

# Introduction

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Paul's Epistle to the Philippians is one of four letters written while he was imprisoned. The others are: Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon. Much discussion among the commentators has centered around whether the Epistle to the Philippians was written by Paul while imprisoned in Caesarea (cf. Acts 24) or in Rome (Acts 28:14–31). Some argue that Paul was also imprisoned in Ephesus, and that he wrote the Epistle of Philippians while incarcerated there.

As Guthrie notes, however, the tradition that has Paul writing his Epistle to the Philippians while imprisoned in Rome has the greater weight of evidence.<sup>1</sup> First, the mention of both the "praetorium" (1:13) and "Caesar's household" (4:22) would indicate his being in Rome, especially if "praetorium" is a reference to the Praetorian Guard or even to the Imperial Guard, for headquarters for these were in Rome.

Further, it appears that Paul was awaiting with some sense of imminence the pronouncement of a life or death judgment, which would indicate a trial to which there could be no appeal. This would rule out the Caesarean imprisonment during which Paul appealed to Caesar (Acts 25:11ff). Likewise, in 3:15, Paul speaks of "as many as are mature (perfect)," which would seem a more fitting description of a considerable community of believers, which fits Rome far better than Caesarea. Also, that Paul had freedom to correspond with the various communities through letters, fits the Roman imprisonment best. Thus, the date of Paul's writing his Epistle to the Philippians is best put at 61 CE. This being the case, he would be released a year later after writing the Epistle to the Philippians (62 CE).

Luke, in writing Acts, gives evidence that the assembly of believers in the city of Philippi were known for their faith in Yeshua. He gives three examples of the power of the gospel in Philippi.

They are (1) the devout proselyte, Lydia, a trader in purple cloth from Asia, who serves as a representative of those well-prepared to receive the gospel (Acts 16:11–15); (2) the soothsaying girl whose spirit of divination was exorcised by Paul, and who illustrates the triumph of Christ over the power of darkness (Acts 16:16–18); and (3) the gaoler (jailer), shaken into a realization of his own need by an earthquake, who

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1 Guthrie, Donald. *New Testament Introduction* (IVP, 1973), p. 535.

shows the power of the gospel to transform entire families, for both he and his household were baptized (Acts 16:27–34).<sup>1</sup>

The occasion for Paul's writing this epistle may have been that when Epaphroditus was sent to Paul in order to give him things needed to sustain him while in prison, he also made known to Paul some difficulties the believing assembly in Philippi were undergoing, difficulties that required the community to be admonished by the Apostle. As Calvin notes:

It appears, however, that attempts had been made upon them by false apostles, who wandered hither and thither, with the view of spreading corruptions of sound doctrine; but as they had remained steadfast in the truth, the Apostle commends their steadfastness. Keeping, however, in mind human frailty, and having, perhaps, been instructed by Epaphroditus that they required to be seasonably confirmed, lest they should in process of time fall away, he subjoins such admonitions as he knew to be suitable to them.<sup>2</sup>

Obviously, Paul also wanted the assembly at Philippi to know how grateful he was for the gifts they sent with Epaphroditus, and thus following his admonitions to sound doctrine and life-application of the truth, he gives his sincere thanksgiving for all they had sent (4:18). In concluding the epistle with these words of kindness and thanksgiving, Paul demonstrates his true love and care for those within the believing community, and thereby wraps his previous strong admonitions with a true sense of desire that they would be blessed as they received the truth and put it into practice.

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1 Guthrie, Donald. *New Testament Introduction* (IVP, 1973), p. 522.

2 Calvin, John. *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to The Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Calvin Translation Society, 1851), p. 21.

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*Outline of the Epistle of Philippians***I. Chapter 1**

- A. Greeting: vs. 1–2
  - 1. Paul & Timothy to the saints....
  - 2. with overseers and deacons
- B. Thanksgiving: 1:3–8
- C. Prayer: 1:9–11
  - 1. prayer for the believers in Philippi
  - 2. that their love may increase
  - 3. that knowledge would be increased and applied
- D. Paul's present circumstances: 1:12–26
  - 1. His imprisonment has encouraged others to be bold witnesses of the gospel, but not always with right motives, yet Paul rejoices that the gospel is being made known.
  - 2. His future is uncertain: desiring to be with Messiah and yet desiring to remain.
  - 3. He is confident that he will be released in order to assist them in their faith.
- E. Exhortation: 1:27–30
  - 1. They must live out their faith which will result in unity and and thus a living testimony of the gospel.
  - 2. They must not fear their opponents but be strong in faith.
  - 3. Faith that God has given will also enable the believer to suffer for the sake of Messiah.

