

# PHILIPPIANS AND PHILEMON

## Testaments to Paul's affection & powers of persuasion.

### THE LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

Paul's Letter to the Philippians is a warm and affectionate letter to the community which, according to Acts 16, was the first community that Paul founded in Europe, one which continued to generously support his ongoing missionary activity. The letter is full of gratitude and encouragement, leading noted scholar Raymond E. Brown to comment that "*in some ways this is the most attractive Pauline letter, reflecting more patently than any other, the warm affection of the apostle for his brothers and sisters in Christ*". The letter however also displays a sober awareness of opposition and danger. Paul himself is in prison "for Christ" (Phil 1:13) and faces an uncertain future.

The letter is significant for the biographical details the apostle offers concerning his Jewish heritage (Phil 3:4-8) and his mindset towards his won imprisonment. The outstanding feature of the letter is undoubtedly Paul's quotation of an early Christological hymn in Phil 2:6-11 through which he invites the community to imitate Christ's humility and 'self-emptying.'

#### *Philippi in the time of Paul*

Philippi was a major Roman city situated some 10 miles inland on the *Via Egnatia*, the great Roman highway that ran across Macedonia. In 42 BCE, almost a century before Paul first visited the city, Mark Anthony and Octavius had defeated Brutus and Cassius, the assassins of Julius Caesar at Philippi and had established the city as a Roman '*colonia*' for settling veterans from their victorious armies. The city retained full Romans citizenship rights in the time of Paul and the apostle may have had this in mind when he insists that for believers "*our citizenship is in heaven, from where we await a saviour, the Lord*" (Phil 3:20).



### *Where was Philippians written from?*

The later chapters of Acts of the Apostles speak of Paul's long confinements in the coastal city of Caesarea in Palestine and then in Rome. Given that Paul himself indicates that he is suffering imprisonment at the time of writing this letter (Phil 1:7, 13, 17) and references to the praetorian guard [Roman officials] (Phil 1:13) and believers from 'the emperor's household' the traditional view was that Paul wrote to Philippians from Rome whilst under house arrest (Acts 28:16-31).

However the letter to the Philippians seems to envisage a far stricter regimen than house arrest (Phil 1:12-20, 2:17). Moreover Rome was more than 700 miles from Philippi and travel between the two cities would have been more difficult than the ease of communication presumed in the letter (Phil 2:19-30) which suggests a minimum of five journeys between the sender and the recipients.

- News reaches Philippi of Paul's imprisonment.
- The Philippians send Epaphroditis with money to support Paul but he falls ill (4:15).
- News filters back to Philippi of his illness (2:26, 30).
- Epaphroditis hears that this news has distressed the Philippians.
- Paul is sending Epaphroditis back to them (2:25-30).
- Paul hopes to send Timothy soon (2:19-23) and indeed still harbours hope of making another visit in person (2:24).
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These same difficulties weigh against those who suggest that the letter was written in Caesarea. Many scholars now suggest Ephesus as the most likely place of composition, sometime during the apostle's three year stay there in the mid-fifties CE. Whilst there is no explicit record of Paul being imprisoned in Ephesus, Acts 19:23-41 speaks of Paul's companions being dragged before the magistrates in Ephesus while in 2 Corinthians [written before his imprisonment in either Caesarea or Rome] Paul speaks of the hardships he endured in Asia (2Cor 1:8-10) and the many imprisonments he has already endured (2Cor 6:5, 11.23).

### *The unity of Philippians*

Whilst scholars accept that Philippians is from the hand of Paul, some question whether the letter as we now have it originally constituted a single unit or whether it combines a number of shorter letters. Some point to the use of the word "finally" (Phil 3:1) so long before the end of the letter and the sudden change of tone from friendship and gratitude to warning in Phil 3:2. Another difficulty they point to is the delayed thank you in Phil 4:10-12 that interrupts what looks like a standard ending of a Pauline letter (Phil 4:8-9, 21-23).

However many other prominent scholars insist that, despite its difficulties, Philippians can and should be read as a single unit and they point to significant parallels of ideas and wording linking Phil2:6-11 and Phil3:4-11 as supporting the letter's intrinsic integrity. The abrupt changes may simply reflect Paul's typical changes of mood as he leaps from topic to topic in addressing the community.

