

KERUX COMMENTARIES

PHILIPPIANS

A Commentary for Biblical Preaching and Teaching

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Philippians: A Commentary for Biblical Preaching and Teaching

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Overview of All Preaching Passages

Philippians 1:1–8

EXEGETICAL IDEA

The Philippians' longstanding partnership in spreading the gospel causes Paul to thank God for them.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Working together for spreading the gospel causes believers to thank God for one another.

PREACHING IDEA

Linking arms with fellow Christ-followers leads to deep gratitude.

PREACHING POINTERS

Paul opened with a formal greeting and friendly note of thanksgiving using an epistolary form familiar to the readers. The exegetical section introduces key terms and major themes, highlighting the rich ministry partnership Paul shares with them. The joyful tone and affectionate prayer shine against the backdrop of Paul's imprisonment, a circumstance known by his audience. If the Philippians struggled with anxiety for Paul's plight, his greeting calmed their fears. If they worried about a suppression of the gospel, his greeting eased their concerns. God had not left them alone in Christian service. Chains were no impediment to God's work. In fact, God used chains—the human chain—the linking of arms between fellow Christ-followers.

Today people often feel isolated and impeded in their faith journey. Linking arms with fellow Christ-followers lessens these negative feelings. Serving together creates shared experiences, stronger resolve, and sustained impact. Opportunities to link arms abound. Local churches may provide inroads to ministry teams (e.g., Youth Group) or connections to community organizations (e.g., YMCA). Parachurch ministries (e.g., Habitat for Humanity) and global development efforts (e.g., World Vision) to unite believers across denominational lines. Individual Christ-followers may covenant with others to form discipleship groups, neighborhood Bible studies, or community gardens. Of course, modern or ancient partnerships lacking deep gratitude, gospel purpose, and godly affection at times dissolve. This passage reiterates these conditions for successful partnerships, looking to God to sustain lasting links among his people.

Philippians 1:9–11

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Paul prayed that the Philippians will grow in love and godly character so that they will be ready for the return of Christ and ultimately bring honor to God.

Overview of All Preaching Passages

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Requests to God for growth in love and godly character prepare believers for Christ's return and brings honor to God.

PREACHING IDEA

Talking to God strengthens our ties to others.

PREACHING POINTERS

Paul built on his words of gratitude for the Philippians' partnership with a prayer for their growth. He lets his original readers overhear what he talked to God about concerning them: their character formation. While he has already stressed the promise that God will finish what he started in them, he now qualified the promise with a prayer for their increase in love and Christ-like living. These words prime the Philippians for an upcoming appeal to imitate Jesus. Paul shared the prayer to encourage his first-century readers to virtuous living and glorious praise until Jesus returns.

Too often contemporary prayers revolve around juvenile requests: more money, easy days, better health, nice weather, and traveling mercies. Followers of Jesus fail to thrive because we have traded the biblical content of prayer for petty goods or personal safety. Setting spiritual growth as a key prayer request for others establishes an important principle: God's people develop character by talking to him. When we intercede for others, our affection for them increases. Greater affection leads to stronger ties and greater interest in their character formation. As Philippians will demonstrate, we do well to ask God for increases of trust, joy, knowledge, fellowship, perseverance, and purity for fellow Christ-followers. This passage recovers how talking to God strengthens our ties to others.

Philippians 1:12–18a

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Paul encouraged the Philippians that his imprisonment had become an opportunity for proclaiming Jesus, and that despite the impure motives of some preachers, he rejoiced that the gospel was being preached

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Hardships in life are opportunities for proclaiming Jesus.

PREACHING IDEA

Roadblocks open new routes to see God at work.

PREACHING POINTERS

When Paul shifted from introduction to present circumstances, he immediately diffused any notion of disappointment. The movement from prayer to imprisonment rings with joy. The exegetical section not only provides historic details of his house arrest and "captive audience" with Caesar's guard, but also the advances in gospel proclamation, even by poorly motivated preachers. Anticipating the concern of his original audience, Paul assured them of positive

Overview of All Preaching Passages

outlook based upon God's ongoing work. Their challenge was looking beyond roadblocks to find joy in God's work in the face of current difficulties.

The tendency to fixate on challenging circumstances remains today. We become pathologically near-sighted. Every accident, misfortune, closed door, and unexpected expense can spark panic or stir disappointment. Our gut reaction to setbacks rarely includes rejoicing; more often we respond with doubt, questions, anger or disbelief. Consider the last time you were caught driving in a construction zone: Were you more prone to praise or road rage? And in the weightier matters of life—college and career, marriage and family, financial and physical wellbeing—roadblocks abound, so the reminder that God has not stopped working is even more essential. This passage directs our eyes to the new routes God opens when we face road blocks.

Philippians 1:18b–26

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Paul modeled a Christ-centered view of life and death, willing to die and be with Christ, yet confident of release and further ministry, while certain of his ultimate salvation and that Christ's prestige will be advanced through him.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Believers are to exhibit a Christ-centered view of life and death, seeking to advance Christ's prestige in the way they live or die.

PREACHING IDEA

Live fully in the face of death.

PREACHING POINTERS

Paul's imprisonment had created a dilemma: he faced possible execution or acquittal. Either option had potential benefits, and he weighed them out before his original readers. The exegetical section explains this dilemma, including theological clarification on honor/shame, salvation, and personal eschatology. Paul wrote frankly, disclosing his preference for death and being with Jesus, but ultimately yielded to the likelihood of pressing on in ministry. This internal dialogue models for the Philippians—who too will face suffering (1:28)—a healthy outlook on mortality and ministry.

Today, we deny death (Becker, 1997). The death sentence hanging over every person is muted by promises of prolonged life. Modern medicine and cosmetic products offer extended life, extended health, and extended beauty. The proliferation of super hero, zombie, and vampire films betray an unwillingness to look death in the eye. Patient-assisted suicide, which will someday be more widespread, tries to ease the sting of dying by granting power to sick people. Sadly, these denials of death prevent it from shaping our priorities. When was the last time you faced your mortality? How does embracing your finitude affect your daily decisions to love, serve, and bring honor to Jesus? This passage encourages us to consider our certain death as motivation to live fully.

Philippians 1:27–30

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Paul exhorted the Philippians to live in a way consistent with their citizenship in God's kingdom—standing together, promoting the message about Christ Jesus, and fearlessly withstanding persecution, realizing that suffering persecution as Christ's representatives in the world was a gift from God.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

As citizens of God's heavenly kingdom, believers should stand together, promoting the gospel and fearlessly withstanding persecution from unbelievers.

PREACHING IDEA

Band together to stand strong as loyal followers of Jesus.

PREACHING POINTERS

Paul's letter moved from a personal update to pastoral exhortation. He began a series of admonitions to unified, steadfast, selfless living. He wanted his original readers to reflect the work of Jesus, which is the heart of the gospel. The encouragement stemmed from a sober reality: loyal Christ-followers will always face opposition. Their dual citizenship set them against the prevailing values and popular opinion of their neighbors. First-century residents of Philippi showed strong allegiance to Caesar and upheld values of military status and family honor. The original audience of Paul's letter would have not have held such values in service of Jesus, resulting in social, religious, and political pressures.

There is no shortage of social pressures against which loyal followers of Jesus stand today. The Western world celebrates independence, self-expression, and consumerism. These values play out in an anything-goes sexual ethic, unfiltered online sharing, and gross personal debt, to name a few. When Christ-followers decide to band together and resist caving to these cultural values, they stand out, often painting a broad target on their backs. How does society respond when Christian teenagers vow to remain sexually pure until marriage? How do the media present the business owner who refuses to provide services for a same-sex wedding? What pressure does a parent feel when refusing to buy his children the latest gadget? This passage remains relevant today where diverse social pressures threaten our collective loyalty to Jesus.

