

Paul's Letter to the Church in Philippi

Martha Showalter (July 27, 2014)

Opening

Just like Laura mentioned last week I too had many thoughts running through my head during the creation of this service and meditation. So just to set the standard, let me mention I ended up telling myself that you get what you pay for!

Prior to reading some commentary and researching I read through the Epistle to the Philippians. It is a rather short book (4 chapters long) and I found it to contain very familiar in language. There are classic passages often found in liturgies and pastoral prayers.

This morning I will give some background and we will also listen to some portions as we work our way through Philippians. At the conclusion I will share some reflections.

The **Epistle of Paul to the Philippians**, usually referred to simply as **Philippians**, is the eleventh book in the New Testament. Paul visited Philippi for the first time on his second missionary journey (49-51 AD). It was the first congregation in Europe.

Biblical scholars are in general agreement that it was written by St. Paul around 62 AD to the church of Philippi, which was an early center of Christianity in Greece. That congregation was very attached to Paul, just as he was very fond of them. Of all the early established churches, their contributions or gifts of support are among the only ones he accepts. ([Acts 20:33-35](#); [2 Cor. 11:7-12](#); [2 Thess. 3:8](#)). The generosity of the Philippians is noted and Paul gratefully accepts their gifts. (Phil. 4:15).. This generous support is remarkable because the Macedonian converts were, as a class, very poor (2 Cor. 8:2), though the very first converts at that church were of all classes. (recorded in Acts 16) As with all epistles, the original was composed in Greek.

Recipients/Philippians

The city of Philippi was named after King Philip II of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great. It was a prosperous Roman colony, which meant that the citizens of Philippi were also citizens of the city of Rome itself. They prided themselves on being Romans (see [Acts 16:21](#)), dressed like Romans and often spoke Latin. No doubt this was the background for Paul's reference to the believer's heavenly citizenship ([3:20-21](#)). Many of the Philippians were retired military men who had been given land in the vicinity and who in turn served as a military presence in this frontier city. That Philippi was a Roman colony may explain why there were not enough Jews there to permit the establishment of a synagogue and why Paul does not quote the OT in the Philippian letter

Philippi was an important city because it straddled the great east-west highway known as the Egnatian Way. The population of this city was cosmopolitan, being made up of Tracians, Greeks, Romans and a few Jews. In the center of the city was a large forum surrounded by temples, a library, fountains, monuments and public baths, indeed fashioned after Rome itself.

In 42 B.C. Antony and Octavia defeated Brutus and Cassius near Philippi. In honor of his victory, Antony made Philippi a Roman colony. This provided the Philippians with special rights and privileges as Roman citizens, and they responded with a great deal of pride and loyalty. Women enjoyed a high status in Philippi—taking an active part in both public and business life. Because of this, women also had important responsibilities in the Philippian church.

As previously mentioned, scholars generally agree that Paul drafted the epistle during his two years of house arrest in Rome. He himself had established the church in Philippi approximately 10 years prior, during his second missionary journey recorded in Acts 16. Thus, his tender love for the believers in Philippi is apparent in this most personal of all Paul's writings.

The church had sent gifts to Paul while he was in chains. The gifts were delivered by Epaphroditus, a leader in the Philippian church who ended up assisting Paul with ministry in Rome. At some point while serving with Paul, Epaphroditus became dangerously sick and nearly died. After his recovery,

Paul sent Epaphroditus back to Philippi sending with him the letter to the Philippian church.

Besides expressing thanks to the believers in Philippi for their gifts and support, Paul took the opportunity to encourage the church concerning practical matters such as humility and unity. He warned them about Jewish legalists and as well as others and gave instructions on how to live a joyous Christian life.

Briefly the outline of the letter is as follows

- Greetings ([1:1-2](#)) (1-2)
- Thanksgiving and Prayer for the Philippians ([1:3-11](#)) (3-11)
- Paul's Personal Circumstances ([1:12-26](#)) (12-14) *the writer's affairs*
- Exhortations ([1:27-2:18](#))
 - Living a Life Worthy of the Gospel ([1:27-30](#)) 27-28
 - Following the Servant Attitude of Christ ([2:1-18](#)) (1-5 ,14-16)
- Paul's Associates in the Gospel ([2:19-30](#)) *updates*
 - Timothy ([2:19-24](#))
 - Epaphroditus ([2:25-30](#))
- Warnings about the opposition to the early church-*a chapter full of such opponents or opposers of the early church/Truth.* (Judaizers and false prophets) ([3:1-4:1](#)) (3:2, 7-9, 12-14, 19-20a)
 - Against Judaizers or Legalists ([3:1-16](#))
 - Against Antinomians or Libertines ([3:17-4:1](#))
- Final Exhortations (*local church level*), followed by Thanks and then the Conclusion)*final greeting and benediction* ([4:2-23](#))
 - Exhortations concerning Various Aspects of the Christian Life ([4:2-9](#)) (4:2-3, 4-8)
 - Concluding Testimony and Repeated Thanks ([4:10-20](#)) 10-13, 15-20
 - Final Greetings and Benediction ([4:21-23](#)) 21-23

Now we will again go through the outline but this time with respective portions of the letter (passages) read out loud.

