

Philippians - Background and Overview

THE MACEDONIAN ECCLESIAS

Of all the ecclesias Paul worked amongst, the Macedonian ecclesias, particularly the Philippians and Thessalonians, had a unique relationship with him. Paul described the Philippians as his "joy and coronal wreath" (4:1), his "dearly beloved" (4:1) and rejoiced to be the drink offering poured out upon the Sacrifice of the Philippians (2:16). This letter is full of Paul's great love for these brethren. And we can understand that love when we look at the Philippians example of selfless labour and personal sacrifice (eg 2:16; 4:15-17) which was even greater than that of the Thessalonians.

In no other letter does Paul open his heart and reveal his feelings as he does in Philippians. This appears to be a result of the lack of major problems overshadowing the ecclesia. The doctrinal problems of the Roman and Galatian ecclesias were absent as were the moral problems which existed in ecclesias like Corinth. Without such problems the ecclesias had devoted itself to the service of Christ and in that Paul rejoiced. In all, Paul's letter is one of his most personal expressions of brotherly love interwoven with powerful exhortations.

THE CITY OF PHILIPPI

Named after Philip of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great, the city was wrested from the Greeks by the Romans in 168BC. In 42BC, Octavian, who later became Caesar Augustus, won several victories against the other assassins of Julius Caesar in Philippi, and when he became Caesar, he made Philippi a Roman Colony. The Roman Colonies became models of Rome itself and their inhabitants were conferred citizenship with the added privileges of ownership of land and slaves and exemption from tribute.

This comes out in the book of Acts when the masters of the demented girl charge Paul before the magistrates, for teaching customs which are not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe, being Romans (Acts 16:20-21). The pride of Roman citizenship is taken up by Paul when he contrasts that with the citizenship of heaven in 1:27 and 3:20.

DIVINE PROVIDENCE IN THE CALL OF THE PHILIPPIANS

Paul writes in Philippians 1:6 that "he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." The record of Acts 16 emphasises that the formation of the Philippian ecclesia was God's work. Paul and Silas started the second missionary journey with the intention of visiting the ecclesias of Syria and Galatia, but having added Timothy to their company in Lystra, God directed Paul and his brethren to Philippi. Consider the following events: They were forbidden of the Spirit to preach the word in Asia (Acts 16:6); They attempted to go into Bithynia: but the Spirit suffered them not (16:7); The man of Macedonia appeared in a vision (16:9); They took a ship immediately to Macedonia (16:10-11); Their journey took only 2 days whereas the return journey took 5 days (20:6); They went straight to the first city (not the most important) in Macedonia (16:12); Lydia, not a native of Philippi, was there when they arrived; The miraculous release of Paul and Silas from prison and the subsequent conversion of the jailor.

PAUL – CHRIST TO THE GENTILES

From Isaiah 49 and Isaiah 52-53 it is clear that Paul was Christ to the Gentiles. In Phil 3, Paul stresses his desire to be conformed to the sufferings, death and resurrection of Christ (Phil 3:10-11; also 1:29-30; 2:5). Paul exhibited this principle when in Philippi:

- Though Paul obviously did a work of God (Acts 16:18); certain at Philippi did not believe but moved against him because their own vested interests were threatened (cp. Jn 15:22)
- Paul's trial was a travesty of justice. They "hated him without a cause" (Acts 16:38; Ps 35:19; Jn 15:25). They made a false accusation saying that he was inciting rebellion against Rome (Acts 16:20-21; cp. Jn 19:12; Lk 23:2). With Silas, he was "taken from prison and from judgment" (cp. Isa 53:7-8).
- They were beaten with "many stripes" (Acts 16:23; cp. Jn 19:1; Isa 53:5)
- They were cast into prison as good as dead, even as Christ died and was placed in a tomb (Acts 16:24 cp. Jn 19:41)
- Divine pleasure was indicated by an earthquake which set them free (Acts 16:26; cp. Mt 27:51; 28:2)
- They were set free as if by resurrection from the bondage of mortality (Acts 16:26; cp. Mt 28:7; Acts 2:24)
- They became the savour of life to those with whom they spoke (cp. 2 Cor 2:16; 4:9-12)

Indeed, before their eyes, Jesus Christ had been evidently set forth and crucified (Gal 3:1; 1:16)

THE APOSTLE LUKE

As we read through Acts 16 and follow the use of the pronoun **we** (which includes Luke) and **they** (which excludes Luke), it appears that Luke joined Paul in Troas (Acts 16:10) and was left in Philippi for six years until the end of Paul's third journey (Acts 20:5-6). If so, Luke would have brought stability to the young developing ecclesia and grounded it upon sound principles before he left it.

