

PHILIPPIANS

HISTORICAL CONTEXT & COMMENTARY



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The Egnatian Way across Macedonia.



PRISON AT PHILIPPI



My intent with this commentary is not to interpret Paul's writings for you. This is a narrative of what was going on in Paul's world at that time in his life. I will at times offer a definition for a word or a possible reason for a statement in the letter. These are offered as points of study and contemplation. Your final understanding of Paul's words are between you and the Holy Spirit.

May the light of Christ and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit be with you as you explore the Word of God.

OLD MINDSETS IN ERROR:

From the third century through the 1700's there were theologians who tried to move Paul into the background and bring John, Mark and Matthew to the forefront. John, Mark and Matthew's writings stress behavior much more than grace. These moves were attempts to impose doctrine (law) on members of the Christian Church. There were leaders that wanted to control the masses rather than serve the Church. One statement that still persists even today was that Paul's writings were heavily influenced by Mark, Matthew and John's writings. I really don't think that was possible. Nine of Paul's thirteen letters were written before Mark wrote his Gospel. All thirteen of Paul's letters were completed before either Matthew or John's Gospels and letters were written. Paul was martyred three years before Matthew wrote his Gospel and 13 years before John's Gospel was written.

BACKGROUND

THE CITY PHILIPPI

What was the significance of Philippi in the first century?

Even in the first century Philippi was an ancient city. It was founded in 358BC and named after Philip II, the father of Alexander the Great. In the first century it was located on the Egnatian Way, roughly half way between Dyrrachium (modern day Durrës, Albania) and Byzantium (modern day Istanbul, Turkey). It was primarily a Roman army military outpost.

Paul was on his second missionary journey in Galatia. According to Acts Paul, Luke, Silvanus and Timothy were roughly 50 miles north of Pisidian Antioch. They had stopped for the night at or near the border with Mysia. There Paul was “troubled by the Spirit” which forced them to bypass Mysia and proceed to Troas where he received a vision of a man in Macedonia. Take time to read Acts 16:6-10.

THE FELLOWSHIP AT PHILIPPI

There may not have been a very large contingent of Jews in Philippi. Normally Paul would ‘**go first**’ to the local synagogue and present Christ’s gospel of grace. There was no mention of a synagogue in Philippi. The Jewish process of establishing a synagogue required 10 men of good standing, with financial means, to form a synagogue.

In the absence of a formal synagogue an informal place of prayer would be established. All of the Jews and “those who worshiped God” would meet there on each Sabbath. So, Paul went to the place of prayer to preach the word. At the place of prayer, Lydia a merchant of dyed cloth, heard Paul’s message of the saving grace of Christ’s sacrifice, and believed. Lydia opened her home to Paul and his companions. Lydia was a “worshiper of God”, a descriptive phrase of the first century Jews, for a proselyte to Judaism. See Acts 16:6-40

The fellowship in Philippi became a major supporter of Paul and his evangelical missions. Many times, Paul received much needed aid just in time (in God’s time) from his loved ones in Philippi. While under house arrest in Rome¹, Paul received a supporter, Epaphroditus, and gifts from Philippi. In response to the love and care, freely given by the Philippian fellowship, Paul writes a letter of thanks, guidance and encouragement to the fellowship. We call this letter Philippians. Philippians is the first of Paul’s letters that was not driven by some element of discourse. Paul was overcome by the love and caring freely given by the Philippian fellowship.

¹House arrest in Rome at that time was much like being ‘out on bail’. Paul was allowed to find suitable living accommodations in the city. House arrest dictated that the prisoner would be chained to a Roman guard or chained within the “house”. At the discretion of the guard, depending upon the level of trust, the chains could be dispensed with. All expenses of the arrangement, including the room and board of the guard, were the responsibility of the prisoner. If you ran out of money, you went back to the dungeon.

THE TEMPERAMENT IN ROME

From A.D. 54 through 68 Nero ruled the Roman empire. Nero was 16 when he came to power. At that time Afranius Burrus was Regent of the Pretorian Guard. For the first eight years of Nero's rule, Burrus and Nero's former tutor Seneca helped maintain a government. In A.D. 63 Nero poisoned Burrus and Seneca fled into retirement in the country. Before his death, Burrus referred to his beloved city of Rome as a “sewer of decadence and lust.”

