

Philippians

Authorship

The majority of scholars regard Pauline authorship of the letter to the church at Philippi as indisputable. This is due in large measure to its internal evidence. It is the most positive of Paul's letters and corresponds well with what is known about his relationship with the recipients as revealed elsewhere (cf. Acts 16; 2 Cor. 9:2; 11:9).

Date

Philippians is one of the so-called prison epistles. It was written toward the end of Paul's first Roman imprisonment (which extended from A.D. 60-62), likely in late A.D. 61.¹

Historical Setting

Paul had been under house arrest in Rome for nearly two years as a result of his appeal to Caesar before Festus (cf. Acts 25). The church had become established throughout the empire, was becoming independent from Jewish association, and had not yet begun to experience much official persecution.

Original Readers

The church at Philippi, the first established by Paul in Macedonia, was the recipient of this letter.

Occasion

The most prominent circumstance occasioning Paul's letter was probably the apostle's sensitivity to the Philippians' concern over the well-being of Epaphroditus, the church's messenger, sent to aid Paul in his ministry (cf. 2:25-30). There are also indications that Paul wishes them to prepare for his and Timothy's arrival (cf. 2:19-24). Some disunity in the church may also have played a part in Paul's decision to write. Otherwise there is little by way of heresy or disorder to warrant the letter.

Theme Statement

Life lived as a citizen worthy of the heavenly kingdom will manifest the humility of Christ and realize his reward.

¹ See Appendix: "Dating of the Captivity Epistles."

Outline

- I. Introductory greeting: Paul writes to the entire church at Philippi.....1:1-3
 - A. Paul and Timothy write to the church as servants.1:1
 - B. Paul and Timothy greet the church with its elders and deacons.1:2
 - C. Paul and Timothy wish for the church grace and peace.1:3
- II. Prologue: Paul relates his own experience for the church’s encouragement.1:4-26
 - A. Paul prays for the church.....1:4-11
 - 1. Paul thanks God for the Philippians’ fellowship in the gospel.....1:4-8
 - a. They had helped him from the beginning.....1:4-5
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 - c. They are fellow partakers of grace.1:7-8
 - 2. Paul petitions God for the Philippians’ spiritual progress.1:9-11
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 - b. He prays for them to continue in sincere faith.1:10
 - c. He prays for them to manifest the righteousness of Christ.....1:11
 - B. Paul comforts the church with respect to his condition.1:12-26
 - 1. His captivity has furthered the proclamation of the gospel.1:12-18
 - a. His captivity has been seen as for the cause of Christ.1:12-13
 - b. His captivity has encouraged Christians to testify of Christ.1:14
 - c. His captivity has furthered the gospel despite the hostile intents of some.1:15-18
 - 2. His captivity will soon end resulting in their benefit.1:19-26
 - a. He is confident that his testimony will remain effective.1:19-20
 - b. He is content to either remain with them or be with the Lord.....1:21-23
 - c. He is convinced that he will remain for their benefit.1:24-26
- III. Body: Paul commends conduct worthy of their heavenly citizenship.1:27-4:1
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 - 1. Their citizenship ought to be worthy of the gospel.1:27
 - 2. They must not be terrified of their adversaries.1:28
 - 3. They have been granted the privilege of suffering for Christ.....1:29-30
 - B. Development: The believer has sufficient resource and example to live as a citizen worthy of heaven.2:1-3:16
 - 1. Paul communicates the expectation of heavenly citizenship.....2:1-4
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 - 1) The basis is the work of God.2:1
 - 2) The expectation is like-minded love.2:2
 - b. The action expected is humility of mind.....2:3-4
 - 1) It esteems others as better than self.2:3
 - 2) It cares for the interests of others before self.....2:4
 - 2. Paul commends the standard *par excellence* of heavenly citizenship, Jesus Christ.2:5-11
 - a. They are commanded to adopt the mind of Christ.....2:5

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3.	Paul communicates the implications of heavenly citizenship.....	2:12-18
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b.	They are to reflect the character of God.....	2:14-15
1)	They are not to grumble.....	2:14
2)	They are to shine as lights in the world.	2:15
3)	They are to hold forth the word of life to the world.	2:16-18
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1)	He sought the welfare of the church.....	2:19-21
2)	He served with Paul in an exemplary fashion.	2:22-24
b.	Epaphroditus exemplified the humility of Christ through his distress over the church’s anxiety on his behalf.....	2:25-30
1)	He was a committed servant.....	2:25
2)	He was a selfless servant.....	2:26-30
c.	Paul exemplified the humility of Christ through a life of sacrificial devotion to Jesus Christ.	3:1-16
1)	Paul was able to rejoice in his position regardless of the opposition.	3:1-3
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2.	Paul commends them for giving and assures them of its value to God.	4:15-18
3.	Paul assures them of God’s continued supply.	4:19-20
V.	Concluding greeting and blessing.....	4:21-23

Theme Statement

Life lived as a citizen worthy of the heavenly kingdom will manifest the humility of Christ and realize his reward.