Passages noted in red

Briefly the outline is as follows

- Greetings ([1:1-2](#)) ([1:1-2](#))
- Thanksgiving and Prayer for the Philippians ([1:3-11](#)) ([1:3-11](#))
- Paul's Personal Circumstances ([1:12-26](#)) ([1:12-14](#))
- Exhortations ([1:27-2:18](#))
 - Living a Life Worthy of the Gospel ([1:27-30](#)) [1:27-28](#)
 - Following the Servant Attitude of Christ ([2:1-18](#)) ([2:1-5](#), [14-16](#))
- Paul's Associates in the Gospel ([2:19-30](#)) *first Timothy then Epaphroditus*
 - Timothy ([2:19-24](#))
 - Epaphroditus ([2:25-30](#))
- Warnings against opposers of the Truth. *Full chapter but the following are samples of warnings Note the tone (Judaizers and false prophets) ([3:1-4:1](#)) ([3:2](#), [7-9](#), [12-14](#), [19-20a](#))*

 - Against Judaizers or Legalists ([3:1-16](#))
 - Against Antinomians or Libertines ([3:17-4:1](#))

- Final Exhortations (local church level), Thanks then Conclusion ([4:2-23](#)) The last reading contains the reference to the title of this worship service.

Now that we have experienced excerpts from this letter let us return to additional background (remarks) from the commentaries.

Let's look at the form or format, specifically ancient letter writing. This letter takes on the structure of a friendship letter or often it is called a "family" letter. Such a letter has the following form:

- The address and greeting
- Prayer for the recipients
- Reassurance about the sender (my affairs)
- Request for reassurance about the recipients (your affairs)
- Information about movements of intermediaries (info update on close associates or friends they have in common with each other)
- Exchange of greetings with third party
- Closing wish for health

This letter has all the characteristics of such a letter.

But it is also a letter of exhortation (which is moral instruction often found in the context of friendship- which often takes on the form of a superior instructor speaking to the inferior by means of a letter). Paul was the recipient's friend or moral superior and in this letter his words aimed at persuasion as well as dissuasion—to live like Jesus (or himself) and not be influenced by various opponents.

As an aside I found myself aligned with a point made by one of the authors I read. In reading a commentary by Gordon D. Fee I found I could relate to his remarks that he is on the side of those who find many of his predecessors (and even contemporaries) engage in finding more “meaning” in grammar and words than Paul surely intended. As he put it, “ I wonder if Paul thought through his talk any more than many of us do, especially in the writing of his letters. “¹ On the other hand Fee does not think that the letter was written willy-nilly but rather the way Paul says things often gives us clues to what he intends. All this to say we should be careful in how much we read into this letter.

Another aspect to consider is the importance of noting how the recipients would have learned about the contents of this letter.

The recipients of this letter were likely to know the contents by listening to it orally. It was dictated to be read aloud in the community. Thus his words plays are designed to be memorable, precisely because oral cultures depended on a very high level of retention. In writing such a document one needed to consider that in order to retain what was spoken it would need to be short and easy to recall or memorable. It wasn't easy to just go back and reread it as we can today. Many have found it puzzling as to why Paul left his “thanksgiving” for the gift to the very end as that could be thought today (and maybe even then) as bordering on rudeness but perhaps orality best accounts for this as it may have intentionally been placed there. Those words of gratitude would have been the words left ringing in their ears as the letter concludes.

I found it interesting to note that various commentary have questioned whether this is a single letter written in entirety or the compilation of several letters put together at a later time. What is noted is the jarring shift in tone that takes place between 3:1 and 3:2. It is at this juncture that Paul shrilly exhorts and warns the Philippians to watch out for the dogs who speak false things. It is surmised that Paul is aware that not only he but also his recipients have opponents they must contend with.

Lastly, similar to what we heard last week, this letter contains moral instruction. Paul warns this early church (by name) to get along with each other and he asks that the church support that effort. He knows this congregation plays an important role in the larger church and thus their example of harmonious living is could be very influential.

There are many volumes of scholarly research but little time to further address them in this setting so I will move on to my reflections.