Philippians 2:1–4

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Based on the encouragement, comfort, tender care, and presence of the Spirit God provides for followers of Christ, Paul exhorted the Philippians to make him completely joyful by living in harmony and humbly putting one another first.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Sincere humility that elevates others creates harmony in the church.

PREACHING IDEA

Put others first to sustain strong bonds with fellow Christ-followers.

PREACHING POINTERS

Now that Paul has warned his readers about suffering at the hands of external forces, he continues to advocate for resiliency against internal pressures. Disunity threatens his original readers. The quest for personal honor, selfish gain, and diverse goals tempts every believing congregation. Such internal battles do not justify uniformity—a mockery of biblical unity and minefield for control—but call for a shared commitment to reflect Jesus’s humble attitude. Paul wants harmony for his original readers, and he assures them aid from the Holy Spirit as they seek to put others first.

Selfish gain and personal ambition drive Christ-followers today. More platforms for self-promotion are available at the click of a finger than ever before. People can peddle their thoughts like cheap wares on social media, blogs, websites, chatrooms, and YouTube. While we may use these tools to maintain contact with distant relatives and old friends, they are sometimes used to fuel mob mentality and social disruption. Often, the byproduct of our communication tools is a sad mix of disconnection, competition, and ambition. Even within the body of Christ, ambition rears its ugly head. How often do loud voices become lobbyists for their niche ministry, trading the big vision of the local church for their pet project? The passage exposes selfish gain and calls for putting others first to sustain strong bonds as Christ-followers.

Philippians 2:5–8

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Christ modeled a servant attitude when, rather than maintaining his exalted status, he became a man and suffered a humiliating death for others.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Humility is demonstrated when, rather than insisting on our rights, we take the role of a lowly servant.

PREACHING IDEA

Climb down the ladder of privilege to reflect the attitude of Jesus.

PREACHING POINTERS

Building on the call to loyalty, unity, and humility, Paul provided another exhortation: to reflect the attitude of Jesus. In one of the most notable and theologically parsed passages of the New Testament, the apostle described Jesus’s downward mobility. The exegetical section sheds light on Jesus’s glorious preexistence, incarnation, and inglorious death. Paul’s description of Jesus’s shameful descent would have sounded remarkable to an honor-oriented

culture. Climbing down the ladder of privilege and status hinted of scandal in their context.

One of the driving narratives of today is the promise of upward mobility. From a child's earliest days of education, she learns she can achieve whatever she dreams. Educators chart a path of academic success leading to financial reward. Rags to riches stories capture our imaginations. Tales of success show how to arrive at the top at any cost, advancing from anonymity to celebrity, from average to extraordinary. Demotions and downsizing spell death in our personal life and economy. This passage presents a different path, encouraging followers of Jesus to follow his example and climb down the ladder of privilege to embody his character.

Philippians 2:9–11

EXEGETICAL IDEA

God the Father highly elevated Christ Jesus to the highest universal status so that all personal beings—angelic and human—will submit to Christ and openly declare his divine, sovereign authority, and so increase the Father's fame.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Christ Jesus reigns as the supreme Lord of the universe and will ultimately be acknowledged as such by all.

PREACHING IDEA

Jesus's crowning victory beckons our humble loyalty.

PREACHING POINTERS

Paul completed the Christ Hymn focusing on God's work of exaltation. Jesus's humble, selfless steps downward are matched by God's sweeping act of vindication: he raised up Jesus and gave him the upmost name. Jesus Christ, not Caesar, is Lord. To the first century readers, Jesus' reversal of misfortune served both to exhort Christ-like character (2:5) and bring comfort in the face of suffering (1:28). Jesus's victory challenged the imperialistic images and symbols of status broadcast daily in the streets of Philippi. Their challenge was to acknowledge Jesus's victory by submitting to him until his Return.

Competition, not humility, drives the Western world to enthrone a winner for every hour, season, and sphere of life. Athletes and coaches aim for personal records, hall of fame status, and team championships. Students pour into their academics to rise to the head of the class. Politicians set their aim on the White House. We hitch our wagons to these exalted figures, who require nothing from us in return. Moreover, many of us strive to make a name for ourselves. Sadly, personal victories are short-lived; worldly triumphs do not last. This passage begs us to acknowledge the exaltation of Jesus: his crowning victory beckons our humble loyalty.

Philippians 2:12–18

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Paul exhorts the Philippians, as God motivates and empowers them, to strive to become a spiritually mature, holy community as they head toward the future salvation God will bring to completion, and to rejoice with him in their mutual sacrificial service to God.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

God motivates and empowers believers to strive to become a spiritually mature, holy community as they head toward the future salvation God will bring to completion.

PREACHING IDEA

Keep working the plan to become spiritually fit.

PREACHING POINTERS

Transitioning from the Christ hymn, Paul completed his exhortation section with a series of three more imperatives to live like citizens of God's kingdom, not Caesar's. He called the first-century audience to finish strong in their spiritual commitments to personal growth, communal life, and evangelistic witness. Their motivation to live God-pleasing lives has both internal and external factors. Internally, Paul promised them God-given energy to work out their salvation. Externally, Paul promised them Jesus will return and justify his labors. In either case, the first-century audience should avoid the pitfall of spiritual idleness.

Followers of Jesus today need a revival of focused, spiritual energy. We are distracted and depleted. We expend our energies on too many tasks that are mindless and meaningless. We manage email, count calories, transport children to extra-curricular events, and fill our DVRs with too many shows to watch in a week. Even the demands of daily life—cooking and cleaning, commuting and working, paying bills and returning phone calls—can sap our energy, leaving our spiritual lives underdeveloped. Becoming spiritually fit should be our chief aim, but it requires a plan and discipline to follow. Often the more urgent tasks take priority. This passage motives us to keep working the plan to become spiritually fit.

Philippians 2:19–30

EXEGETICAL IDEA

The Philippians are to receive and honor two proven, sacrificial servants of Christ from Paul—Timothy and Epaphroditus.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

We should value followers of Jesus who demonstrate sacrificial service for the church.

PREACHING IDEA

Give kudos to those who take risks for Jesus.

PREACHING POINTERS

Paul shifted from moral exhortation to traveling arrangements, sharing with his original readers upcoming plans to see them again. Prior to his arrival, however, the Philippians will receive two familiar ministry partners who have risked their lives: Timothy and Epaphroditus. The exegetical section reveals Paul's reinforcement of the Christ hymn while giving updates on these two commendable servants. Their humility and sacrifice deserve recognition. Moreover, Paul alleviates any worries his first-century readers experienced concerning Epaphroditus' delayed return.

Today we can learn a lesson on commending those who take risks for Jesus. Our world has no shortage of role models. Children exalt heroes from TV and movie screens. Famous athletes and star singers shape cultural trends in dress, language, and politics. Parents, teachers, and coaches, serve as personal examples to emulate. The challenge is choosing the right kind of role model, who risks her security, comfort, and reputation to make Jesus famous. Not only does Paul consider himself a risk-taker and worthy role model, but he also gives kudos to two ministry partners who risk their life for Jesus.

Philippians 3:1-6

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Paul's warning against Judaizers emphasizes that Christ-followers are God's true people—because they worship and serve God under the power and direction of the Holy Spirit, they trust only in Jesus the Messiah, who secured their justification, and they do not seek justification through keeping the Law.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

God's true people are those who worship God under the power and direction of the Holy Spirit, who trust only in Jesus the Messiah for justification, and who do not seek justification through keeping the Law.

PREACHING IDEA

Don't trust an impressive resume to secure good standing with God.

PREACHING POINTERS

The tone of Paul's letter takes a turn in chapter three. The exhortation to copy Jesus's humble, self-giving, sacrificial attitude (as modeled by Timothy and Epaphroditus), contrasts sharply with a warning about Judaizers. Although the original readers may not have directly encountered the legalism Paul criticizes, they are no stranger to poorly motivated preachers and cultural pressures. Immanent threat or not, Paul considers it relevant to remind his first century audience of the happy fact of their new identity in Christ. They don't earn good standing with God by birthright or obedience, but receive it by trusting Jesus.

