

# PHILIPPIANS

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## Profile:

Sent from: Paul, at Rome, joined by Timothy.  
Sent to: Members at Philippi, in northern Greece, "with the bishops and deacons."  
Date: About A.D. 62.  
Purpose: To thank the Philippians for help and to encourage them to perfect their lives.  
Main themes: Christ and obedience; progressive salvation.

## Background:

It is assumed that Paul's Epistle to the Philippians was the last written during his First Roman Imprisonment. In the Epistle, Paul seems to express faith that his trial will result in his acquittal and consequent ability to visit them shortly. (Phil. 1:25-26) Timothy was with him at the time of writing.

## The City

Philippi was named for its refounder Philip, the father of Alexander the Great, the world conqueror. Situated in Eastern Macedonia at the foot of Mount Pangaeus and between the Nestus and Strymon rivers, it was a prosperous trading center because of its location on the famous Egnatian Road, which linked the Aegean and Adriatic Seas. From the high acropolis above the theater, one views Paul's city below, with the wide circumference of the periphery wall and small stream beyond, and a sea of fertile fields on the outside. The remodeled second-century city lies in crumbled splendor, with walls and gates and forum located where Paul walked earlier. Besides the road from the coast, the main east-west road ran through Philippi, which increased its economic and intellectual vitality. Communication and help to the apostle went out on these routes.

As one of the first missionaries, Luke sketched the place of first European preaching: "Philippi, a city of the first rank in that district of Macedonia, and a Roman colony" (Acts 16:12, NEB). Anthony and Augustus had defeated Julius Caesar's assassins at the battle of Philippi; afterward that "small settlement" was "enlarged" by immigration of rewarded veterans. Later, Augustus eliminated Anthony, and many who lost their Italian lands were permitted to resettle in Philippi and other eastern cities." This explains the social overtones when Paul was beaten for teaching "customs which are not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe, being Romans" (Acts 16:21). "Colony" was a technical term for Romans settled outside Rome. That Philippi was a colony implies that it had civic rights of Rome and the honor of modeling its local government after that of the mother city. The old Roman virtues were loyalty and reliability. These qualities certainly summarize the remarkable faithfulness of the Philippian Christians.

Paul came to Phillip with his small missionary group in obedience to the vision of the pleading man of Macedonia (Acts 16:9). They landed at Neapolis (modern Kavalla) and made their way over the coastal range to the interior plains flanked by spectacular mountains. The Apostle seemed to have a special affection for the converts he made in this city, and they readily reciprocated it. The trust which Paul had in the Philippian saints is shown in the fact that he on several occasions allowed them to send him gifts of money (2 Cor. 8:9; Phil. 4: 15, 16, 18), although it was usual for him to make his own way through tent-making. It was one of these gifts from the Philippians during his imprisonment which caused the Apostle to write the Epistle. Knowing that Paul was in prison and presumably in need of funds, the thoughtful Philippians sent him a gift of money by the hand of Epaphroditus, one of their number. (Phil. 2:25; 4:14-18) It was their apparent intention that Epaphroditus should not only deliver the money, but stay and assist Paul in whatever way that he could. In his characteristic manner, the Apostle calls him "my brother, and companion in labor, and fellow-soldier, but your messenger, and he that ministered to my wants." (Phil. 2:25) Epaphroditus administered to Paul's needs with zeal and devotion, but his health failed

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<sup>11</sup> Adapted from Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Understanding Paul*, 244–247, and Sidney B. Sperry, *Paul's Life and Letters*, vii to 303.

