Background to the Book of Philippi

First Century Philippi

In Paul’s time Philippi was an important city in the Roman province of Macedonia. It was located on a fertile plain in the highlands about ten miles northwest of the port city Neapolis (modern Kavalla in northern Greece), and the Via Egnatia—the primary road linking Italy with Asia—ran through the city. After the Romans conquered Macedonia at the Battle of Pydna in 167 B.C. they divided it into four districts. Philippi was located in the first of these districts and probably contended with Amphipolis (the district’s capital) and Thessalonica for the coveted title of “leading city” of its region.

Mark Anthony and Octavian designated Philippi a Roman colony and enlarged its territory after their defeat of Brutus and Cassius in a famous battle fought on the plains and hills surrounding the city in 42 B.C. From that time the city and its surrounding regions became a favorite location for settling Roman soldiers whose term of service in the army had ended. As a result, by Paul’s

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3 Appian, Civil Wars 4.13.105–32.
4 Strabo, Geogr. 7.41; Dio Cassius, Roman History 51.4.6.
time, Philippi had a decidedly Roman character. In first-century inscriptions found at the site of Philippi, Latin is the dominant tongue. Some of these inscriptions mention duumviri, aediles, and quaestors, all Roman terms for city officials—and clear evidence that in Paul’s time the city was administered according to Roman custom. Moreover, the architectural remains of buildings and monuments from the first century are reminiscent of Rome: a Roman forum, Roman baths, and an arch marking the limit of the city’s sacred, uncultivated area (pomerium).⁵

Idolatry: Important commercial centers, with their wide variety of influences, teemed with religious activity, and Philippi was no exception. Inscriptions from around Paul’s time show the presence of a sanctuary dedicated to Dionysius (Bacchus) and other deities associated with him: Liber, Libera, and Hercules. Themes of fertility often accompanied worship of Dionysius, and the Dionysian mystery cult seems to have given him a role in assuring a happy life for the dead. Women played an especially prominent role in the worship of Dionysius and his associates in Philippi. Nearly eighty depictions of the goddess Diana appear in reliefs carved into the hill above Philippi, and although they come from a period after Paul, they probably reflect religious convictions current during his time. Diana was associated with fertility, childbirth, and children, typical concerns of ancient women. Most of her followers, both priestesses and devotees, seem to have been women. The Thracian Horseman also appears in seven hillside reliefs. He was especially connected with the safe conduct of the soul into the afterlife. In addition, archaeologists have turned up an altar dedicated to the emperor Augustus and a sanctuary dedicated to the worship of some 140 Egyptian deities.

The Gospel Comes to Philippi

Into this cacophony of religious activity, Paul and his friends Silas, Timothy, and Luke brought the gospel. Taking the gospel to Philippi had not been Paul’s idea. After traveling through central Asia Minor, Paul, Silas, and Timothy had wanted to continue north to Bithynia, but “the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to” (Acts 16:7), and they had been forced to turn east toward Troas. There Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia, who begged him to “come … and help us” (16:9), and Paul and his friends, now accompanied by Luke, obediently went (16:10–12). Their ship from Troas landed at Neapolis, and from there they followed the Via Egnatia to Philippi.

THE MEDITERRANEAN WORLD: MACEDONIA

Paul discovered no synagogue in the city, but only a place of prayer where a few women gathered to call on the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Luke tells us that this place was “outside the city gate” (Acts 16:13). Paul explained the gospel to the group of women gathered there, and a woman named Lydia, together with her household, believed. She must have been wealthy, for not only was she a businesswoman, but she owned a house large enough to accommodate Paul and his companions during their visit to Philippi (16:14–15).