We are no less affected by moralism in today's church. The specific deeds we deem holy and perverse have a more modern dress, but the tendency to encode some acts as tolerable and others as egregious follows the same line old of logic. We ban certain genres of music (e.g.,

rap) and make allowances for others (e.g., country). We condemn some content in movies (e.g., sex and language) but justify “lesser” sins (e.g., violence and greed). Moreover, we praise people who take short-term mission trips or practice evangelism, but give little recognition to the volunteer who replaces the trashcan liner or sanitizes the nursery toys. This passage strongly challenges our misplaced trust in an impressive religious resume for good standing with God.

Philippians 3:7–11

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Paul pursued a personal relationship with Jesus as the only way to have a truly right standing before God at the final Judgment and to experience the future bodily resurrection.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

A personal relationship with Jesus is the only way to have a truly right standing before God at the final Judgment and to experience the future bodily resurrection.

PREACHING IDEA

Dump everything that disrupts you from knowing Jesus better.

PREACHING POINTERS

Building off his warning about would-be Jewish moralists, and echoing imagery from the masterful Christ hymn, this passage makes it clear: Intimacy with Jesus was Paul’s greatest aim, for it was the only means to right standing with God. Though his religious resume is impressive, Paul deemed it—along with every other accomplishment, comfort, or worldly pursuit—dispensable. The original readers would have heard the edge in Paul’s rhetoric, as he crassly threw their cultural values into the garbage heap. They prized social status, religious performance, and family lineage, but he willingly pitched them in the trash.

Our culture does not put a premium on knowing Jesus better. We are conditioned to pursue success, security, and comfort with greater loyalty than knowing him. Busyness in the church can serve as a substitute for knowing Jesus better. Managing our social lives with the myriad of recreational activities, family obligations, and friend groups can distract us from knowing Jesus better. Even all our grandiose (or misguided) thoughts about Jesus may inhibit us from knowing him better. This passage inspires us to dump everything that disrupts us from knowing Jesus better.

Philippians 3:12–16

EXEGETICAL IDEA

The Philippians are to agree with Paul and to pursue the ultimate goal of full intimacy with Jesus in a resurrection body in the age to come.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Believers are to pursue the ultimate goal of full intimacy with Jesus in a resurrection body

in the age to come.

PREACHING IDEA

Always take one more step as you strive to become like Jesus.

PREACHING POINTERS

Paul fixes his focus forward in this passage on his forthcoming resurrection and glory. His earthly life was interrupted by a heavenly calling that drives him ever forward. Athletic imagery colors these verses with sweat and drive, as the exegetical section explains. While the apostle's comments are deeply personal—evident in several first-person pronouns—he invites his original readers to join the marathon. His race is their race; they are spiritual siblings pursuing resurrection and glory together. Perhaps, legalism looms in the background; however, the passage more clearly encourages followers of Jesus to always take one more step as they strive to become like Jesus.

Today, the idea of striving after Jesus tends toward one of two ends on the human-effort spectrum. On the one hand, followers of Jesus treat salvation as a works-based project. They burn themselves out striving for perfection at home, work, church, and community. On the other hand, an errant understanding of grace discourages some believers from any spiritual effort. The unbreakable promise of heaven renders them of little earthly good. Perfection and passivity constitute the poles of our pursuit of Jesus; his people often pinball between the two. God's calling in our lives embraces the tension of our gritty pursuit and glorious ending.

Philippians 3:17–4:1

EXEGETICAL IDEA

The Philippians are to follow Paul's pattern of living a Christ-like life of humility, self-denial, and sacrificial service while they wait for Jesus to return and complete their redemption by giving them resurrection bodies like his.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Believers should follow the apostolic pattern of living a Christ-like life of humility, self-denial, and sacrificial service while they wait for Jesus to return and complete their redemption by giving them resurrection bodies like his.

PREACHING IDEA

Follow in the footsteps of people who align their lives with God's kingdom.

PREACHING POINTERS

Paul capped a series of personal affirmations about striving toward Jesus with an exhortation to imitate the apostle and others who align their lives with God's kingdom. The lifestyle of a believer is described with echoes from the Christ hymn—humility preceding the glory of their resurrection bodies. The exegetical section will show this transformation hinges on Jesus's return. In the meantime, Paul warns his original audience to remain steadfast amid "enemies of the cross," an uncertain group of opponents. In any case, their challenge was to

follow Paul's footsteps, not those who aligned their lives with earthly ends.

Today we are swayed by many fads, famous people, and faith options that do not align with kingdom values. We emulate parents and teachers, friends and celebrities, media and marketers whose peddle self-indulgence and shameful gain. We buy sleek products (e.g., MacBooks and Fitbits) to secure social capital. The fear of shame silences our religious convictions (e.g., marriage as a covenant between male and female). We are terribly impressionable people, modifying our behavior based upon our current company. The footsteps we choose to follow become critical in our spiritual formation. This passage appeals to our need to follow in the footsteps of people who align their lives with God's kingdom.

Philippians 4:2–5

EXEGETICAL IDEA

The Philippians are to live together in unity, being deeply satisfied with the Lord in every circumstance, exhibiting a humble, gracious spirit to all people.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Believers are to live together in unity, being deeply satisfied with the Lord in every circumstance, exhibiting a humble, gracious spirit to all people.

PREACHING IDEA

Resolve disagreements before they wreak havoc on harmony and happiness.

PREACHING POINTERS

Paul moved toward his conclusion, transitioning from the topic of external opposition to internal tensions. An interpersonal squabble in the church lingers between two women, Euodia and Syntyche (4:2). The nature of their disagreement is not stated, but given the fact Paul addresses them by name in his letter and asks for a mediator (4:3), it suggests the matter was disruptive to the community. Here, Paul puts the unity principle to the test. The original readers surely had awareness of the tension between these important female figures. Resolving their differences would not only prove beneficial to harmony and happiness in the Philippian church, it would also demonstrate Christ-like meekness to a watching world.

Settling disagreements in our day is no simple matter. The lack of civility makes tense conversations toxic. People are trigger happy on social media, willing to lambast anyone who reflects an opposing view. Political discourse in America has devolved into name-calling and posturing. And under the banner of tolerance, our culture—overly sensitive and quick to take offense—has effectively banned moral disagreement. Followers of Jesus—whose names share a place in the book of life—should resolve their differences with gentleness. Sadly, when tensions arise among believers, we often descend into the same stubborn discord. The passage appeals to our need to resolve disagreements before they wreak havoc on harmony and happiness.

Philippians 4:6–9

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Instead of worrying, the Philippians are to lay out their concerns before God in prayer and to focus on godly virtues, following Paul's sacrificial, Christ-like lifestyle, so that so that they may experience the peace God gives.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

A lifestyle of laying out one's concerns before God in prayer, thinking about godly virtues, and following a sacrificial, Christ-like lifestyle leads to experiencing God's peace.

PREACHING IDEA

Keep God ever on your mind to calm your restless heart.

PREACHING POINTERS

Having dealt with interpersonal conflict, Paul transitions to the life of the mind. His awareness of the Lord's nearness serves as a hinge. Paul's original readers had many reasons for anxiety: the apostle's plight, Epaphroditus' health, opposition, suffering, and misguided teaching all threatened them. Until Jesus returned, they were sure to feel tensions as citizens of heaven among Roman enthusiasts. Paul writes to assure them a greater peace than Caesar's is available. However, to feel Christ's peace, they would have to fix their minds on God.

Reasons for unrest abound today. Marketers prey on the fear of being left out. Media fuels the fear of disease, crime, and political scandal. Medical talk and research makes people instantly squeemish (just ask people how they feel when searching their symptoms on WebMd!). And followers of Jesus live in pluralistic society where religious truth claims come across as oppressive. Cries of intolerance and accusations of hate plague the Western church; persecution has pushed the church underground in many other areas. In such a climate, our anxieties take on a life of their own, filling our minds with soul-squelching chatter. This passage implores followers of Jesus to silence the clamor of restless thoughts by keeping our minds ever on God.