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and he became very ill—indeed, "nigh unto death." (Phil. 2:27) Through the Lord's mercy his life was spared, lest Paul "should have sorrow upon sorrow." (Ibid.) When he recovered, Epaphroditus grew homesick and "was full of heaviness" because his friends in Philippi had heard that he had been sick. (Phil. 2:26) Paul thereupon allowed him to return to his home and at the same time seized upon the opportunity to send his friends a letter by him. In it the Apostle thanked the Philippians for their kindness, commended Epaphroditus for his devoted service, and exhorted them to receive him with joy and honor. (Phil. 2:26-30)

Epaphroditus may have reported to Paul, when he first arrived in Rome, that there was some tendency to disunion in the branch at Philippi, that some members were pessimistic about the future in view of the Apostle's imprisonment, and that the Judaizers and Libertines were stirring up trouble. It is possible that Paul had received a letter about these and other facts at a more recent time (Phil. 1:12, 19, 25, 26; 3:2; 4:10-13) and so was also using this letter to counsel the Philippians in these matters and to encourage them. He tells them that their difficulties will pass by if they live their religion and carry out in their lives the teachings of Christ. His watchword in the Epistle is "joy." However difficult their task may be, the Philippians are not to give way to despair. They are to meet and solve their hardships bravely, with stout hearts. In this joyful vein, Paul closes his exhortation: "Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice." (Phil. 4:4)

## **Church Members**

Trusting in the Troas vision, Paul entered Philippi and found the devout women meeting at the place of prayer on the edge of the city. One of their number was a vital personality—Lydia, whom the Greek calls a "dealer in purple" (Acts 16:14, NEB), was from Roman Asia and probably had import contacts. She had a large enough house for four missionaries and the means to insist that they stay with her (Acts 16:15). She may be one source of assistance that Paul received from Philippi soon after and long after leaving. The other convert named in Acts is the Philippian jailor, baptized after the humility of despair when the earthquake deprived him of his prisoners. But this literal act of God was discerned by this man of faith, whose household joined the Church with him (Acts 16:33-34). The same was true of Lydia's household (Acts 16:15). Paul met with these members and others before leaving Philippi after his first visit (Acts 16:40).

When Paul wrote a dozen years later, the Philippian church was directed by the "bishops and deacons" (Philip. 1:1), suggesting that its growth had resulted in several household churches. Moreover, the quality of the members there rises above that of all other known branches. Paul's warm feelings are expressed at the beginning of the final chapter, where he calls the Philippians "my joy and crown" (Philip. 4: 1), terms not used elsewhere. Appreciation to the strong women of that branch is evident as he asks for harmony between Euodia and Syntyche and mentions "those women which laboured with me in the gospel" (Philip. 4:3). They were to be assisted by Paul's "true yokefellow," who Clement of Alexandria thought was Paul's wife, temporarily staying in a trusted branch of the Church. Another intriguing name follows, Clement, a trusted "fellowlaborer." Yet others merit that title, "and their names" are "in the book of life."<sup>79</sup> Here is another unique compliment to the Philippians. In fact, they are told that they "have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence" (Philip. 2:12). What other letter to a church made such a statement? Paul could not say anything like that to the Corinthians or Galatians, so the Philippians stand at the high end of the spectrum of faithfulness. What Paul would teach them is most revealing on the subject of how exaltation is obtained.

## **Reason for Writing**

Paul and Silas left Philippi with the formal apology of the city fathers and fresh scars of their public beating. But Saints eternally blessed by the missionaries would not ignore their practical needs. Paul and his companions went seventy-five miles west to Thessalonica, where ugly opposition was stirring, and the Philippians filled Paul's needs there once and then sent help again (Philip. 4:16). After a riot in that place, persecution soon forced Paul to the new field of labor in southern Greece. He left three branches of the Church in northern Greece, which explains another compliment to the Philippians: "In the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me concerning giving and receiving but you only" (Philip. 4:15, NKJB). In this time Paul was at Corinth, laboring intensely at missionary work and earning bread by his trade. He preached the gospel to the Corinthians "freely"; "other churches" paid the

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cost of Corinthian service, for "that which was lacking to me the brethren which came from Macedonia supplied" (2 Cor. 11:7-9).

