Greek-speaking and surrounded by Greek traditions, the city followed Roman law. As a stop on the major highway, the Via Egnatia, it was a crossroads of many cultures and religions, being the home of temples for Egyptian gods such as Serapis, the Phrygian mother goddess Cybele, and others. Religious pluralism was a given in this, as in so many other, Roman cities.

The letter to Philippi followed the ministry that Paul had conducted there between 49 and 52 CE. As a typical Pauline letter, Philippians continues the apostle’s oral teaching, emphasizing the centrality of Jesus’ death and resurrection to a new way of life. By connecting the Christian story to the ethical behavior within the Christian community, Paul seeks to encourage his readers to follow key exemplars, notably Jesus, Timothy, Epaphroditus, and Paul himself.

Though brief and structurally simple, Philippians seems to jump from topic to topic in a way that has led some scholars to suggest that two or more letters of Paul have been spliced together. However, this seems unlikely, and the alleged roughness of the transition from chapter 2 to chapter 3, in particular, can be explained as owing to the fact that Paul intended the letter to be read aloud to a small group of people who would track his argument that they should model their life on Jesus and on the Christians they knew, including Paul.

Paul had helped found the church at Philippi (see Acts 16:11–40) and the relationship between the Philippians and Paul had been reciprocal, with the Philippians sharing in the gospel from the first day (1:5). They had also provided him with regular financial support. Writing to this established and active church, one of Paul’s major themes is the call to lead a life of joy. The inescapable result of living a life focused on imitating Christ, he notes that joy (1:4), selflessness (1:20–26), humility (2:3), and a passion for the true gospel (3:1–3) are the key attributes of those in genuine relationship with God. Paul calls his readers to unity, asking them not to [look to] your own interests, but to the interests of others (2:4 NRSV). Doing so, they will become
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blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which [they] shine like stars in the universe (2:15) through their good works and through their willingness to share joyfully in the sufferings and sacrifice of others for the sake of the gospel (2:17–18).

COMMENTARY

ADDRESS • 1:1–2

The address follows Paul’s practice of adapting the conventional Greco-Roman letter opening (“A to B, greetings”) by offering a theological characterization of the letter’s senders (servants of Christ Jesus) and recipients (all the saints [literally, “ones sanctified,” by God] in Christ Jesus). Paul substitutes for the standard Greek letter greeting chairein (as in Acts 15:23; 23:26; Jas 1:2) the similar blessing grace and peace [Greek charis kai eirene]. Such changes fit Paul’s letters for reading aloud in ancient Christian worship assemblies (1 Thess 5:27; Col 4:16). Timothy is a co-sender of the letter, but the authorial references in the singular (“I”), which begin at 1:3–26, as well as the third person reference to Timothy in 2:19–23, imply that Paul is the principal author (Bockmuehl 49). This is the only letter in which Paul directly addresses the church’s overseers and servants (NIV deacons), suggesting that he either intends to strengthen them (as in 1 Corinthians 16:15–16), or to draw attention to their responsibility to work toward the goals he articulates in the letter (as in Philemon), or both (Campbell 124, who suggests that the “overseers and servants” included: Epaphroditus, Euodia, Syntyche, and Clement).

PAUL’S PRAYERS FOR THE CHURCH • 1:3–11

As often in his letters, Paul opens the body of Philippians with a report of how the church has figured in his daily prayers to God. As usual, the things for which Paul gives thanks introduce themes that he will develop through exhortation. The phrase with joy (verse 4) initiates a theme that recurs with significant variations throughout the letter (1:18, 25; 2:2, 17–18, 28–29; 3:1; 4:1, 4, 10). Paul has given thanks for the Philippians’ cooperation in his missionary endeavors (verse 3). This participation has taken concrete expression in periodic financial gifts (4:15–18), but it also includes the moral transformation begun at their conversion by God, which God will complete until the day of Christ Jesus (1:6). Paul has served as God’s agent in the Philippians’ transformation, and they thus share a special bond (1:7a, 8; compare 1 Thess 2:7–8; Paul’s word employs the same root as partnership in 1:5). Paul’s present circumstances, which involve both imprisonment and … the defense and confirmation of the gospel (1:7b RSV; there is no basis in the Greek text for the NIV’s whether), take place in the context of this relationship.

