

Philippians, Colossians and Philemon

Study Workbook
“Pillar of Truth” Series

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Introduction to Philippians

Philippi was the first Macedonian city into which Paul entered as a result of what has often been called “the Macedonian vision” (Acts 16:11-12). It was built upon the banks of the Gangites River, about ten miles inland from the seaport of Neapolis. Philippi was originally named Crenides in the ancient kingdom of Thrace, but was overthrown and then re-named by Philip II of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great, in the mid-4th century BC. The city was in an excellent location for a military stronghold, since it guarded the route coming into Macedonia from a sea-based invasion. It was also in close proximity to gold mines which would eventually provide financial backing for Alexander’s march across the world. “Inestimable consequences flowed from this conquest. It has been truly said that if Philip and Alexander had not gone East, Paul and the gospel which he proclaimed could not have come to the West. For, these conquerors brought about the *one* world of Hellenistic speech that made possible the spread of the gospel to many regions.”¹

Philippi was made a Roman colony by an edict of Augustus (Octavian) Caesar, in commemoration of his and Antony’s victory over Brutus and Cassius (42 BC). A Roman colony was considered a satellite of Rome itself, and its citizens enjoyed all the rights and privileges as did citizens of Rome. “The colonists [of a Roman city] went out with all the pride of Roman citizens, to represent and reproduce the City [i.e., Rome] in the midst of an alien population.”² Philippi was free from taxation, had its own city government (rather than being overseen by a provincial ruler), and enjoyed autonomy as long as its own laws did not violate Roman law. It was comprised of three groups: the Roman colonists themselves; the native (Greek) Macedonians; and “a large group of [Eastern] Orientals, including Jews.”³ While its citizens spoke Koine Greek, Latin was Philippi’s official language.

On his second missionary journey (ca. AD 52), Paul (and Silas) came to Philippi and sought out a synagogue of Jews, as was his practice in coming to a place that had not yet been evangelized. He found no synagogue, suggesting that there were not enough Jewish men to establish one (which required at least ten heads of households). He did, however, come upon some Jewish women who were praying by the river, and to them he preached the gospel of Christ. One woman, Lydia, heard this gospel and obeyed it, and thus became the first known convert to Christianity on the continent of Europe (Acts 16:13-15). After this,

¹ William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Galatians, Ephesians, etc.* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 5.

² W. J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 225; bracketed words are mine.

³ H. I. Hester, *The Heart of the New Testament* (Liberty, MO: Quality Press, Inc., 1963), 282; bracketed word is mine.

however, Paul encountered trouble that is well known to Bible students. A slave-girl who allegedly possessed the ability to divine the future began following Paul and Silas and disclosing their identity as “bond-servants of the Most High God.” After “many days” of this, Paul finally had had enough and exorcised from her the demonic spirit that had been the source of this information (Acts 16:16-18). This, of course, ruined the steady income her masters had enjoyed until that moment. They took their anger out on Paul and Silas, and dragged them before the city magistrates to face allegedly criminal charges. The [implied] charge was that of *religio illicita* (“illegal religion”), since it was against Roman law to introduce an entirely new religion to any imperial city or territory. The other charge was that of disrupting the peace of the city. These charges were based upon spite and ignorance, since these men did not know or understand the gospel message that Paul preached. Nonetheless, the city officials had Paul and Silas beaten and imprisoned (Acts 16:19-24). Later, after it was found out that these evangelists were Roman citizens, the city officials feared severe repercussions from Rome and begged that Paul and Silas leave them—which they did, but in their own time (Acts 16:35-40). After this, Paul later visited Philippi again, and enjoyed a very favorable relationship with the church there. These were good people of solid character. “The men were manly, the women womanly; and like the centurions so often mentioned in the NT, many of them with military background exhibited the stern qualities of rugged dependability, honesty, liberality and faithfulness.”⁴ The Christians at Philippi were extremely supportive of Paul, and were among those who gave even to their own hurt because they first gave themselves to the Lord (see 2 Corinthians 8:1-5, Philippians 4:15-16).

