
Faculty Books

2003

The Books of Philippians and Colossians: Joy and Completeness in Christ

Robert Glenn Gromacki
Cedarville University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/faculty_books



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gromacki, Robert Glenn, "The Books of Philippians and Colossians: Joy and Completeness in Christ" (2003). *Faculty Books*. 31.

https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/faculty_books/31

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Cedarville, a service of the Centennial Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Books by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Cedarville. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@cedarville.edu.

The Books of Philippians and Colossians: Joy and Completeness in Christ

Description

Are Christians really different than anyone else?

What does a real Christian look like? What is Christianity really all about? Paul's letter to the Philippians and Colossians answer these ponderings through their unique emphasis on practical Christian living. These books present that the basic beliefs of Christians are to make those truths the foundation of everything they think and everything they do.

In Philippians, Dr. Gromacki uses Paul's teaching to show Christians how they should conduct themselves in times of suffering, in witnessing for Christ, in preserving unity, in overcoming anxiety, in imitating Christ, and in cultivating joy and peace in their lives.

In Colossians, Dr. Gromacki explains how Paul sets forth the sovereignty of Jesus Christ over all creation and the church, and in particular, over every individual person. The reader is brought face to face with the majesty and glory of Christ, and challenged to throw aside other worldviews and philosophies in order to live in holiness before the Lord.

In both these epistles, Paul seeks to turn the attention of believers away from their old, sinful lifestyle to newness in Christ. Believers are challenged to grab hold of the righteousness that is accredited by faith, that might know Christ, "and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death."

Disciplines

Biblical Studies | Religion

Publisher

AMG Publishers

ISBN

9780899578156

CHAPTER 1

Background of Philippians

Writer

The contents of the epistle strongly support the traditional view that Paul wrote Philippians. The author calls himself "Paul" (1:1). Not only is Timothy closely associated with Paul in the greeting and in the ministry, but Paul regarded him as his spiritual son (1:1; 2:19–23; cf. 1 Tim. 1:2). The reference to Timothy is significant because he was on Paul's missionary team that originally evangelized Philippi (Acts 16).

The autobiographical background, cited by the author (3:4–6), harmonizes with the details of Paul's life as recorded in the other Pauline letters and in the book of Acts. The historical background for the writing of the letter fits into Paul's known life. He was in prison, probably in Rome (1:7, 13), but he expected to be released and to revisit Philippi (1:25–27; 2:24; cf. 1 Tim. 1:3).

Peter O'Brian writes about the Pauline authorship:

Philippians has generally been accepted as a genuine letter of Paul. The apostle's claim to have been its author has rarely been challenged, and for good reason. The picture the writer draws of himself coincides with that known of Paul from other sources, including Galatians and Acts. So the disclosure of his inner feelings (Phil. 1:18–24), the description of his present situation (1:12–13) and the names of his friends and coworkers (2:19–24), and his references to the gifts sent to him from Philippi and Thessalonica (4:15–16; cf. Acts 17:1–9; 2 Cor. 8:1–5) are consistent with what we know of him from elsewhere.

. . . Further, echoes of Philippians may be heard in the writings of Clement (ca. A.D. 95), Ignatius (ca. A.D. 107), Hermas (ca. A.D. 140), Justin

Martyr (ca. A.D. 165), and others. Apparently there was never any real question in the minds of the Church Fathers about the authorship or canonical authority of *Philippians*, for a number of them not only quote from the letter but assign it to Paul as well. *Philippians* also appears in the oldest extant lists of NT writings, the Muratorian Canon (later second century) and the canon of Marcion (d. ca. A.D. 160).¹

City of Philippi

The city of Philippi was located on a fertile plain about nine miles from the Aegean Sea, northwest of the island of Thasos. Neapolis served as the seaport. In New Testament times it was regarded as "the chief city of that part of Macedonia, and a colony" (Acts 16:12), but Thessalonica was actually the capital of that Roman province.

The city's inhabitants were regarded as legal Roman citizens who had the right to vote and to govern themselves. Because no Jewish synagogue was located there, scholars believe the citizens of Philippi were anti-Semitic. Large numbers of Jews could be found in other Greek cities, such as Thessalonica, Berea, and Corinth.

Originally, the city was a Phoenician mining town because of its proximity to gold mines located in nearby mountains and on the island of Thasos. Later, Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, took the city from the empire of Thrace and renamed it after himself.

Subsequently, a crucial battle between the coalition of Octavius and Antony and that of Brutus and Cassius was fought there. The former won, thus ending the Roman republic in 42 B.C. As a Roman colony, the city grew in prominence because it was on the main road from Rome to the province of Asia.

Today the city lies in ruins. The site has been excavated by archaeologists who have uncovered a marketplace, the foundation of a larger arched gateway, and an amphitheater dating back to Roman times.