Paul prays that the church that shares in his mission (verses 9–10) will find that their love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight so that they may grow in their moral sensitivities. Transformation of behavior is the principal standard that Paul offers for evaluating the life of the church (see Rom 12:2–3; 8:3–4). As in 1:6, this transformation continues until Christ returns (compare 2:11).

Leadership Roles in the Pauline Churches

The term “overseer” for a leader in the Pauline churches (Greek episkopos, traditionally translated “bishop”) occurs only here and in the Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:7; see Acts 20:28 and episkope [‘overseership’] in Acts 1:20 and 1 Timothy 3:1). The functions of spiritual oversight and communal guidance that the word suggests, however, occur elsewhere in Paul’s references to the structure of his churches.

In his earliest letter, Paul encourages the church to respect those who labor among you and stand before you in the Lord and admonish you (1 Thess 5:12–13). Even more clearly, in 1 Corinthians Paul appeals to the membership of the church to submit [literally, “order yourselves under”] such people as the household of Stephanas (1 Cor 16:15).

“Deacons” is perhaps too specific a rendering of the other term for leaders that Paul uses in Philippians 1:1, as diakonos is Paul’s general term for ministers, used of Christ in his earthly ministry (Rom 13:8), Paul himself (1 Cor 3:5; 2 Cor 6:4; Col 1:9, 25) and his itinerant coworkers Apollos (1 Cor 3:5), Tychicus (Eph 6:21; Col 4:7), and Epaphras (Col 1:7); Phoebe is identified specifically as a servant of the church in Cenchreae (Rom 16:1).
REPORT ON PAUL’S CIRCUMSTANCES · 1:12–26
In this section, Paul shows how his imprisonment (see 1:7b), which his converts might find disheartening, instead provides further grounds for joy in thanksgiving. Most importantly, his personal adversity has really served to advance the gospel (verse 12), as evidenced by two results detailed in verses 13–14. First, the awareness that Paul was imprisoned for the sake of Christ spread throughout the whole palace guard, who rotated on four-hour shifts, as well as everyone else in the imperial service involved with the trial of Paul’s case (Fee 113–14). And second, Christians had increased confidence in preaching the gospel presumably in Rome and perhaps beyond (for Paul’s awareness of circumstances in Christian communities generally, see Rom 1:8; 15:34; 16:19; 1 Cor 15:11; Gal 1:23–24; 1 Thess 1:8; 2:14).

Paul expands on the second result of his imprisonment in verses 15–17 with a recognition of mixed motives among preachers of the gospel, some doing so for the sake of [God’s] good pleasure (not NIV’s out of goodwill, verse 15; compare 2:15, according to his good purpose) and in love (verse 16), but others for bad motives or even to increase [Paul’s] suffering in imprisonment (verse 17 NRSV). Remarkably, Paul regards this situation with contentment, rejoicing that whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached (verse 18). This suggests that there is no fundamental disagreement in doctrine between Paul and the evangelists to whom he here attributes bad motives, as clearly is the case with those he opposes in Philippians 3:2, 18–19 (see 2 Cor 2:17; 6:14–16; 10:9–18; 11:4–6, 12–23).

Paul takes the preaching of Christ resulting from his imprisonment as an occasion to rejoice (verse 18), thus offering modeling behavior for the Philippians (2:17–18). In verses 18–26, Paul prepares them for the outcome of his court case. He will regard either conviction or acquittal as a divine salvation (verse 19; NIV deliverance) and no cause for shame so long as he joins other fearless preachers (verse 14) in preaching Christ with courage (verse 20). The fate of Paul’s body serves to exalt Christ (compare 2 Cor 4:10–12; Gal 2:19–20).