Before long, however, storm clouds gathered over Paul’s ministry in the city: The apostle angered the owners of a slave girl by exorcising her of a demon that enabled her to earn “a great deal of money for her owners” by telling fortunes (Acts 16:16–19). The enraged slaveholders dragged Paul and Silas before the city magistrates and charged them with being Jews and creating a stir by advocating “customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice” (16:20–21). At the magistrates’ orders, Paul and Silas were stripped, beaten, and thrown into prison (16:22). Despite the conversion of the jailer (16:31–34) and an apology to Paul from the magistrates for

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6 Ibid., 315.
9 Ibid., 51.
failing to give Roman citizens a proper trial (16:35–37), the persecution of the fledgling Philippian church continued (Phil. 1:27–30)\(^\text{11}\)

**Introduction to the Book of Philippians**\(^\text{12}\)

Philippians is the epistle of joy and encouragement in the midst of adverse circumstances. In it, Paul freely expresses his fond affection for the Philippians in view of their consistent testimony and support, and lovingly urges them to center their actions and thoughts on the person, pursuit, and power of Jesus Christ. Paul also seeks to correct a problem with disunity and rivalry, urging his readers to imitate Christ in His humility and servanthood. In this way the work of the gospel will go forward as believers seek to stand fast, be of the same mind, rejoice always, and pray about everything.

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**Introduction and Title**—Paul writes a thank-you note to the believers at Philippi for their help in his hour of need, and he uses the occasion to send along some instruction on Christian unity. His central thought is simple: Only in Christ are real unity and joy possible. With Christ as your model of humility and service, you can enjoy a oneness of purpose, attitude, goal, and labor—a truth which Paul illustrates from his own life, and one the Philippians desperately need to hear. Within their own ranks, fellow workers in the Philippian church are at odds, hindering the work in proclaiming new life in Christ. Because of this, Paul exhorts the church to “stand fast….be of the same mind….rejoice in the Lord always….but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known….and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (4:1, 2, 4, 6, 7).

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\(^{11}\) Clinton E. Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary Volume 3: Romans to Philemon*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 343-46.

This epistle is called *Pros Philippesious*, “To the Philippians.” The church at Philippi was the first church Paul founded in Macedonia.

**Date and Setting**—In 356 B.C., King Philip of Macedonia (the father of Alexander the Great) took this town and expanded it, renaming it Philippi. The Romans captured it in 168 B.C. and in 42 B.C., the defeat of the forces of Brutus and Cassius by those of Anthony and Octavian (later Augustus) took place outside the city. Octavian turned Philippi into a Roman colony (cf. Acts 16:12) and a military outpost. The citizens of this colony were regarded as citizens of Rome and given a number of special privileges. Because Philippi was a military city and not a commercial center, there were not enough Jews for a synagogue when Paul came (Acts 16:13).

Paul’s “Macedonian Call” in Troas during his second missionary journey led to his ministry in Philippi with the conversion of Lydia and others. Paul and Silas were beaten and imprisoned, but this resulted in the conversion of the Philippian jailer. The magistrates were placed in a dangerous position by beating Roman citizens without a trial (Acts 16:37–40), and that embarrassment may have prevented future reprisals against the new Christians in Philippi. Paul visited the Philippians again on his third missionary journey (Acts 20:1, 6). When they heard of his Roman imprisonment, the Philippian church sent Epaphroditus with financial help (4:18); they had helped Paul in this way on at least two other occasions (4:16). Epaphroditus almost died of an illness, yet remained with Paul long enough for the Philippians to receive word of his malady. Upon his recovery, Paul sent this letter back with him to Philippi. (2:25–30).

Silas, Timothy, Luke, and Paul first came to Philippi in A.D. 51, eleven years before Paul wrote this letter. Certain references (1:13; 4:22) suggest that it was written from Rome, although some commentators argue for Caesarea or Ephesus. Paul’s life was at stake, and he was evidently awaiting the verdict of the Imperial Court (2:20–26).

