

Paul and the Philippians

To whom it may concern": When I see these words, I prepare myself to read a formal document. A letter beginning "Dear Sir" is equally impersonal. However, a handwritten "Hi, Phil!" catches my attention; a friend wrote a message especially for me.

The apostle Paul's letters extend over most of that formal/informal range. However, his letter to the Philippians suggests a deeper relationship than the opening phrases suggest.

"I Have You in My Heart"

The first two verses of the Philippian letter give little clue as to what will follow. Within that opening, Paul follows the ancient pattern of identifying himself as writer and the church as recipient and giving words of blessing. Yet, from there, Paul writes with an intimacy unique among New Testament letters. "I have you in my heart . . . I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus" (1:7-8).

Paul further demonstrated his close ties with his Philippian brothers and sisters by using the *koinonia* word family. Many of us recognize the Greek word *koinonia* [koi-no-NEE-uh]. Today, this word is most frequently translated by the English word "fellowship." That word, unfortunately, brings images of potlucks and church foyer chatter.

In the first century, however, *koinonia* meant something far deeper than potluck suppers. In verses 4 and 5, Paul celebrated the strength of his interaction with the Philippians: He pointed out that every thought of them brought joy to his mind. Why? Because of their rich "partnership" (*koinonia*) with him over the recent years of his ministry.

Had the Philippians sent Paul cookies in a care package? No, nothing so easy. Paul soon points out how the Philippian believers had all shared (using a verb in the *koinonia* word family) God's grace with him (1:7). Paul and the Philippian Christians knew each other well. They actively cared for one another, and they demonstrated their care through sacrificial action.

As Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians, he was "in chains for Christ" (v. 13). Yet, he did not feel alone. Not only was God with him, but despite the hundreds of miles that separated him from them, he knew that the Philippians shared (the same *koinonia* word that appeared in v. 7) in his troubles (4:14). They had sent money to express their concern (vv. 10, 18). Through their gift, Paul sensed the deep friendship his Philippian supporters offered.

When my wife and I served in Australia as

missionaries, friends and family back home found many creative ways to demonstrate that they were "with us." Their messages and gifts encouraged us, just as the Philippians' ministry to Paul gave him strength and joy.

Forging the Bond of *Koinonia*

How did such a strong relationship develop between the apostle and this church? Luke's record in Acts 16 gives helpful background. When Paul first arrived in Philippi, as was his custom, he found the Jewish meeting place. There, Paul proclaimed Jesus as the promised Messiah. At least one from the group, a wealthy businesswoman, accepted this good news. Lydia then opened her home to Paul and his companions.

Paul continued ministering within this community until jealous nonbelievers organized his arrest, beating, and imprisonment. As Paul and his companion Silas courageously sang God's praises, God miraculously freed them. In the process, God, through His human representatives, led the jailer and his family into faith and the local Christian community.

After one last meeting with the believers, Paul felt it best to leave town. Yet the new Christians in Philippi had quickly developed a solid bond with the missionaries. As Paul

displayed his dungeon-strong faith in Christ, church members saw his commitment to Jesus and the gospel he had shared with them. They knew they would not have experienced God's grace unless Paul had come to them.

Perhaps as they bid farewell to Paul, they asked to join his mission. If they did, Paul evidently urged them to take his place as missionaries in their hometown. They agreed to do that and committed themselves to supporting Paul in his travels. As Paul continued on his risky venture, the love of the Philippians helped him carry on.

Koinonia in Action

After leaving Philippi, Paul next preached Jesus in Thessalonica. Several times, members of the Philippian congregation journeyed the roughly 80 miles to take



Ruins of the ancient city of Philippi. The ancient city of Philippi lay on a fertile plain nine miles inland from the Aegean Sea's north shore and the modern-day seaport of Kavála, known in Paul's time as Neapolis.

care packages to Paul (see 4:18). The church and the founding pastor then apparently lost touch with each other for a period (v. 10). Undoubtedly, however, Paul and the Philippians remained in prayer for each other (1:3-4, 19).