Theme Development

In this most positive of Paul's letters one is able to sense the overwhelming joy that results when believers participate together in the cause of Christ. Though the prospect of difficulty is not entirely absent in the Philippian situation, the overarching tone of the letter is one of joyful confidence in living the Christian life as one who is worthy of inclusion in the Father's heavenly kingdom. Whether things are going well, or just about to come undone, Philippians offers a reminder of what is most important on this side of the Christian's heavenly home.

I. Introductory greeting: Paul writes to the entire church at Philippi (1:1-3).

Paul takes the stance as a servant in his correspondence with a group dear to his heart. He and Timothy want the best for the Philippian believers and are overjoyed to offer themselves to the accomplishment of that end.

II. Prologue: Paul relates his own experience for the church's encouragement (1:4-26).

Paul has been in a Roman prison for the better part of two years and the church has naturally been concerned about his state. He begins by addressing this situation so as to put them at ease.

A. Paul prays for the church (1:4-11).

Paul recounts how he gives thanks for the church in light of their participation in his ministry of the gospel (1:4-8). He wants them to share his focus, which is decidedly not on his difficult circumstances but rather on the cause of Christ. His prayer for them is to increase in those qualities and activities that will glorify God (1:9-11).

B. Paul comforts the church with respect to his condition (1:12-26).

In order to put the church at ease about his condition he shares how all that has happened to him, good and bad, has actually turned out for the gospel's furtherance (1:12-18). His only concern is that he remain faithful to the opportunities given him to share Christ, that is, that he would maintain his boldness and thus be delivered ("saved," cf. 1:19) from being ashamed. He is confident that their prayers for him will accomplish that end (1:19-21). Even

though he knew that he could glorify God by life or death, he has a sense that he will remain on in this world for their benefit (1:22-26, cf. 2:24).

III. Body: Paul commends conduct worthy of their heavenly citizenship (1:27–4:1).

Paul now introduces the main theme of his letter, namely, conducting one's life as a citizen of heaven for the sake of the gospel of Christ.² They will need to be united in intent and confident in the face of persecution to live as worthy citizens (1:27-29). They had Paul as an example of the possibility of that kind of a life (1:30).

B. Development: The believer has sufficient resources and examples to live as a citizen worthy of heaven (2:1–3:16).

The body of the epistle proceeds to develop the basic attitude of heavenly citizenship in terms of the attitude and behavior of the Lord Jesus Christ and those who have followed his example, specifically, Timothy, Epaphroditus, and Paul.

1. Paul communicates the expectation of heavenly citizenship (2:1-4). Paul picks up the “one mind” idea introduced in 1:27 and builds his main exhortation around it. The mind he refers to is the attitude which sets aside one's own rights and prerogatives for the benefit of another, that is, “humility” (2:1-4). On the basis of what they already possess in Christ (1:1), this is a reasonable and realizable expectation.

2. Paul commends the standard *par excellence* of heavenly citizenship, Jesus Christ (2:5-11). The mind of humility is the mind of Christ (2:5). It is the attitude that motivated him to leave his rightful position of privilege and honor and become a human servant for the accomplishment of mankind's redemption (2:2-7). As a result he was exalted above all things to the glory of the Father (2:9-11). This is the standard by which believers are to measure true ambition (cf. 2:3).

3. Paul communicates the implications of heavenly citizenship (2:12-18). On the basis of this example, the readers are exhorted to deliver themselves from the selfish interests of the flesh and live as obedient citizens of the kingdom (2:12; cf. 2:3; 3:20). This is possible only because God is at work in them for this very purpose (2:13). Murmuring and disputing are counter-productive to the way of life that results in a sterling testimony for Christ in a darkened world (2:14-16). No sacrifice is too great to make for such an undertaking (2:17-18).

² “Conduct” in 1:27 translates the Greek *politeuo* meaning “to live as a citizen,” which forms an *inclusio* with the *politeuma* of 3:20, translated as “citizenship.” Notice also the “stand fast in one spirit” of 1:27 and the “therefore . . . so stand fast. . .” in 4:1.

4. Paul commends examples of heavenly citizenship (2:19–3:16). Three examples of this mind are readily available for the Philippians' consideration. They knew of Timothy's proven character, seen in his service with Paul on their behalf. Paul adds that he has no one so like-minded who would care for their needs (2:19-24). Likewise their own messenger Epaphroditus is so other-centered that he was grieved over their distress over his own illness (2:25-30).