“Those who have fallen asleep...”
Paul states that between death and resurrection the Christian (or at least the Christian martyr; see Rev 6:9–11) experiences an intermediate conscious state (2 Cor 5:4, 6–8; Luke 23:31–31), which suggests that only the body “falls asleep” in death (1 Cor 15:50–52; 1 Thess 4:13–15).

EXHORTATION TO HEAVENLY CITIZENSHIP · 1:27–41
1:27–2:5 Paul turns next from his circumstances to the church’s responsibilities. The Philippians need not be discouraged by Paul’s trials but should focus their energies on living as a colony of God’s heavenly kingdom. The first imperative verb in the letter (weakly rendered conduct yourselves in NIV) might more fully be translated “exercise your citizenship” (Greek politeusthe, verse 27); a noun form of the same root appears toward the close of the exhortation (Greek politeuma, “citizenship,” 3:20). Paul’s evangelistic preaching evidently presented membership in the Christian community as preparation for life in the coming kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9–11; Gal 5:21) in royal imagery drawn from the preaching of Jesus (Mark 1:15; 4:11, 26–32; 9:1, 43–47) and Jewish Scripture (Exod 15:18; Ps 33:1; 96:10; 97:1; 99:1; Isa 40:10–11). The language in which Paul develops this imagery in Philippians doubtless made sense in Philippi, a Macedonian city under Roman rule since 168 BCE, and a Roman colony since 30 BCE (Bockmuehl 6–6; Fee 25–26). The appeal to unity (verse 7b) also echoes ancient political rhetoric, in which faction was one of the greatest evils a city-state or federation faced (see Mitchell, especially 60–68, 180–83).
Paul understands the opposition the Philippians have experienced (verse 28) to be one of the woes attending the advent of the messianic age (see Mark 13:7-27; Rom 6:3-4; 8:17-18; 1 Pet 4:12-19). The Philippians’ perseverance through this hostility proves God’s favor for the persecuted and judgment on the persecutors (see 2 Thess 1:4-8). The Philippians’ suffering for Christ (verses 29-30) also makes them Paul’s partners in the gospel.

The appeal for unity, humility, and mutual concern in 2:1-5 introduces the letter’s central example of Christ, the “first citizen” of the heavenly kingdom (2:6-11). In 2:1, Paul recalls the divine gifts (see 1:7) sustaining the Philippian community as a basis for the appeal that follows. The if is rhetorical and does not imply uncertainty about the presence of the encouragement, comfort, fellowship with the Spirit, or tenderness and compassion that accompany life in Christ (2:1 NRSV). The faithfulness of the Philippian community and other churches undergirds Paul’s expectation of joy in God’s impending judgment (verse 2; see 4:4; 2 Cor 1:14; 1 Thess 2:19). Christian unity in spirit and purpose (verse 2b) comes through the renunciation of selfish ambition and vain conceit and the cultivation of humility. The NIV softens the charge of verse 4 by the addition of not only and also. Paul in fact exhorts Christians, Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others (2:4 NRSV). The example of Christ is the indispensable model for the Christian mind (verse 5).