**Theme and Purpose**—This letter was written to convey Paul’s love and gratitude for the believers at Philippi and to exhort them to a lifestyle of unity, holiness, and joy. Paul evidently enjoyed a very warm relationship with the Philippian church, perhaps his favorite. They were more sensitive and responsive to his financial needs than any other church (see 4:15–18; 2 Cor. 8:11) and appeared to have no major problems in their midst. Philippians was not written because of any crisis, but to express Paul’s affection for them, his gratitude for their gift, his encouragement concerning their Christian growth, his admonitions against false teaching, and his thoughts about his circumstances. Paul gave the Philippians the latest news of his imprisonment and growing ministry in the propagation of the gospel (1:12–20), and prepared them for the coming of Timothy and possibly himself (2:19–24). He warned them of the twin dangers of legalism and antinomianism (3), but this was more of a preventative than a corrective measure. On the other hand, Paul recognized a growing problem of disunity in the Philippian church and sought to correct it before it became severe.\(^\text{13}\)

**Survey of Philippians**—Philippians is the epistle of joy and encouragement in the midst of adverse circumstances. Paul freely expresses his fond affection for the Philippians, appreciates their consistent testimony and support, and lovingly urges them to center their actions and thoughts on the pursuit of the person and power of Christ. Paul also seeks to correct the problems

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\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 405-07.
of disunity and rivalry (2:2–4) and to prevent the problems of legalism and antinomianism (3:1–19). Philippians focuses on: Paul’s account of his present circumstances (1); Paul’s appeal to have the mind of Christ (2); Paul’s appeal to have the knowledge of Christ (3); and Paul’s appeal to have the peace of Christ (4).

Paul’s Account of His Present Circumstances (1): Paul’s usual salutation (1:1–2) is followed by his thanksgiving, warm regard, and prayer on behalf of the Philippians (1:3–11). For years, they have participated in the apostle’s ministry, and he prays for their continued growth in the real knowledge of Christ. Paul shares the circumstances of his imprisonment and rejoices in the spread of the gospel in spite of and because of his situation (1:12–26). As he considers the outcome of his approaching trial, he expresses his willingness to “depart and be with Christ” (1:23) or to continue in ministry. Paul encourages the Philippians to remain steadfast in the face of opposition and coming persecution (1:27–30).

Paul’s Appeal To Have the Mind of Christ (2): Paul exhorts the Philippians to have a spirit of unity and mutual concern by embracing the attitude of humility (2:1–4), the greatest example of which is the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ (2:5–11). The *kenosis*, or “emptying” of Christ, does not mean that He divested Himself of His deity, but that He withheld His preincarnate glory and voluntarily restricted His use of certain attributes (e.g., omnipresence and omniscience). Paul asks the Philippians to apply this attitude to their lives (2:12–18), and he gives two more examples of sacrifice, the ministries of Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:19–30).

Paul’s Appeal To Have the Knowledge of Christ (3): It appears that Paul is about to close his letter (“Finally, my brethren,” 3:1) when he launches into a warning about the continuing problem of legalism (3:1–9). Paul refutes this teaching with revealing autobiographical details about his previous attainments in Judaism. Compared to the goal of knowing Christ, those pursuits are as nothing. True righteousness is received through faith, not by mechanical obedience to any law. Paul scornfully refers to the Judaizers as “dogs” (*their* term for Gentiles) and “evil workers” (that is, the attempt to achieve salvation by works). Paul could be refuting the opposite extreme of antinomianism (3:17–21). Some, however, believe this may still refer to the legalists. Paul yearns for the promised attainment of the resurrected body.

Paul’s Appeal To Have the Peace of Christ (4): In a series of exhortations, Paul urges the Philippians to have peace with the brethren by living a lifestyle of unity, prayerful dependence, and holiness (4:13). In chapter 4, verses 4–9, Paul describes the secrets of having the peace of God as well as peace with God. He then rejoices over their gift, but explains that the power of Christ enables him to live above his circumstances (4:10–20). This joyous letter from prison closes with greetings and a benediction (4:21–23).  

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