### THE STRUCTURE OF PHILIPPIANS

1:1-11	Greeting and Thanksgiving
1:12-26	Paul's own situation and outlook
1:27-30	An appeal for unity and steadfastness.
2:1-18	A call for humility: the example of Christ.
2:19-30	News of Timothy & Epaphroditis
3:1-4:1	Warning against opponents. Paul's own example.
4:2-9	Appeal for peace and goodness.
4:10-23	Gratitude and final greeting

### READ THE LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

With this background in mind carefully read this relatively short letter a number of times.

1. *How would you describe the tone and mood of the letter?*
2. *What is Paul's attitude towards his imprisonment?*
3. *What characteristic of Christ does Paul wish to emphasise in the Christological hymn in Phil 2:6-11?*

### Notes

The warmth of Paul's affection for this particular Christian community is evident in his effusive greeting and thanksgiving. Paul joyfully remembers the Philippians' "partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (Phil 1:15). Indeed the themes of joy (Phil 1:18, 2:2, 17; 3:1; 4:1, 4, 10) and partnership (Phil 2:1, 3:10; 4:15) echo throughout the letter. The community at Philippi have generously enabled Paul's missionary endeavours by their gifts to him (Phil 4:16) and the phrase "until now" may refer to Paul's having just received their latest contribution.

Despite his imprisonment Paul remains joyful and hopeful, courageously stressing its positive results. He wants the Philippians to know that his imprisonment, although on the surface a disadvantage, has "served to advance the gospel" (Phil 1:12). Paul's imprisonment leads him to reflect on the possibility of his own death. Whereas in his earlier letter to the Thessalonians he had clearly expected to be alive for Jesus' return (1 Thess 4:15-17), now he realizes that he may die first (Phil 1:2-23) and he debates whether the immediate access to Christ provided by death is better than the continued service he can offer to Christ by his preaching. Whilst such indifference to death may strike us as difficult to understand it is entirely consistent with Paul's sense of his new identity in Christ. In Galatians he writes "*I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me*" (Gal 2:19-20).

Paul's advice to the community in Phil 1:27-28 *'Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents'* in many ways summarizes the letter and its message. This unity will be sustained by patient and humble care (Phil 2:1-4) and Paul urges the community to copy the attitude of Jesus as shown in the "Christ hymn" of Phil 2:6-11.

In chapter 3 the tone of the letter changes dramatically as Paul warns the community against those who seek to threaten the community's faith. The threat probably comes from conservative Jewish Christians who seek to draw the community into the rituals of Judaism, similar to those he condemned so bitterly in his letter to the Galatians (Gal 1:6-7; 6:12). Paul condemns such opponents as "evil-doers" and "mutilators of the flesh," the latter almost certainly a sarcastic reference to their insistence on circumcision. Paul goes further by contemptuously dismissing these adversaries as "dogs" – ironically, the common Jewish slur for the uncircumcised.

In chapter 4 the warmth of the pastoral relationship returns to the fore. Paul encourages the community to stand firm and urges that peace should reign, both in their dealings with each other and in their hearts. Finally, he remembers their generosity and friendship during his troubles (Phil 4:10-20) and thanks them once more for their "partnership in the gospel."

### *The Christological Hymn of Phil 2:5-11*

Raymond E. Brown describes these verses as "among the most memorable lines ever penned by the apostle." Here Paul urges the Philippians to avoid rivalry and cultivate humility by citing Jesus' behaviour as the example to emulate. The rhythmic and poetic qualities of the passage as well as the absence of typically Pauline ideas and vocabulary suggest that this was a pre-Pauline composition, one that was perhaps used as a creed in early Christian liturgies. It consists of a bipartite structure, the first half describing Jesus' self emptying (2:6-8) and the second half describing his exaltation by God (2:9-11). The first half of this twin movement comprises Jesus' actions; the second describes God's response.

