

## **BACKGROUND PAPER ON THE EPISTLE TO THE PHILIPPIANS**

### The City of Philippi

The City of Philippi was located in modern Macedonia, which is north of Greece. The city was founded by Phillip II, the father of Alexander the Great. The church can thank Phillip and his son Alexander for establishing the Greek empire, which gave way centuries later to the Roman Empire. The Greek Empire gave a cohesiveness to the nations of the world through a common language and culture that set the stage for the eventual spread of the gospel.

Without going into a lot of history, Philippi became a Roman colony and was a reproduction of Rome on a small scale, both culturally and physically. The inhabitants were undoubtedly proud to be Romans, with all the rights and privileges afforded Roman citizens. Philippi would have had a large contingent of Roman army veterans, who would have retired with a land grant from the emperor.

Why is any of this important? There are several statements that Paul made in his letter that can better be understood within the context of Philippi's history:

1. Paul wrote to the Philippians from his Roman prison concerning the progress of the gospel among "the praetorian guard" (1:13). This would have had special meaning to the veterans and citizens in Philippi. Paul does not mention this guard in any other place.
2. He urged the Philippians to "to exercise your citizenship in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (1:27). The Roman citizens in Philippi would have had a better picture of and appreciation for their heavenly citizenship, being earthly citizens of the great Roman empire. Paul wrote using analogies that would make sense to his readers.
3. Paul talked about suffering (1:27-30). Certainly these Philippian believers would have received some "backlash" from the emerging and powerful emperor cult that expected Roman citizens to declare that Caesar was lord.
4. Paul seemed to make his strongest case for the divinity of Christ to these believers who were perhaps under pressure to extol the divinity of Caesar.
5. Paul mentioned Caesar's household in 4:22. He makes no other reference in any other letter.

### The Church at Philippi

To understand the church at Philippi, you should read Luke's historical account in Acts 16 now. What is significant about this church plant was that it was the first such effort in Europe. Paul had been trying to take the gospel east to Asia (see 16:6-8). The Spirit of Jesus did not permit Paul and his team to go in that direction, but instead gave him directions to go west. As a "western" believer, I am grateful for the Spirit's

missionary direction! Many have said that the gospel has spread westward since that time, and will continue to do so until it returns to where it started—in the Middle East. Let it be so, Lord Jesus.

Paul received his “call” to go west in a night vision. “During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them” (Acts 16:9-10). Some believe that the man in the vision was the jailer who played such an important role in the mission to Philippi (see 16:31-40), but that cannot be proved from the Bible account.

It is of note that Paul and his team “got ready at once” to go to Macedonia. They **concluded** that God wanted them to go there. In other words, Paul and his team used their brains. They reasoned that God wanted them to preach the gospel somewhere. Since they had been trying to do just that but felt resisted, they assumed that this vision was from God. The whole team received the vision, even though Paul was the only one who saw the man calling him over. They didn’t “pray about it,” but rather they set out immediately. I recently received an email from someone who stated in the email that the Lord had been dealing with him for eight weeks, eight weeks mind you, to send out the email. So much for an immediate response! And that over sending an email!

There was obviously no synagogue in Philippi, for on the Sabbath Paul and his team went out to the river where there was a place of prayer. Jewish law stipulated that if there were 10 Jewish males in an area, a synagogue could be formed. I would assume there were no Jews in Philippi. Perhaps the same persecution of Jews that was taking place in Rome was also happening in this Roman colony. At any rate, Paul went looking for a place where devout God-fearers would gather. He obviously knew where to look and found them praying.

Paul’s first convert was Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. This purple cloth was very expensive, the dye coming from the throat of a local shellfish. It is reported that there was only one drop of this purple dye in each fish, so you can be sure that Lydia was wealthy from distributing this expensive purple cloth.

Notice the phrase: “The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.” God opened her heart, but she still needed to respond. There were three people involved here: the Lord, Lydia and Paul and all three had a role in her conversion. Salvation work is never dependent on one person only; it always requires a team effort.

