

# Philippians Historical Background:

## 1. Foundations

- a. Prior to 359BC was known as Krenides, the “The Little Fountains”
- b. In 359BC was annexed by Philip II, the father of Alexander the Great, and renamed after himself.
- c. Alexander made Philippi a great urban center of the east.
  - i. It has been said that if Alexander the Great had not gone east, then Paul and the gospel would not have gone west
  - ii. Greek, the language of the world at the time of Christ, was spread and unified through Philip and Alexander
- d. In 146BC Philippi became governed by Rome, one of its six main provinces
- e. 42BC the historic battle between Brutus and Cassius, defenders of the Roman republic, and Antony and Octavian (later Augustus), the avengers of Caesar’s death.
  - i. At the end of this battle of Philippi, Brutus and Cassius were dead and Antony and Octavian were victorious
  - ii. Philippi was made a Roman colony
- f. In 31BC Antony was defeated by Octavian, who became Caesar Augustus, and many of Antony’s Roman soldiers lost their land claims in Rome and were resettled in Philippi

## 2. Geography

- a. Located 10 miles northwest of Neapolis (present day Kavalla, heart of the Greek tobacco industry)
- b. Renowned gold mining region, which is why Philip annexed the region of Macedonia, and supported his conquests from the gold produced around Philippi
- c. Located on the Via Egnatia, or the Ignatian Way, a Roman highway, 14ft wide, that connected the port with Philippi
  - i. This road ran from Byzantium to Dyrrachium across modern-day Albania, Greece, and Turkey

## 3. Politics

- a. After 31BC was a Roman colony with all said privileges
  - i. Think of it as a “little Rome” planted outside of Italy
  - ii. Predominately Roman citizens, but all its citizens were given the rights of the citizens of Rome
  - iii. Had *praetors*, local governors, which only colonies were allowed
- b. This citizenship entailed:
  - i. Freedom from floggings and usually arrest (except in extreme cases)
  - ii. The right to appeal to Caesar
  - iii. Names appear on the rolls of Roman tribes
  - iv. Exemption from paying tribute to Caesar (no taxes like most foreign conquered lands)
  - v. Right to acquire, hold, and transfer land
  - vi. The right of self-government to regulate their own civic affairs
- c. The Philippians, then, took great pride in their Roman citizenship
  - i. This may be why Paul speaks so clearly of citizenship in the book of Philippians

## 4. Economics

- a. Philippi, though once a renowned gold region, was most likely a major military outpost rather than a trading center
- b. The military were given land, and often allowed to keep spoil from war
  - i. Philippi was full of military presence and personnel
- c. Note that Lydia was a trader of purple fabric who was apparently quite wealthy (no taxes)

- i. Purple was the color that Romans loved, so Philippians prided themselves as makers of it, they loved things that were Roman
  - ii. Purple dye was expensive because it was created from the shellfish gathered from Thyatira and each shellfish produced one drop of dye!
- d. The ability to avoid paying tribute to Rome made the Philippian church one of the most capable of supporting other churches
  - i. Helped, particularly Lydia and Luke (who was possibly Philippian), the Thessalonian, Athenian, and Corinthian churches (4:15; 2 Cor 11:9)
  - ii. Paul actually writes his letter to thank the Philippians for their gift to him as he awaits his verdict in Rome.

## Paul and the Philippian Church

1. Acts 16 – The Lord Prepares the Way for the Gospel
  - a. The Lord Prepares the Meeting
    - i. Paul and Silas, along with Timothy, desired to go preach the gospel in Asia and Bithynia, but the Holy Spirit stopped them.
    - ii. Paul had a vision of “the man from Macedonia” calling for their help, so they went to Philippi “a Roman colony”
      1. They went down to the river, to a place of prayer (16:13),
      2. Interesting note: why not the synagogue? Usually Paul goes to the synagogue
      3. There probably wasn’t a synagogue!
        - a. Need 10 Jewish men to start a synagogue, indicating that there wasn’t a strong Jewish presence in Philippi, not even 10 men!
          - i. Romans had racist antipathy toward Jews, possibly Philippians, too
          - ii. Strong presence of Emperor worship, with its Imperial cult
        - b. Philippians in the only NT book that does not quote the OT even once!
          - i. Paul reasons from the gospel in ways that the Philippians would understand
          - ii. Speaks of citizenship, Christ as the true deity (opposed to Caesar), military analogy and the Praetorian guard greeting
  - b. The Lord Prepares the Mind
    - i. At the river they met God-fearing women, Lydia is mentioned by name
      1. The fact that the gospel is going forth to women first is a demerit on its veracity to the ancient worldview
      2. This is an indicator that the reports are true, and not merely myth
    - ii. “and the Lord opened her heart” to Paul’s teaching on the gospel
  - c. The Lord Prepares the Message: the possessed Slave-girl of Philippi
    - i. She proclaims the source of the message, “the Most High God”
    - ii. She proclaims that His messengers are true
    - iii. She proclaims that the message is one of salvation
  - d. The Lord Prepares the Means: Prison
    - i. Paul and Silas are thrown into prison in Philippi
      1. For casting out a “spirit of divination”