2:6-11 The description of Christ falls into two sections roughly equal in length, the first (verses 6-8) describing Christ’s lowering of himself and the second (verses 9-11) describing God’s exaltation of him. The narrative begins before Christ’s earthly mission with his existence in the form of God (NIV margin), that is, “the visual characteristics of [God’s] heavenly being” (Bockmuehl 129; compare 1 Kgs 22:19; Isa 6:1-5; Ezek 1:4, 26-28). This imagery is used both of Adam (Gen 1:26-28) and, more pertinently in this context, of the eternal Wisdom by which God created (Wisdom of Solomon 7:26). Elsewhere Paul designates Christ as wisdom from God (1 Cor 1:30), draws on Jewish wisdom tradition to describe Christ’s role as God’s agent in creation (1 Cor 8:6; see Prov 8:30; Wisdom of Solomon 9:1-2), and describes Christ’s incarnation as abandoning heavenly riches for earthly poverty (2 Cor 8:9). The preexistent Christ’s story becomes the photographic negative of Adam’s (see Gen 3:1-7) and a positive example for Christians in that he emptied himself (NRSV) of heavenly glory and divine privilege, to assume the form of a servant (2:7; NIV margin), or slave (NRSV), echoing Isaiah 52:13-15. Jewish teachers understood divine Wisdom to be embodied in the Mosaic Law (Sirach 24:23), but only Christians thought of the image of God’s eternal Wisdom (or Word, as in John 1:14; compare Wisdom of Solomon 9:1-2) being made in human likeness (2:7). Christ further exemplified the life that Paul commends to Christians in that once he had descended from heaven, he humbled himself. Specifically, he became obedient to death— even death on a cross (2:8), the most shameful death known to Roman antiquity, reserved for slaves and enemies of the imperial order. Paul’s therefore (2:9) encourages Christians facing discouragement; because Christ’s humility during the extremes of suffering and death led God to reward him with an incomparable position and name (2:9), so also the Philippians may look forward to sharing Christ’s reward if they follow in his steps. Verse 9 reflects early Christian interpretation of Psalm 110:1 (in combination with Is 52:13), according to which
The Nature of God

The risen Son now reigns at God's right hand (compare Rom 8:34). A further interpretation of this verse appears in the statement that the Father bestowed on Christ the name that is above every name, which is to say the divine name. Since the Greek Old Testament renders the name Yahweh as "Lord," reference to the Lord Jesus connects him to God. The climactic scriptural allusion of the passage applies to Christ God's declaration in Isaiah 45:23 (Before me every knee will bow, by me every tongue will acknowledge me). The church's mission is to proclaim this message (cf. Phil 1:29; 2:19-20).

2:12-18 In 2:12–13, Paul draws a lesson from the story of Christ. The plural pronoun in the phrase work out your own salvation (verse 12b NRSV) implies effort to secure each other's hold on salvation rather than exclusive concern for one's own fate (Thompson 48, note 30; compare 1 Cor 6:7; Heb 10:25). Psalm 2:11 encourages fear and trembling among Gentiles in the presence of the Lord and the anointed ones, where Paul has brought the Philippians. Paul does not endorse "works righteousness," for it is God who works in the faithful to transform both desires and actions (see Rom 12:1–2). This same interplay of divine and human agency also appears in 1:5, and Paul's frequent ethical appeals emphasize such actions for believers (Rom 12:1–15:1; Gal 5:1–6:10). The corollary of unity (2:1–4) is to leave aside complaining or arguing (verse 14), unlike the Israelites in the wilderness (Exod 16:7–12, 17; Num 11:1, 14, 27, 29). The phrase crooked and depraved generation (verse 15; see Deut 32:5) further refers to those opposing the church (1:28), in comparison with whom the Philippians shine like stars in the universe (see Dan 12:3) by maintaining their hold on the word of life (2:16, see NIV margin). As verse 16 makes clear, Paul views the church's present work of faithful endurance in terms of Christ's return (compare 1:6, 10; 4:5). Paul would have run the apostolic race and labored for nothing if his converts proved faithless on the day of Christ (also Gal 2:2), but in the present situation, Paul's life stands as a libation of wine poured out over the sacrifice and the offering of the Philippians' faith (2:18 NRSV; see 4:18b).

