

Philippians - Introduction

The place where this letter was originally sent to is Philippi.

It is situated in Greece, close to the coast.

It was abandoned in the 14th century, and is now an archaeological site.

At the time the book of Philippians was written, around AD 60, Philippi had been colonised by the Roman Empire.

Philippi was a modest sized city of about 10,000 inhabitants, with a wide range of ethnic groups. The Roman population was a minority, but because they belonged to the 'ruling class', they had a big influence on the politics and culture of the area.

Like most of the cities in the Greco-Roman world, Philippi was home to a wide range of gods, Roman, Greek and Egyptian.

Who the book was written for

The book of Acts tells us that Paul visited Philippi with his companions Luke, Timothy and Silas, during what has become known as his 'second missionary journey'.

It is easy to forget how hard Paul and his colleagues worked to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. Scholars estimate that he and his companions travelled over 10,000 miles, much of that on foot.

And there was me, pondering whether to walk or drive the mile-and-a-bit to church this morning.

Before we look at the letter to the Philippians, let's see how Paul got involved with the community he is writing to, which is helpfully supplied to us by Luke in the book of Acts.

The verses before these say that Paul received a vision of a Macedonian man asking him for help (for the geography experts, this Macedonia is in a different location to 21st century Macedonia). In response to this, he and his companions caught a boat from Troas to Philippi.

On the Sabbath they went out looking to find ‘a place of prayer’. Philippi only had a small population of Jews, and there is no historical or archaeological evidence that Philippi had a synagogue at this time. When this was the case, Jews would gather on the Sabbath (Saturday) in a public place to read the Bible and pray together.

They discover such a meeting being held by a river, and join it. Paul explains the Gospel to them, and a ‘worshipper of God’ (which means a non-Jewish person who had converted to Judaism) called Lydia responds to Paul’s message, and then asks that she and her entire household be baptised!

She then persuades Paul, Luke, Timothy and Silas to stay at her house.

During their time at Philippi, Paul and his colleagues continue to visit the riverside gathering. A clairvoyant female slave starts following and taunting them as they walk from Lydia’s place to the riverside.

The joy of having someone follow you around chanting, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.” soon wore thin, and eventually Paul decides ‘you done poked the bear’, and invokes Jesus’ power to drive out the clairvoyant spirit from her.

Not surprisingly, having lost a major source of income, her owners are less than pleased about this, and strong-arm Paul and Silas to the market-place to face the local magistrates.

Rather than claiming they have lost income because their slave was no longer able to tell fortunes, they go for the easier accusation, that Paul and Silas are trouble-making Jews.

The Romans were not big fans of the Jewish people. Faithful Jews refused to worship Rome’s pantheon of gods, and their insistence on not working on the Sabbath was seen as being ‘lazy’ rather than devout.

A mob gathers and gangs up on Paul and Silas. The magistrates take the easy way out and have them stripped, beaten (always a crowd pleaser) and thrown into jail. (A side-detail that will make sense in a minute, it

was probably the jailer who was given the task of carrying out the beating.)

The next scene begins around midnight, with Paul and Silas praying and singing, with the other prisoners listening to them (something they had no choice about, and we are not told if they were enjoying it or not).

And then an earthquake shakes the prison, followed by a miraculous opening of all the doors and loosening of the prisoners' chains.

This wakes the jailer who seeing all the doors open assumes that the prisoners have escaped, and decides to commit suicide rather than receive a worse punishment from the authorities for not doing his job.

Paul sees that the jailer is about to kill himself, and quickly reassures him that all the prisoners are still in the jail.

If you're wondering why the prisoners didn't 'do a runner' it is probably because they were in a state of shock from the earthquake, and decided to stick with the guys who seemed to know the God who made it happen.

The jailer then rushes in and asks Paul and Silas what he has to do to be saved, aware that this supernatural event is linked to them, and terrified at what the authorities are going to do to him when they visit the earthquake-damaged jail.

Never ones to miss an opportunity to share the gospel, Paul and Silas tell the jailer to put his faith in Jesus, and assure him that if he does, both he and his household will be saved. Like the encounter with Lydia, salvation is not an individualistic thing, all of the jailer's extended family become Jesus followers.