Thirdly, Paul holds himself forth as a example to follow (3:1-16; cf. 3:17). They should rejoice, despite those who glory in the flesh (3:1-3), because Paul has been able, by the grace of God, to overcome all such boasting (3:4-7). His pursuit is Christ as life indeed and life guaranteed (3:8-11). All other things in this life are comparable to garbage (3:8). His desire is to attain to the kind of life that displays the resurrection power of Jesus on a day to day basis (3:10-11). Though this is not a perfectly realizable goal here and now, it is nonetheless what Paul is making his continued and concerted objective (3:12-14). His desire is that the Philippians would have the same pursuit (3:15-16).

C. Application: Walk as a worthy citizen (3:17–4:1).

Paul exhorts the Philippian believers to follow his example, rather than that of those who set their minds on earthly things (3:17-19). By so doing they will conduct themselves in keeping with their true identity as subjects of the Father's heavenly kingdom (3:20) and will be continually buoyed by the hope of their ultimate glorification (3:21). To this end they must adhere steadfastly (4:1).

IV. Epilogue: Paul exhorts and thanks the church in specific ways (4:2-20).

Having concluded his main thought, Paul gives a number of exhortations. Two women need to be encouraged in the "same-mindedness" of which he has just spoken (4:2-3). The whole church needs to continue in a positive and winsome manner (4:4-5), protected by the peace of God (4:6-6) and experiencing the presence of the God of peace (4:8-9). What they are to do with their minds will be critical to both experiences (cf. 4:7-8).

B. Paul thanks the church for their material generosity (4:10-20).

Once again Paul expresses thanks for the Philippians' participation in his ministry, this time in the matter of providing material support (4:10). Though he has not been conscious of material need, they will benefit from their giving because it is a pleasant gift in God's eyes (4:18). It simply manifests the gracious provision of the glorious Father (4:19-20).

V. Concluding greeting and blessing (4:21-23).

Paul concludes with two-way greetings, underscoring the theme of their mutual pursuit of all that the grace of God has made possible. There is little indication in this letter that the anticipated reunion between Paul and his “partners” in the gospel will be anything other than a very joyous occasion.

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Appendix

Dating of the Captivity Epistles

The reason that Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon are called prison, or captivity, epistles is because of the explicit references to the author's bonds (Eph 3:1; 4:1; 6:20; Phil 1:7, 13, 14; Col 4:18; and Phlm 1, 9). Since the author had relative freedom to receive visitors and carry on extensive correspondence "captivity" rather than "prison" may be the best descriptive term for grouping these works. Furthermore, three of these may be grouped as coming from the same time and place, namely Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon. This is due to the mention of Tychicus as being the bearer of two of the letters (cf. Col 4:7 and Eph 6:21) and the mention of Onesimus as being Tychicus' companion (cp. Col 4:9 with Phlm 10–12). In addition Archippus is greeted in the salutation of Philemon (v. 2) and addressed in the epilogue of Colossians (4:17). On the basis of this internal evidence Harrison summarizes: "These three epistles, then, emanated from the apostle at the same time and must have originated at one place."³ Besides the lack of such links with Philippians, that letter is also set off from the other three by its much more positive tone with respect to Paul's expectation of imminent release (Phil 1:25).

The dating of Ephesians has been complicated in modern times by questions about its authenticity and its destination. Guthrie summarizes the traditional arguments for Pauline authorship as being (1) its self-claims (Paul's naming of himself and the many first person references) (2) its external attestation (its general acceptance as a work of Paul and wide circulation by the middle of the second century) (3) its Pauline structure (4) its language and literary affinities (5) its theological affinities and (6) its historical data.⁴ With respect to the last evidence, Guthrie notes that the lack of reference to the fall of Jerusalem (which would be *apropos* to the Jew and Gentile discussion) and "the absence of a developed ecclesiastical organization" point to an early rather than latter date.⁵ After examining the arguments against Pauline authorship,

³ Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 293.

⁴ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4th ed. revised (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 496-99.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 499.

Guthrie concludes, “that the weight of evidence is inadequate to overthrow the overwhelming external attestation to Pauline authorship, and the epistle’s own claims.”⁶

However, Pauline authorship notwithstanding, there are still difficulties in identifying the destination of Ephesians. This is due to the lack of the words ἐν Ἐφεσῶ (en Epheso) in the salutation of some manuscripts, the seeming lack of familiarity with the readership (cf. 1:15; 3:2; 4:21) and the absence of reference to specific individuals in the concluding section (6:21–24).⁷ Two possibilities for the textual variant are either that the destination reference was dropped, particularly in Egypt, for liturgical reasons or that it was originally intended as a circular letter.⁸ Whatever the exact destination, the close connection with Colossians argues for a Roman captivity origin. Harrison puts the three connected letters (Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon) around the middle of the Roman detention⁹, which would be, according to the chronology worked out above, the winter of A.D. 60/61.