There is virtually no doubt that Paul wrote Philippians. The personality of the author is consistent with everything we know about Paul; furthermore, Paul’s name is in the salutation. “This letter is so fresh, distinct, [and] inimitable in every way that forgery is impossible.”⁵ It is clear from internal evidence that he was in Roman prison at the time of writing, but expected to be released soon (1:12-14, 2:17-28). There is no good reason to believe that this imprisonment was other than that which Luke mentioned at the end of Acts, where Paul spent “two full years” in prison while waiting for his official hearing before Emperor Nero (Acts 28:30-31). Given this premise, the writing is dated ca. AD 62, or about ten years after the founding of the church in Philippi. This letter was carried from Rome to Philippi by Epaphroditus, who had been sick for some time while he was with Paul (2:25-26).⁶

⁴ James B. Coffman, *Commentary on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians* (Austin, TX: Firm Foundation, 1977), 251.

⁵ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of Paul’s Epistles to the Philippians, Colossians, etc.* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 698; bracketed word is mine.

⁶ “It is rather significant that in a number of such instances in the New Testament, the Apostles, who could have miraculously healed, did not do so in such cases, and these instances emphasize that the Divine

Purpose and Theme

The return of Epaphroditus gave Paul an opportunity to bring the Philippians up to date on his own circumstances, since they were concerned for him. This also provided an excellent occasion for Paul to express his deep gratitude for the gift(s) that the Philippians had sent to him during his imprisonment. “One of the greatest sources of encouragement to Paul in these dark days of imprisonment in Rome was the sympathetic concern of some of his churches for him. The church at Philippi was not only one of the best of these but was composed of Christians who deeply and genuinely loved Paul.”⁷ Paul also took this opportunity to impart to them whatever counsel, encouragement, and perspective he could provide as an apostle of Jesus Christ. These combined factors resulted in one of the more personal and letter-like writings of the New Testament.

Certainly *rejoicing* is a major theme of this epistle, and Paul wanted these people to find joy and cause for rejoicing even in the midst of very difficult circumstances (just as Paul did himself, even while in prison). “Joy is the music that runs through this epistle, the sunshine that spreads over all of it. The whole epistle radiates joy and happiness.”⁸ The implication seems to be: if we (Christians) can rejoice during times of difficulty, then we will learn to be joyful and content people in any circumstance (cf. 4:11-13). Thus, Paul is often referred to as the “optimistic prisoner” in light of this particular epistle.⁹ “It breathes the language of a father, rather than the authority of an apostle; the entreaties of a tender friend, rather than the commands of one in authority. It expresses the affections of a man who felt that he might be near death, and who tenderly loved them; and it will be, to all ages, a model of affectionate counsel and advice.”¹⁰

Philippi served as the retirement settlement for many Roman officers and career soldiers. For this reason, and because of its Roman colony status, it was stable, disciplined, and relatively peaceful. Likewise, the internal character of the church itself was virtually trouble-free. This did not mean that it did not have its external challenges, however, such as those of the “false circumcision” (3:2-3)—i.e., Judaizing teachers—who tried to infiltrate nearly any of the early churches. One scholar believes that Paul and the Philippians both suffered also from Roman pressure or persecution (citing 1:30). This, he argues, explains references to “citizenship” and Paul’s use of “Lord” (*kyrios*) and “Savior” (*soter*), which were titles

powers which God had given them to confirm the gospel never were used for personal, private or selfish reasons” (Roy E. Cogdill, *The New Testament: Book by Book* [Marion, IN: Cogdill Foundation, 1975], 80).

⁷ Hester, 320.

⁸ Lenski, 691.

⁹ Hendriksen, 38.

¹⁰ Albert Barnes, *Barnes’ Notes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, no date), “Introduction,” cxl.

also given to Emperor Nero.¹¹ In a more natural perspective, while the city prided itself on its Roman citizenship, Paul brought the Christians' attention to a far greater citizenship—that of heaven itself (3:20-21). This “forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead” theme (3:13) predominates this epistle.