The jailer joyfully accepts their invitation, takes them back to his house, washes their wounds (that he had probably inflicted!), has himself and his household baptised, and organises a meal for them, all before the next day dawns.

When morning arrives, the magistrates send an order for Paul and Silas to be released. However, Paul decides not to go quietly and, not for the last time, invokes his rights as a Roman citizen, something that the magistrates hadn't realised he possessed.

Terrified at what might happen if the Roman authorities found out they had a Roman citizen beaten without a proper trial, they go to the jail and personally escort them out of it. They then ask them to leave the city to prevent any further disturbances.

Paul and Silas go to Lydia's place, where we get one verse about them meeting with the 'brothers and sisters' where they 'encouraged them', before they leave this newly created church community to continue their journey to Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, etc...

The only other mention in Acts of him visiting Philippi is Acts 20:6, which reads...

...we sailed from Philippi after the Festival of Unleavened Bread, and five days later joined the others at Troas, where we stayed seven days.

This was probably on his third missionary journey... which took him from Antioch, across Asia to Greece, then back across Asia to Jerusalem, where he ends up being imprisoned by the Roman authorities and taken back to Caesarea.

Many adventure-packed years later Paul was put under 'house arrest' at Rome. He wrote (or, more likely, dictated to a scribe) the letter to the Philippians in the final years of his life, possibly while chained to a Roman soldier.

One of Paul's friends, probably a Philippian called Epaphroditus, embarked on a difficult and dangerous 2 month, 800 mile journey to deliver and read the letter to the small gathering of Philippian believers.

And now we, a small gathering of Northoltian believers, nearly 2,000 years later, are going to study this letter. As Margaret brings us the

reading from the first 11 verses of the book we are going to travel through over the coming months, let's imagine the situation.

They would have been listening to this letter gathered in someone's house, which was how most of the early Christian believers met and worshipped. I like to think that it was at Lydia's home, the first Philippian convert that we talked about earlier, although we don't know this for sure. So, imagine...

— Lydia, tired after a day of working, eager to know how Paul is doing, and what he has to say to them almost 10 years after she had come to know Jesus as her Lord and Saviour.

— One of her household slaves, grateful for the chance to be with a group of people who don't treat her as a second-class citizen, taking some time to worship a God who loves every person equally, no matter what their worldly status.

I find it helpful (and entertaining) that there is historical evidence that audiences of the original letter would not have listened to it quietly.

I'm not sure what your family situation is like, but I think of it as being like having a meal with my family, and I read out an email from someone living overseas who couldn't be there in person. It is very likely that they will interject, ask questions and laugh at a family in-joke.

But, don't worry Margaret, I'm not encouraging the congregation to do this today. Let's be on our best behaviour as Margaret brings us the reading, and as we listen to the words, imagine Epaphroditus reading them all those centuries ago.

Bible Reading

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus.

To all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 1:1-11

Paul introduces the letter using a common pattern of the time, introducing himself and Timothy, announcing who the intended audience is and pronouncing a blessing on them.

It is significant that Paul uses the term 'servants of Jesus Christ'. The Greek word for 'servant' can also be translated as 'slave'. Some of the hearers would have been slaves, and this will be something that will become significant later in the letter.

Paul refers to the hearers as 'God's holy people in Christ Jesus'.

The Greek word for 'holy people' is the word that used to be translated as 'saints', borrowing from the Old Testament concept of God's people being set apart, made holy, sanctified (saintified) by God

The believers in Philippi would have been mainly non-Jews, but the scriptures they would have been reading were what we now call the Old Testament (they would have had no idea that they were listening to a

letter that would later be studied by billions of people as holy scripture, over a period of two millennia!).

And these early believers had come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah the Hebrew scriptures spoke about, the promised Christ, God's saviour and liberator, hence Paul's use of the title 'Christ Jesus', Messiah Jesus.

Paul mentions overseers and deacons, which indicates that in the decade since its inception the Philippian church has developed a leadership structure.