Philippians 4:10–13

EXEGETICAL IDEA

While the Philippians delighted in their material provision, Paul hds learned to be satisfied in life (experiencing spiritual/emotional wellbeing and peace) in any circumstance (having much or little) through his relationship with Christ and the strength he provides.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Spiritual/emotional wellbeing and peace comes through a personal relationship with Christ and the strength he provides in every life situation.

PREACHING IDEA

Satisfaction starts by learning to say: "Whatever God gives is good enough!"

PREACHING POINTERS

Thanking the Philippians for their financial support is one of Paul's key purposes for writing the letter. However, his "Thank you" goes beyond a word of gratitude. The exegetical section explains how Paul reframes the discussion, turning his appreciation into a theological primer on contentment in God's supply of inner calm and external needs. His first century audience may have overvalued their financial gift or under-estimated how God provides material goods and internal strength in crisis situations. Paul's "Thank you" is not a backhanded rebuke, but another reminder of God's part in the partnership with his people who proclaim Jesus.

Contentment seems less common than entitlement in the Western world. We assume our most basic needs will be met by employers or government aid, giving little credit to God for his abundant supply. Lack of bread and milk sparks a visit to overstocked grocery stores more often than prayer for daily supply. When our old cars, clothes, and computers wear out, we rush to retailers (online or local) to acquire new goods. Whether we pay cash or finance, it is easy to remove God from the receipt. This passage reminds us that all our assets ultimately come from him, so we must find satisfaction in him, learning to say: "What he gives is good enough."

Philippians 4:14–23

EXEGETICAL IDEA

The Philippians' material aid to Paul is a spiritual investment and act of worship that brings spiritual reward and provision from God.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Christian giving is a spiritual investment and act of worship that brings spiritual reward and provision from God.

PREACHING IDEA

God stamps his seal of approval on generous living.

PREACHING POINTERS

Paul continued to convey his appreciation for the Philippians' generosity. Their most recent gift through Epaphroditus—one of many previous donations—shows revived concern for Paul and the expansion of the gospel. The exegetical section will demonstrate how Paul looks beyond the material side to the spiritual, seeing their offering as a God-pleasing sacrifice. If the original readers have mistaken his comments about contentment as a slight, Paul assures them of his gratitude, magnified by the apostle's understanding of their future reward. Paul closes his letter with a final reminder to his readers that their gracious Heavenly Father has riches in store for them. Glory is the stamp of approval awaiting generous followers of Jesus.

Generosity should mark today's church, as well. There is no shortage of causes and needs to give to: building programs, short-term trips, homeless shelters, camp scholarships, African wells, utility relief, and the general church budget. Followers of Jesus will give an account

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for how they steward, spend, and share their monetary resources. Our wallets are windows into our worship; sacrificial giving pleases God. And knowing the Western church is among the wealthiest people on the planet only adds to the urgency of giving to good causes and clear needs. This passage speaks directly to the financial opportunities knocking at the doors of the church.

Introduction

OVERVIEW OF INTRODUCTORY ISSUES

Author: Consensus is this is a genuine letter from Paul. Many believe that in 2:6–11 Paul quotes a hymn of the early church.

Place and Date of Writing: Paul is in prison, probably in Rome, *ca.* A.D. 62, though Ephesus, *ca.* A.D. 52–55, is possible.

Occasion for Writing: The Philippians had sent Epaphroditus with financial aid to Paul. Paul is now sending him back. He writes to let them know how the gospel is spreading despite his imprisonment, to encourage them to stand firm in the midst of opposition, to confront a lack of humility and disunity in the church, to warn them about false teachers who may arrive, and to thank them for their gift.

Readers: Paul planted the church in Philippi on his second missionary journey (Acts 16). Since that time they had partnered with him in spreading the gospel.

Historical Setting: Philippi, in Macedonia, was founded *ca.* 356 B.C. by Philip II of Macedon (father of Alexander the Great). In 42 B.C. it became an official Roman Colony, with 1000–3000 Roman military veterans eventually settling there. The Roman imperial cult, which deified the emperor, was the dominant religion. Of the population (roughly 10,000), perhaps forty percent were Roman citizens. The believers (estimated to number 33–100) probably came largely from among the city's service groups, slaves, and poor.

AUTHORSHIP OF PHILIPPIANS

Authenticity

Philippians claims to have been written by the apostle Paul (1:1), and there are no good reasons

for doubting its authenticity. The consensus is that this is a genuine letter from him. Its themes and situations ring true to what we know of Paul's ministry. Scholars have typically discussed two particular issues regarding authorship.

A Hymn of the Early Church?

Scholars debate whether Paul wrote the "hymn" of 2:6–11 or whether he was quoting an existing hymn of the early Judean church. Discussions focus mainly on the unusual vocabulary and rhythmic style of the hymn. Most believe that it was composed at an earlier time, either by Paul himself or by someone else. Some see it as a hymn of the early church, perhaps originally in Aramaic, that Paul quotes (e.g. Martin, 1997; Martin and Dodd, 1998). A minority view is that as Paul was writing Philippians and meditating on the example of Christ, he heightened the elegance of his writing and composed the text at that time (Fee, 1992, 29–46). The arguments on both sides of the debate are evenly balanced, and some feel that neither view can be proven conclusively (Carson and Moo, 2005, 499–503). Whether Paul is the hymn's original author or not, and whether he composed it while writing the letter or inserted it, this is an exquisite description of Christ's humility, death, and exaltation.

A Composite Letter?

Some scholars have argued that the epistle was not originally one letter from Paul, but represents a compilation from two or three of his letters to the Philippians. A typical proposal is that three separate letters—(A) a thank-you note (4:10–20), (B) friendly encouragement (1:1–3:1; 4:4–9; 4:21–23) and (C) a warning against opponents (3:2–4:3)—have been "cut and pasted" by

an editor (see Collange, 1979; Perkins, 1991; Reumann, 2008). Williams summarizes a number of partition theories (2002, 49). Advocates point to the alleged “rough transitions” in the letter as it presently stands. For example, many note that 3:1 fits nicely with 4:4 and that 3:2–4:3 seems like an insertion. They note the abrupt move from warm encouragement (3:1, “Rejoice in the Lord”) to warning (3:2, “Beware the dogs”). Further, the opening expression in 3:1, “finally” (τὸ λοιπὸν) sounds like Paul is ready to close the letter. So this is taken as evidence that a later editor has “pasted” 3:2–4:3 onto another letter at 3:1.

The arguments for the composite theory are unconvincing. The fact that scholars cannot agree on the extent of the supposed original letters and that some of the suggestions are mutually contradictory reveal how subjective these arguments can be. Watson concludes that scholars have misunderstood epistolary conventions or have understood them in an unnecessarily restricted sense (2003, 176). Recent studies using rhetorical or text-linguistic analysis argue for the unity of the epistle, though see the critique by Bockmuehl of such studies on both sides (1998, 22–24).

Arguments for unity include: (1) the repetition of common themes and the verbal parallels that occur in the various sections of the letter. For example, the repeated occurrence of the verb φρονεῖν (1:7; 2:2 [2x], 5; 3:15 [2x], 19; 4:2, 10 [2x]) throughout the letter, or the parallels between the example of Christ in 2:6–11 and the example of Paul in 3:7–11. (2) The letter as it stands is understandable and in keeping with the usual stylistic fluidity of Hellenistic “family” letters (Alexander, 1989). (3) All extant manuscripts contain the whole letter. There is no manuscript evidence for two or three originally separate letters. (4) No one has demonstrated a convincing purpose for cutting and pasting such letters together. What motive would an editor have had? And why would an editor not smooth out the “rough transitions?” Suggesting that

Philippians is a composite letter due to its rough features does not solve the perceived problem. It only shifts the problem of organization from Paul to the supposed editor. (5) The term in 3:1 (τὸ λοιπὸν) may be rendered “in addition” instead of “finally” (cf. 1 Thess 4:1). In the end, it is best to regard Philippians to be a single original letter from Paul.