General Outline

- ❑ Section One, Lesson One: Salutation and Opening Comments (1:1-11)
- ❑ Section Two: Expectations of Christian Living (1:12 – 2:30)
 - Lesson Two: Paul's Proclamation of the Gospel (1:12-20)
 - Lesson Three: Encouragement to Live in a Worthy Manner (1:21 – 2:4)
 - Lesson Four: The Pre-eminent Example of Christ (2:5-11)
 - Lesson Five: Working Out One's Salvation (2:12-18)
 - Lesson Five (continued): The Coming of Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:19-30)
- ❑ Section Three: The Heavenly Perspective (3:1-21)
 - Lesson Six: Gaining Christ through the Sacrifice of All Things (3:1-11)
 - Lesson Seven: Letting Go in Order to Move Forward (3:12-21)
- ❑ Section Four: Reliance upon God (4:1-23)
 - Lesson Eight: Dwelling upon Excellence (4:1-9)
 - Lesson Nine: The Philippians' Support of Paul (4:10-19)
 - Lesson Nine (continued): Final Thoughts and Salutation (4:20-23)

¹¹Paul Barnett, *Jesus & the Rise of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 332-333. William Hendriksen also supports this view to some extent (8).

LESSON ONE

Section One: Salutation and Opening Comments (1:1-11)

While the opening salutation is from both Paul and Timothy, it is clear that Paul is the actual writer of this epistle and the authority behind its content (1:1). The Philippians are well-acquainted with Timothy, since he was with Paul when he founded the church there (Acts 16:1-10). At the time of writing, Timothy is accompanying Paul while he is in prison in Rome awaiting his trial before Emperor Nero. “Bond-servants” (*doulos*) indicates their humble position relative to Christ’s own: He is the head of His church, and they are merely His servants. The exclusion of Paul’s usual reference to his apostolic authority indicates that he is not writing to them to address problems, but that this is a more personal letter.¹² “To all the saints...including the overseers and deacons” is a unique address among the New Testament epistles. In the earliest days of the church, church leadership came directly from the apostles; as time went on, however, this leadership was increasingly turned over to the appointed elders and deacons of each congregation. (Note the plurality of men in both groups.) In Philippians, however, Paul speaks to the entire group as one. “Overseers” (*episkopos*) is another word for bishops, elders, or pastors. “Grace to you and peace” (1:2) is Paul’s standard but sincere opening for many of his epistles. The source of all divine grace and spiritual peace is ultimately God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ.

“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you...” (1:3-5). Paul’s daily prayers regularly included his gratitude and appreciate for the church in Philippi, as well as for other churches (see 1 Corinthians 1:4, Ephesians 1:15-16, Colossians 1:3-4, et al). Despite his lengthy imprisonment, Paul is particularly joyful and upbeat when speaking of the Philippians, partly out of sheer relief that they are relatively trouble free for the moment. “For you all” indicates an address to a group that is not divided or fractured, but is striving to be united in their efforts. “In view of your participation in the gospel ...” (1:5)—the Philippians are not merely hearers of the gospel, but clearly they are doers as well (cf. James 1:21-25). They take seriously their responsibility as fellow participants in the work of the kingdom, contributing financially to the needs of the saints abroad, and supporting Paul personally in his ministry to the churches. Thus, they do all things for the sake of the gospel, making them fellow partakers of it (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:23). Thus, “participation” necessarily implies “fellowship”: a special relationship that God created in His church for the very purpose of disciples of the Master working together for a singular cause.

¹² In this opening, Paul does not refer to himself as an apostle. Yet, “Paul is not dropping his apostolic authority for the time being, he is now only not making it felt” (Lenski, 699).

Paul then expresses his confidence that God is actively at work within the church at Philippi (1:6). “God...is not like men. Men conduct *experiments*, but God carries out a *plan*.”¹³ God never starts something that He does not intend to finish, yet the completion of this work requires the ongoing faith of those in whom He is working. Thus, Paul implies (as he will say directly later on) that the Philippians need to continue in their faith so that God will continue to carry out His will in them. Given this, His divine activity has no limits, and will continue until the literal appearance of Christ.¹⁴ Paul feels comfortable speaking so candidly about the Philippians in this way, since he and they have mutual regard and affection for one another (“I have you in my heart”) (1:7). His ministry to them and their support of his own ministry—despite all the trials and difficulties involved in both cases—have created a strong bond between the two. The church in Philippi witnessed Paul and Silas’ unjust imprisonment for their sakes (Acts 16:22ff), and is well aware of Paul’s present imprisonment in Rome for the sake of the gospel. Likewise, his love for them is pure and genuine—so much so, that he calls upon God to be a witness of it (1:8).

