

Unit 1 Introduction

Philippians: Behind the Scene

The Word of God provides timeless principles; yet these principles are contained within time-bound situations. In order to discover these principles which clearly address life issues today, we have to dig a bit into the context and background of the Scriptures. That's exactly what we do when we enter into a Bible study or Sunday School class.

Because the book of Philippians has so many memorable verses, it might also be tempting for us to simply take individual verses and try to study them in isolation from their setting. Here are some of my favorite verses from Philippians:

- *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain* (Philippians 1:21).
- *Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus* (Philippians 2:5).
- *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice* (Philippians 4:4)!
- *And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus* (Philippians 4:7).
- *I can do all this through him who gives me strength* (Philippians 4:13).
- *And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus* (Philippians 4:19).

Let's decide to do our homework as good students of God's Word and take a look at Philippians from several different angles in order to understand its message clearly in context.

What do we know about the writer?

Well that seems like a rather easy question, doesn't it. The opening verse tells us plainly that Paul (along with Timothy) was sending this letter. Paul is certainly a name that readers of the New Testament know rather well. He was at first a passionate opponent of Christianity, but after his Damascus Road experience he became an equally passionate proponent of the Christian cause. Some of the information we know about Paul will definitely assist us as we begin to read some of his words:

- He was highly educated in important Jewish schools of the day. Paul understood the Old Testament and the context of the New Testament gospel as well as anyone in his time.
- He had a personal and extraordinary experience with the risen Christ which gave his sentences a unique fervency.
- He spent many years after his conversion reflecting on his new-found faith with both head and heart, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit. The word the gospel of John uses for the Holy Spirit is the versatile Greek term, *Paraclete*, literally one who stands beside you. When Paul reflected on Christian theology and later when he wrote the key tenets of those thoughts, he had an enabled helper beside

him at all times, the very Spirit of Christ himself.

- Having traveled widely, Paul knew well the key issues new Christians were experiencing around the Mediterranean world of his day.

- Paul was a Jew by birth, but he was born into a Greek speaking city of the Roman Empire and knew first-hand how to communicate clearly with his largely Greek speaking audiences, including the fledging church in Philippi.

What do we know about the Philippians?

The readers of this letter lived in a large city on a major road called the Egnatian Way, connecting Rome with the rest of the empire to the east. Philippi was about 10 miles inland from the port city of Neapolis, which was on the coast of the beautiful Aegean Sea. Philippi is situated in northern Greece today, but in the first century this area was known as Macedonia, home to the famous Alexander the Great a couple centuries earlier.

We will remember now the well-known story found in Acts 16:9. There Paul received a vision where he saw and heard a man he recognized as being from Macedonia; the man pleaded for Paul to come and help him. Paul responded immediately to this heavenly invitation and the Christian message moved dramatically from the Middle East and Asia to Europe for the first time in Paul's missionary travels. Paul, with Silas, Timothy, and Luke (the "we" writer in Acts, indicating a first-hand account of the Philippi journey). What an impressive mission team!

Remembering that the book of Acts provides a handy reference point for many of Paul's later letters, we read in Acts 16 several key events the Paul team encountered on their first trip to Philippi. There we discover an initial encounter with a prayer meeting group led by a woman named Lydia, identified as a seller of purple, likely indicating a person of some wealth. (Purple was a color especially difficult and expensive to make in ancient times). This group quickly formed the basis of the new Christian church in that city.

Then we see Paul embroiled in a heated encounter with the owners of a slave girl who had ungodly abilities to predict the future. Paul cast out the evil spirit which immediately caused the slave owners a permanent loss of income. We can only imagine the gratitude of the nameless slave girl.

Having been accused of wrongdoing, Paul and Silas were hauled off to prison, only to find their shackles and cell doors opened wide by an earthquake at the midnight hour. The jailer, fearing severe repercussions for dereliction of duty and ready to end his life, was brought back to life by the words of Paul: "We are still here." The

jailer immediately realized Paul was not an ordinary man and did not carry with him an ordinary message. He and his family joined the Christian family that very night.