**II. Chapter 2**

- A. Continuing Exhortations: 2:1–18
  - 1. to strive for unity: 2:1–2
  - 2. to practice humility, i.e., to have the mind of Messiah: 2:3–11
  - 3. to have their lives marked by obedience and purity: 2:12–18
- B. Timothy and Epaphraditus: 2:19–30
  - 1. Timothy will be sent to Philippi: 2:19–24
  - 2. Explanation for sending Epaphraditus: 2:25–30

**III. Chapter 3:1–4:1**

- A. Warnings against false teachers: 3:1–4:1
  - 1. those who teach a salvation based upon works and traditions rather than upon faith through God’s grace alone
  - 2. those who teach for self-gain – a “this world” perspective (3:1–16)
- B. True believers serve Yeshua, awaiting His return. (3:17–4:1)

**IV. Chapter 4:2–23**

- A. The need for unity: Euodia and Syntyche (4:2–9)
- B. Paul expresses his joy at the Philippians’ renewed concern for his welfare. (4:10–20)
  - 1. He has learned the secret of contentment in all circumstances.
  - 2. He recalls their earlier generosity.
  - 3. He describes their care for him as a fragrant offering to God.
- C. Concluding salutation: (4:21–23)

# Chapter One

## *commentary*

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**1–2 Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Messiah Yeshua, to all the saints in Messiah Yeshua who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Yeshua Messiah.**

Paul begins all of his letters with his name (Παῦλος, *paulos*), and includes Timothy (Τιμόθεος, *timotheos*) here as well as in the opening of 2 Corinthians, Colossians and Philemon. In the opening of 1 & 2 Thesalonians, Timothy is included as well as Silvanus. But when Paul includes his fellow worker, Timothy, in the opening of these epistles, it is not to indicate that both he and Timothy were authors of the letter. It may have been that Timothy acted as an amanuensis, i.e., one who takes dictation or writes manuscripts, but it is most likely that Timothy's name was added since he was well known to the Philippian *ekklesia* as Paul's close friend and companion. Indeed, Timothy had assisted Paul in founding the believing community in Philippi.

Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And a disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium...Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe. So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily. (Acts 16:1–2, 4)

Timothy regularly accompanied Paul as he traveled to take the gospel to many regions and to strengthen and encourage the believers who were in these regions. This indicates an apostolic pattern of making disciples as well as offering a clear example that those sent out to do this kind of work should never go by oneself. Rather, they should be accompanied by at least one other worker. For not only does this bring strength and companionship in the work being done, but it also strengthens the message, for in the mouth of two or three a thing is established (Deut 19:15).

...*bond-servants of Messiah Yeshua* – The Greek δοῦλοι Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ is translated by the NASB as “bond-servants” since in the ancient world,

a “servant” or “slave” was owned by his or her master. Paul uses this same description in his introductory salutations of Romans and Titus as well. In other epistles of Paul, he identifies himself by adding “apostle” (cf. 2Cor, Gal, Eph, Col, 1&2 Tim). It may well be that the reason he does not do so in this letter was because he was fully accepted by the believing community in Philippi and his apostolic authority was not being challenged.<sup>1</sup> He therefore did not feel the need to remind them of his apostolic office.

By referring to himself and Timothy as “bond-servants of Yeshua” Paul is not emphasizing the servile aspect of being a slave, but rather, he expresses the thoughts of cheerful and willing service to the One Who died for him and gave him true life, and life eternal. Indeed, being a “bond servant” of Yeshua is to experience true freedom!

and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness... But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life. (Rom 6:18, 22)

But what does it mean to be a “bond-servant of Yeshua?” It is clear by the fact that Paul uses the plural “bond-servants,” thus including Timothy, that being a bond-servant of Yeshua is not restricted to someone in a position of authority, such as an Apostle or designated “leader” in a community of faith. Rather, all who are believers in Yeshua must strive to see themselves as owned by Him, and as therefore desirous to live one’s life as pleasing to Him and fulfilling His desires. It is in this role as a “bond-servant” of Yeshua that the one who is “born again” finds the greatest freedom and fulfillment in this life.