It is believed that Paul was imprisoned twice in Rome between the years of A.D. 60 and 67. Burrus and Seneca were running things during the first imprisonment from around A.D. 60 to 63. Nero, alone was running things during the second imprisonment when Paul was martyred. It is possible, there was only one imprisonment from A.D. 60 through 67. The first few years Paul was allowed much freedom and preached throughout the palace and the city of Rome. After the purging of Burrus and Seneca, Paul was confined in chains and was no longer allowed to preach the grace of Christ. This difference in treatment and freedom may have led to the idea of two separate confinements. There is no historical documentation of Paul visiting any location outside Rome from A.D. 60 until his martyrdom in A.D. 67.

THE LETTER

Paul opens the letter in what has become his standard, TO, FROM and BLESSING style.

Paul makes a profound statement in the opening of chapter 1 in verse 6. God is not done with us when we accept the word and believe the Gospel of Christ. No, He continues His work in us until our last mortal breath or the day of Christ's return comes. This is a profound and reassuring statement. There is however an underlying truth; God has so much more He wants to do in our lives. But we must allow him in. This concept is fortified in chapter 4:4-9.

NOTE: To fully understand all that influenced Paul's writing of the Philippians letter, more prerequisite reading is highly recommended. That would include Acts 23:31-26:30 as well as Acts 27-28.

CHAPTER 1

We must remember that Paul visited Philippi once during his second missionary journey and twice during the third missionary journey. So, we know the fellowship in Philippi has heard Paul's 'Gospel from Christ' in great detail. So as outsiders 2000 years later we some times miss some of the nuances of Paul's writings. Chapter 1 v6 is one of these subtleties. Paul makes a short statement knowing that the details will come to the minds of the Philippians. To understand what Paul means when he mentions "the day of Christ" read 1 Thessalonians 4:13 to 5:11. These events of the last days would have been explained to the Philippians most likely during all three of Paul's visits to Philippi.

Paul believed that his hardships and afflictions promoted the Gospel. Whether it be flogging, persecution or imprisonment, Paul's attitude reflects his confidence in his righteousness. Throughout all his trials and tribulations Paul did not show any weakness in his dedication to the mission given him by Jesus. Others observed Paul's dedication and resolve to serve Jesus the Christ. Paul was convinced that his courage and dedication would inspire others to be strong in their convictions of salvation.

There are commentaries that say Paul drew heavily from Mark 9:38-41 when he wrote verse 15 to 18 of chapter one. There is a major flaw in that comment. Mark was written three years after Philippians was written. The topic here is the Gospel being preached by those of questionable motivation. But, as long as they are preaching the true Gospel of Grace, their motivation is unimportant to Paul.

Paul now instructs the believers in Philippi to live by the Gospel that was preached to them.

“...you will be saved—and that by God.”

We do not know the exact level of persecution the Philippians were suffering. We do know that Nero was then 24 years old and starting to act more directly in the matters of the Roman Empire.

CHAPTER 2

As you read the first 4 verses of chapter 2 keep in mind Paul is offering guidance for behavior within the fellowship of Christ. Outside the fellowship when dealing with those of the world, some discernment must be applied to our interactions. Tenderness, compassion, love and being like-minded are not priorities in the world.

Also note in verse 4 he writes about taking care of other's needs as you take care of your own. Quite often there are interpretations that say everyone else first and yourself last. That is not how a fellowship in Christ should work. In our fellowship we work together to attend to the physical and spiritual needs of **all** in the fellowship. No leader, no saint, gets top billing. In the top spot is Jesus.

NOTE: In his writings Paul refers to all who hear the WORD and believe as saints.

In verses 5 through 11 we are reminded that Jesus gave up **everything** to do the will of the Father. When we consider what Jesus did for us, we must remember what the Father had already done. When he created man he breathed a soul into him, and gave him a free will to govern his actions on this earth. For all the Father has done for us and for all that Jesus has done for us, we have only been asked one thing. **Give back our will to sin.**

In verses 12 through 18 he goes on to encourage the behavior reflective of "Children of God". There is one phrase that a majority of people have a problem with; "continue to work out your salvation". Does this mean we have to work to earn or keep our salvation?,,,,, **NO.**

A word for word translation of verse 12 reads:

So that, my beloved, according as you always obey, not as in my presence only, but now much rather in my absence, with fear and trembling be carrying your own salvation into effect.