Later, as Paul awaited his first trial in Rome, the Philippians could again become the answer to their own prayers, as they renewed their generous financial support for the pastor-prisoner.

We do not know the identity of the first Philippian gift-bearers—those who carried offerings from Philippi to Paul in Thessalonica. However, Paul singled out for praise the Philippians' most recent representative, an otherwise unknown hero called Epaphroditus [i-PAF-ruh-DIE-tuhs]. He had come not only with financial support (4:18) and promises of ongoing prayer, but also with the wonderful gift of his own service and companionship.

The apostle not only appreciated the coins Philippi sent but specifically affirmed their carrier—Epaphroditus—for his role as his “brother, co-worker and fellow soldier” (2:25). Out of love for Paul, Epaphroditus had all but given his life. Despite (or perhaps because of) his desire to serve Paul and Christ, Epaphroditus had fallen seriously ill and nearly died (v. 27).

The Philippians must have felt double concern, for two of their own were suffering. Sharing their grief, Paul certainly would have dropped his chains and traveled to Philippi, but the Roman authorities had other plans for their prisoner. So, Paul devised four other plans he hoped would show the same level of *koinonia* as the Philippians had given him.



The Via Egnatia was a broad, military supply road that extended from the Adriatic ports to the seaport of Neapolis in Greece, passing through Philippi. In Paul's time, this stone-paved road was nearly doubled in length, extending another 250 miles east to Byzantium (modern-day Istanbul).

First, Paul returned the gift that was Epaphroditus himself. Paul could have kept this messenger of encouragement as his own servant. Instead, Paul sent him back to minister to his own church family.

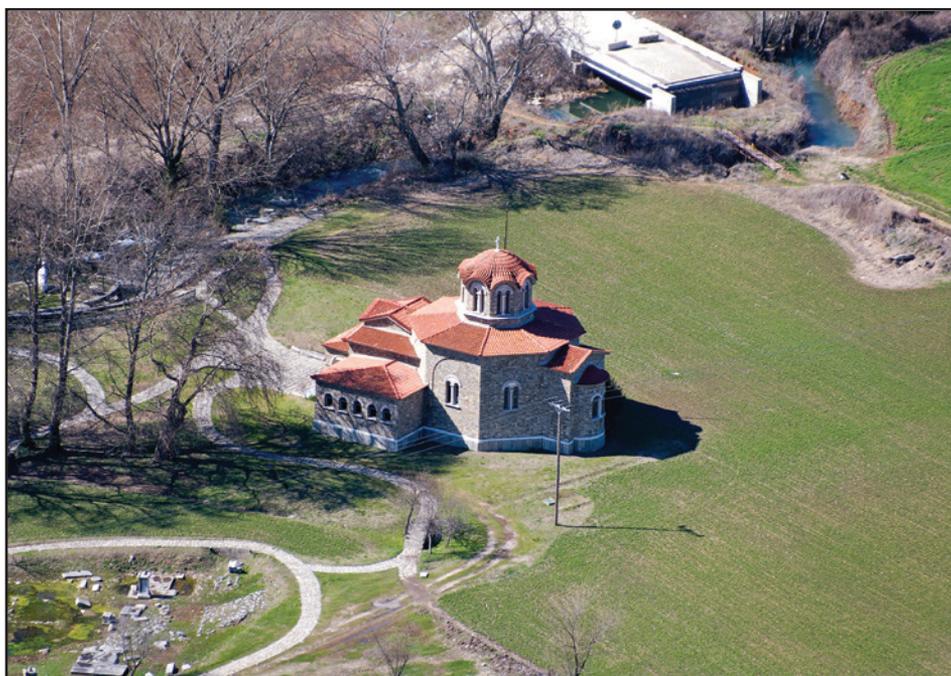
Second, Paul wrote (and likely asked Epaphroditus to carry) this wonderful letter we call “Philippians.” Imagine the hope

carried in this letter's strong promises. For example, God “who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (1:6), and “God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus” (4:19). Likewise, hear the wise instruction Paul offered in his own model (3:4-17; summarized in v. 17: “Join . . . in following my example”), as well as Jesus' pattern that Paul himself followed (2:5-11; “Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus,” v. 5).

