

Philippians – “The Mind of Christ” Introduction to the Letter

The church at Philippi was the first church that Paul “planted” when he crossed from Asia into Europe on his second missionary journey. The story of Paul’s ministry in Philippi is found in Acts 16, and can be summarized as follows: Paul and his group cross from Asia Minor to Macedonia (modern-day Greece), and travel to Philippi, a Roman colony about 10 miles inland. Although Philippi was not a large city, it was viewed as important because it was a Roman colony which had been established by Augustus after he became emperor of Rome. A large number of Roman citizens were resettled in Philippi from Italy, and in Paul’s day the leading people of the city still regarded themselves as Romans. The other residents of Philippi were native Greeks who worked as farmers and laborers. There was no significant Jewish presence in Philippi; Acts 16 does not mention the presence of a synagogue, and archaeological research has not discovered one there. This is supported by the fact that Paul’s first contacts in Philippi were at “a place of prayer” outside the city gate, by the river, and that his first convert was Lydia, a God-fearing Gentile. Thus, when we think about the church at Philippi, we should think of it as a church without any significant Jewish presence or opposition.

Acts 16 does not indicate how long Paul and his group were in Philippi, but it seems likely that it was a short period of time by our standards. (Notice, for example, that in Thessalonica Paul and his group were only in the city for about 3-4 weeks before troubles arose and they had to leave the city; the same sort of time frame seems reasonable for the ministry in Philippi.) The only reference to time in the account in Acts 16 is in verse 16, where we read, “*Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave...*” The fact that the events

could have taken place in a short period of time, and the way that Luke tells the story, seems to indicate that Paul was probably only in Philippi for a few weeks to perhaps a couple of months.

It has always been interesting to me that Paul planted these churches in Acts 16-17 but did not stay with them very long. We have focused on his letters as the primary way that he continued to lead them, and of course those letters were important, but something that I had never realized before starting to prepare for this study is the fact that Luke apparently stayed in Philippi when Paul and the rest of his group left. This conclusion is based on the fact that at the end of Acts 16, Luke indicates that “they left” (see 16:40), and this continues in chapter 17 when he says that “they came to Thessalonica” (17:1). The “we” passages of Acts – which are the evidence which supports the idea that Luke had joined Paul’s group – begin in Acts 16:10, after Paul had seen the vision of the man of Macedonia. These “we” passages continue through chapter 16 until Paul and Silas left Philippi, and they do not resume until Acts 20:6, when Paul has come back to Macedonia. Therefore, I conclude that Luke had stayed in Philippi during this entire time, helping the new believers and continuing to teach them.

However, when Paul leaves Philippi in Acts 20:6, Luke is with him (“we sailed from Philippi”) and the narrative of Acts reflects that Luke was with Paul for the rest of his days. Therefore, by the time Paul writes the letter to the Philippians, it has been about 10 years since Luke had left them. We have no way of knowing whether Paul had written to them or otherwise communicated with them during that time, but the letter to the Philippians is obviously written while Paul is in prison – most likely in Rome, as is reflected in Acts 28. He spent a significant time in prison there (see Acts 28:30, “for two whole years Paul stayed there...”), awaiting his trial before Caesar and his ultimate fate. He was able to receive visitors, and receive help from his

friends – and this had prompted the Philippians to send Epaphroditus to him in Rome to help him in any way possible. The letter to the Philippians indicates that at some point Epaphroditus became sick, and news of this had made its way back to Philippi. Therefore, the most logical conclusion is that Paul sent the letter to Philippi with Epaphroditus, so he could go back home and the people in the church at Philippi could be reassured that Epaphroditus was okay.

That conclusion is reflected in the contents of the letter. Unlike most of Paul's letters, there are no stern rebukes about problems that have arisen, and no theological corrections like those that were necessary with Corinth (for just one example). Instead, he is writing to encourage them, to warn them about the types of things that face all churches, and most of all to remind them to keep their focus on Jesus. As you read through Philippians, notice how many times Paul uses the names Jesus, Jesus Christ, Lord Jesus Christ, or some combination of them. (I'll give you the answer: 51 times in the 104 verses of Philippians.) The theme for Paul's message in Philippians may well be in 3:8 – *I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*

In my mind, the key passage in Philippians is 2:5-11, in which Paul challenges us to “have the same mindset as Christ Jesus” (2:5, NIV). His explanation in verses 6-11 of what it means to “have the same mindset as Christ Jesus” is some of the most powerful language in the entire Bible.

The letter to the Philippians is an important book for us to study at this point in time, because Paul is writing to a church which has a great deal in common with the church in America today. The church at Philippi was living among people who were largely pagan, and who were very proud of their status as a Roman colony. They put great stock in that status, and they viewed

the emperor in very positive light (even though the emperor at the time Paul wrote this letter was the infamous Nero). The people of Philippi (not the church people) would have viewed anyone who refused to acknowledge the emperor and the greatness of Rome with much suspicion. The church was thus faced with the challenge of being marginalized in its culture, viewed suspiciously – or even in a hostile light – by those who did not share their faith. Paul wrote to encourage them to not let their circumstances steal their joy; to remember their “partnership in the gospel”; to strive to have “the same mindset as Christ Jesus”; to be united as the church; and to have confidence in the faithfulness of God, who had begun a good work in them and would be faithful to carry it on to completion until the day of Christ (see 1:6).

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