The population of Philippi consisted largely of Roman military personnel, either retired legionaries and officers who made it their permanent home or those who were stationed there on duty. Descendants of the original colonists helped to preserve the Roman atmosphere. They guarded their privileges jealously and resented any activity that might evoke official disapproval. The Jewish community in Philippi was too small to support a synagogue but held a weekly prayer meeting outside the city on the river bank. . . . The Roman population would probably possess more wealth than did the native Greeks.²

Establishment of the Church

Soon after Paul and Silas started out on Paul's second missionary journey, they recruited Timothy to assist them (Acts 15:36—16:5). Forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach in Asia and Bithynia, the three came to the coastal city of Troas. Paul there received a vision directing the team to go to Macedonia (Acts 16:9). Luke joined the team, and the four departed for Neapolis in Macedonia the next day. This was the first time Paul brought the gospel to Europe.

The missionaries left Neapolis for Philippi, where they ministered to a group of women on the Sabbath by the river, since there was no synagogue in the city. Lydia, a merchant woman of Thyatira, and her household believed and were baptized (Acts 16:15; cf. 16:40).

The next significant event in Philippi occurred when Paul cast out a demonic spirit from a slave girl. Her enraged masters seized Paul and Silas, dragged them to the city's rulers, and brought a false accusation against them (Acts 16:20–21).³ Because of the Philippian antagonism toward Jews, the multitude beat them and cast them into prison.

At midnight Paul and Silas prayed, sang, and communicated their faith to the other prisoners. An earthquake shook the prison's foundations, opened the doors, and loosed the chains from the walls. The jailer, fearful that the prisoners under his care had fled, was about to commit suicide when Paul stopped him. Paul then led the jailer and his household to a saving knowledge of Christ.

At his release the next day, Paul revealed that both Silas and he had Roman citizenship and that they had been wrongfully beaten. They then went to Lydia's house, ministered to the believers, and departed for Thessalonica, leaving Luke behind.⁴ The young church at Philippi began with an unusual membership of a converted businesswoman, a former demonic soothsayer, a jailer, and perhaps some prisoners.

Close contact between Paul and the Philippian church was maintained after this initial contact. The church sent gifts to Paul on two separate occasions during his ministry in Thessalonica (4:14–16; cf. Acts 17:1–9). Silas was probably sent by Paul from Athens to do some additional work there (Acts 17:15–16; 18:5; 1 Thess. 3:1–6).

During his third missionary journey, Paul went into the province of Macedonia, with an obvious stop at Philippi (Acts 20:1). After three months in Corinth, he revisited Macedonia and Philippi before he left for Jerusalem (Acts 20:2–6). On this final contact, Luke rejoined Paul and accompanied the apostle.⁵

Time and Place of Writing

News of Paul's imprisonment in Rome had come to the Philippian church by some unknown means, and it created a great deal of concern and anxiety. To get firsthand information on Paul's predicament, the church authorized Epaphroditus to go to Rome to confer with Paul and to present him with a monetary gift for his financial needs (4:10, 14–18). When Epaphroditus saw that Paul's material needs were much greater than the size of the Philippian gift, he stayed on in Rome, working to raise more money for Paul (2:25, 30). In so doing, Epaphroditus became very ill and almost died (2:27, 30). Word of his severe sickness somehow reached Philippi and caused a new concern for the church (2:26). When Epaphroditus discovered that the church knew about his illness, he became distressed (2:26).

During the time period covered by the last communications, God had healed Epaphroditus totally, or at least sufficiently, so that he was well enough to return to Philippi (2:27). Paul determined then to send Epaphroditus back to Philippi so that the church might rejoice at his return (2:28). The apostle thus used this occasion to write this epistle and to send it to Philippi by way of Epaphroditus. Paul's confidence in his imminent acquittal and release (1:25; 2:24) probably indicates that it was written near the end of Paul's two years of imprisonment at Rome (A.D. 59–61).

Some have speculated that Paul wrote this letter from a prison in Ephesus rather than in Rome. There are at least four arguments against and criticisms of that viewpoint. First, Paul planned to send Timothy to Philippi, and he did just that from Ephesus (2:19–23; cf. Acts 19:22). But why did Paul not mention Erastus in the epistle if these two sendings of Timothy are identical?

Second, it is possible that there was a praetorian guard⁶ stationed at Ephesus (1:13) and that "Caesar's household" referred to the imperial civil servants located there (4:22); but the natural use of those phrases argues for a Roman setting.

Third, Luke is not mentioned in Philippians although he was in Rome with Paul and was listed both in Colossians and Philemon. Since Luke was not with Paul in Ephesus (Acts 19), that city seems to be the more likely place of origin. However, Luke is not mentioned in Ephesians either. And, if Paul did write from Ephesus, why did he not include the names of Gaius and Aristarchus, who were with him in that city (Acts 19:29)?

Fourth, the Ephesian proponents say that too much time would have been involved in the five exchanges of communication; however, it only required a month to travel from Rome to Philippi. These exchanges could have taken place within a six-month period, well within the two-year limits of

Paul's Roman imprisonment. Until more objective evidence is forthcoming, the traditional view that Paul wrote from Rome must stand.