2. Her masters call out Paul and Silas as “Jewish troublemakers”, indicating their pride in their Roman citizenship and disdain for these “outsiders”
3. Only after being beaten and imprisoned does Paul indicate that he, too, is a Roman citizen and has been unfairly treated
- ii. God sends an earthquake to release them from prison
  1. The Philippian jailer is saved
  2. The authorities are ashamed because they treated Roman citizens as such and Paul made them publicly apologize
  3. They are sent out of town

## Purpose of Philippians

1. Give thanks to the Philippians for their loving gifts to him
  - a. Epaphroditus had brought a gift to Paul, who was under house arrest in Rome, and Paul wanted to thank the Philippians for it
  - b. House arrest meant that Paul could not leave, but was not in a jail, but a house where he had to provide for his own welfare
  - c. Paul was grateful not only for the gift, but also for Epaphroditus himself as a friend and assistant
    - i. It seems many in Rome were afraid to visit Paul due to repercussions from Roman society
    - ii. Paul is grateful for Epaphroditus’ loyalty and love and thanks the Lord for them (1:3-11; 4:10-20)
2. Guide the Philippians in their deepening dependence upon Jesus and their understanding of who He is
  - a. Epaphroditus also brought word on how the Philippian church was doing, and Paul wanted to instruct on some things
    - i. Their true citizenship is gospel-focused and “in Christ” first and foremost (1:27-30) and they are to exercise it in a manner worthy of the gospel
    - ii. Unity in mind and purpose (2:2)
      1. Euodia and Syntyche were not one-minded (4:2)
    - iii. They are to be humble, like Jesus who humbled himself and took the form of a servant to die on a cross (2:1-11).
    - iv. They are to be light-bearers in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation (2:14-16)
    - v. Beware of false-teachers (3:1-3, 17-21)
      1. Judaizers (legalists) and anti-nomians (lawless, cheap grace) abounded as in all the churches (false-teachers)
    - vi. Needed encouragement to rejoice even when things were difficult and overwhelming (3:4-16; 4:1-7)
    - vii. Fix their minds on pure and holy things (4:7-8)
3. Fill their vision with Joy and Gladness
  - a. “Joy” or its cognates are mentioned 16 times in this brief book
  - b. Even though Paul is imprisoned and his death may be imminent, he gives great cause to rejoice
    - i. The furtherance of the gospel to Rome (1:12-17) is a cause for great joy
    - ii. Christ will be exalted, by life or by death, and that is a cause for great joy (1:19-26)
4. To encourage them with good news and Epaphroditus’ return
  - a. Epaphroditus had been quite ill so Paul sent him back home
  - b. Philippians is an intensely personal letter
    - i. Paul calls them “my joy and my crown” (4:1)

- ii. Those who “labored side by side with me in the gospel” (4:3), “fellow workers”, and “names written in the book of life”
- iii. “sharers in his trouble” and “partners” in his ministry

So, in light of the Philippian church’s situation at the time of Paul’s letter and imprisonment in Rome, there are certain themes and elements of Paul’s letter that are specifically intended to speak to the Philippians concerning the glory of Jesus Christ and the gospel which they share:

Our true citizenship is that of “saints in Christ” before we are citizens of any earthly realm. In Christ, united to Him by faith, we belong to God with all the privileges of heavenly citizenship. We are not American first, nor male/female, slave/free, white/black, or even Baptist/Anglican, etc. We are “in Christ”, holy and beloved, united by faith in Him with Him as our Master and King. He is our glory and our boasting, our beauty and our goal. He alone is sufficient for all our needs for life and godliness. We are saints, not because of our righteousness or our ability to believe, but because we are united in Him and therefore holy.

Our joy is not contingent upon our earthly success in any realm, from parenting to career, biblical memorization or comfort in these broken-down bodies. Our joy stems from the glory of Christ and His exaltation throughout all the earth. His glory is our joy and our peace is secured in His sufficiency and provision toward God on our behalf. We can rejoice even though we suffer amidst the squeezing of this world, He is enough. And with our eyes upon Him and our hearts trusting in Him, we find that joy shines forth from even the darkest dungeons and the deepest anxieties of the darkness of even death itself. The Risen One still reigns and He is 100% for His people. This is the key to indomitable joy.

Jesus is more than a man. One of the most Christ-exalting passages in Scripture pertaining to the deity of Jesus is contained within this letter. And, yet, Paul uses it as an example, an illustration if you will, of our need to humble ourselves and serve each other. Because our Savior is who He is, then we are to be like Him: holy, righteous, humble, good. Let the glory of Christ be our vision and the vision of His cross be our boasting and our guide until the day when He completes His work and brings us all home to glory.