Third, Paul promised to send another personal gift—Timothy, another leader who cared for the Philippians more than for himself. Paul was offering all he had—in the depth of Christian *koinonia*.

Last, Paul hoped that he would regain his own freedom and have opportunity to greet in person his dearly beloved friends in Philippi (v. 24). Evidence within two of Paul's later letters (1 Timothy and Titus) indicates that Paul did enjoy another period of travel and ministry.

Consider the church in Philippi as pastor and people met once again. This group would have included Lydia, Epaphroditus, and other believers whom Paul was meeting for the first time. Together, they rejoiced in God's grace that brought them back together for a short period in Philippi. Likely they also celebrated the strength of that grace that would unite them and all God's people in eternity's perfect *koinonia*.



Baptistry of the Chapel of St. Lydia from above, Philippi.

Autobiography in Paul's Letters

Of all the New Testament authors, Paul alone tells us about himself directly. And he tells us a lot. Why did he do this? Was Paul an egomaniac? Was he obsessed with himself and his own importance? A close look at what Paul has to say about himself helps us to see that Paul wasn't just introducing himself.

The Tradition of Authorship in the New Testament

Most of the books in the New Testament give little clue about their authorship. The four Gospels and Acts are anonymous. Within the books themselves, no authors' names are mentioned. Hebrews and 1, 2, and 3 John are also anonymous.

Other books in the New Testament mention their authors' names—books are named for James, Peter, and Jude. Revelation identifies John as its author. Of course, we can reach some conclusions about the interests, backgrounds, emphases, education, and so on of even anonymous authors based on the way they wrote, but we would know next to nothing about most New Testament authors if we had only their books.

Among New Testament authors, only Paul is self-conscious enough to write autobiographically. However, even he does not write an autobiography. His letters offer only vignettes—brief glimpses of episodes

from his life. The first true autobiography ever was written four centuries after Paul by Augustine of Hippo (*Confessions*). So, what does Paul say in his remarks about himself?

Finding Paul in His Letters

Autobiographical remarks make up the better part of the first two chapters of two of Paul's earliest letters—1 Thessalonians and Galatians. Curiously, Paul uses "we" to refer to himself in 1 Thessalonians. But in Galatians, he uses the "I" form. Is the "we" form in 1 Thessalonians more modest? Or, is this the story not only of Paul, but also of the letter's co-senders, Silas and Timothy (1:1)?

Paul uses "I" and "we" frequently in 1 Corinthians 13: "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels" (v. 1) and "We know in part and we prophesy in part" (v. 9). However, his hypothetical formulation suggests that what he says of himself applies equally to all: "If [anyone speaks] in tongues . . . [Everyone knows] in part."

Scholars also debate whether the "I" of Romans 7 applies only to Paul or also to others. Does his "I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law" (v. 7) apply to all Jews, or even to all people? Is verse 15 autobiographical: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do?"

Identifying autobiographical sections of

Paul's letters can be controversial. Yet beyond noting the existence of these sections, the more important question remains: Why does Paul write about himself at all?

Why Did Paul Write About Himself?

A serious study of autobiographical remarks in the writings of contemporary Jewish and pagan writers raises doubts about popular notions concluding that Paul was self-obsessed. It also challenges the views of many scholars concluding that Paul wrote about himself out of apologetic motives (that is, that Paul was forced to write about himself in response to false charges made against him by others).*

Simply put, the real reason for Paul's autobiographical remarks was usually to demonstrate that he practiced what he preached. Ancient writers were generally reluctant to write about themselves without good reason. One good reason was to satisfy the expectation that philosophers were to live consistently with their philosophy. Paul most often wrote about himself to show how he personally lived out the implications of his "philosophy"—the gospel.