- <sup>5</sup> *Let the same mind be in you that was<sup>1</sup> in Christ Jesus,*  
<sup>6</sup> *who, though he was in the form of God,*  
*did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,*  
<sup>7</sup> *but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,*  
*being born in human likeness.*  
*And being found in human form,*  
<sup>8</sup> *he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death,*  
*even death on a cross.*
- <sup>9</sup> *Therefore God also highly exalted him*  
*and gave him the name that is above every name,*  
<sup>10</sup> *so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,*

*in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*  
<sup>11</sup> *and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,*  
*to the glory of God the Father.*

Whilst modern Christian readers tend to understand the opening verses as demonstrating Jesus' pre-existence and Incarnation (in the same way that the prologue to John's Gospel speaks of Word being 'with God' and the Word 'being God' John 1:1), it remains open to question whether the community had come to articulate Jesus' divine nature so clearly at such an early date. While other Pauline texts (2 Cor 8:9, Gal 4:4, Col 1:15-17) appear to support the idea of Christ's pre-existence with God, 1 Cor 15:28 refers explicitly to a clear subordination of Jesus to God the Father.

Many commentators suggest that the hymn is most likely structured on a contrast between Adam and Jesus (a contrast that appears also in 1 Cor 15:21-23, 45-49 and Rom 5:12-19). Both Jesus and Adam reflect the divine image since both are born in the image or form of God (Gen 1:27). But whereas Adam tried to seize or grasp godlike status (Gen 3:5) Jesus accepted the lot of a slave and became obedient to death even death on a cross. For Paul, Jesus' "death on a cross" represents the climax of his self-emptying and becomes the hinge and focal point of the entire hymn. Jesus' death on the cross is, for Paul, the heart of his gospel, and here as elsewhere (*'I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified'* 1 Cor 2:2) he mentions crucifixion with any explicit reference to resurrection. Christ's self-emptying on the cross provides the model for the self-sacrifice that Paul wishes the Philippians to emulate.

Whereas Adam's disobedience brings shame and death, Jesus' perfect obedience brings glory and exaltation. Jesus' self emptying [often referred to by the Greek term *kenosis*] earns him the fullness of God's reward and the conferring of the '*name that is above every name*' and the praise of the entire creation.

It is noteworthy that this same movement of loss and gain is paralleled later in the letter in the description of the apostle's own experience in Phil 3:4-10. Paul has willingly sacrificed all the privileges he enjoyed by birth and his chosen way of life as a Pharisee in order to attain "*the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*" (Phil 3:8). Paul values knowing Jesus above everything else in life. Perhaps deliberately, this account of his own life journey parallels what was said previously of Jesus, that glory comes through sacrifice: "*I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death*" (Phil 3:10).

## THE LETTER TO PHILEMON

Containing a mere 25 verses and only 335 words [in its original Greek form], Paul's letter to Philemon is the shortest of all his letters and yet it remains one of the most intriguing letters in the New Testament. Designed to persuade Philemon to accept back his slave Onesimus who had become a Christian at Paul's hand, the letter demonstrates Paul's considerable rhetorical skills with almost every line hinting at something more than is stated. The letter expresses Paul's deep conviction that by virtue of their incorporation into Christ through faith, all believers, regardless of their social rank or status, are challenged to live out a new and changed relationship with each other that is rooted in their shared faith in Christ Jesus.

### *The background to the letter.*

This short letter represents one piece of an extended conversation involving Paul, Onesimus, Philemon and others. Unfortunately the rest of the conversation is not available to us but the letter hints at the situation addressed here by Paul.

It appears that Philemon was a well-to-do Christian whose home served as the meeting place of the house-church (v.2). It is not clear if Paul had ever personally met Philemon but his coming to faith is the fruit of Paul's mission, be that directly or through Paul's co-workers mentioned in verse 23-24. Onesimus is a slave belonging to Philemon who is, at the time of the letter, with Paul. Why he has left his master is the subject of much speculation. He has clearly done something to offend his owner. This may have been some inappropriate act while in his service or simply involved his running away. While he may well have been a runaway slave the prevailing opinion amongst scholars is that he was visiting Paul to ask him to mediate with Philemon in relation to some difficulty or problem between the two. The language of "begetting" in verse 10 suggests that Paul had personally converted Onesimus. Perhaps compelled by Roman law or motivated by the fact that he had been responsible for the new life shared by both Philemon and Onesimus, Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon with this letter pleading with Philemon to accept him back '*no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother*' (Phlm 1:15).