Reflections

How would I respond to such a letter? If I were to write a letter in response what might it say, especially if I were one of the named individuals noted in the letter? After thinking about this for some time and even considering initially about constructing a letter of response to be read out loud today I abandoned that approach as I became certain that I couldn't do it justice. All I could do was to think about how I would respond today if such a letter were read to our congregation and I was named in a less than ideal light. Did it make a difference that Paul asked other members of the church to help and support in the effort and he also noted that the women had contended at Paul's side in the cause of the gospel? In other words, he also named them in a positive light. Frankly I am not sure I would be happy as being named as needing to get along with another individual, even if others were asked to support this effort. I have to wonder about the consequences of Paul's approach. Did it work, did the folks pull together and support each other? What about the folks he named? What became of them, did they continue to be involved in the future workings of that church? I was unable to determine what became of the situation but Paul was direct and also more comprehensive in his solution than just saying they should agree to agree. I found it useful to note that this was followed

immediately by the well-known passage on rejoicing in everything and not to be anxious about anything but in everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving present your request to God. The context was interesting indeed. In addition he then asked the recipients to think on whatever was true, noble, right, pure, lovely and admirable, excellent or praiseworthy. Certainly this was a challenge for the two women as well as the other members of the early church. Wouldn't this message be as useful today as then in reminding us how to live a joyful life, how to support each other and doesn't it also provide techniques for doing so?

What meaning does this letter have for us today? As just noted previously, this letter is often noted for the description of living a joyful life. It is the title of our morning service. Living that joyful life is described in detail even when life may have serious challenges. Paul himself would have faced many opponents and have endured many undesirable circumstances and it was certain that this young congregation also had many opponents. This letter certainly challenged with its instruction on joyful living, thinking of positive things and not to be anxious but pray with thanksgiving. Certainly a high standard of living was presented to the recipients and in turn to us. Paul noted thinking of the positive rather than dwelling on the negative. I was left to wonder if the joyfulness Paul promotes during life's challenges are perhaps a much more effective method of helping this young church rather than using other tactics. This is certainly an example of positive evangelism. Psychologically isn't honey often more effective in the long run in obtaining a desired behavior rather than the use of a negative approach or frightfully scaring the wits out of someone? Did Paul realize that? Wouldn't this positive message and methodology of practicing the discipline of focusing or filling one's mind with positive thinking be as effective then as it is now? Rejoice in the Lord always.

Changing direction in my reflections, let's recall this is after all a missionary letter. How does this compare to today's missionary accounts of their work? How do my experiences with such missionary accounting compare with Paul's accounting in this letter? I found this similar to missionaries recounting their work. From my vantage point missionaries often put a positive spin on sharing what they had accomplished. Interestingly this was always in the context of fund raising so their stories had a way of being held accountable for the money they had received and in turn were hoping to receive. In some ways since Paul had accepted gifts and support from this

congregation wouldn't he have had some of the same motivation as modern missionaries during their fund raising efforts? Even though it has been noted that Paul wasn't in the habit of accepting gifts (support) from the congregations he had established, he clearly accepted gifts from this congregation. Could that help explain some of the differences in this epistle to some of the others? Moreover, is this an early example of effective fund-raising efforts?

Lastly,

Paul was in jail, with a perhaps uncertain future. Being in that circumstance did he think of his legacy and how does that play out in this letter? Today we have many examples of folks helping to craft their legacy; there are an abundance of memoirs and autobiographies. How was legacy thought about during Paul's time? I found little in the commentary I read about this concept of legacy. Would Paul have been thinking about what he wanted folks to recall after his demise when he wrote this letter? I believe there were at least two aspects in this letter which could be thought of as legacy building. He used two models regarding how we are to live, a Christ-like existence: first he noted Jesus and then at one point he also noted his own life as an example of being Christ-like filled with humble following of what we are expected to do if we are followers of Jesus. Secondly he was also concerned with the life of the young church. The future of the church would obviously depend on the early beginnings of the church he helped to start. The very success and his own legacy would be connected to what became of these congregations. Both the model of his own life as compared to Jesus's example of living and the success of the early church would be very important components he may have wanted to be part in a lasting legacy. Could that have played a factor in his writing? Is Paul really any different than some folks today are in the way they are involved in crafting their own legacies? I cannot answer that but I do have to question if it didn't play a part.

Regardless of all the questions that arise from the study of this letter, it is indeed an often quoted work which deserves to be heard at the conclusion of this presentation.

Let's conclude with the beautiful language found at the conclusion of this epistle of Paul to the Philippians. Let's listen to Paul's final greetings as the

4: 4-9,19-20

References

1 The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Paul's Letter to the Philippians, Gordon D Fee, pg xii

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