It was equally important to document how others also positively incarnated the truth of the gospel. In Philippians 2, Paul appealed to the examples of Jesus Christ (vv. 5-11), Timothy (v. 22), and Epaphroditus (vv. 25-30). These models found God's approval in placing the needs and interests of others ahead of their own.

In contrast, Paul's autobiographical comments in Philippians 3:4-14 are preceded and followed by reminders of the unfortunate negative examples of some unnamed professing Christians. They lived with inappropriate priorities. They trusted what humans could do far too much; they did not take seriously enough the implications of the gospel of grace (vv. 1-3).

Other supposed Christians lived as virtual "enemies of the cross of Christ" (v. 18). Paul wrote "with tears" of their misguided priorities: "Their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things" (v. 19); and of their future prospects, "Their destiny is destruction" (v. 19).

True Christians know that their "citizenship is in heaven" (v. 20). They are loyal to their coming Savior and Lord, who is already bringing "everything under his control" (v. 21). They joyfully anticipate His completion of the process that will transform them so that they will be like Him. They are not perfect, but they press on to the goal of the heavenly call (vv. 12-14).



About 60 years after Paul ministered in Ephesus, the Library of Celsus was erected near the intersection of Curetes and Marble Streets. The two-storied façade of the library gave patrons a grand welcome. The library collection consisted of 12,000 scrolls preserved in a double-walled room designed to control humidity and temperature.

Paul was convinced that the Philippians were just such true believers. Because of their “partnership in the gospel” (1:5), Paul was confident that God would bring His saving work “to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (v. 6). Paul prayed that their lives would evidence the results of a right relationship with God “that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God” (v. 11).

Paul wrote the Philippians from prison, awaiting the prospect of execution (vv. 7, 12, 20-22, 27). He knew that some Christians in the city of his imprisonment did not like him and were preaching the gospel “out of envy and rivalry” (v. 15) and “selfish ambition” (v. 17). They hoped their preaching would make more trouble for Paul (v. 17).

Paul refused to allow such circumstances keep him from rejoicing (vv. 4, 18; 2:17-18; 4:10-13). Even his imprisonment “served to advance the gospel” (1:12). Paul’s joy did not depend on his circumstances, or even on being liked, but on serving Christ and those for whom Christ died.

Paul repeatedly called the Philippians to this same joyful living (1:25-26; 2:17-18, 29;

3:1, 15-16; 4:4). Christian joy does not depend on personal comfort. One’s joy can be made more complete, however, by partnership in a community of “like-minded” believers, who share the same selfless, Christlike love and spiritual purpose (2:2).

Paul invited the Philippians to follow his example in this (3:15-17). He did not imply

that he was exemplary in every respect (vv. 12-14). Yet, he was willing to illustrate the gospel truth he urged the Philippians to take seriously by appealing to the model of his own life.

Paul identified himself with other true Christians “who put no confidence in the flesh” (v. 3). That is, he did not trust himself or his own accomplishments. This was not because he had no reason for self-confidence. On the contrary, he had many achievements about which he could have boasted (v. 4). But he refused. What Paul once considered an asset had become a deficit. What seemed valuable from a human perspective was only rubbish compared to life in Christ (vv. 7-8).

Conclusion

Today, Paul’s Philippian “autobiography”—his religious heritage and achievements—may seem unimpressive to us, but that is largely because we live in a very different cultural and religious context. The continuing significance of his autobiography is found in its challenge to judge our priorities and values in light of the cross behind us and the crown still ahead of us. Will we choose the countercultural path of putting the needs and interests of others above our own comfort?

*The full evidence for this and other claims made in this essay are presented in my doctoral dissertation: George Lyons, *Pauline Autobiography: Toward a New Understanding* (Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series, 73; [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985]).



Remains of a temple in Ephesus dedicated to Hadrian, emperor of Rome (AD 117 to 138).



The port city of Kusadasi, gateway to the ancient ruins of Ephesus.