At any rate, Lydia is converted and she prevailed upon Paul and his team to stay at her house. We can assume I think that others were converted after this. As Paul would make his way to river prayer location, there was a slave-girl who had a **python**, the Greek word for a spirit of divination. Notice that this girl was declaring the truth that Paul and his team were “bondservants of the Most High God.” But this annoyed Paul who eventually cast the spirit of divination out of her. It seems that truth isn’t the issue, but the source of the truth is more important. Note the difference between this slave-girl and

Lydia. Both had truth, but one had it from God and the other had it from the devil. The slave-girl knew the truth from a demonic source, and Paul could not let that continue. Do you know anyone who has the truth, but got it from an illicit spiritual source?

Now the trouble began. It is of note that Paul's first trouble in Philippi was not essentially religious, but economic. The owners of the slave-girl made money from her divination and now Paul had cast out the means of her revelation. So her owners were to suffer economic loss and they were angry. They dragged Paul and Silas before the magistrates and before long, the crowd had stripped and beaten the two men. The authorities then put Paul and Silas in prison, entrusting them to the care of the Philippian jailer, who was probably a Roman veteran.

Now the fun really began. At midnight, Paul and Silas were singing hymns, an amazing testimony for men in their condition. Suddenly there was an earthquake and we have no reason to believe that this quake only took place in the jail area. I would think that the whole city felt it. During the earthquake, all the shackles and irons fell off the prisoners' arms and legs. The jailer, seeing what had happened, assumed that they had escaped and prepared to kill himself rather than face the humiliation of having failed in his duties.

But Paul urged him to restrain his hand and Paul was able to lead the jailer and his household to Jesus. When the officials came to send Paul away the next day, Paul refused to go. Paul was a Roman citizen and had been flogged without a trial, a serious offense against him. The officials did come personally to see him off, being much relieved when the incident was behind them. Having said farewell to the church in Lydia's home, Paul and his team departed Philippi.

### **Philippians the Epistle**

Now it is ten years after the story in Acts 16 took place. Paul found himself in prison again, this time for an extended period of time in Rome. He made the most of this break in his travel schedule by writing the prison epistles, generally believed to be Philemon, Ephesians, Colossians and Philippians. These would have been written about 10 years after Paul founded the Philippian church.

There are a few things that stand out about this letter to the Philippians. First, is how vulnerable and honest Paul was to this church. His love and intimacy with them is evident. He shared his thoughts and feelings, writing freely about death, ministry, suffering, finances and Jesus. You could almost say that Paul had a special love affair with the Philippians. Perhaps it was the suffering that he encountered when he first came to Philippi. Or maybe the receptivity of the people made his memories of them so special. Whatever the reason, Paul's Philippian letter did not contain the rebukes of Galatians, the chastisement of Corinthians or the concern of Colossians. This was brother Paul writing his friends and coworkers in Philippi.

The second thing that stands out is Paul's joy. He is in prison, yet he wrote to the Philippians to encourage them! In some ways, they were in worse shape over his condition than he was. Paul wrote to them about the joy of suffering, about how God was using his imprisonment to further the gospel, and about how they needed to rejoice in the Lord at all times! There was no complaining or attempts to gain sympathy. Paul wanted them to know that he was in fine spirits, even though in prison.

The final thing that stands out is Paul's disdain for anyone who would try to undo what he has done in building the church. He called those people "dogs" who did evil (3:2). He solemnly warned the Philippians to avoid those who were "enemies of the cross of Christ." (3:18). He even sent their emissary Epaphroditus, whom they had sent to minister to Paul, back to them so that they would not be concerned about him. Paul exhibited a pastor's heart for his flock and worked diligently to build them up and not burden or tear them down.

In conclusion, the letter to the Philippians gives us an intimate picture of Saint Paul the prisoner, the pastor and apostle. He was writing his favorite church about what it was like to serve the Lord as a church planter and leader. While the letter was addressed to all the church, he made sure to include the leaders. That was because he shared so many secrets of successful, godly leadership as he wrote the letter. Finally, Paul gave us a picture of noble and joyous service in the midst of pressure and suffering, another important lesson for leaders and followers alike. May the Lord bless the reading of His word as you now begin your 28 day study of Philippians.