

# **A LOOK AT A BOOK: Philippians**

## **A Friendly Thank You Note**

### **June 24, 2012**

#### **Theme and Occasion**

The church at Philippi appears to have been Paul's favorite. He received regular assistance from it (Philippians 4:15ff.; 2 Corinthians 11:8ff.) The epistle to the Philippians is thus the most personal of any that Paul wrote to a church. It is, in fact, a thank you note for their most recent financial gift (4:10, 14), which they had sent through Epaphroditus (2:25). During his trip or after his arrival with the offering, Epaphroditus had fallen almost fatally ill (2:27). The Philippians heard of his illness, and word came back to Epaphroditus that they were concerned about him. Paul sensed that Epaphroditus wanted to return to Philippi and therefore sent him with the epistle (2:25-30)

#### **Subsidiary Purposes**

The return of Epaphroditus not only enabled Paul to write his gratitude for their financial assistance, but also gave him opportunity to counteract a tendency toward divisiveness in the Philippian church (2:2; 4:2), to warn against Judaizers (ch. 3), and to prepare the Philippians for approaching visits by Timothy and, hopefully, by Paul himself (2:19-24).

#### **Caesarean Origin**

Paul was in prison at the time of writing ("my imprisonment," 1:7, 13). But to which of his imprisonments does Paul refer? Probably not the Caesarean, because there he would not have been able to preach so freely as is implied in 1:12, 13 (compare Acts 24:23). Also, Paul would have known that release in Caesarea would mean almost instant lynching by the Jews in the territory; his only prospect of safety lay in appealing to Caesar and thus going to Rome under guard. Yet in Philippians 2:24 (and Philemon 22) Paul hopes for quick release.

#### **Ephesian Origin**

Ephesus presents a better possibility for several reasons. Paul writes that he hopes to send Timothy to Philippi (2:19, 23); and Luke writes that Paul sent Timothy and Erastus to Philippi from Ephesus (Acts 19:22). (But if the two passages are really parallel, why does Paul omit mentioning Erastus in Philippians 2:19ff.?) A further argument for an Ephesian imprisonment is that the argument against the Judaizers in chapter 3 is similar to Paul's earlier arguments.

According to Acts, Luke accompanied Paul to Rome, but was not with him in Ephesus. That Paul does not mention Luke in Philippians as he does in Colossians 4:14 and Philemon 24 therefore suggests he wrote Philippians from an Ephesian imprisonment. (But if Philippians was written toward the end of the Roman imprisonment, Luke might have left Paul by then, so that this argument from silence is not decisive.)

Generally considered the strongest argument in favor of an Ephesian imprisonment over against the Roman is that Philippians presupposes too many journeys between Rome and Philippi (about a month's journey apart), whereas the short distance between Ephesus and Philippi makes the numerous journeys within a short period of time more conceivable. The journeys presupposed in Philippians are:

- (1) the message carried from Rome to Philippi that Paul had been imprisoned there;
- (2) the bringing of the gift by Epaphroditus;
- (3) the delivery back to Philippi of the report that Epaphroditus had fallen ill; and
- (4) the return of the word that the Philippians were concerned about Epaphroditus.

In reality, however, this argument for Ephesus against Rome is not substantial. Time for the journeys between Rome and Philippi would require only four to six months *in toto*. Allowances for intervals between the journeys still keep the whole amount of time required well within the two years (or longer) we know Paul spent in Rome (Acts 28:30).

We must bear in mind that an Ephesian imprisonment of Paul is largely conjectural and is not mentioned in Acts even though Luke goes into great detail about Paul's ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19).

### **Roman Origin**

In favor of Rome, "Praetorian Guard" (1:13) and "Caesar's household" (4:22) most likely point to Rome. According to 1:19ff., Paul's life was at stake in the trial. The trial must therefore have been before Caesar in Rome, for in any other place Paul could always exercise his right of appeal to Caesar. The early tradition of the Marcionite prologue likewise assigns the epistle to Rome. For all these reasons and because of the weakness of arguments to the contrary, the traditional view that Paul wrote Philippians from Rome remains the best.

### **Joy in Hardship**

Read Philippians 1.