### *Authorship and origin of letter.*

Almost all biblical scholars accept that Paul wrote this letter. The fact that eight of the ten people mentioned in Philemon are also mentioned in the Letter to the Colossians suggests that Philemon was a member of the Christian community in the Colossae region. Paul describes himself as '*a prisoner of Christ Jesus*' in the opening verse and, as in the case of Philippians, the most likely place of imprisonment is Ephesus. In terms of a slave's flight Ephesus would have been only 100-120 miles away compared to the immense distances between Colossae and Rome and Caesarea, cities which are explicitly mentioned as sites of the apostle's imprisonment.

### READ PAUL'S LETTER TO PHILEMON

With this background in mind, carefully read Paul's letter to Philemon a number of times. It certainly won't take long!

- *If you were Philemon, how would this letter have moved you? What would have been your likely decision?*
- *What techniques does Paul draw on to persuade Philemon?*
- *What is the basis of Paul's appeal to Philemon?*

*Paul's gentle art of persuasion.*

As one reads this short letter one can almost sense Paul pulling out all the stops as he attempts to persuade Philemon to respond positively to his appeal and the letter offers clear evidence that Paul was well versed in the Greek arts of rhetoric and persuasion. Addressing the letter to the whole community provides greater incentive for Philemon to comply with his request. Paul begins by flattering Philemon (not necessarily insincerely) and thanking God for his Christian faith and love (verse 5), the very qualities that he will appeal to in the body of the letter as the basis of his request. Paul praises Philemon for the good he has already done for the community and suggests that together they can do even more good for Christ (Phlm1:6-7). He claims his right as apostle to order Philemon to do the good he is about to propose but prefers to appeal on the basis of love.

Having established the basis of his appeal as the love relationship that exists between himself and Philemon and their mutual love for the holy ones, Paul now identifies the object of his appeal. The depth of affection Paul felt for those he brought to faith is apparent in his describing Onesimus as his 'child' and his 'own heart' in Phlm 1:11-12. Paul broadly hints that in returning Onesimus he is depriving himself of what is a major comfort during his imprisonment and this subtly increases the pressure on Philemon to accede to his request. Notice how much Paul is asking: not simply that Onesimus escape the punishment that could legally be imposed but that he be received as a 'beloved brother.' In verses 18-19 Paul guarantees to reimburse Philemon any debt he may have incurred but by subtly reminding Philemon that he is the very one to whom Philemon owes his Christian life, Paul makes the prospect of any such repayment unthinkable. Paul's expressed hope to visit Philemon after his release serves as a final touch in the subtle yet constant pressure exerted throughout the letter on Philemon to respond to Paul's appeal. That Philemon reacted generously is almost certain as otherwise it is unlikely that the letter would have been preserved.

## PAUL AND SLAVERY

Modern readers are often disappointed that Paul does not denounce slavery as incompatible with Christian's belief in God's equal love for all humanity. Instead he appears to accept it as a social fact, nowhere ordering Christians to free their slaves. Whilst such disappointment is understandable we must be careful not to project our mindset and world view back into Paul's time.

Paul's concern, rightly or wrong, focuses not on the place of slavery in society but rather on the place of the slave within the Christian community. What is striking in Paul's writings is that slaves are directly addressed in his letters which would have been highly unusual at that time. The clear implication is that Paul regarded them as full members of these churches. Slaves as well as masters receive advice as in Col 3:22-4:1 in a way that would have been inconceivable within general Roman society at the time.

Paul firmly believed in the principle that there are "neither free nor slave" in Christ (Gal 3:28, 1 Cor 12:13) but he understood it not in the sense of abolishing slavery in society but rather as abolishing its significance for believers

so far as their relationship with God and each other was concerned. Paul's primary concern, here as elsewhere, was the Christian community and ensuring that Christians treated each other in brotherly and sisterly love within the constraints of the social system. Indeed, through his extensive and repeated use of familial images in the letter to Philemon [brother, father, child] Paul implicitly indicates that a new model of relationships has already been established with the Christian community. In this new relationship, master and slave are both called to live out these familial relationships that ought to characterize the community of believers. Whether he intended Philemon to free Onesimus or simply to welcome him back is impossible to say. What is certain is that, whatever their respective social positions, Paul fully expected Philemon to treat Onesimus as a "beloved brother" (v. 16).

The Letter to Philemon challenges Christians of all ages to recognize the new relationship that exists among believers as a result of their incorporation into Christ. This new relationship transcends all others, including that of master and slave and challenges us to live in mutual love and work as partners in promoting the gospel.

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