THE TIME OF WRITING PHILIPPICANS

There is no doubt that Paul wrote this letter from Rome during his first imprisonment. That he was a prisoner is obvious from Phil 1:7,13,14,16 and the mention of Caesar's household (4:22) and the Praetorian Guard (1:13) confirm he was in Rome. He appears to be awaiting trial (1:19-25; 2:23), and the degree of confidence about his possible release can lead to only one conclusion, namely that it was his first imprisonment. Paul had appeared unto Caesar in order to legalise the Truth as an acceptable religion in the Roman world. He says in Phil 1:17 that he is "set for the defence of the gospel" not just himself. It appears that the apostle was successful in this aim.

PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

Philippians is a letter of overflowing appreciation for support of the Philippian brethren in both spiritual and physical things. But while Paul pours out his love for the brethren, he counsels them to build self-sacrificial love into their relationships and therefore remove disputes (4:2). He therefore directs their attention to Christ's example of humility and submission and the spirit of Christ as manifested in Timothy and Epaphroditus. While not tackling any particular doctrinal problems, Paul warns them against the Judaizers (Phil 3:1-8), and shows the contrast in salvation by faith.

PAUL'S CHARACTER IN PHILIPPIANS

The epistle to the Philippians is a letter of great personal intensity in which the apostle Paul pours out his heart to his beloved brethren and sisters. As the spirit of God framed Paul's thoughts and left on record a wonderful legacy of Paul's mind, we can but faintly understand the greatness of the apostle whom they all loved. After reading the epistle carefully, we find that what mattered to Paul above everything else in his daily life was to follow the example of his Lord. He was Christ-centered, not to the detriment of the Father's glory, but rather to His honor (1:2:11). "For to me to live is Christ" he wrote in Phil 1:22, "that I may win Christ" (3:8). To Paul his Lord represented an ideal towards which he constantly pressed forwards (3:13-14). To be "in Christ" was everything to him, and this phrase occurs 17 times in the epistle, showing us the desire Paul had to develop a mind and attitude like that of the Son of God. There was with him a fervent desire to know Christ and the power of his resurrection (3:8-10) and to be made conformable to the principles of his death. Progress in this direction was so important to him that he often exhorted the Philippians to do the same (1:6,9,13; 2:2; 4:9).

We also see clearly in this epistle Paul's example of rejoicing under the most adverse of circumstances (1:18); in fact, the epistle is as much one of joy as it is of brotherly love. The joy of the disciple in Christ is meant to be an unquenchable strength which provides a striking contrast to the world which is so dependent upon external stimuli. Paul and his hearers were in the happy circumstance of being a joy to each other. His prayers for them were always uttered with joy (1:4) because they were his crown and rejoicing in the Truth (4:1). It was on this basis that he appealed to them to complete that bond of joy they experienced by repairing the breaches in their unity and become like-minded (2:2).

Like the Lord Jesus, Paul was a man of fervent prayer. He exhorted the Philadelphians not only to make known their requests to God, but to also appreciate the necessity of thankfulness. "But in everything", he said, "by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God". He told them, "I thank God in all my remembrance of you" and laid before his readers the substance of his prayers for them (1:4,9-11). If this epistle can be regarded as an expression of Paul's tender and affectionate feelings for his brethren in the faith, it must also be esteemed as one of the noblest testimonies to Paul's humility. It was from this virtue that many of his other characteristics sprang. He recognized Christ's absolute authority in all that happened to him. He accepted adversity without complaint and his ability to rejoice under suffering shows us his lowliness and steadfastness. He was free from the self-righteousness of the Pharisees and abased himself completely (4:12). He was but the servant of the Lord and like his master emptied himself of all self-importance.

The qualities of Paul's excellence shines brightly and the motivation for everything he did was plainly revealed in 4:13 "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me". There is so much to learn from his example as we attempt to "press toward the mark from the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

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