PLACE AND DATE OF WRITING

Paul was “in chains” when he wrote Philippians (1:7, 13, 17). This could refer to full imprisonment or to house arrest, perhaps being chained to a Roman soldier, which was common (Rapske, 1994, 31, 169, 173, 181; *DNTB*, 828; Wansink, 1996, 46–47). He expected to be released and to come to Philippi (1:19, 24–26; 2:23–24), though there was a chance that he might be executed (1:20–23). He does not state where he was imprisoned. The Philippians knew his location, for they had sent Epaphroditus to attend to his needs (2:25–30). The place of his imprisonment had a “praetorium” (1:13). In Rome this would refer to the Praetorian Guard, an elite detachment of Roman soldiers loyal to the emperor who functioned as his personal troops and bodyguards. Outside Rome, *praetorium* would refer to the headquarters of the provincial governor, especially an imperial governor who had troops under his command such as in Caesarea (*DNTB*, 176, 995).

Also close to Paul as he wrote were “those from Caesar’s household” (4:22), a phrase denoting mainly slaves and former slaves who served a wide range of functions from domestic service to professionals (e.g. doctors and educators), and to bureaucrats who served in the imperial administration throughout the provinces (*DPL*, 83; *DNTB*, 1001). Another phrase Paul uses, “most of the brothers in the Lord” (1:14), suggests the presence of an established church at Paul’s location.

The book of Acts records three imprisonments of Paul: a brief imprisonment in Philippi (16:23–40), a two-year imprisonment in

Caesarea (23:23–26:32), and a two-year imprisonment in Rome (28:16–31). In addition, Paul states that he was “in prison more frequently” than the false apostles threatening the Corinthians (2 Cor 11:23). According to *1 Clement* 5:6, Paul was imprisoned seven times. So he endured imprisonments for which we have no details. Scholars usually note three possible locations for Paul’s imprisonment when he wrote Philippians—Rome, Caesarea, and Ephesus.

Rome

The traditional view is that Paul wrote Philippians during his Roman imprisonment described in Acts 28. This view accounts for Paul’s mention of the Praetorian Guard, those from Caesar’s household, and the existence of an established church. The view that Paul was writing from Rome goes back at least to the second-century A.D. Marcionite Prologue, which states: “The Philippians are Macedonians. Having received the word of truth, they persevered in the faith and did not accept false apostles. The apostle commends them, writing to them from prison in Rome” (Bruce, 1988, 142).

Some scholars argue that Rome is unlikely due to its distance from Philippi—perhaps as much as 1200 miles by land (Carson and Moo, 2005, 504), or 800 miles by land and sea. This may be a problem because of the several trips between Paul and the Philippians presupposed in the letter. First, there had to be a trip from Paul to Philippi to inform them that he was already imprisoned or else headed there; then a trip from Philippi for Epaphroditus to bring Paul their gift (2:25); then another trip to Philippi for them to hear about Epaphroditus’ illness (2:26); finally another trip from Philippi with news of their concern for Epaphroditus (2:26). In other words, four 800–1200-mile journeys are presupposed—each taking perhaps as long as two months (Silva estimates four to seven weeks, 2005, 5–6). If we allow two months per journey, this is only eight months, and Paul’s first Roman imprisonment lasted two years (Acts 28:30).

These trips are not really as big a problem as some scholars have thought. The number of journeys implied can be reduced if Epaphroditus became sick while en route to Rome and a companion immediately returned to Philippi with the news, and if Paul, when hearing of this, assumed their concern for him. He did not have to wait to hear from the Philippians to know that they were concerned for Epaphroditus (Garland, 2006, 179). Llewelyn suggests that the Philippians may have learned of Paul’s dispatch from Caesarea to Rome while he was en route and that Epaphroditus may have already been in Rome when Paul arrived (1995).

Caesarea

As an alternative to Rome, some suggest that Paul wrote Philippians during his two-year imprisonment at Caesarea (Acts 23:23–24:27). Located on the Mediterranean coast, Caesarea was the center of the Roman administration of Palestine. Herod’s palace was located there with a guard that would fit the designation “Praetorian” (Acts 23:35). As the imperial headquarters, there would have been “those from Caesar’s household.” Like Rome, Caesarea is far from Philippi (1000 miles), though with a two-year window, this is not a problem.

A possible weakness of the Caesarea designation, however, is that there is no evidence of a sizable church in Caesarea. Also against Caesarea may be the facts of his legal case. Paul still had the opportunity to appeal to Caesar (Acts 25:11), so it is not clear that while in Caesarea, Paul would have thought that he might be put to death by the Roman government (Phil 1:21–23). In reply to this last point, some suggest that in Philippians 1:21–23, Paul may have been thinking, not of the Roman courts, but of the Jews who wanted to kill him (Acts 21:31, 36; 22:22; 23:30; 25:3, 24; 26:21). Further, Rapske states that while the provincial Roman governor was strongly counseled by Roman law to grant an appeal to the emperor, he was not bound by law to do so (*DNTB*, 216–217). Of the

three options usually mentioned for the place of writing, this is the least popular among scholars.

Ephesus

In recent decades, this view has gained support. Paul spent three years at Ephesus during his third missionary journey (Acts 20:31). There is no explicit record of Paul being imprisoned there, but he does say that he “fought wild beasts in Ephesus” (1 Cor 15:32). He also writes of his afflictions in Asia—that he “despaired even of life” and that he “had a sentence of death” from which he was rescued (2 Cor 1:8–10). “Fought wild beasts” and “sentence of death” are likely metaphorical, and these words may imply imprisonment or other sufferings. Supporters of this view note that the term “praetorium” can refer to the residence of any provincial governor (Matt 27:27; Mark 15:15; John 18:28, 33; 19:9; Acts 23:35) and that “those of Caesar’s household” can refer to slaves or freedmen in imperial service in numerous cities. The major argument in favor of Ephesus, though, is the distance between Ephesus and Philippi—these two cities are only one hundred miles apart. For some scholars this makes the presupposed trips between Paul and the Philippians more plausible.

Against Ephesus, critics reply that no evidence exists for applying the term “praetorium” to the governor’s palace in Ephesus; it was in a *senatorial*, not an *imperial* province. Also, some scholars point out that on this view Paul would have written Philippians around the same time he wrote 1–2 Corinthians and Romans, when he was concerned about the collection for the churches in Judea (1 Cor 16:1–4; 2 Cor 8–9; Rom 15:25–28). They think it strange that Paul talks about the collection in those three letters but makes no mention of it to the Philippians. Others note that there is no explicit record that Paul was actually imprisoned at Ephesus. In particular, there is no direct evidence of a

prolonged imprisonment necessitated by the multiple trips between Paul and the Philippians.

At present, there is no consensus among scholars. Many believe it is impossible to decide the issue. A good case can be made for Rome (the traditional view) or for Ephesus. Fewer support Caesarea. We will assume the traditional view that Rome is the place of origin since the distance between Rome and Philippi does not seem to be a problem if Paul was imprisoned for two years. The place of origin determines the date of Paul’s writing: if he wrote from Ephesus, the date is A.D. 52–55; Caesarea, A.D. 57–59; Rome, A.D. 60–62. Due to the travel reflected in the letter, Paul would likely have written Philippians nearer the end of the latter two terms (Hemer, 1989, 275).

A decision on *where* Paul was imprisoned does not greatly affect the interpretation of Philippians. The important point is to know that he was in prison and that this determined his present reality and relationship with the Philippians. His prison letters have additional gravity and urgency because he is incarcerated (Nebreda, 2011, 250).