2:19–3:14 In 2:19–30, Paul surveys the travels of two of his missionary associates, because he expects them to return to Philippi soon (2:19, 23, 25), and because they provide the church with models of sacrificial faithfulness (see 3:17). Thus Paul's roving assistant Timothy takes a genuine interest in the Philippians' welfare (verse 20), as Paul has urged the Philippians to do for one another (2:4). As in 1 Corinthians 4:16–21, Paul now commends Timothy as a trustworthy authority whose visit will prepare the church for Paul's own return to them (Phil 2:24). Epaphroditus, who conveyed the church's offering to Paul (2:25; 4:18) and fell ill on the journey (2:26–27), approached the point of death, the same phrase that applies to Christ in 2:8. Epaphroditus's willingness to sacrifice all for the gospel embodies for the Philippians the virtue of Christ in their midst.

The appeal to the Philippians to receive Epaphroditus with great joy (2:29) prepares for a renewed exhortation to rejoice in the Lord (3:1). Commentators often find the transition in these verses abrupt, but comparing the church's conduct with that of outsiders occurs elsewhere in the letter (2:17–30; 3:17–20; and comment on 4:4–9). By asking them to watch out for (3:2), or perhaps simply consider, those requiring the circumcision of Gentiles, Paul contrasts such teachers with the Christian community, the true circumcision (3:3; see Rom 2:28–29; 8:3–4), who put no confidence in the flesh by trusting in the law.

In 3:1–14, Paul expands on his reasons for renouncing confidence in the flesh (3:4) and so puts himself forth as a further example of sacrificial obedience. Though he was circumcised on the eighth day (verse 5), as required by Leviticus 12:3 (see Luke 2:21), and a Pharisee, a member of a popular Jewish sect known for its faithfulness to ancestral tradition, Paul gave up his advantage among his peers. Paul's career in persecuting the church stemmed from his zeal for the Pharisees' understanding of the law (Gal 1:13–14). Legalistic righteousness (verse 6) is more neutrally translated righteousness under the law (NRSV). To embrace his
call to apostleship, Paul left such achievements behind, regarding them as loss (verse 7) and even as rubbish (verse 8), to the extent of renouncing his own ancestral righteousness...that comes from the law and accepting instead the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith (verse 9) as declared in the gospel (see Rom 3:20–31). Sharing in this righteousness involves imitating Christ’s obedience even to the point of death (3:10–11; Rom 6:3–11). The word somehow (verse 11) emphasizes that this participation depends on the course run by Paul (and the Christians who follow his example) in the interim between our present and God’s future (Bockmuehl 217).

3:15-4:1 Paul concludes his central exhortation to Christian citizenship by drawing the church’s attention to three related matters. First is the positive example the Philippians have in Paul and others who imitate his self-denying service in imitation of Christ (3:17), including Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:9–30). Second is the negative example of those whom Paul sorrowfully names enemies of the cross of Christ, perhaps the same teachers of circumcision opposed in 3:2, if their devotion to their stomach refers to their acceptance of material rewards for their teaching (compare 2 Cor 11:7–9, 19–21) and if their mind being set on earthly things indicates their concern to conform to the practices of the earthly Jerusalem (see Gal 4:25). Third, Paul contrasts their earthly orientation with the perspective of those whose citizenship is in heaven (3:20). Christians expect the Savior to return from there to transform the body of our humiliation (3:21 NRSV), a condition to which Christ was previously subject (2:8), into the likeness (a word recalling Christ’s “form,” 2:6–7) of his glorious body (see 2:9–11). Humiliation and suffering in the present prepare Christians for the glory to be revealed in God’s accomplishment of his saving purpose (see Rom 8:17–18), and this hope constitutes the basis of Christian perseverance (4:3; compare 1 Cor 15:58).

APPEAL TO EUODIA & SYNTYCHE FOR UNITY · 4:2–3

The appeal to Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord (verse 2 NRSV) and Paul’s call to a fellow Christian at Philippi to mediate their dispute (verse 3) suggests a delicate situation involving significant members of the community (compare Philon or the role of Stephanas’s household in 1 Cor 16:15–16). In this case, the women named struggled beside [Paul] in the work of the gospel (verse 3 NRSV), evidently as his close associates in missionary work.

