

Philippians

PHILIPPIANS: AN OVERVIEW

1. BACKGROUND

2. PAUL - ROMAN PRISON

3. BIRTH OF THE PHILIPPIAN CHURCH

1. BACKGROUND OF THE BOOK

During Paul's second missionary journey in AD 50-52, Paul arrived in Philippi to share the gospel of Christ (Acts 15:36-18:22). The Philippian church grew from a handful of new believers and initially met in the home of a woman named Lydia. Paul visited again in AD 56 on his third missionary journey (Acts 20:1-2). From the beginning, many opposed Paul's message and viewed this foundling church as a threat to their civil order. After Paul departed following a second visit, it is most likely that his brothers and sisters in the Philippian Church never saw him again.

The Philippian letter was written while Paul was in Rome under house arrest enduring difficult conditions. Bound by chains and under constant Roman guard, Paul waited for his hearing before Caesar. Epaphroditus was sent to Paul on behalf of the church in Philippi to bring a generous monetary gift, and in return Paul sent back this letter of encouragement. Drawing on his experience as a prisoner, Paul offered a unique voice to support and strengthen the oppressed church.

2. PAUL IN A ROMAN PRISON/HOUSE ARREST

The Book of Philippians is one of four books scholars refer to as "the prison epistles". The other three include Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon, bearing the name because each was written by Paul while he was in Roman custody. Although the distance between Rome and Philippi would require tedious effort to travel, many biblical scholars still agree that Rome was the most likely site of the prison from which Paul was writing this letter to the Philippian Church. In Rome, Paul was waiting for a hearing in Caesar's court, and his imprisonment took the form of a house arrest. He was able to live in his own rented home but was still bound with chains, under constant supervision of a guard, and had very limited sustenance with even less comfort. Furthermore, the strong possibility of execution lived with him in that place. Under house arrest, prisoners relied on the generosity of family and

friends for their survival. Among others, one friend remained faithful to Paul in his suffering—the Church in Philippi. Although it had been nearly a decade since Paul’s second missionary journey and the church plant in Philippi, the family of believers in that city loved Paul well.

3. BIRTH OF THE PHILIPPIAN CHURCH

Key Person # 1: Lydia and her conversion

The story of Lydia’s conversion begins in the book of Acts. Compared to other biblical figures, the New Testament provides a great deal of information about her. She lives in Philippi but is a native of the Asian city of Thyatira and has a career in the fashion industry as a dealer of purple goods. She is wealthy, possibly a widow, owns her own home and employs servants. However, Lydia’s most compelling characteristic is described in Acts 13:43 as “one who worshiped God”. This means she is a proselyte, a newcomer, alien, sojourner—a stranger that has bound herself to the law. Proselytes are “Gentiles who adopted the Jewish mode of worship and attend the synagogues.” Lydia rejects the paganism and emperor worship common in the city of Philippi, believing in one true God and trying to live a moral life. She is an intellectual seeker and has some limited understanding of the law and atonement.

During Paul’s second missionary journey, Paul and his travel companions would have walked the twelve miles from Neopolis, the port city to Philippi via the Egnatian Way, a critical east-west trade road that runs through Macedonia (modern day Europe). They stop in the city of Philippi, Lydia’s current hometown. Paul would seek out the synagogue as a place to begin his witness about Christ. With no synagogue in the city, on the Sabbath he goes to the place of prayer near the river and begins to speak about Jesus. Lydia is listening to Paul and her world suddenly makes sense. As a new convert, she is baptized and opens her home to be used by Paul and his companions.

Key Event: Imprisonment / Earthquake

After Lydia’s conversion, Acts 16 reveals one of the most dramatic events from Paul’s first days in Philippi. Paul and Silas draw unwanted attention when they rescue a slave girl from a life of exploitation and oppression. A demonic spirit had given her the supernatural ability to foretell the future. This spirit, through the slave girl, also recognizes Paul and his companions and follows them around for days shouting endlessly that these men are from the Most High God. Paul becomes exasperated, loses his patience, and demands the demons to leave. The girl’s healing is her owner’s financial ruin. Paul and Silas are accused of illegal activities, stripped, beaten, and thrown in prison. While in the deepest part of the prison, feet in chains, they begin to pray and sing hymns. Broken and lost people are listening. And God is listening. Miraculously, an earthquake shakes the prison as doors fly open and chains fall off. In the darkness, the jailer assumes everyone has escaped and is overcome with dishonor and shame and despair. But before can take his own life, Paul tells the jailer,

“We are all here!” (v 28). In the moments that follow, Paul and Silas speak words of life and the jailer and his entire household receive the gift of salvation, are baptized, and became the genesis of the generous, fruit-bearing congregation of Philippi.

Key Person #2: Epaphroditus

The Philippian congregation sends a man named Epaphroditus to Rome to deliver gifts and financial support to Paul. Although his name suggests a pagan upbringing, history reveals he is a convert to Christianity and a beloved member or even a pastor of the church. At some point on his journey or while he is ministering to Paul, Epaphroditus becomes ill and nearly dies. The Philippian church hears about the illness and anxiously awaits news from Rome. Paul describes him as a brother and fellow soldier and affirms his loyalty and steadfast hope, and that he is one who is on mission for the Kingdom. Both Paul and Epaphroditus are eager to send word back to the church in Philippi to share the good news of his recovery. Epaphroditus later travels back to Philippi and joyfully hand delivers the letter to his waiting friends.