OCCASION FOR WRITING

Nearly all of Paul’s letters were occasional—written for the particular situations and needs of the recipients at the time of writing. Each letter addressed a specific occasion, determining much of what Paul said and the way he said it. So each letter reveals certain details about what was going on with Paul and with the recipients at the time he wrote. We can say something about Paul’s circumstances and those of the church at Philippi by noting what he writes in Philippians.¹

Paul’s Circumstances

Paul is imprisoned where there is a praetorium (1:13) and believers who are “from

¹ For criteria on mirror reading polemics in Paul’s letters see Barclay, 1987. For mirror reading moral issues, see Gupta, 2012.

Caesar's household" (4:22). His imprisonment has served for the advancement of the gospel and has caused the brethren around him to become bold in their witness for Christ (1:13–14). Some of those preaching are motivated by rivalry toward Paul, but others by love toward him (1:15–18). He faces the possibility of execution, but he expects to be released and to come to Philippi (1:19–26). Epaphroditus had arrived from the Philippians with their gifts to minister to Paul's needs (2:25; 4:18). As the Philippians had heard, Epaphroditus had become ill to the point of death, but God spared him. Paul is now sending him back and wants them to receive him with joy and honor (2:26–30). Paul hopes to send Timothy to them soon (2:19) and to come shortly himself after his case is resolved (2:24).

The Philippians' Circumstances

They are experiencing threats of intimidation and persecution from opponents of the gospel (1:27–30). In the face of such opposition, disunity among the believers is a threat. Selfish ambition, conceit, grumbling, and arguing may be present (2:2–3, 14). An argument exists between two of the leading women in the church who had collaborated with Paul—Euodia and Syntyche (4:2–3). Disunity and lack of humility among the believers has the potential to harm their witness to the world around them (2:14–16).

The church also needs to beware of false teachers (3:2–3), though they are not yet present. Paul also calls the Philippians' attention to "enemies of the cross of Christ" (3:18–19). Scholars debate the precise identity of these groups. The false teachers (3:2–3) were most likely Jewish-Christian false teachers who advocated circumcision and keeping at least parts of the Old Testament Law as necessary for justification. The "enemies of the cross" may refer to the same group or perhaps immoral Gentiles.

Purpose for Writing

Paul's long-term partnership with and affection

for the Philippians was reason enough to write. He is keeping in touch from prison and reassuring his extended family (cf. Alexander, 1989, 95). His sending Epaphroditus back to them provided the specific occasion to write about several things. The contents of the letter suggest that he had primarily a twofold purpose in writing—first, to inform and encourage them with news of his circumstances and plans; second, to address several issues regarding their circumstances.

First, he writes to encourage them by providing news from his imprisonment. After letting them know that he thanks God for their partnership and is praying for them (1:3–11), he reassures them that the gospel is advancing despite his imprisonment (1:12–18a) and lets them know of his prospects for the near future—that he expects to be released and to come to them (1:20–26). He assures them that their representative Epaphroditus has executed his task well in ministering to his needs (2:25–30). He also commends Timothy, whom he will send shortly (2:19–23). And he lets them know that he too hopes to visit soon (2:24). He also informs them of the joy he felt when he received their financial support (4:10, 14–20) while at the same time assuring them of his contentment in his circumstances (4:11–13).

Second, he writes to encourage them and direct them toward Christian thinking and behavior as he confronts several issues among them. Through his own example, he urges them to find joy in what matters—the progress of the gospel (1:12–18a) (Thielman, 2005, 309, 321). By explaining how he views the prospects of being executed or released, he shows them how they should view the possibility of death (1:18b–24). He exhorts them to live as citizens of the kingdom, worthy of the gospel, standing firm in one Spirit and in unity as they suffer for Christ (1:27–30). He exhorts them to replace selfish ambition, conceit, grumbling, and arguing with putting others first in humility and unity (2:1–16). He urges them to rejoice with

him (2:18; 3:1), to beware of false teachers, and to follow his example in pursuing intimacy with Christ (3:2–21). He calls on two of the leading women of the church to heal the rift between them (4:2–3). And he gives general exhortations for thinking and behavior (4:4–9). As Still summarizes it, Paul calls them to live in such a way that, together, they all can glorify God and advance the gospel as they await Christ’s return (2012, 66).

READERS TO WHOM PAUL WROTE

Paul writes to believers in the church at Philippi, a church he planted on his second missionary journey in Acts (Acts 15:36–18:22).

Beginning of the Church

Luke records Paul’s founding the church in Philippi in Acts 16:11–40. On the second missionary journey, in response to Paul’s vision of a “man of Macedonia” (Acts 16:9), Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke went to Philippi. On the Sabbath, they went outside the city gate to a place of prayer near the riverside. There they shared the gospel with a group of women who had gathered. Luke first describes the conversion of Lydia, a “worshipper of God” (σεβουμένη τὸν θεόν). This designation refers to Gentiles who have become followers of the God of Israel and have attached themselves loosely to the Jewish community, but who have not officially converted to Judaism and do not keep the entire law (Schürer, 1986, 3:161–69). The Lord opened Lydia’s heart to believe the gospel. After she and her household were baptized, Lydia persuaded Paul and his companions to stay with her.

Luke then describes how Paul and Silas cast a spirit of divination out of a slave girl. Acts 16:16 uses the term “python spirit” (πνεῦμα πύθωνα), perhaps indicating that she channeled the oracles of Apollo, the Python god. Paul and Silas were imprisoned because of their actions, but the Lord miraculously released them when an earthquake caused the prison doors to open and their bonds to unfasten. As a result, the

Philippian jailor and his household believed in Christ and were baptized. With these conversions, the church at Philippi was born. This is the first European church in the Acts narrative, and so represents a milestone as the gospel spread to an entirely Gentile, Roman setting.

It is not clear how long Paul and his team stayed in Philippi on their foundational visit, but presumably it was not too long. While Paul, Silas, and Timothy went on to evangelize Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens (Acts 17:1–34), they apparently left Luke at Philippi. This is implied by the “we sections” in Acts (where the narrative is written using the first person plural “we” and so presented as a first-hand report by Luke). The first “we section” in Acts ends at Philippi (Acts 16:17) and the second “we section” begins there (20:5), suggesting that Luke may have stayed at Philippi rather than traveling with Paul in Acts 17:1–20:3, a period of about seven or eight years. If Luke did remain at Philippi during this time, he would have become an important member of the church there.

During the third missionary journey (Acts 18:23–21:16), the bulk of which included a stay in Ephesus that lasted nearly three years (Acts 19:1–41; 20:31), Paul sent two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, to Macedonia (Acts 19:22). They likely revisited the church in Philippi. After Paul left Ephesus, he traveled through Macedonia encouraging the churches before going to Greece (Acts 20:1–2; cf. 2 Cor 2:12–13; 7:5). Again, Philippi would have been one of the Macedonian cities he visited. After a three-month stay in Greece, Paul returned through Macedonia and sailed for Troas from Philippi (Acts 20:3–6). His goal was to reach Jerusalem by Pentecost with a monetary gift for the relatively poor Jerusalem church (Acts 20:16; 1 Cor 16:1–4; 2 Cor 9:1–5; Rom 15:25–29). This collection from the Gentile churches on the mission field was in recognition of their spiritual debt to the mother church in Jerusalem. Once Paul arrived in Jerusalem, he was arrested in the temple and spent two years

imprisoned in Caesarea (Acts 24:27). After his appeal to Caesar and subsequent transfer to Rome, Paul spent two years there under house arrest in which he was able to receive visitors (Acts 28:30). Paul probably wrote Philippians during his Roman imprisonment.