These references of aid at Corinth show that the Philippians were able to send messengers three hundred miles. They did the same thing when Paul was more than twice that distance in Rome. Of the prison epistles, Philippians has the clearest references to imprisonment at the empire's capital. Since it is fashionable to doubt that location, the two Philippians' references to Rome must be surveyed. First, the Saints "of Caesar's household" sent greetings (Philip. 4:22). Commentaries create a wrong impression by assuring readers that the imperial household extended throughout the empire. Any reigning Caesar directed a huge official staff, a civil service handling finances and resources. Outside Rome, the imperial establishment did not staff provincial political centers but collected some taxes and managed scattered business operations. Greetings from provincial staff on a state property or from minor tax collectors would be vague and puzzling to the Philippians. Moreover, Philippians 1 makes the point that Paul's imprisonment had extended the gospel to prominent places. Since the imperial bureaucracy concentrated in Rome, a simple "Caesar's household" implies the center of the empire. In Josephus, for instance, Herod's son Antipater used the slave of Augustus' wife in a plot and was accused of "having corrupted the household of Caesar"---at Rome." Again Philo tells how Herod's grandson Agrippa was made king and en route to Palestine visited Alexandria; there Agrippa was considered worthy of honor partly because he was "a member of Caesar's household." This supposedly shows how "Caesar's household" could be used outside of Rome, but it proves the opposite, for Agrippa had just come from Rome, where he was fostered by the new emperor. In these first-century examples, Rome is strongly indicated when "Caesar's household" is used without modification.

The other Roman reference in Philippians is Paul's indication that his "bonds in Christ" were becoming known "in the whole praetorium" (Philip. 1: 13, literal trans.). This Latin term was written in Greek form, which the apostle obviously expected to be clear without explanation. The King James Version uses "palace" because the New Testament uses the term of Pilate's headquarters and of the building in Caesarea where Paul was brought after the Jerusalem arrest. But as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Acts describes no general missionary work during Paul's Palestinian arrest--perhaps he felt restrained because of Jewish hostility while imprisoned. So vitally expanding conversions do not fit the Palestinian buildings or situations. But custody at Rome was another mission, Luke says, for Paul taught the gospel "with complete freedom" (Acts 28:31, JB). That is the situation in Philippians 1, which fits the Roman imprisonment. Thus, "praetorium" in that setting could be the military barracks or more probably the praetorian guard stationed there. That is the common meaning of praetorium in historical writings and inscriptions of Paul's century. So the gospel that Paul preached to visitors was heard by his Roman guards and began to spread through the ranks as it had also through Caesar's staff. Some Bible-bound scholars say that Paul could be imprisoned elsewhere than Rome because the praetorian troops were stationed in other major cities. But special personal missions aside, the imperial guard was stationed only at Rome to guard the emperor.

Paul wrote to the Philippians near the end of his two-year imprisonment (Acts 28:30), for he had a specific expectation of release instead of general faith that it would happen: with the Lord's blessing he would "come shortly" (Philip. 2:24). This fits the time necessary for communications to go back and forth between Paul and the Philippians. After all their prior help, they had sent Epaphroditus to Rome with things to support the chained apostle (Philip. 4:18). Paul was grateful and recounted their relationship of more than a decade by sending thanks "for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now" (Philip. 1:5). Support for a messenger on the long journey to Rome probably took some organizing, which is evidently reflected in the opening recognition of the bishops and deacons, unprecedented in the other letters that have survived. With the letter Paul was sending back the messenger. Epaphroditus was appreciated as a "brother and fellow-laborer" (Philip. 2:25, literal trans.). This man had longed for his Philippian friends; he was discouraged at being sick but was also discouraged because word came back from Philippi that they knew he "had been sick" (Philip. 2:26). In fact, Epaphroditus had been critically ill, for Paul makes the point that this messenger risked his life to help Paul---"for the work of Christ he came close to death" (Philip. 2:30, NKJB). The devotion of Epaphroditus is a symbol of the solid faith and works of the Philippians. Far on the road of progression, they received a letter underlining how much diligence is required for the prize of exaltation with God.