Purposes

Paul learned about the spiritual needs of the church through conversations with Epaphroditus and with those who came to Rome with the report of the church's concern over Epaphroditus's illness. First, Paul wanted to relieve their anxiety over the circumstances of his imprisonment (1:1–30). They thought that the apostle's ministry had been brought to an abrupt stop, but Paul assured them that God was using the episode for the advancement of the gospel.

Paul had several other reasons for writing. There apparently was a growing disunity among the members as evidenced by Paul's appeal to them to manifest humility and unity (2:1–8). Paul also informed the church of a possible imminent visit by Timothy (2:18–24); explained the reasons behind Epaphroditus's sickness and healing (2:25–30); warned against the deceitful tactics and doctrines of the Judaizers (3:1–4:1); admonished Euodia and Syntyche to maintain spiritual and sisterly unity (4:2–3); prescribed truth that would give the members mental and emotional stability to replace their anxiety (4:4–9); expressed thankfulness for their financial assistance (4:10–20); and shared greetings with all of them (4:21–23).

In conclusion, Harrison writes:

Warning is issued against Judaizing propagandists with whom Paul was well acquainted from long experience (3:2ff.). More gentle is the rebuke of the perfectionists in the ranks of the saints (3:15). Once more the language becomes severe in reference to sensualists and materialists (3:18–29).

Finally, the apostle writes to encourage his readers in the conduct of Christian life—in suffering (1:27–30), in witness (2:16), in the cultivation of joy and peace (4:4–7) and of high and holy thoughts (4:8)—in fine [Latin, “towards the goal”], to join in imitation of the apostle as he runs the race incident to the upward calling in Christ (3:13–17).⁷

Distinctive Features

The intimate relationship that existed between Paul and the Philippian church can be seen in his frequent use of the first person singular personal pronoun. In these four short chapters, there are over one hundred occurrences of such words as *I*, *me*, and *my*. In fact, the pronoun *I* can be found fifty-two times.

This fact does not mean that Paul lacked humility; rather, it shows the natural person-to-person rapport between him and the people. Thus, of all the epistles written to churches, Philippians is the most personal.

Within the book is a strong emphasis on the word *gospel*, found nine times in various constructions: "participation in the gospel" (1:5); "defense and confirmation of the gospel" (1:7); "greater progress of the gospel" (1:12); "defense of the gospel" (1:16); "conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (1:27a); "faith of the gospel" (1:27b); "served with me in the furtherance of the gospel" (2:22); in *the cause of the gospel* (4:3); and "the first preaching of the gospel" (4:15).

This book has a traditional reputation of being the epistle of joy. Various forms of the words *joy* and *rejoice* are found eighteen times. This theme can be seen in the key verse: "Rejoice in the Lord always: again I will say, rejoice!" (4:4).

One of the greatest Christological passages occurs within this book as an example of genuine humility and obedience (2:5–11). It speaks of Christ's eternal deity, incarnation, humiliation, death, resurrection, and exaltation via ascension. Theologians have called it the *kenosis* passage, based on the Greek text underlying the phrase: "But emptied Himself" (2:7). The three Greek words of this phrase (*alla heauton ekenōsen*) are literally translated: "But himself he emptied." The *kenosis* concept takes its name from a transliteration of the Greek word *ekenōsen*. The question thus raised is: Of what did Christ empty Himself when He became man? Did He empty Himself of His divine attributes? If He did, then he was less than God when He walked on the earth. But He was just as much God when he was in the womb of Mary or when he hung on the cross as He was when He created the universe. Rather, Christ surrendered the independent exercise of His divine attributes when He became incarnate. He had them, but He did not always use them. He learned, hungered, and grew weary; these are characteristics of His human nature. However, He did use His divine attributes at times under the control of the Holy Spirit. He forgave sin, created food, gave life to the dead, and walked on water. The emptying of Himself also involved the veiling of the outward display of His deity and glory in human flesh. No halo was upon His head, nor did a glow radiate from His face. Only on the Mount of Transfiguration was His glory permitted to shine through His flesh (Matt. 17:1–13). He also emptied Himself of the rights of sovereignty in order to become a servant to others.

St. Paul steps forward to check the growing tendency [of feuds]. This he does with characteristic delicacy, striking not less surely because he strikes for the most part indirectly. He begins by hinting to them that he is no partisan: he offers prayers and thanksgiving for *all*; he hopes well of *all*; he looks upon *all* as companions in grace; his heart yearns after *all* in Christ

Jesus. He entreats them later on, to be "steadfast in one spirit," to "strive together with one mind for the faith of the Gospel." He implores them by all their deepest Christian experiences, by all their truest natural impulses, to "be of one mind," to "do nothing from party-spirit or from vainglory."

He urges the Philippians generally to exhibit to the world a spectacle of *forbearance*. He reminds them of the peace of God, which surpasses all the thoughts of men. He entreats them lastly, by all that is noble and beautiful and good, to hear and to obey. If they do this, the God of peace will be with them.⁸

The book of Philippians also provides an insight into the motivations of Paul: "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (1:21). Paul wanted Christ to be magnified in his body, whether through living or dying for Him. He later elaborated upon these goals (3:10-14).