A Study of the Book of Philippians

Paul and the Letter to the Philippians (Philippians 1:1-2)

“If one had no other book but Philippians in the New Testament, and all else had been lost, most of the essentials of true faith in Christ, true Christian experience, and abundant hope would still be documented.”

~ John Walvoord, Philippians, 22

I. Overview

Undergoing imprisonment with the potential of capital punishment, reeling from the near death of a close companion, and the longing to reunite with dear friends are all part of the backdrop of this letter penned by the Apostle Paul. In an epistle that is more emotional than theological, Paul writes a letter full of gratitude, joy, and exhortation. In so doing, these words penned nearly 2,000 years ago to a group of believers living in Macedonia resonate even today—words that provide invaluable instruction on how to live the Christian life well. Thus, not surprisingly, this letter contains Paul’s motto for life: “For me to live is Christ; to die is gain.” (Phil 1:21).

II. Introduction

A. Writer

This letter claims to be written by the apostle Paul (e.g., 1:1). The style and historical context of this letter only further supports Pauline authorship.

B. Occasion

Imprisoned in Rome, Paul writes this letter while waiting for his case to be tried before the Emperor Nero (1:12 and 2:17; also, see Acts 28:16, 30-31). The date is in the early 60s. Philippians is one of the four “Prison Epistles” Paul writes during this timeframe (i.e., Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon).

Observe the circumstances surrounding the Book of Philippians:

1. Philippians hear of Paul’s imprisonment.
2. The church sends Epaphroditus to assist Paul.
3. The church hears of Epaphroditus’ severe illness.
4. Paul is concerned about the church and Epaphroditus.
5. Paul sends the physically-restored Epaphroditus to Philippi with this letter.

1. Philippi the City

• This city was located on a major northern, east-west Roman highway called the via Egnatia. This important military road linked Byzantium with the Adriatic ports that led to Italy.
• Augustus designated Philippi a Roman colony after the battle of Actium in 32 BC. This title was the highest privilege obtainable by any provincial municipality as it permitted the city to possess municipal self-government and exemptions from poll and land taxes. In fact, many of the city's inhabitants were army veterans who were granted Roman citizenship and land for their service to the Roman Empire. Consequently, it should not be surprising that the city was a strong supporter of the Emperor.

• Since most of the inhabitants were retired military personnel and their families, there would have been few Jews living in Philippi. As seen with Lydia's ministry outside the city walls, there existed no synagogue (see Acts 16:12-15).

2. Philippi the Church
  • This was the first church established by Paul in Europe. The apostle founded this church during his second missionary journey (see Acts 16:12-40).
  • This church had close contact with Paul and supported him financially (e.g., sending gifts on two separate occasions, as seen in Philippians 4:14-16, Acts 17:1-9, and 2 Cor 8-9).

C. Purpose
  1. Paul encourages the Philippian church to be unified (1:12-26; 2:1-8; 4:2-3).
  2. Paul rejoices over their progress in the faith and calls for continued spiritual growth (4:2-9).
  3. Paul explains why he was sending Epaphroditus back to them (2:25-30).
  4. Paul thanks the Philippians for their prayers (1:19) and financial gift (4:10-20).

D. Structure
  I. Introduction (1:1-11)
     A. Greeting (1:1-2)
     B. Thankful and Joyful Prayer (1:3-11)
  II. The Priority of the Gospel (1:12-26)
     A. The Advancement of the Gospel due to Paul's Imprisonment (1:12-18a)
     B. The Exaltation of Christ due to Paul's Imprisonment (1:18b-26)
  III. The Importance of Living Out the Gospel (2:1-30)
     A. The Exhortation to Humility (2:5-11)
     B. The Call to Work Out One's Salvation (2:12-18)
     C. The Examples of Humility: Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:19-30)
  IV. The Need to Guard the Gospel (3:1-4:9)
     A. The Warning Against Theological Error (3:1-21)
     B. Concluding Admonitions (4:1-9)
V. Conclusion (4:10-23)
   A. An Expression of Gratitude (4:10-20)
   B. Closing (4:21-23)

E. Major Theological Themes

1. Paul stresses the “gospel” throughout this epistle (see 1:5, 7, 12, 17, 27; 4:3, 15).

   The key to this Gospel message is Christ. One commentator writes, “The centrality of Jesus Christ in the universe, in the world, in an individual’s life, vibrates throughout the letter to the Philippians” (G. F. Hawthorne, Philippians, I).

2. Paul places a strong emphasis on “joy” (see 1:25; 3:1; 4:4, 10).

   “. . . joy is not so much a feeling as it is a settled state of mind characterized by peace, an attitude that views life—including all of its ups and downs—with equanimity. It is a confident way of looking at life that is rooted in faith in the living Lord of the Church (1:25; 3:1; 4:4, 10).” (G. F. Hawthorne, “Philippians,” in DPL, 713).

3. Paul highlights the importance of “humility”.
   - Humility is required for every believer (2:1-5)
   - Jesus Christ serves as the ultimate example of humility (2:5-11)

4. Paul lays out the guidelines of true discipleship (1:21; 2:12-13).

“There is an intense sense of personal relationship with Christ in this letter. For Paul, Christian existence is not to be understood simply in terms of belief in a set of doctrines or as a way of life, although these are integral parts of it; it is also a spiritual experience of a relationship with God through Christ.”

For further thought . . .

Based upon our study this morning, you may want to spend some additional time this week interacting with the following:

Take some time reading through the Book of Philippians. If possible, attempt to do this in one sitting so that you can capture the letter in its entirety. If you don’t like to read, then listen to a recording of someone reading the Book of Philippians (e.g., bible.org, youtube).

After listening to or reading through the Book of Philippians, jot down two or three specific thoughts that stood out to you.

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What surprises you after reading or hearing this letter in light of the fact that Paul faces the possibility of being executed for the Gospel?

After interacting with this letter, what specific truth personally encourages you in your spiritual life? Why?