(From: Interlinear Scripture Analyzer 3 Bata.)

This verse has been defined in various ways. Some say it means your behavior should reflect your gifted salvation. Others say it reflects the enormous debt you owe to Christ for your salvation. A debt that a life time of service cannot repay. I write of this only because you should be aware and discern what it means to you. Keep in mind, through out all of the New Testament, it is made clear that our salvation is a free-given GIFT. We don't earn it. We don't work for it. It is purely a love gift from God.

The remainder of chapter 2 is news for the Philippians. First, he was sending Timothy to them in what I believe was to be a leadership role. Then to ease their minds on the welfare of Epaphroditus, he would also be returning to Philippi.

CHAPTER 3

Here again Paul is addressing the false claims of the circumcised who come behind him corrupting the Gospel of Christ. The Jewish writers and speakers of the first century used the term “dogs” for the ungodly pagans. Paul turns this term back against these very writers and speakers as he refers to them as dogs. He goes on to explain that he as a former persecutor of the church in Jerusalem, could speak with authority. After all he had been beyond compare in his knowledge and execution of the law of Moses. He then lists his credentials. Despite his former transgressions of the church of the Way, Christ chose him to bring the truth of Grace to the masses.

Everything, spiritually and mortally that Paul gained through the law has been set aside. The truth of the righteousness gained from the Grace of God through Jesus the Christ exceeds any gain from Law. The Law brought only a yardstick on behavior. Whereas the acceptance of the Gospel of the sacrifice of Jesus brings salvation and results in God’s imposition of righteousness upon us. Caution is issued at this point; righteousness is not a once and done event. It is a lifelong endeavor.

Verses 12 to 14 continues with a subtle inference or reminder that righteousness is not a “once and done”. It is a pursuit that one must follow until the return of Christ.

We need to look closely at verses 15 and 16. Here we find a subtle reference to the freedom we have in Christ. In our walk in Grace, we will not start out fully understanding all things of God, and that is ok.

We are directed to hold onto our common beliefs and wait for God to clarify the rest. God has extended this grace to us and we must extend this grace to other believers.

Next Paul offers himself and unnamed leaders as examples for all to emulate. Be watchful of those who live the Christian lifestyle and let them be your guide. The Christian life will bring the rewards of eternity with our Savior. Rejection of the Gospel is destined for destruction.

CHAPTER 4 ~PEACE OF CHRIST

I believe chapter 4 verse 1 is the actual closing of chapter 3. Therefore, we will start at verse 2.

Verses 2 through 9 are commonly referred to as the exhortation verses. Let's explore EXORT for a moment first. The word infers 3 similar but distinctively different meanings.

1. To erg strongly.
2. To give advice.
3. To make an appeal.

First, Paul strongly ergs the two ladies to get along and resolve or accept their differences. Second, he advises Syzygus to aid these ladies in solving their differences. Third, verses 8 and 9 he appeals to all in the Philippian fellowship to put into practice the list of qualities and attributes in order to realize the peace of God.

You may ask who was Syzygus. Some translations of Philippians translate the word as yokemate. Others translate the word as true companion. There are no other references to this person. The most common belief is, that he is the leader of the fellowship in Philippi makes the most sense to me. This is one of those “freedom in Christ” issues in which I allow you your thoughts and you mine.

Verses 10 through 19 are an elaborate object lesson on giving and receiving physical support to those in need. It is easy to say “may the Lord bless you in your needs.” It is more difficult to tend to those needs. Paul being Paul is more concerned about the grace of the giver than the fulfillment of his needs.

Paul then writes a short benediction and proceeds to his typical closing dialogue. An interesting insertion here is that although he is a prisoner, he has managed to evangelize the very household of Cesar.

Now as a final recap, of this letter remember that Paul was under house arrest in Rome at the time of its writing. When the Philippians church heard of Paul’s dilemma, they sent Epaphroditus to Rome. He arrived with financial aid and words of encouragement to ease the burden of confinement.

This act inspired Paul to write the first of four very personal and caring letters. These are the Philippians, Philemon, and the Timothy letters.