He then wishes the Philippians 'grace and peace', which Paul uses frequently in the openings to his other letters. It combines a standard Greek word that we translate as 'grace', with 'peace', which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *shalom*.

He then adds to this, 'from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ', emphasising the intimate relationship that the God of Israel has to the Messiah Jesus.

Notice that he calls God '*our* Father', Paul wants to remind the Philippian believers that through their faith in Jesus they share an intimate relationship with the Creator and sustainer of the universe.

Christianity is not primarily a belief system, it is a supernaturally enabled relationship. If you are a Christian, God the Father has, through the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of God the Son, allowed you to enter into a relationship with him, by the power of God the Holy Spirit.

Paul then tells them that the Philippians are a group of people that he is very fond of, how he thanks God for them, how he prays with joy (hey, a delight word!) for them, and how he is confident that Jesus will continue to work in their congregation.

Notice how Paul sees his work with the Philippians as being a partnership.

This is a frequent theme in Paul's letters, and is related to the partnership that Christian believers share in 'the gospel', the good news of God's plan to restore humanity's relationship with him.

And as the Philippians have benefitted from Paul's sharing of this good news with them, so they are now expected to share this good news with those around them.

In the same way, two thousand years later, we have received the good news of Jesus, and in partnership with other Christian believers, we are to pass this message on to our family, friends and neighbours.

And we don't do this in our own strength. We can't do this in our own strength. As Paul declares, 'He who began a good work in you, will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus'. God started the work in us, and he carries on that work. We need God's help and strength if we are going to survive and thrive.

The Christian life works best in partnership with other Christians, with each of us encouraging one another to depend on God's empowering and strengthening. Salvation is not a one-off event, we continue to be 'saved' until the day we die, or until Jesus returns.

Paul continues to express his love for the Philippian believers, combined with his longing to be with them in person.

Paul wants his listeners to know that his bond with the Philippians isn't dependent on circumstances. Through good times and bad, Paul wants these early believers' to know that their participation in the good news is stronger than the physical chains that bind him.

And, of course, they would all have heard about how God had broken Paul and Silas' chains on their first visit to Philippi, so they are also learning that just because God can do something, doesn't mean he has to do something.

And this participation in the good news includes belonging to a community of believers, empowered by God's supernatural grace, the same supernatural power that is available to each one of us today.

And it is this community experience that Paul is so desperately missing. As he says, 'God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus'.

Paul completes this section with a prayer, the key points of which (spoiler alert) are expanded in the rest of the letter.

And he starts with love. It's easy to pass over this and jump to the rest of the prayer, but it is what distinguishes the Christian gospel from other philosophies and religions.

Christians don't get to achieve love through knowledge.

We have received, and continue to receive God's love as a supernatural, unearned gift. There is nothing we can do to deserve this, or to make God love us any more than he already does.

What Paul is asking is that his listeners' love 'may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight'.

Knowledge and depth of insight are great qualities, but they need to be combined with wisdom and love to be truly Christian, so that we can 'discern what is best and may be pure and blameless...'

This is not just 'head knowledge', it is practical wisdom and insight that is applied to all of our lives, and the world that we live in. It will affect the way we use our time and our money. It will affect the way we speak, the things we choose to do, and the things we choose to resist doing.

And the goal of all this? That you 'may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness'.

As we read the scriptures, talk with and listen to God, and spend time with fellow believers, our knowledge and insight into the way he wants

us to live will increase, along with the desire to put those insights into practice in our lives.

And as we put these insights into practice in our lives, and see the 'fruit of righteousness' which 'comes through Jesus Christ', we are inspired to learn and listen to God more, and share this with other believers... 'to the glory and praise of God'

And so once again, we see the virtuous circle at play.

God works in us as we read our Bibles, pray for those around us and live generous and morally upright lives in our communities.

God is delighted, and we experience the delight of lives that are free from guilt and remorse, lives that make a positive difference to the world around us.

And as we do this, we experience the joy of knowing God's love and grace in our lives, as Paul writes, the 'good work' that he begins in us, and that we carry on to completion, in his supernatural strength, until the day we die, or Jesus returns.

Amen!