

INTRODUCTION TO THE EPISTLE TO THE PHILIPPIANS

by

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Note: Author's introduction in his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1890). The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.

It was a decisive moment in the missionary career of the Apostle Paul when, summoned by the vision of a man of Macedonia, he sailed from Troas, and crossing the Ægean Sea set foot for the first time upon the soil of Europe. Immediately before him as he landed lay the important city of Philippi, which in earlier times had been called Crenides, or fountains, on account of its numerous springs, but was afterward named Philippi in honor of the great Macedonian conqueror who had enlarged and fortified it. From its vicinity to the field of the battle which ended the Roman republic, between Octavius and Antony on the one side and Brutus and Cassius on the other, it had become a famous historical landmark, and as a Roman colony with the so-called *jus Italicum*, or privilege of Roman citizenship, it outranked all the other cities of Macedonia. But its highest glory was conferred upon it when Paul entered its gates bearing the message of salvation, and it became the first city of Europe to listen to the gospel from the lips of an apostle.

Paul's first stay in Philippi was very brief, owing to the treatment he received at the hands of the Roman magistrates (Acts 16:16-40); but he left behind a most important result of his short visit in a little band of converts who formed the nucleus of a most remarkable church. On at least two subsequent occasions Paul revisited the place (Acts 20:2,6), most likely making somewhat longer visits than on the first occasion, and possibly he made still another visit after his release from his first Roman imprisonment.

The members of the church which he founded there must have consisted chiefly of heathen converts, since there appears to have been but a small number of Jews residing in Philippi. At the time of his first visit we find mostly women meeting for prayer by the riverside (Acts 16:13), the fact that they possessed no synagogue showing how few in numbers and how poor they were. Between this Philippian Church and the great apostle the most friendly and cordial relations existed from first to last. It was the only church under his charge that never gave him occasion for rebuke or reproof. Its members were never seduced from their steadfast loyalty to him and to his teachings, nor did they ever fall into any such terrible sins as appeared elsewhere, or give heed to doctrinal errors as even the neighboring church of Thessalonica seems to have done.

In the letter before us Paul declares that he had never had occasion for anything but joy and gratitude in all his remembrance of them. From the first day, they had maintained with him and with each other the closest kind of fellowship. A slight ripple had indeed been excited in the otherwise calm current of their spiritual life by the dissensions of two women of influence, but beyond this nothing had occurred to give the apostle the least

anxiety in regard to their unity and harmony. Of course, the same dangers threatened them that threatened the other apostolic churches--dangers from persecuting heathen, from false Jewish teachers, and from the pernicious example of worldly Christians. Against all these threatening perils the apostle urges them to stand fast in a spirit of loving, unselfish harmony, and of careful observance both of his teachings and life. While Paul himself declares that they had always been obedient, we find no hint in subsequent literature of any deviation from this high standard of loyal and steadfast obedience.

The Philippian Church revealed its lovely and unselfish character especially in its treatment of the apostle's personal needs, a sort of consideration he seems never to have received at the hands of any other church. While he was still in Macedonia in the neighboring city of Thessalonica, soon after his first visit to Philippi, they kindly sent supplies to relieve his necessities more than once. At a later period they were for a long time unable to do anything for him--though their hearts were always ready--until the visit of Epaphroditus to Rome furnished them with the long-coveted opportunity. Then their old spirit, like a tree in springtime, blossomed out again in a most loving and lavish contribution to his needs that awakened all the deepest feelings of the apostle's tender heart, and gave occasion for this letter in return. It was apparently entrusted to the same messenger who had brought their gifts, and who had deepened and intensified the apostle's sense of gratitude by carrying out his mission in such a self-sacrificing spirit as to bring upon himself a dangerous and almost fatal sickness, which led the apostle to send him back to Philippi sooner than he would otherwise have done.

