

# THE BOOK OF PHILIPPIANS

## ORIENTING DATA FOR PHILIPPIANS

- Content: Paul's thanksgiving for, encouragement of, and exhortation to the suffering community of believers in Philippi, who are also experiencing some internal struggles
- Author: the apostle Paul, joined by his younger companion Timothy
- Date: probably A.D. 62, almost certainly from Rome
- Recipients: the church in Philippi (mostly Gentile), founded around A.D. 48–49 by Paul, Silas, and Timothy; Philippi is located at the eastern end of the vast plain of Macedonia on the very important Egnatian Way, which connected Rome with Byzantium (later Constantinople and Istanbul)
- Occasion: Epaphroditus, who had brought information about the church to Paul in prison and delivered their gift to him (2:30; 4:18), is about to return to Philippi, having now recovered from a nearly fatal illness (2:26–27)
- Emphases: Paul's and the Philippians' partnership in the gospel; Christ as the key to all of life, from beginning to end; knowing Christ, by becoming like him in his death (sacrificing oneself for others); rejoicing in Christ even in suffering; unity through humility and love; the certainty and pursuit of the final prize<sup>1</sup>

## OVERVIEW OF PHILIPPIANS

Philippians is the favorite letter of many Christians, full of wonderful and memorable passages. To his longtime friends at Philippi Paul bares his soul more than anywhere else in his letters (1:12–26; 3:4–14). Here you get a good look at what made Paul tick—Christ crucified and raised from the dead, whose story is recounted in 2:5–11. Paul has given up all his past religious “profits” and counts them as “loss,” as “garbage,” in comparison with knowing Christ, who is also the final prize he eagerly pursues (3:4–14).

But the community in Philippi is experiencing some inner tensions at the very time they are also undergoing suffering because of pagan opposition to their gospel, so Paul addresses this matter head-on (1:27–2:18). He also warns them against adopting Jewish marks of religious identity, especially circumcision (3:1–4), which would, in fact, make them enemies of Christ (3:18–19).

Thus even though Paul's and their “circumstances” make up the heart of this letter, everything finally focuses on Christ. Indeed, Paul urges the Philippians to follow his own example just as he follows Christ (3:15, 17; 4:9; cf. 2:5). Since the letter will be read aloud in

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [\*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 353.

church and since they are his friends no matter what, he saves his thanksgiving till the end (4:10–20)—acknowledging their gift with overflowing gratitude and reminding them that God himself accepted it as a sweet-smelling sacrifice (4:18), which leads to doxology (v. 20).

## SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING PHILIPPIANS

Although Philippians is much loved, most people have a difficult time following its flow of thought, since it is not easy to see how everything fits together. Knowing three things should help you to see how the letter works and hopefully make it even more special to read—and obey!

First, friendship was a much more significant matter in the Greco-Roman world than it is in Western cultures, so much so that the highest level of friendship—between equals and based on mutual goodwill and trust—was the topic of several tracts among the philosophers, starting with Aristotle. Such friendship was entered into consciously, almost contractually. It was always accompanied by *social reciprocity* (that is, friends expected to “benefit” one another by their mutual goodwill and trust), which was most often expressed by way of metaphors from commerce, especially mutual *giving and receiving*. A striking feature of such friendship was the assumption that friends had mutual enemies, so that those who stood in opposition to one party in the friendship became the automatic enemies of the other (see John 19:12).

One type of ancient letter, the letter of friendship, arose out of this relationship; here the writer would share his or her own present thinking (often including reflection on one’s circumstances) and inquire about the other’s circumstances. Mutuality and goodwill always find expression in such letters, as do the obligations of benefits received and given.

That Paul had entered into such an arrangement with the Philippians (alone among all his churches) is explicitly stated in 4:14–16. All kinds of other features of friendship thus appear in Philippians—their mutual partnership in the gospel from the very beginning (1:3–5; 4:15); Paul’s special affection for them (1:8; 4:1); Paul’s enemies must also be theirs (3:1–4, 17–19). The whole letter fluctuates between his and their circumstances (the language referring to each other’s circumstances, distinct to such letters, appears in 1:12, 27; 2:19, 23).

Second, another kind of letter was the letter of moral exhortation, usually written by the recipient’s friend or moral superior. Such letters aimed to persuade or dissuade toward or away from certain kinds of attitudes or behavior. In such letters the author usually appealed to examples, including sometimes his own.

This is where the story of Christ in 2:5–11 fits into our letter, as well as Paul’s own story in 3:4–14, whose point is that knowing Christ means to “become like him in his death.” Those who do not follow Paul’s example (3:17) are called “enemies of the cross” (3:18). These appeals are designed to curb the bickering that is going on in the community (2:1–4, 14; 4:2–3).

Third, the opposition to the church in Philippi is almost certainly related to the fact that Philippi was a Roman military colony. The town had been reconstituted by the first Roman emperor, Augustus (Octavian), and given to troops defeated and disbanded by him (at the battle of Philippi) during the Roman civil war. Because they had been thus favored by Octavian, the citizens of Philippi developed a fierce loyalty to the emperor as such. It is not surprising, therefore, that the cult of the emperor, with its devotion to the emperor as “lord and savior,” flourished in Philippi. This loyalty brought its citizens into direct conflict with Christians and

their devotion to Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior (cf. 3:20). Since Paul was also a prisoner of Rome because of the gospel (1:13), this meant that he and the Philippian believers were currently going through “the same struggle” (1:30).

This background makes it easy to think that part of the reason for the narrative of 1:12–26 is also to offer the Philippians an example of how to respond to such attempts to suppress the gospel, namely, to rejoice in the Lord and to determine, whatever the outcome, that “to live is Christ and to die is gain” (1:21).

As you read through the letter, see how often these things help you see how Paul is trying both to encourage and to exhort the Philippians to be like Christ, and like Paul his servant.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [\*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 353–356.