...to all the saints in Messiah Yeshua who are in Philippi – The Greek word often translated by English “saints” is ἅγιος (*hagios*) which has as its basic meaning “holy,” that is “set apart,” “sanctified.” It is unfortunate that certain parts of the Christian Church have used the term “saints” to denote someone who has done extra-ordinary work in the church and who is therefore being singled out as having greater importance and holiness.

But this, of course, is not how the term is used in the Scriptures. Here, in our text, as elsewhere in the Apostolic Scriptures, it is used to denote those redeemed individuals who comprise a believing commu-

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<sup>1</sup> See Marvin Vincent, *Epistles to the Philippians and to Philemon* in the ICC (T & T Clark, 1897), p. 2.

nity (*ekklesia*), describing them as “set apart from the world and unto Yeshua” through the saving work of Yeshua in redeeming them unto Himself. Further, the inevitable result of being redeemed, born from above, is to live more and more righteously even as He is righteous.

This, therefore, ought to be foremost in the hearts and minds of all who comprise a community of faith, that the watching world would see them, both in their individual lives as well as in their corporate identity, as lights of God’s greatness and love. But to honestly strive for this high calling requires on-going growth in becoming what God intends us to be, and this in turn requires a humble spirit.

...including the overseers and deacons: – “Overseer” (ἐπισκόπος, *episkopos*) is used interchangeably with “elders” (πρεσβύτερος, *presbuteros*) We see this in Acts 20:17 in which Luke relates that Paul sent for the “elders of the *ekklesia*.”

From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the *ekklesia*. (Acts 20:17)

Yet when they come and Paul is addressing them, he refers to them as “overseers.”

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the *ekklesia* of God which He purchased with His own blood.

Thus, those who are designated as teachers and pastors within the local believing community are “elders” who “oversee” who are likewise “shepherds” and whose duty it is to “shepherd the *ekklesia* of God.”

“Deacon” (διάκονος, *diakonos*) carries the sense of a person who helps others who are in need within the body of Messiah, the local *ekklesia*. It appears that this office or designated position within the apostolic *ekklesia* may have found its beginning in Acts 6 in which widows within the believing community were not being properly cared for.

Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. “Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wis-

dom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”  
(Acts 6:1–4)

The use of “overseers and deacons” in Paul’s opening of this epistle is an important witness to the fact that these two positions were well in place in the early apostolic *ekklesia*. There are some, however, who deny that such organized offices within the *ekklesia* would have been established so early in the emerging *ekklesia* Yeshua promised to build. But the evidence overwhelmingly supports that these offices were established within the *ekklesia* comprised of the followers of Yeshua. Guthrie, in discussing the mention of “overseers and deacons” in our text, makes this bold statement.

Their specific mention here shows indisputably that two distinct orders of officials were in existence at an early state in the history of the Church. Those who dispute that such a state of organization could have existed in Paul’s lifetime are hard put to it to explain away the present reference.<sup>1</sup>

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Yeshua Messiah.* –

Paul uses the same combination, “grace” and “peace” in the opening salutation of Titus: “Grace and peace from God the Father and Messiah Yeshua our Savior” (Titus 1:4). Here in our text, he adds “Grace to you.” But what is interesting is that in both cases, Paul puts “grace” before “peace,” and it seems very probable that this is in line with Paul’s primary theology, namely, that every good thing the child of God has is the result of God’s grace. Here, specifically, genuine peace, both inward as well as that which enables the child of God to persevere in times of hardship, comes from trusting God and thus such peace is the gift of God’s grace.

In addition, what is obvious is that God’s special and specific grace which He gives to His children flows from the work of Yeshua as our Lord and Savior, and living Intercessor (Heb 7:25). All those who are “in Messiah” are saved by His grace and have access to the shalom which only He can provide.

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1 Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, p. 523.