SUMMARY EXHORTATIONS TO THE CHURCH · 4:4–9

A final appeal to rejoice in the Lord always (verse 4) introduces a concluding exhortation to the church at large, which emphasizes the Christian posture toward an often hostile society. Everyone should see the church’s gentleness (verse 5), a refusal to retaliate in kind when attacked (2 Cor 10:1; 1 Tim 3:3; Titus 3:2; Jas 3:17; 1 Pet 2:18). The Christian community can sustain this posture even against hostility because of its confidence that the Lord is near (Rom 13:11) and will soon redress the wrongs suffered by his people (Rom 12:17–21). It can petition God boldly for its needs (verse 6) as the peace that God’s heavenly kingdom brings reshapes hearts and...minds in Christ Jesus (verse 7).

Paul next identifies specific qualities that the church should cultivate, which have in common their unchallengeable goodness (verse 8), which will also be evident to all (verse 9). Most striking is the prominence in this list of that which is excellent, evoking the Greek philosophical ideal of “human excellence” as the basis of ethics and politics. Paul’s letter suggests that this ideal is fulfilled in the Christian life of self-denying service and humility (1:3; 8; 3:21; 4:12). Paul appeals to his ministry and his imprisonment as exemplifying such virtue and
supplying a model for the Philippians’ continued practice, which will ensure God’s presence with the church even in suffering (verse 9).

CONCLUDING EXPRESSION OF JOY · 4:10–20
The letter’s conclusion returns to Paul’s circumstances and expresses his joy at having received the Philippians’ tangible expression for concern for his well-being (verse 10). In context (verses 11–12), the climactic declaration “I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (verse 13) refers to the ability God grants Paul to endure external conditions rather than to perform impressive spiritual feats (but see Rom 15:17–19; 2 Cor 12:12). Paul acknowledges the Philippians’ recent kindness (verse 14) and recalls their history of financial support of his ministry (verses 15–16; contrast 1 Cor 9:11–12, 15; 2 Cor 12:13), a corollary of their participation in its spiritual blessings (verses 17–18; see Rom 15:25–27). As before (1:18–26), Paul expresses his confidence in God’s provision for the church’s welfare (verses 19–20; see 1:25–26).

GREETINGS & BENEDICTION · 4:21–23
Paul invites the Philippians to greet every saint (verse 21a NRSV), by implication through the congregational exchange of the holy kiss (Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Thess 5:26), and extends greetings from the Christians in his presence (verse 21b), singling out the saints … who belong to Caesar’s household for special mention (verse 22). These perhaps included the households of Aristobulus and Narcissus (Rom 16:10–11), and in any case their mention increases the likelihood that Philippians was written from Rome (Bockmuehl 269–70; Fee 459). As is Paul’s usual custom (Rom 16:20; 1 Cor 16:22; 2 Cor 13:13; Gal 6:18; Eph 6:24; Col 4:18; 1 Thess 5:28; 2 Thess 3:18), the letter concludes with a benediction pronounced on the congregation gathered for worship at the Lord’s table (verse 23).

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS
Three principal themes unite this encouraging book. First, the Philippians share a partnership in Paul’s gospel (1:5, 7), which involves their suffering for Christ (1:29–30), imitating Paul’s sacrificial service (3:3–4:3; 4:8–9), and financially supporting his mission (2:25; 4:10–20). Second, they adopt as the basis of their life together the sacrificial mindset of Christ in his earthly life (2:5–7), as well as of Paul (3:4–17; 4:9) and his coworkers (2:19–30; 3:27), more precisely characterized as “humility” (see 2:3, 8; 3:21; 4:12). And, third, they should embrace the joy that characterizes life in Christ (2:18, 28–29; 3:1; 4:4; compare 2:2), which Paul exhibits despite his captivity (1:14, 18; 2:17; 4:1, 10). This friendly letter thus encourages a vigorous Christian community life that can serve as a model for the church in any circumstance.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

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