paul had several purposes in composing this epistle. First, he wanted to express in writing his thanks for the Philippians’ gift (4:10–18). Second, he wanted the Philippians to know why he decided to return Epaphroditus to them, so they would not think his service to Paul had been unsatisfactory (2:25, 26). Third, he wanted to inform them about his circumstances at Rome (1:12–26). Fourth, he wrote to exhort them to unity (2:1, 2; 4:2). Finally, he wrote to warn them against false teachers (3:1–4:1).

Historical and Theological Themes

Since it is primarily a practical letter, Philippians contains little historical material (there are no OT quotes), apart from the momentous treatment of Paul’s spiritual autobiography (3:4–7). There is, likewise, little direct theological instruction, also with one momentous exception. The magnificent passage describing Christ’s humiliation and exaltation (2:5–11) contains some of the most profound and crucial teaching on the Lord Jesus Christ in all the Bible. The major theme of pursuing Christlikeness, as the most defining element of spiritual growth and the one passion of Paul in his own life, is presented in 3:12–14. In spite of Paul’s imprisonment, the dominant tone of the letter is joyful (1:4, 18, 25, 26; 2:2, 16–18, 28; 3:1, 3; 4:1, 4, 10).

Interpretive Challenges

The major difficulty connected with Philippians is determining where it was written (see Author and Date). The text itself presents only one significant interpretive challenge: the identity of the “enemies of the cross” (see notes on 3:18, 19).

Outline

I. Paul’s Greeting (1:1–11)

II. Paul’s Circumstances (1:12–26)

III. Paul’s Exhortations (1:27–2:18)

A. To Stand Firm Amid Persecution (1:27–30)

B. To Be United by Humility (2:1–4)

C. To Remember the Example of Christ (2:5–11)

D. To Be Light in a Dark World (2:12–18)

IV. Paul's Companions (2:19–30)

A. Timothy (2:19–24)

B. Epaphroditus (2:25–30)

V. Paul's Warnings (3:1–4:1)

A. Against Legalism (3:1–16)

B. Against Lawlessness (3:17–4:1)

VI. Paul's Admonition (4:2–9)

VII. Paul's Thankfulness (4:10–20)

VIII. Paul's Farewell (4:21–23)

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