Paul’s prayers for the Philippians include an appeal on their behalf for increasing love and wisdom (1:9).¹⁵ “Real knowledge” implies an increasingly *improved* knowledge—learning that is continually being refined and made more accurate through prayer and study. “All discernment” involves wisdom in dealing with spiritual matters, which includes the ability to judge between right and wrong (Hebrews 5:14). The purpose for this knowledge and discernment is then stated (in 1:10-11).

- ❑ **“To approve of the things that are excellent”**: Excellent things must be properly appraised; the natural man of the world does not value them in the way that a spiritual child of God does (1 Corinthians 2:11-14). Christians are to “proclaim the excellencies of Him who called [us] out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9), but we must first know what these excellencies are in order to proclaim them. The standard for this approval is the Word of God; the application of this approval is in the Christ-like manner in which we live.
- ❑ **“Sincere and blameless”**: The Greek word for “sincere” literally means “(to be) judged by sunlight,” that is, to be held up to the sun’s rays and scrutinized for purity.¹⁶ In the case of believers, we are held up to God’s Word and exposed by the

¹³ Hendriksen, 55.

¹⁴ “The day of Christ Jesus” and “the day of the Lord” in New Testament epistles consistently refers to the Second Coming; see 1 Thessalonians 5:2, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2, and 2 Peter 3:10, for example.

¹⁵ For further exposition on this point, see comments in this workbook on Colossians 1:9-10.

¹⁶ *Thayer’s Greek Definitions*, electronic edition (© 2009 QuickVerse) [Strong’s #G1506]. But the English word comes from two Latin words, *sin* (without) and *cere* (wax). “Italian marble vendors and certain merchants of porcelain fell into the habit of hiding flaws in their merchandise by filling cracks and blemishes with a certain kind of wax; but the more reputable dealers advertised their wares as *sin cere* (without wax); and

Light for what (and who) we really are (Ephesians 5:7-13). If our character is consistent with God's expectations, we are sincere; if not, then we fail the test (cf. 2 Corinthians 13:5). "Blameless" means "unoffensive," as in not bringing offense against God with our actions, and thus not incurring guilt and His condemnation. This does not mean that we are unable to sin, but that *when* we sin we take the proper recourse and seek God's forgiveness (Colossians 1:22, 1 John 2:1-2). "Until the day of Christ" indicates the duration of our seeking to be sincere and blameless: until death or the Second Coming, whichever comes first. (This phrase, "until the day of Christ," can also mean "with a view toward the day of Christ." Even so, the objective and process remains the same.)

- **"Having been filled with the fruit of righteousness":** The power (or producing energy) of this fruit is the Holy Spirit; the believer's connection to this power is his fellowship with Christ. "Paul wants all the Philippians to appear then as being filled with nothing but fruit of a righteous quality."¹⁷ We are made to think of the vine-branch analogy in John 15:1-9: because of our branch-like connection to the Vine (Christ), we are able to bear fruit (by the Holy Spirit; see Galatians 5:22-23). Thus, the effect of fruit-bearing comes "through Jesus Christ," and is impossible apart from Him (John 15:5). "To the glory and praise of God" describes the ultimate benefit of this fruit-bearing process: not only do we receive salvation, but God is honored by our decision to serve Him.

Passages such as this illustrate the full purpose of what Christians do and why we do it. While the world stumbles into the future without purpose, objective, or an accurate understanding of what is to come, the Christian is to be informed, prepared, and looking forward to the full revelation of God's plan in the hereafter. It takes strong conviction to believe in things we have never seen, which is why "we walk by faith and not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7).

from this derived the meaning of the English word 'sincere.' The true meaning of it is 'without deception' or 'without hypocrisy'" (Coffman, 265).

¹⁷ Lenski, 720.