Paul's Longstanding Partnership with the Philippians

The Philippians partnered in a special way to support Paul in his missionary work. This is evident from several statements in his letters. Paul notes that they had been his partners “from the first day until now” (Phil 1:5), which suggests their financial support from the time he planted the church. He also notes that two ladies, Euodia and Syntyche, labored side by side with him in the gospel along with Clement and other fellow workers at the Philippian church (Phil 4:2–3). They continued to support Paul when he left Philippi and went to Thessalonica (Phil 4:15–16). Their financial partnership with him was unique. In 4:15 Paul states, “no church partnered with me in the matter of giving and receiving except you only.” When Paul stayed for a year and a half at Corinth (Acts 18), he accepted no money from the Corinthians, but he was supported by gifts from “the brothers from Macedonia” (2 Cor 11:7–9). The Philippians’ generosity was not limited to providing for Paul’s personal needs. They set an example of sacrificial giving to support the collection for the Jerusalem church that Paul raised during the third missionary journey (2 Cor 8:1–5). Paul’s statement that “their extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity” (8:2) confirms that the Philippian believers were not wealthy, though there may have been some, like Lydia, who lived above a subsistence level (*DNTB*, 1001–03).

When Paul was imprisoned in Rome, the Philippians sent one of their own, Epaphroditus, to minister to him during his imprisonment (Phil 2:25–30) and to bring material gifts from the church (Phil 4:18). It had apparently been

sometime since their last gift (Phil 4:10). All of this explains why Paul considered them “fellow partakers of grace” in his imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel (Phil 1:7). And it explains Paul’s affection for them (Phil 1:8). Clearly Paul enjoyed a special friendship and partnership with the believers at Philippi. There is no evidence of conflict between Paul and the Philippians similar to that evident in, say, his letters to the Galatians or Corinthians. Sampley writes, “Of all the Pauline churches, this one seems to have given Paul the least grief and the greatest joy” (1980, 62). As he writes Philippians, he rejoices at the partnership they shared since the founding of the church.

HISTORICAL SETTING

A Roman Colony

Philippi was a city in eastern Macedonia settled by immigrants from Thrace. The modern city Krenides is located near its ruins. In 360 B.C., colonists from Thasos annexed it and named it Krenides (“springs”) due to its many springs of water. In 356 B.C., they asked Philip II of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, to defend them against Thracian tribes. Because of the nearby gold mines in the Pangaion Mountains, Philip was happy to take over the area. He founded a new city just west of Krenides, named it after himself, and settled new colonists there.

Rome took control of the city in 168–167 B.C. when the Roman general Lucius Aemilius Paullus defeated the Macedonians and divided Macedonia into four districts. Philippi was part of the eastern district. After a Macedonian revolt in 148 B.C., the Romans consolidated the four districts into one province with Thessalonica as the capital. From 145 to 130 B.C., the Romans built a strategic stone-paved military road, the Egnatian Way, which connected Byzantium to Dyrrhachium on the Adriatic Sea. In 42 B.C., Philippi was the site of a famous battle. Mark Antony and Octavian (later known as Augustus Caesar) defeated Brutus and Cassius, who in 44

B.C. had assassinated Julius Caesar. After this battle, Mark Antony enlarged the city to include about 730 square miles including the port city Neapolis (modern Kavala) ten miles south. He made it a Roman Colony and resettled it with veteran soldiers who had lost their lands in Italy. Their presence helped to “Romanize” the local population (*DNTB*, 961).² In 31 B.C., Octavian, who had taken the name Julius in honor of Julius Caesar, defeated Mark Antony at the Battle of Actium and renamed the city after himself: *Colonia Iulia Augusta Philippensis* (“the colony of the Philippians of Julius Augustus”). Octavian resettled the city once again, this time with Italian colonists and veterans of Legion XXVIII and of the Praetorian Cohort. In the two resettlements by Mark Anthony and Octavian, probably between 1000–3000 Roman colonists joined the native Greek and Thracian population in Philippi.

Octavian granted Philippi the *ius italicum* (Italian law), an honor that made it Italian soil with a Roman form of administration, law, and judicial procedure, and exempting its citizens from land taxes. Those who possessed citizenship in the colony were citizens of Rome. The city’s administration, layout, style, and architecture reflected that of Rome. All of this created a distinctively Roman city in eastern Macedonia loyal to Octavian.

In Acts 16:12, Luke calls Philippi “a leading city of that district of Macedonia, a colony” (πρώτη μερίδος τῆς Μακεδονίας πόλις, κολωνία).³ It was not *the* leading city of Macedonia; Thessalonica was the capital and Amphipolis was the largest city. But it was the most important city in eastern Macedonia, and it was an important stopping point on the Egnatian

Way. Paul used the Egnatian Way when he traveled from Neapolis to Philippi, to Amphipolis, to Apollonia, and to Thessalonica (Acts 16:11–12; 17:1).

Population

By the time Paul arrived (ca. A.D. 49), nationalities at Philippi included primarily Macedonians and Romans, but also Greeks from Thasos and southern Greece, Thracians, and immigrants from Egypt and Asian Minor. Philippi was relatively small, with perhaps around 10,000 inhabitants in the mid-first century (Pillhofer, 1995, I: 74; Oakes, 2001, 46). The smallish size may have contributed to a stronger sense of “community” in the city (de Vos, 1999, 238–44). Many were Roman citizens who identified themselves as “Roman” (cf. Acts 16:21). Yet the majority were non-citizens. The population included landowners, slaves, peasant farmers, tradesmen, merchants, and agricultural workers. While a significant number were Roman and spoke Latin (the official language), Greek was the common language of the marketplace and surrounding area. Oakes estimates that perhaps forty percent of the people were Roman citizens (2001, 50). While de Vos believes that the church consisted largely of Roman citizens (1999, 251), Oakes argues that most were not. He thinks the believers came largely from among the city’s service groups, slaves, and poor (2001, 59–70).

Religion

Inscriptions, shrines, and coins have been found at Philippi honoring numerous gods, especially Isis, Bacchus/Dionysus, Silvanus, and the Thracian Horseman, among others. Most commentaries assume that Philippi was

2 See Nebreda (2011, 147–61) for the “Romanization” of both the western and eastern parts of the Empire (in particular, Philippi) through cultural change. This consisted of implementing a common language (Latin), construction of roads to facilitate commerce, introduction of a “higher” Roman culture, redistribution of land and creating *coloniae* in foreign areas, ruling via a pacific form of government, subtle challenges to local and ethnic identities, and *urbanitas* (attitudes of exclusivity and snobbery).

3 This reading is supported by important manuscripts and defended by Metzger and Aland in *TCGNT*, 395.

a syncretistic city in the mid-first century A.D., but Bormann argues that the presence of many of these cults cannot be demonstrated prior to the mid-second century A.D. The Roman imperial cult, which deified the emperor and his family members—honoring him as Benefactor—was dominant throughout the first century (Bormann, 1995, 61–67). Excavations have revealed two unspecified temples that most scholars believe to be imperial cult temples (de Vos, 1999, 249). In Neapolis, an inscription, probably from the mid-first century A.D., calls one Cornelia Asprilla a “priestess of Livia Augusta” (Caesar Augustus’ wife) (Pilhofer, 2000, II: 2–3).

Christians would have faced certain challenges in this socio-religious environment. Withdrawal from participation in the imperial cult or from any of the traditional cults would have triggered opposition from the general population and perhaps local authorities. It may have caused them to lose their jobs. They would have had to leave some guilds, civic organizations, or social clubs where idolatry or other immoral practices occurred (de Vos, 1999, 264, 272; Oakes, 2005, 310–14). In the first-century Roman world, religious functions were intertwined with everyday life.

Imagine the opposition you might face from family, friends, customers, and others if, for religious reasons, you declined to participate in numerous basic celebrations and customs of your culture—Thanksgiving, Christmas, Fourth of July, office parties, Friday night football games, singing the national anthem, and so on. Though you might not be arrested, people would notice, and you would become an “outsider.”

In working out his social makeup of the church, Oakes estimates its size to be maybe one hundred (2001, 169–70). Verhoef estimates the size to be around thirty-three (2013, 22). While speculative, such numbers remind us that the first believers in the city constituted a very small percent of the population.

