

Unit 1 Introduction

The Book of Philippians

Letters are written by someone and sent to someone at a particular time and place. Although Paul preached the same good news about Jesus Christ in all of his letters, he emphasized different aspects of the gospel message in response to the particular needs of the community to which he was writing.

When Paul wrote to the Philippians in the middle of the first-century, he was familiar with the city's history and its emphasis on social status and the ways people saw themselves getting ahead. According to Paul, the gospel challenges the world's standards about who or what is important or valuable.

Interestingly, Paul criticized the Philippians church less than he did any other church to which he wrote. Perhaps this is because he knew they were experiencing persecution, similar to the imprisonment that he and Silas endured in Philippi according to Acts 16. Thus, Paul did not write them to say "give up your status or your privilege," as much as he wrote to say "don't worry" that your status has been changed. True value comes from living a life that looks like and points to Jesus.

Moreover, when Paul wrote to the Philippians, he encouraged them as a community. The Christian life is not meant to be lived alone. Paul instructed the Philippians to encourage one another and to rejoice together. Even when times are hard, fellowship with other believers makes the journey better.

Status

Philippi is located in Greece. A previous city called Krenides existed at the same location. But it was destroyed and then rebuilt by Philip II (the father of Alexander the Great) in 358 BC. Thus, the city was named after its "re-founder." Over 300 years later, the Romans fought there and took over the city (44-42 BC). Finally, in 30 BC, Caesar declared Philippi a Roman colony, and he offered Roman citizenship to the leadership of the city.

The city itself served two important functions for the Romans. First, Philippi is located on the Via Egnatia, the main road from east to west across the Roman Empire. Philippi's location on this main trade route made the city an excellent place for travelers either to buy goods for their journey or to sell goods on their way home. Thus, it was possible to make money by setting up a business that served travelers, and some moved to Philippi for this reason. Second, Philippi became a popular location to settle for those who had earned citizenship by serving in the military. These new citizens wanted to exercise political power, and there were opportunities to do so in new Roman colonies. Thus, Philippi was populated in the first

century by ambitious people seeking to increase their social status either by making money or serving in leadership within the empire.

The Bible offers an example of each of these types of citizens in Philippi. According to Acts 16, the first person that Paul met in Philippi was a woman named Lydia who sold purple clothing. She listened to Paul's preaching and believed in the Lord, and she and all of her household were saved (Acts 16:13-15). In the letter to the Philippians, Paul described Epaphroditus as a "coworker and fellow soldier" (Philippians 2:25). Paul's reference here is metaphorical, a "soldier" for Christ. Still, it is interesting that Paul only calls two men a fellow soldier: Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25) and Archippus (Philemon 2). We don't know if Epaphroditus was a Roman soldier, but Paul at least felt that the Philippians would understand this image given their context.

One of the reasons that Paul writes to the Philippians is to address their assumptions about social status and the Christian life. Following Christ does not always cohere with the world's view of power and prestige. Jesus did not consider status, but gave himself up on our behalf. Paul claimed Christians should not be surprised when they are persecuted for believing in Jesus. Just like the Lord, we who are part of God's family should be prepared to offer our lives for others. In the first century, this may have meant imprisonment or even death; in the 21st century, North American Christians may need to support those around the world who suffer in these kinds of physical ways.

Persecution

Persecution of Christians increased during the second and third centuries AD; still, there was some persecution of Christians right away in the first century AD. Philippi may have been one of the first cities where Christian persecution occurred. The book of Acts includes a story of Paul and Silas being thrown in prison in Philippi for casting a demon out of a slave girl. While in prison, Paul and Silas witnessed to the jailer, and he accepted Jesus (Acts 16:16-40). Paul also experienced persecution other places; he wrote the letter to the Philippians while he was in prison somewhere else (Philippians 1:13-14). Moreover, Paul implied that some of the Philippians themselves had been put in jail (Philippians 1:29-30).

For status-conscious Philippians, it was a problem that Paul and others were in prison. It didn't seem to make sense that following Jesus would lead to persecution or loss of social status. In fact, some rival preachers spoke negatively about Paul and the fact that he was in prison (Philippians 1:15). Paul claimed that they were preaching out of their own self ambitions (Philippians 1:17).

In response, Paul reminded the Philippians of the gospel about Jesus Christ. Jesus is truly divine; Jesus is God (Philippians 2:6). Nevertheless, Jesus took on human nature, and even died on the cross (Philippians 2:7-8). Jesus did not shun suffering or persecution, but He accepted it on our behalf. Jesus demonstrated the Christian way. Christians also are called not seek the world's status, but to lay down our lives on behalf of others. Paul did this. Some of the Philippians were doing this. If we claim to follow Christ, then we have to be willing to give up our privileged status and offer our lives on behalf of others as well.

Households

Paul writes to house churches. This point is not unique to Philippians, but rather is true of all Paul's letters. Thus, when we imagine first-century churches, we should think about all the things that make up a household. In the Philippian house church, often someone was cooking. Children were running around. People were talking about work and leisure activities.

In the letter to the Philippians, Paul used familial language to talk about the church. He called the members of the church "brothers and sisters" (e.g. Philippians 3:1). Paul referred to Timothy as a son and called himself Timothy's father (Philippians 2:22). Paul also urged the Philippians to become "blameless and pure children of God" (Philippians 2:15).

We know of three women by name who were part of the church

at Philippi: Lydia (Acts 16:14), Euodia, and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2). Based on Acts, we can assume that a former slave girl also was part of the community; Paul and Silas had cast out a demon from her (Acts 16:18). So, this community included men and women, slave and free, and presumably both rich and poor.

Families go through good times and through hard times; sometimes they even fight (Philippians 4:2). Paul encouraged the Philippians to support one another, to be unified, to rejoice together, and to take care of one another (just like they took care of Paul in his time of need, Philippians 4:16). In fact, most of Philippians 4, which we typically treat as instructions to individuals, is in the plural: Paul is addressing the whole community as the family of God.

Not only that, but Paul reminded the Philippians that the family of God extends to other locations as well. He refers in particular to Christians who are part of Caesar's household, presumably in Rome. We too are members of God's family. Even today the message of Philippians is to be lived out in community, where other members of God's household can encourage one another, support each other, and share life together.

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