

## **Paul's Epistle to the Philippians**

### Introduction

Paul's brief Epistle to the Philippians offers encouragement and advice to a community he had founded some years previously. Two passages from the letter give beautiful expression to core convictions of the Christian movement: the "hymn" of 2:6-11 that celebrates the story of Christ's self-emptying, and the calls to "rejoice" and to persevere in a life of virtue in 4:4-9, but throughout the text Paul's pastoral sensitivity and rhetorical power are evident.

The letter feels somewhat disjointed. It seems to come to a conclusion in 3:1, but then continues, with a somewhat more severe tone than was evident in the first two chapters. Many scholars believe that our canonical text may in fact be a combination of what were originally two separate letters written by Paul. These scholars suggest that the letters joined together by members of Paul's missionary team who were responsible for publishing a collection of his letters after his death. Other scholars recognize the disjointed character of the letter but suggest that this feature may be caused by circumstances in which Paul was writing and that the letter was composed not at one sitting but over a period of time. Whether one letter or more, there are common themes that run through the whole of the letter as it has been preserved.

#### *Paul's Situation: Prison*

Paul's situation as he writes to Philippi is difficult. He is in prison, guarded by Roman soldiers (1:12-14, cf. 4:22). A similar situation obtains for three other Pauline letters: Philemon (1), Colossians (4:18), and Ephesians (3:1). The location of this imprisonment is somewhat uncertain. A colophon or appended paragraph found in many ancient manuscripts of these letters

suggests that Paul was in Rome. If so, the letter would have been written in the 60's, when Paul was a prisoner in Rome (Acts 28:16). An alternative view holds that Paul was writing not from Rome, a considerable distance from Philippi, but from a time of imprisonment during his years of missionary activity in the Aegean area in the mid 50's. Although the account of his work in Acts does not mention such an event, it is clear from Paul's references in 2 Corinthians (6:5; 11:23; cf. the "death sentence" mentioned in 1:8-9), probably written from Ephesus around 56 or 57, that Paul had spent time in jail during those years. The ancient opinion about a Roman location for Paul's prison was probably based on the references to the "praetorium" (1:13) and the "household of Caesar" (4:22), but there were Roman garrisons, labelled "praetorian" in other cities (Jerusalem: Matt 27:27; John 18:28-19:9; Caesarea: Acts 23:35), and slaves or freedmen in provincial service might be counted as part of the "household of Caesar." Another "prison epistle," Philemon, makes most sense on the assumption that Paul is not far from the household from which the slave Onesimus had come (v. 10; cf. also Col 4:9); Ephesus is a likely candidate for the location of Paul's imprisonment when writing that letter.



Brutus and Cassius, assassins of Julius Caesar. Like many of the other cities where Paul conducted his apostolic activity, Philippi was very much part of the Roman Empire.

The remains of the Roman forum at Philippi.



The Roman Theater at Philippi.



*Issues Addressed*

Paul's correspondence with his Philippian converts treats three issues. One is the very practical matter of offering a word of thanks for support he has received (4:10-19). He is also concerned about a threat to the community from external sources (3:2) and difficult relations within the community leading to division. In addition to thanksgiving, he offers advice aimed at

reinforcing positive relationships and advocates harmony through a celebration of shared values. Those values are focused on Christ's sovereignty, more lofty than anything that Rome offers, which in turn grounds eschatological hope.

#### *Additional Readings*

PHEME PERKINS, "Philippians: Theology for the Heavenly Politeuma," in Jouette M. Bassler, ed., *Pauline Theology*, Vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 89-104.

KATHERINE GRIEB, "Philippians and the Politics of God," *Interpretation* 61 (2007) 256-69.

#### *General Bibliography*

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PETER OAKES, *Philippians: From People to Letter* (SNTSMS 110; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

JOHN REUMANN, *Philippians: A New Introduction with Translation and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

BEN WITHERINGTON, *Friendship and Finances in Philippi: The Letter of Paul to the Philippians* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994).