The dating of Colossians is closely tied to the evidence for the dating of Ephesians and Philemon. While the material relating to Onesimus and Philemon fit better against an Ephesian captivity as opposed to a Caesarean imprisonment, there is insufficient reason to overthrow the traditional Roman imprisonment view for either of the alternatives. Guthrie, in accepting a Rome origin, thinks that Colossians would have had to have been written during the middle or later half of Paul’s time there in order to allow for the news of his plight to have spread to the Lycus valley communities and for Epaphrus to have sought Paul out (cf. Col 1:7; 4:12).¹⁰

Philemon is addressed to the owner of the slave Onesimus who had found the way from his native city of Colosse to Rome where Paul was imprisoned. Colossians and Philemon belong to the same period. Guthrie thinks it likely that Tychicus, accompanied by Onesimus, was the bearer of both letters to Colosse.¹¹ The date, then would be the same as that for Colossians, that is winter A.D. 60/61.

⁶ Ibid., 527.

⁷ Cf. Ibid., 528-33.

⁸ Ibid., 529-30.

⁹ Harrison, *Introduction*, 301.

¹⁰ Guthrie, *Introduction*, 580.

¹¹ Ibid., 664.

Philippians presents a more complex situation with respect to destination and dating. Paul's close association with the church at Philippi, well established through the record of Acts, leaves very little doubt as to the authenticity and destination of the letter. The real question is the origin of the letter given the nature of the church's interaction with the apostle during the period in question. Paul is clearly a prisoner (Phil 1:7, 13, 16). At issue is the identification of the imprisonment. Rome has always been the traditional opinion, however more recently cases have been made for Caesarea and Ephesus.

Robinson has recently argued for the Caesarean context for the prison epistles.¹² However Guthrie concludes that were the Roman hypothesis to prove faulty, the Ephesian alternative would "probably be unchallenged."¹³ One of the main reasons for entertaining the Ephesian imprisonment hypothesis as being the context for the Philippian correspondence has to do with the number of back and forth visits reflected in the letter in light of Philippi's relative proximity to Rome versus Ephesus. On the surface there needs to be sufficient time for news of Paul's situation to come to Philippi, Epaphroditus' arrival in Rome with a gift for the apostle, the messenger's falling ill and its news reaching the home church, followed by Paul's receiving a report of the church's concern over their emissary's condition. Guthrie demonstrates the plausibility of such rather extensive travel falling well within Paul's two-year stint in Rome, noting that numerous Roman writers confirmed the contention of Bishop Lightfoot that a month was sufficient time for a journey from Rome to Philippi.¹⁴

Another problem is the supposed conflict between Paul's statement that seems to indicate that he viewed his death as imminent, on the one hand, and his expectation of receiving word from Timothy regarding the Philippians' welfare on the other (cp. 2:17 with 2:19). This would be problematic with the greater distance involved between Rome and Macedonia. The answer, of course, is that Paul's true expectation is that he will be released (cf. 1:25), the reference in 2:17 being a hypothetical worst scenario with respect to his service on behalf of the church's faith.

Finally, Paul's anticipated itinerary upon release has raised objections to Rome as the place of writing. The record of Acts, coupled with the Roman correspondence, leaves the very

¹² John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1976), 57-85.

¹³ Guthrie, *Introduction*, 555.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 547-49.

definite impression that Paul has his sight set inexorably upon Spain as his next field of missionary endeavor. This seems to go against his stated intention to visit Philippi soon (cf. 2:24). However, Paul's plans had changed more than once in his missionary work (e.g. in his intentions regarding visits to Corinth). There is no necessary conflict between a proposed visit to Philippi upon release from Rome (a movement East) before resuming his long held goal of ministry in the far West. At any rate there are no compelling reasons to deny Rome as the site of Paul's imprisonment on account of distances and itinerary.

The references in Philippians to Caesar's household and the praetorium (1:13), the relative freedom to carry on correspondence and receive companions, and the expression of a sense of imminent acquittal all serve to support the traditional view that Paul wrote Philippians from Rome, probably toward the end of his captivity, likely late in A.D. 61. This conclusion, in turn, leads to, at least, the opportunity for a visit to Spain and the necessity of a final imprisonment, which provides the possible backdrop to the Pastoral Epistles.