

A Survey of Philippians

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Background Information

Author

Paul clearly names himself as the author (1:1). The details of the epistle (e.g., references to Timothy, the founding of the church, the self-description of the author) fit with Pauline authorship. “The greeting names Paul and Timothy as its senders; and there is no reasonable ground to discredit the notice about the writer and his assistant since the diction and ideas are very much in harmony with other Pauline Epistles . . .”¹

Context

Paul planted the church at Philippi during his second missionary journey (cf. Acts 16:9-40). The church remained in contact with Paul after he left Philippi, sending him gifts while he was in Thessalonica (Phil 4:15-16). Its members contributed to Paul’s Jerusalem collection despite adverse circumstances (2 Cor 8:1-5). And late in Paul’s ministry, they sent him an offering by way of Epaphroditus (Phil 4:10-14, 17-18). The letter to the Philippians was penned as an expression of thanksgiving.

Date

Various details in the epistle seem to indicate that Paul wrote it during his imprisonment in Rome (Acts 28:16-31). Timothy was present with him at the time of writing (Phil 1:1; cf. 2 Tim 4:9ff). He was in “bonds” (Phil 1:13, 16), facing the real possibility of death (vv 20-21). He was in the vicinity of converts from “Caesar’s household” (4:22), and his testimony had impacted “the whole palace guard” (1:13 NKJV). Therefore, Paul would have written the letter between 60 and 62 A.D.²

Themes

The major themes of Philippians are not difficult to identify; in fact, most appear in the opening statement that follows Paul’s salutation (1:3-11).

3	I thank my God upon every remembrance of you,
4	Always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy ,
5	For your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now;
6	Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ :
7	Even as it is meet for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart; inasmuch as both in my bonds, and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel , ye all are partakers of my grace.
8	For God is my record, how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ.
9	And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment;
10	That ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ ;

¹ Bo Reicke, “Philippians, Epistle to the,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4th ed., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979-88), 3:838.

² *Ibid.*; Robert P. Lightner, “Philippians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty*, New Testament ed., ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1983), 647.

11 Being filled with **the fruits of righteousness**, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.

The letter also emphasizes the concepts of unity among believers (e.g., 2:2; 3:16; 4:2) and the attitude or mentality of Christians (e.g., 1:27; 2:2; 3:16).

Commentators disagree on which of these themes is to be considered predominant. Many interpreters identify joy as the letter's primary motif. However, through repeated reading of the book I have come to conclude that the central idea is that of partnership (or fellowship) in the gospel.

Paul's main concern in writing to the Philippians was that they continue to conduct themselves as partners in the enterprise of the gospel. This idea is communicated most clearly at the end of chapter 1:

1:27-30

27 Only let your conversation be [*politeuomai*: to behave as a citizen] as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel;
28 And in nothing terrified by your adversaries: which is to them an evident token of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that of God.
29 For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake;
30 Having the same conflict which ye saw in me, and now hear to be in me.

It also appears in other texts:

2:12-16

12 Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.
13 For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.
14 Do all things without murmurings and disputings:
15 That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world;
16 Holding forth the word of life; that I may rejoice in the day of Christ, that I have not run in vain, neither laboured in vain.

3:10

10 That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death;

3:20

20 For our conversation [*politeuma*: commonwealth of citizens] is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ:

Thesis Statement

The message of the whole epistle can be summarized in the following thesis:

Believers should conduct themselves as partners in the gospel of Jesus Christ, joyfully serving, regardless of circumstances, until his return.

Outline

Tracing the theme of partnership in the gospel through the book yields the following outline:

- Partnership through *adversity* (1:1-30)
- Partnership through *unity* (2:1-30)
- Partnership through *conformity* (3:1-4:9)
- Partnership through *generosity* (4:10-23)

Partnership through Adversity (1:1-30)

At the time of writing Paul was in the custody of the Roman government, his fate unknown. If tradition is correct, he would soon die a martyr. While he was a prisoner, some sought to discourage him by stirring up division among Christians. Yet, none of these circumstances deterred him from faithfulness to the Lord. Rather, he requested prayer that he would boldly represent Christ. In short, he modeled his own teaching that “unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake” (1:29).

Partnership through Unity (2:1-30)

Paul encouraged the Philippians to share the mind of Christ, who humbly divested himself of the glory of heaven so as to take the form of a servant and die a criminal’s death. He held up Timothy and Epaphroditus, two ministers well known to the church, as examples of faithful service. He enjoined them to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (2:12), in unity shining “as lights in the world” (2:15).

Partnership through Conformity (3:1-4:9)

Paul contrasted godly living with the excesses of legalism and libertinism. By his own testimony he showed the folly of trusting in one’s own accomplishments rather than the righteousness of Christ. He referred to his own determination to “know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death” (3:10). Without reservation he called on the Philippians to follow him and others who shared his desire to be identified with Christ.

Partnership through Generosity (4:10-23)

Paul acknowledged the generous assistance that the Philippians had provided him at various points in his ministry. He characterized their most recent gift as “a sacrifice acceptable, well-pleasing to God” (4:18). He applauded their generosity because he knew it produced spiritual reward. He affirmed that God would faithfully supply all their needs because of their sacrificial giving.

Summary

Paul’s letter to the Philippians interweaves deep theological insights with the apostle’s warm feelings toward a church that had shown itself faithful for years. It contains so many memorable texts, including the sublime statement that “to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (1:21); a hymn that identifies Christ as the Son of God who became flesh to die in our place (2:5-11); Paul’s testimony of his renunciation of all things for the privilege of knowing Christ (3:4ff); instructions on how to honor the Lord with our thought life (4:6-9); and reminders of God’s faithfulness to his children (4:13, 19).