Jewish presence

Philippi likely had only a small Jewish population in Paul’s day. Scholars debate whether Philippi had a synagogue. For other cities in the narrative of Acts, Luke states that Paul entered the *synagogue* and preached to the Jews (Acts 13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:1, 10, 17; 18:4). But for Philippi, Acts 16:13 mentions only a “place of prayer” (προσευχή) outside the city gate next to the river. The debate is whether “place of prayer” denotes a synagogue—as it does in the papyri and the writings of Philo and Josephus. Some scholars argue that it does (Schürer, 1979, 2.439f, 445; Schnabel, 2004, 1153), but others doubt this (Fitzmyer, 1998, 585; Pervo, 2009, 402). Some have thought that since Luke only mentions Paul finding women gathered there (16:13), Philippi must have lacked the ten Jewish men required to have a synagogue (Bruce, 1990, 358; cf. *m. Abot* 3:6; *b. Megillah* 23b). But Paul and his coworkers may have simply come across a women’s prayer meeting.

The only archaeological evidence for a synagogue is an inscription mentioning a synagogue from the late third or early fourth century A.D. (Koukouli-Chrysantaki, 1998, 28–35). But this may not be relevant to the first century. Even if Philippi had a synagogue, the Jewish presence in the city was minor. This would mean that the church at Philippi had few, if any, Jews. There are a few allusions to the Old Testament in the letter (e.g. Job 13:16 in 1:19; Isa 45:23 in 2:11; Deut 32:5 in 2:15; Ex 15–17, Num 14–17 in 2:14). This would be expected because of Paul’s background. But his use of the Old Testament in the letter is minimal, suggesting a largely Gentile church.

THEOLOGICAL EMPHASES OF PHILIPPIANS

The inspiring and motivating nature of this letter is due especially to several prominent theological themes—each relevant today.

Doctrinal Emphases

The Preexistence and Deity of Christ

Paul describes Christ Jesus as “existing in the form of God” (2:6) prior to his “being born in the likeness of men” (2:7). This refers to the timeless, preincarnate existence of the Son of God. “In the form of God” refers to the fact that prior to becoming man, he manifested the outward, visible appearance of God. He visibly revealed God’s glory and majesty (cf. Heb 1:3). The implication is that Jesus Christ himself is fully divine. Further, he was also “equal to God” (2:6). This refers to his equality with the Father in divine essence, status, privilege, power, and glory.

The Self-Emptying and Self-Humbling of Christ

Paul describes how the preexistent Son of God “emptied himself” (2:7), a concept explained by what follows: “taking the form of a slave,” and being born in the likeness of men.” Without giving up his divine essence, the preincarnate Christ set aside the visible appearance of his glory and the divine privileges of his status by becoming a human being, a lowly slave. Further, once he became a human being, he “humbled himself,” being obedient to God to the extent of suffering a humiliating death on a Roman cross (2:8).

The Exaltation of Christ

In 2:9–11, Paul describes how God highly exalted Christ after his voluntary self-humiliation. He bestowed on him the name that is above every name, “LORD.” This is the title used of Yahweh in the LXX, the name that he shares with no one else (Isaiah 42:8). Christ, who pre-existed in divine glory but voluntarily humbled himself, has now received from the Father a position and name that only God may possess. Every knee in the universe will bow in submission and every tongue will acknowledge that Jesus Christ is LORD (cf. Isaiah 45:23). He occupies the highest position of authority in the

universe. Paul’s understanding of the high status of Christ in Philippians agrees with his statements about Christ’s status elsewhere (e.g. Rom 9:5; 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:15–16).

God’s Work of Sanctification in Believers

God is the one who works in believers’ lives. He provides grace, peace, and mercy (1:2; 2:27). He has begun a good work in them and will bring it to completion (1:6). He makes them able to stand firm with one Spirit, not being frightened of persecution (1:27–28). He is working in them as they work out their own salvation (2:12–13). Their righteousness, which is through faith in Christ, comes from God (3:9). He has called them upward to receive the prize when Christ returns (3:14; cf. 3:21). He sends his peace to guard their hearts and minds (4:6–7). As believers practice what Paul teaches about the Christian life, the God of peace will be with them (4:9). He is pleased when they give sacrificially toward the work of the gospel, and will supply all of their needs according to his riches (4:18–19). All glory and praise will be to God when their lives are filled with the fruit of righteousness, which comes through Christ (1:11). God supplies the initiation, calling, power, resources, and motivation for followers of Christ. And he will see that they reach the goal he has for them.

Unity in the Church

Paul presupposes that Christian unity is based on the theological reality that together believers are “in Christ. The phrases “in Christ,” “in the Lord,” or “in him” (plus variations) occur twenty-one times. They denote believers’ identity as those who belong to Christ and are united with Christ. Christ is the one through whom and in whom they enjoy God’s saving blessings. Each use may have a specific force: (1) To denote *identity* as Christians: believers are saints “in Christ Jesus” (1:1; 4:21); (2) to denote *union* with Christ: found “in him” (3:9). (3) To describe *the sphere or cause of relations* to one another:

believers are to welcome a brother “in the Lord” (2:29), and to be of one mind “in the Lord” (4:2). (4) To denote *the sphere or cause of actions*: believers are confident “in Christ” (1:14), glory “in Christ Jesus” (1:26; 3:3), are confident to act “in the Lord” (2:24), rejoice “in the Lord” (3:1; 4:4, 10), and stand firm “in the Lord” (4:1). (5) To denote the *object of actions*: hope “in the Lord Jesus” (2:19). (6) To describe the *sphere, cause, or means of God’s actions* on behalf of believers: he encourages believers “in Christ” (2:1), calls them upward “in Christ Jesus” (3:14), guards their hearts and minds “in Christ Jesus” (4:7), makes them able “in him who strengthens” (4:13), and fulfills their needs according to his riches “in Christ Jesus” (4:19) (cf. Campbell, 2012, 67–199; Best, 1955, 1–33; *DPL*, 433–36). Believers’ existence together “in Christ” determines everything about them—how they see themselves, how they act, how they relate to one another (Marshall, 1993, 138–44).

Practical Emphases

Practical Unity among Christians through Humility

The doctrinal “in Christ” unity of believers has practical implications. In the midst of persecution, believers are to stand firm in one Spirit with one mind and to live in harmony with one heart and purpose (1:27–2:2). They are also to do all things without grumbling or arguing and so shine as stars in the world (2:14–15). The means for achieving harmony is by cultivating the character quality of humble concern for others and putting others’ interests above their own (2:3–4).

Paul reinforces this attitude by presenting several examples of what humility that leads

to harmony looks like. The chief example is Christ himself (2:5–11), but also Timothy, Epaphroditus (2:20–30), and even Paul himself (2:17). In contrast to these positive examples, Paul also notes the negative examples of the rival preachers who minister from envy and rivalry (1:15–17), the false teachers (3:2–3), and the enemies of the cross who set their minds on earthly things (3:19). Unity and harmony require that believers follow the positive examples Paul sets forth, especially that of Christ himself.

The Humility of Christ as a Paradigm for the Christian Life

In 2:6–8, Christ is a *paradigm* for Christian humility, self-sacrifice, and service for others. He is the supreme example of what Paul means by, “Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility regard others to be more important than yourselves. Let each one of you not merely look to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (2:3–4).

The Pursuit of Knowing Christ as the Center of the Christian Life

For Paul, to live is Christ (1:21) and his all-encompassing goal is to know Christ (3:8). In the Old Testament, knowing God came through his acts of self-revelation and consisted of entering into a personal relationship with him that he had made possible (*NIDNTTE* 2:579). Significantly, for Paul, it is now knowing *Christ* that is the center and goal of his life. Christ occupies the place Yahweh held in the Old Testament (I. H. Marshall, 1993, 147). Knowing Christ begins with a personal encounter in which Christ “apprehends” believers (3:12), who then leave their past life