The informality of this thank you note makes it difficult to outline. Throughout, the dominant emotional note is one of joy. In the first chapter – after the customary greeting, thanksgiving, and prayer – Paul describes the ministry he is carrying on in spite of his imprisonment, even because of it. The palace guard and roman officialdom on general are hearing the gospel. Moreover, the boldness of Paul’s witness inspires other Christians, even those who do not like Paul. The latter are not false teachers, however, for Paul calls them “brethren” (1:14).

### **The Christ Hymn**

Read Philippians 2.

This chapter is famous for the passage on Jesus’ self-emptying, or humiliation, and exaltation (2:6-11). Many scholars think Paul is quoting an early Christian hymn. The ancient world despised humility; Christian teaching made it a virtue.

### **Against Judaizers**

Read Philippians 3.

The “Finally, my brethren” in 3:1 sounds so much like the closing part of an epistle – yet two more chapters follow – and Paul changes tone so suddenly that some scholars posit a long interpolation, beginning in 3:2, from another epistle. But the theory lacks manuscript evidence. It is better to suppose a break in dictation, perhaps with fresh news from Philippi about a threat of false teachers there. Paul had intended to close, but then thought it necessary to prolong the epistle with warning against the Judaizers.

Chapter 3 contains another famous passage. It is Paul’s autobiographical review of his Jewish background and the revolution in his scale of values when Christ became the goal of his life (3:3-14).

Paul’s Jewish background had been impeccable: (1) circumcision on the eighth day exactly as prescribed by the Mosaic law (Leviticus 12:3); (2) Israelite ancestry; (3) tribal origin in Benjamin, from which came the first king of Israel, Saul (also a name of Paul); (4) Hebraistic rather than Hellenistic practice and heritage; (5) Phariseeism; (6) zealotness to the point of persecuting the church, (7) blamelessness in formal observance of the law.

Realizing his readers might misunderstand him to claim perfection, Paul disclaims it and expresses the ardor with which, forgetting the past, he is pursuing the heavenly goal (3:12-16). “Forgetting” does not mean banishing from memory (if that were possible), but disregarding as having any present potency.

The discussion again comes around to the Judaizers, who opposed the cross of Christ by requiring works of the law, who worshipped their belly by insisting on adherence to the dietary restrictions of the law, who gloried in their shame by exposing nakedness for the rite of circumcision, and who set their minds on earthly things by occupying themselves with forms and ceremonies (3:17-19)

## **Exhortations**

Read chapter 4.

The various exhortations in chapter 4 include a plea for unity between two women of the church, Euodia and Syntyche, former helpers of Paul. The man who is to aid their reconciliation is a “true yokefellow.” Exhortations to joy, patience, trust, prayer, thanksgiving, and nobility of thought follow – with promise of God’s presence and peace and the return of Jesus.

Then Paul expresses thanks for the recent gift to him from the Philippian church, as well as for previous contributions. Throughout this section Paul maintains disinterest in money for its own sake or for his selfish benefit, but indicates a concern for and confidence in the reward of the Philippians for having given so generously. Finally, greetings and a benediction conclude the epistle.

## **A Summary Outline of Philippians**

Theme: thanks for financial assistance with personal news and exhortations.

Introduction: greeting (1:1,2)

I. Personal Matters (1:3-26)

A. Paul’s thanksgiving, prayer, and affection for the Christians in Philippi (1:3-11).

B. Paul’s prison-preaching, prospect of release, and readiness to die (1:12-26).

II. Exhortations (1:27-2:18)

A. Worthy conduct (1:27-30)

B. Unity by humility, with the example of Christ’s self-emptying (2:1-18)

III. The sending of Timothy and Epaphroditus to Philippi (2:19-30)

IV. Warning Against the Judaizers, with a Famous Autobiographical Passage (3:1-21)

V. Exhortations (4:1-9)

A. Unity between Euodia and Syntyche (4:1-3)

B. Joy and trust (4:4-7)

C. Nobility of thought (4:8, 9)

VI. Thanks for Financial Assistance (4:10-20)

Conclusion: greetings and benediction (4:21-23)

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Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1981)