So, the Philippian church presents quite a spectrum of socio-economic status: a wealthy businesswoman, a public servant of likely middle-class rank, and a seeming worthless slave at the very bottom of society. What an interesting church, all receiving Paul's interesting letter. Some say Philippi may have been Paul's favorite church, since they proved time and again their financial generosity and their lack of ongoing infighting like the immature church at Corinth. Based on his initial journey through this city, these folks would have created a permanent and positive impression on Paul. Perhaps most importantly, Paul knew some of these folks personally, by name and through life experiences.

What do we know about the book of Philippians itself?

It is important to realize that 22 of the 27 books of the New Testament are written in a very common literary form in the first century. Those 22 books are written as letters, to groups of people or to individuals. All of the New Testament books attributed to Paul are written in a letter format. For us to fully understand the book of Philippians we have to know something about first century letters.

First, letters were usually meant to be read from beginning to end in one setting; that would be an interesting exercise for modern Bible readers to reproduce. Second, Paul's letters were often meant to be read out loud to an entire group, or in this case to an entire church. Third, Paul's letters contain most of the typical features you would expect in any letter sent and received in the ancient world. Letters, not unlike ones we would see today, would begin with greetings and personal words, would move to the body or "main part" of the correspondence, and conclude with some final words of farewell. The book of Philippians follows this basic plan. Fourth, some have suggested Paul wrote his Philippian letter as a "friendship letter" which would further define how he chose words and ideas.

Paul also employs another common strategy in his letter to his Philippian friends known as rhetoric. The world of the New Testament understood the value of someone who could persuade other people through either the spoken or written word. The book of Philippians appears to have some components of a structured theme throughout its pages that leads the reader from beginning suppositions all the way through to key conclusions.

Finally, within the Philippian letter, the careful reader will see Paul's use of quotations, poetry, allusions and figurative language, all used to enhance his Spirit-guided words of wisdom and truth. For example, some see in Philippians 2:6-11 a possible early hymn of the church that exalted the humility of Christ. These words have come to us in our church context today as some of the most beautiful words for the ear and for the soul ever recorded in the pages of Scripture.

What do we know about the situation behind the writing of Philippians?

Why did Paul decide to write this particular letter to this particular church at this particular time? Finding an answer to these connected questions will take us a long way into discovering the deep meaning behind these written words.

Philippians is one of four books in our New Testament known as the "Prison Letters" (including Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon). This description indicates that Paul wrote these letters while in official confinement. That fact in itself should help the reader grasp a deeper tone behind this book. If Paul was incarcerated in Rome, as most think, and was soon to face a trial and execution at the hands of key persecutor of the early church, Emperor Nero, we would expect Paul to pour out his heart-deep reflections. This would not have been the time to mince words.

From the letter itself, we see Paul wanted to thank the Philippians for assisting him during his time in detention. But while he is writing, he uses the limited pages of his paper supply to encourage the already strong Philippian church to remain steady in the face of their own ongoing persecution and maintain a sense of humility and unity that would provide the kind of witness that could and did quite literally change the world.

What are the key ideas found in this book?

Finally, what major themes will we find in this special Pauline letter? Let's outline them briefly:

- The mission of the church must and will move on through adversity and suffering.
- Outward circumstances cannot touch the inner joy and peace of a Christian follower.
- If the church is to be a beacon of witness to the world around it, the pattern of Christ's own life must be modeled. Only through understanding clearly the servant life of Jesus, which allowed a unique bridge between God and humanity to be built, does the church have a message worthy of proclaiming, living out and dying for.
- Theology is critically important to the believer, clergy and laity alike. We cannot be sloppy in our Christian beliefs. But reciting a creed is not the end of the story; those words of truth in our minds and hearts must be lived out in discipleship forms every day in word and deed.

We have completed a brief but important look into the context of Philippians. It is so vital in our Bible study opportunities that we take this "step back" before we attempt to take a "step forward." As you move through your Philippian study, enjoy the process—all of it—and know that at every corner there are new depths of clarity that you will discover even in the most well-trodden biblical paths.

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