As the Epistle was not called forth like most of the others that Paul wrote, by any doctrinal or practical danger threatening the church, it is written in an entirely different tone and style from any of his other writings. It is not divided, as the rest are, into two portions, one preeminently doctrinal, the other preeminently practical and hortatory; but the thought flows on from beginning to end in a most unstudied and natural way, like an ordinary friendly letter. There is, of course, a certain order of thought, but there are no rigid and clearly marked divisions between the different portions. In a free and natural way the apostle touches upon four special topics: *first*, his own condition and prospects; *second*, the necessity for unity and steadfastness on the part of the church; *third*, the threatening dangers from Judaizing teachers; and *fourth*, the special subject of the contribution which he has received from the church. This is the outline in general of the order of thought; the more minute analysis is as follows:

After the usual address and salutation (1:1,2), the apostle gratefully recognizes the favorable condition of the church at Philippi, and prays that it may develop more and more richly in all the essentials of Christian life (1:3-11). He briefly describes his condition and labors at Rome, revealing at the same time his exalted state of mind amid the uncertainties and dangers of his position (1:12-26), and exhorts his brethren to unity, humility, and steadfastness in view of the inspiring example of Jesus Christ the Lord (1:27-2:11). This line of exhortation leads to the noble doctrinal passage describing Christ's condescension, humiliation, and subsequent exaltation (2:5-11), when the practical tone is again resumed, and the Philippians are urged to work out their salvation in such a spirit as to make them bright examples in the midst of a wicked world (2:12-18); after which the apostle speaks very feelingly of the spirit and labors of his messengers and assistants, Timothy (2:19-24) and Epaphroditus (2:25-30).

Apparently about to close his Epistle, Paul is led by some unknown occasion to the thought of his Jewish opponents, and he launches out into an indignant contrast between their example and his own, earnestly admonishes the Philippians to imitate him rather than them (3:1-16), and draws a vivid picture of the contrasted character and destiny of true and false believers (3:17-4:1). Admonitions mixed with commendations addressed to individuals (4:2,3), general exhortations to joyfulness and spiritual mindedness (4:4-9), followed by a most beautiful and delicate recognition of the kindness of the church in their gifts (4:10-20), with salutations and a benediction (4:21-23), conclude the Epistle.

We assign the Epistle to the time of Paul's imprisonment in Rome in accordance with universal tradition, the indications of the letter itself, and the views of nearly all commentators. It may be well, however, to mention the highly improbable opinion that it was written at Cesarea during the period of Paul's imprisonment there. In favor of this view are cited the facts that Paul was in prison at the time, in a place called the Prætorium (Acts 23:35, same word), and among Roman soldiers. But all of these facts agree equally well with the theory of its composition at Rome, while there are many features of his condition and the state of affairs around him, revealed in this Epistle, which are not so easily reconciled with the Cesarean as with the Roman imprisonment. For instance: [1] the widespread influence of his example, of which there is no hint in Luke's account of the stay at Cesarea, but which fully accords with the description of his residence at Rome (Acts 28, see especially verses 30, 31); [2] the large number of brethren who were affected in various ways toward him, implying a large city; [3] his uncertainty as to the event of his trial, which he would much more probably have felt at Rome where his trial was impending, than at Cesarea where it was still remote; [4] and finally and most decisively his allusion to "Cæsar's household" (4:22).

We therefore assume the place of composition to be Rome and the time to be toward the close of Paul's first imprisonment, A.D. 63 or 64, which we infer from the fact that the apostle has evidently been a long time in prison and looks forward to a speedy decision of his case. This was therefore most probably the last epistle which was written by Paul to any church. And surely the great apostle to the Gentiles could have closed this marvelous series of inspired letters to the churches he had founded with nothing more beautiful and appropriate than this loving and tender Epistle, which expresses so ardently his perfect joy and gratitude over the remarkable fellowship of this beloved church, exhibits so gloriously his calm and heroic spirit of resignation and triumph in view of a possible martyrdom, and accepts so delicately and graciously the material gifts of his brethren, even as a noble king might receive the offerings of devoted subjects. This is indeed an Epistle of the heart, and so a most fitting close to the series of Epistles which the great-hearted Paul wrote to the churches.

[Return to the Introductions to the Epistles of Paul](#)